Since the introduction of the Grande Progetto Pompei in 2015, both the media and international community of scholars have witnessed extraordinary new archaeological discoveries at Pompeii. An impressive amount of new work is currently being carried out on developing new methodologies that give the audience a sense of not just being-with the past, but ways to reconnect with everyday life, stories and identities. When one thinks of Pompeii, the iconic paved streets with still-visible chariot tracks, bars and taverns of all dimensions immediately come to mind. However, few other artefacts from the abundant remains uncovered at the site have evoked so much curiosity, embarrassment and moral anguish than sensuality-themed iconography found in Pompeii’s private homes.
The exhibition *Arte e sensualità nelle case di Pompei* (21 April 2022-15 January 2023) has been curated by professor in art history and classical archaeology, Maria Luisa Catoni (IMT Lucca) and director of the Pompeii archaeological park, Gabriel Zuchtriegel. It offers a glimpse of the sensual, sexual and erotic aesthetics which decorated different spaces of ‘an ideal’ Pompeian *domus*. This wide repertoire brings together 69 items, including wall-paintings, statues (ranging from 139 cm to 94 cm) and statuettes (63 cm-13 cm), as well as other personal and everyday objects, dating to between the first century BC and the first century AD. Aside from the bronze medallions decorating the ceremonial chariot or ‘pilentum’ from Civita Giuliana discovered in 2021, and the newly restored wall-paintings from *cubiculum* 8 at Villa del Carmiano at Gragnano, all displayed works have been recovered from the storage rooms of Pompeii (rather than borrowed from other institutions or museums). The use of stored objects from depositories is a much-welcomed development for displaying sensual and erotic art from Pompeii. While current practices have a tendency to arrange exhibitions around the same familiar artefacts, *Arte e sensualità nelle case di Pompei* exhibits lesser-known examples—giving the audience an idea of the complex and diverse nature of such items. This review attempts to evaluate the potential of *Arte e sensualità nelle case di Pompei* and the accompanying catalogue. It begins with a definition of the field, continuing with an account and a walk-through of each of the exhibition areas. The review concludes with a descriptive evaluation of the lavishly illustrated catalogue.

Sponsored by American Express and Caruso (a Belmond Hotel), the exhibition is a result of several collaborations emerging out of GGP between Ministero della Cultura (MiC), the Pompeii archaeological park, la Procura di Torre Annunziata and IMT Lucca, combining archaeology, conservation, cultural heritage and education. Based on a well-established branch of Pompeian scholarship examining the social and cultural meanings of visual sensuality and eroticism, *Arte e sensualità nelle case di Pompei* seeks to take visitors on a tour of an ideal Roman house while stimulating critical thinking about the past and acceptance of different uses of sensuality and eroticism. Such a new blend is certainly welcome as past archaeological thinking has had a tendency to treat ‘sensual’ art and objects as morally ‘polluted’—reflective of a society obsessed with pleasure and without any restrictions concerning displays of raw nudity, erotic encounters and couples engaging in sexual acts. Sectioned according to the various spheres of the *domus*, the audience is reminded that these artefacts were the property of living people, thus, re-establishing the fluid emotional ties between users of such objects and the objects themselves. Although much scholarly attention has been directed towards uncovering the decorative symbols behind these objects and how ancient viewers might have felt or thought looking at them, *Arte e sensualità nelle case di Pompei* successfully demonstrates that meaning was complex. Instead of leaning towards yet another reading of representation and symbolism, this
exhibition attempts to bring the reach of art, eroticism and sensuality to a different level by re-evaluating the performative powers of images throughout the Roman house.

Currently housed in the northern portico of Pompeii’s Palestra Grande (II.7.1), *Arte e sensualità nelle case di Pompei* consists of seven sections. Objects are placed on an average eye-level, making them visible for both adults and children. The large spaces of the Palestra Grande and the lack of stairs pose few challenges, granting independence to visitors reliant on wheelchairs or other mobility devices. Texts and interpretative descriptions are provided in both Italian and English, but in an effort to make the
exhibition more enjoyable for different target groups, the App MyPompeii allows visitors to access additional information directly on their phones or tablets. Apart from the app and one video located in the last section showing pictures of the excavations conducted around the Civita Giuliana when the ceremonial chariot was discovered, no other technical devices or educational activities are available. The audience begins the tour at the public ‘Atrium’ before moving through the more private rooms of a Roman house.

The first room titled ‘Atrium’ brings the visitor into the entrance hall of a Roman **domus**. Here, viewers are presented with the overall aim of the exhibition—namely to explore how erotic and sensual imageries were integrated elements of a Roman house. The objects on display include a fresco depicting a naked Narcissus gazing lovingly at his own reflection, the famous water fountain of Priapus with his erect member from the House of the Vettii (Fig. 1), a marble herm **trapezophoros** (table leg) and a painted lararium with an adjoining masonry altar from Terzigno ‘Villa 6’. While this first section exhibits objects found in connection with the *atrium*, the room appears rather empty. Leaving only four items to account for the multitude of artistic styles, personal tastes and intentions flourishing among Pompeian house owners creates the idea that domestic erotic imageries were a standardized means of visual communication. Perhaps an alternative could have been to include additional artefacts. While this might have risked making the room appear somewhat overcrowded, it could have helped assign cognitive awareness among visitors regarding the unique story behind each of the items that played out differently for the people who surrounded themselves with them on a daily basis.

‘Cubiculum’ constitutes the exhibition’s second section. An instant feeling of secluded privacy is caught in the way this unit is arranged. Decorated with black fabric draped against the ancient bricked walls of the Palestra and the glass windows facing the *natatio* create the impression of a half-illuminated space defined by intimacy. An interaction of these sensations is exercised in the items on display, especially in several frescos portraying well-known mythological scenes about erotic romance and sensual pleasure. Among these are Hippolytus and Phaedra, Meleager and Atalanta (Fig. 2). Additionally, there is one depiction of a female centaur, satyr and nymph and three frescos of Silenus with a maenad either sharing a drinking vessel or leaning close in an erotic embrace. With the intention of defining the Roman **cubiculum** as a private personalised area, the exhibition includes five women’s hairpins (one in bronze and four in bone) showing the goddess Venus arranging her hair, terracotta lamps with erotic scenes of couples delighting in intercourse and a sexual graffiti uncovered at Castellammare di Stabia *si quis formosus factus non dederit(esse) ad paedicandum, ille amore captus formosae feminae ne frustratur fututione* (which translates ‘if a person becomes beautiful and does not engage in pederasty, when he falls in love with a beautiful woman he is not going to score’). Also displayed in the ‘Cubiculum’ is the newly discovered bedroom roof from the House of
Leda (V.6.12) unearthed during the 2018-2019 excavations. Although highly important, it is easy to miss by visitors as it is located on the ceiling without any information to guide the audience’s attention towards it (Fig. 3). This section also features the erotic frescoes from Villa del Carmiano: three scenes showing a man and woman copulating in different positions. The diverse objects set in the special atmosphere of the space make this section of the exhibition exceedingly well-composed.

The area titled ‘Triclinium’ contains nine artefacts. The most impressive piece is a bronze ephëbe lamp-holder found at Insula Occidentalis (VI.17) depicting a young naked adolescent standing on a circular base with two bulls interspersed with a small bird mounted onto an adjoining rectangular plinth decorated with four lion’s feet (Fig. 4). The other items are a mixture of the cameo glass panels from the House of M. Fabius Rufus (VII.16.22) representing the Theseus and Ariadne myth, seven frescos showing a wide range of sensual topics such as playful centaurs, nude maenads, the abandoned Ariadne, Diana and Actaeon, the Calydonian princess Deianira with the centaur Nessus alongside a tool grip illustrating Dionysus and Pan embracing. While the ‘Cubiculum’ is a genuine attempt to recollect the settings of a typical Roman bedroom, the same may not be said for this section. The installations appear somewhat chaotic with the above-mentioned items placed randomly around the room without any logical historical, chronological or socio-cultural order. A possible solution, considering that the exhibition aims to give...
visitors a sense of being inside an ideal Roman dining room, may have been to add a replica of a lectus or cathedra. Or, to use sound effects and scents of food cooking resembling ancient dinners. This could assist visitors in interacting with the symbolic meaning of the exhibited artefacts and further communicate their roles in the ‘Triclinium’.

The ‘Peristyle’ is the exhibition’s largest section. Twelve objects provide an encounter with a typical colonnaded courtyard of the domus. The high glass windows facing the natatio allow natural light to enter. Hence, one gets the physical feeling of walking through an interior open enclosure. The displayed material evidence includes three marble statuettes of Venus, two of Pan, five frescos capturing different sensuality-related sceneries, a bronze fountain mouth with the bust of a satyr and a small statuette of a child fisherman sleeping underneath his hooded cloak covering his head but leaving his thighs, feet and genitals exposed. This division playfully encourages visitors to connect with how sensuality and erotica shaped the art of a Roman peristyle. Possibly, in an
attempt to stress the fact that the peristyle was partially an outdoor space, additional objects such as ornamented fountains or basins could have made this clearer to visitors less versed in the architectural layout of a Roman house.

Flanking the ‘Peristyle’, are two unified sections titled ‘Oplontis’ and ‘Domus di Loreio Tiburtino’. Although there is no information explaining the reasons behind this particular choice of domus, the pair is selected as illustrating examples of how sensuality-themed iconography was intertwined with the gardens of large and luxurious Roman
villas. Villa A of Oplontis (or the so-called Villa of Poppea) is situated in the modern town of Torre Annunziata and not Pompeii. From this context, there are four marble statuettes of male and female creatures carrying the lyre and *plectrum* alongside a marble sculpture of Hermaphroditus attempting to break free from the passionate grip of an animated satyr (Fig. 5). Enigmatically, while announcing that the items on display are retrieved from either Villa A of Oplontis or ‘Domus di Loreio Tiburtino’, visitors are confronted with objects bearing no obvious connection to these places. First, there are large panoramic compositions representing theatre masks, plants and animal discovered in the garden of the House of the Golden Bracelet (VI.17.24). Considering the enormous symbolic value of these panels and the sensory experiences they invoke, one wonders why the curators have not dedicated an entire area to these representations. Rather, they are placed somewhat discreetly in a corner without complementary exhibition texts offering a more detailed understanding. Second, there is a marble relief of a bearded satyr dating to the first century BC unearthed in the garden of the House of the Golden Cupids (VI.16.7). In addition, *Arte e sensualità nelle case di Pompei* presents the statuettes recovered from the gardens and *eurípi* of the House of Loreius Tiburtinus (II.2.2). From the gardens there is...
a statue of a sleeping Hermaphroditus (Fig. 6). The sculptures from the water channels are arranged in three groups: an Egyptian-inspired imagery of a river deity, a falcon-headed crocodile and Sphinx; marble examples decorating the water-channels, comprising a bust of Dionysus, a Lion clutching an antelope in its mouth, a cherub with a theatre mask and a shelf with a theatre mask; and, finally, a satyr, a lion and young Hercules grasping a snake in his tiny fist, the muses Polyhymnia and Erato. Although many of these items have never before been shown in public, the potentially confusing mixture of
artefacts appertaining to other sites and locations may complicate visitors’ perceptions of how sensuality-themed representations were used in Pompeian gardens.

The last section, ‘The ceremonial chariot of cività Guliana’, houses the bronze medallions of the ceremonial chariot found in 2021. The medallions portray maenads/nymphs and satyrs, and were apparently situated at the rear of the chariot, which presumably could hold two or three individuals. While the chariot in its entirety is not included, the medallions are stored in illuminated glass cases, allowing visitors to admire the detailed scenes.

The catalogue, like the exhibition it accompanies, examines the different meanings of sexual and erotic art in Pompeii. Including the preface and richly illustrated overview of each artefact appearing in the exhibition, the volume consists of thirteen chapters written by a diverse range of contributors affiliated with universities in Italy, Germany and the USA. One is immediately struck by its size, not the typical tourist guidebook sold around Pompeii. Available only at the main book shop located next to the park’s main entrance at Porta Marina, it costs €39—an affordable price considering its length (almost 300 pages) and the fact that it is generously illustrated. However, the catalogue is only available in Italian, preventing potential readers with little experience of engaging with academic Italian from enjoying its contents.

From a scholarly point of view, the book is structured around topics relating to sex-themed visual imagery from Pompeii. According to the introduction by the editors, Maria Luisa Catoni and Gabriel Zuchtriegel’s, all contributors examine topics centred on Pompeian erotic art. However, no shared theoretical perspectives or methodological frameworks are found among the contributors. Furthermore, the majority of papers deal with several of the same artefacts—objects not on display in the current exhibition, with the exception of Director General of Museums Massimo Osanna’s paper, which offers a stimulating analysis of the recently discovered finds at the House of Leda. In my opinion, this contribution is of great importance to Pompeian studies on domestic architecture and the use of sensuality-themed iconography, and would be better situated at the front of the book, instead of in the back of the catalogue as the final chapter.

The main chapters may be summarised as follows: Antonio Varone (Deutsches Archäologisches Institute), an undisputed authority within the field of Pompeian erotic art, charts how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars have considered and understood sensuality, eroticism and sexuality in relation to domestic architecture and visual representations located inside Roman houses. Ilaria Battiloro (Mount Allison University) & Marcello Mogetta (University of Missouri-Columbia) discuss the cult of Venus in Pompeii and the goddess’s connections to sensuality and desire. Francesca Ghedini (University of Padova) examines expressions of eros and seduction in texts and images. Anette Haug (CAU Kiel) offers a fruitful discussion on how Amor is conceptualised in space, mural paintings, reliefs and statues. John Clark (The University
of Texas at Austin), another authority on the subject, explores the apotropaic nature of sexual imagery. Anna Anguissola (University of Pisa) brings erotic scenes into conversation with displays of intimacy in Pompeian domestic spaces. Monica Baggio (University of Padua) skilfully combines body movements and erotic expressions in a semantic interpretation of amorous gestures in Pompeian wall-paintings. Maria Luisa Catoni deals with the communicative features of sexual representation, arguing that intermedial experiences were generated from such images. Monica Salvadori (University of Padova) shows how ancient texts (in Salvadori’s case, Ovid’s *Tristia*) may be used to construct sensuality and eroticism in Roman art. Gabriel Zuchtriegel offers an examination on how depictions of Hermaphrodites and centaurs were perceived in the Pompeian imagination. Finally, Paul Roberts (Ashmolean Museum) discusses *Eros* in relation to the Roman *convivium* or dinner banquet.

In sum, the chapters are at the forefront of current thinking about sensuality and eroticism in Pompeian domestic architecture. They consider how to examine these scenes, and how to interpret their meaning based on different schools of thought and intellectual inquiry.

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