

## Changing Viewpoints in the House of the Vettii Peristyle

The House of the Vettii, excavated in the late 19th century, is one of the most famous houses in Pompeii. The well-preserved residence, owned at the time of the eruption by two freed slaves from the Vettii family, is known to tourists and scholars alike for its opulent wall decoration and unusually large peristyle garden. Visible to passersby through the main doorway of the house, the garden, with its statues, fountains, and paintings, served as a status symbol for the upwardly mobile freedmen homeowners. This presentation will articulate how the peristyle functioned not only as a primary circulation space but also as a visual and thematic focal point that tied together the decorative spaces found throughout the house.

The peristyle served to connect the rooms at the front of the house to those at the rear; several rooms are only accessible via the peristyle's colonnaded walkway. Once in the peristyle, a visitor would quickly understand that the space was designed to be best seen from the main entrance and from the largest reception room in the house. By viewing the peristyle along these two main axes, it is clear that its painted and sculptural decoration was carefully planned to unify the large space and maximize the visual impact of its decorative scheme. For instance, the symmetrical view from the largest reception room spans the full length of the garden and is framed by the only two bronze sculptures in the house. The symmetry and decorative motifs of these carefully planned vistas recall the gardens found in the villas of extremely wealthy Romans, thus giving the peristyle an added layer of meaning and emphasizing the ambitions of the patrons. From the majority of rooms in the house, however, these two main lines of sight disappear, replaced by secondary views of the peristyle. Each allows a unique perspective of the garden with a different combination of sculptural and painted decoration, often set up to correspond with the decoration of the particular room. For example, a room featuring a painting of Ariadne abandoned by Theseus is directly aligned with a painting of a bacchant in the peristyle, alluding to Ariadne's eventual rescue by Bacchus. Formal similarities in the poses of Ariadne and the bacchant strengthen the association. Such correlations show off the education and sophistication of the Vettii and would have provided topics for discourse among guests at the house.

The various lines of sight into the peristyle reveal that it was meant to function not simply as a circulation space but as a transformational space, changing in meaning depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. Although the primary axes organize the peristyle as a whole and recall the grandeur of villa architecture, the secondary lines of sight create more subtle narratives that intellectually engage the viewer and invite him or her to appreciate the interplay of decorative elements throughout the house. It therefore becomes clear that the peristyle was intended to act as the aesthetic and thematic center of the Vettii residence.

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