

Sex on the Walls: The Art Program of the Suburban Baths in Pompeii

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Overview

Uncovered in 1986 by Luciana Jacobelli, the Suburban Baths of Pompeii feature some of the most intriguing depictions of sexual art found in Pompeii. Art historian John R. Clarke argues that these explicit images were intended for both a male and female audience. Clarke and Jacobelli believe these images do not suggest the promotion of prostitution within the baths. Permanent installations of sexually explicit imagery in Pompeii were usually found in private portions of a home or in public spaces in which the sale of sex occurred. I argue that the sexually graphic imagery found in the Suburban Baths promoted the sale of sex within its confines and, because of this, the art program was intended for a largely male audience.



Exterior of the Suburban Baths in Pompeii



Sexually Explicit Bronze mirror,
70 – 90 CE



Example of sexually implicit art
from the 1st century CE. Scenes
like this were believed to be
acceptable for public view.

Location

The Suburban Baths are located right outside the Porta Marina gate in Pompeii and would have been one of the first buildings seen by seafaring travelers as they entered the city. Given the location, these baths were most likely targeting maritime travelers who were likely males looking for more than just a hot bath.

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Graffiti

Several inscriptions found on the exterior of the Suburban Baths describe sexual acts taking place within the building. One inscription states “We, Apelles Mus with his brother Dexter lovingly scewed two women each twice.” The brothers might have even been repeat customers because another inscription reads “Apelles, Caesar's servant of the bedchamber, with Dexter lunched most pleasantly and also screwed.” These graffiti suggest that prostitution was a trade plied in this establishment.



Portion of art program found in changing room of Suburban Baths
featuring sexually explicit imagery, dated to 1st century CE



Scene found in private room
in the *House of the Vettii*.
Believed to be in slave's
(specifically cook's) bedroom



Scene found in largest brothel in
Pompeii called the *Lupanar*



Scene from Suburban Bath
changing room. Sexual scenes
with more than two partners are
uncommon in Roman art.

Sexual Imagery

Sexually explicit imagery, or graphic depictions of penetration, can be found on frescoes and household objects all over the ancient Roman world. In Pompeii, permanent installations of sexually explicit imagery, such as frescoes, tended to be placed in intimate settings within the home, away from public view. Portable household objects, such as lamps and mirrors, with erotic imagery could be placed away from public view. The only places we find permanent of sexually explicit imagery like frescoes in public view is in brothels, such as the *Lupanar*, or taverns known for prostitution, like the Tavern on the Street of Mercury. This sort of pattern suggests that the sexually explicit imagery of the Suburban Baths implied the sale of sex within its confines.