



**Ancient Landscapes Receive a Contemporary Reexamination In
Roman Landscapes: Visions of Nature and Myth from Rome and Pompeii
Opening at San Antonio Museum of Art in February 2023**

San Antonio, TX – October 12, 2022 – The San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA) announced that early next year it will present *Roman Landscapes: Visions of Nature and Myth from Rome and Pompeii*, the first exhibition in the United States to explore landscape scenes as a genre of ancient Roman art.

Serving as a contrast to the archetypal works of antiquity with which most museum audiences are familiar—the larger-than-life statues venerating gods or heroes, or scenes of battle or ritual found on friezes or pottery—these works instead depict artists’ idyllic visions of a countryside dotted with seaside villas and rural shrines, where gods and mythological heroes mingle with travelers, herdsman, and worshippers.

Organized by and presented exclusively in San Antonio, *Roman Landscapes* features more than 65 works, including major loans from museums in Italy, France, and Germany, many of which have never before been shown in the United States. The exhibition was curated and organized by Jessica Powers, SAMA’s Interim Chief Curator and Gilbert M. Denman, Jr., Curator of Art of the Ancient Mediterranean World, and will be on view at SAMA from February 24 through May 21, 2023.

Roman Landscapes will be accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue published by the museum, featuring essays by Powers; Bettina Bergmann, Professor Emeritus of Art History at Mount Holyoke College; Verity Platt, Professor of Classics and History of Art at Cornell University; Lynley J. McAlpine, Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow at SAMA; Timothy M. O’Sullivan, Professor of Classical Studies at Trinity University; and Thomas Fröhlich, Director of the Library at the German Archaeological Institute in Rome. In conjunction with the exhibition, Trinity University will dedicate its spring Lennox Seminar Lecture Series to subjects explored in the museum’s presentation.

Developed through several years of research that began with Powers’ explorations of works in SAMA’s own notable collection, *Roman Landscapes* will feature an array of wall paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and cameo glass and silver vessels created in Roman Italy between 100 BC and AD 250. The exhibition will introduce visitors to their cultural and archaeological contexts and highlight the artistic conventions that distinguish Roman landscape scenes, including fluid, almost impressionistic brushwork and the use of bird’s-eye perspective.

“The artistic innovation of showing human figures within visually dominant natural settings began during the tumultuous final decades of the Roman Republic, as civil war in Italy resulted in changes in land ownership and territorial expansion continued in the eastern Mediterranean,” said Powers. “In that context, landscape imagery was particularly resonant because of its portrayal of an idealized rustic past

and its emphasis on traditional Roman religion. Roman authors recognized the novelty of these images, though the concept of a ‘landscape’ scene did not arise until the Renaissance. Until now there have been few museum exhibitions focusing on this type of ancient art. *Roman Landscapes* addresses this, demonstrating how artists, patrons, and viewers in Roman Italy embraced landscape depictions over several centuries.”

“This outstanding exhibition, expertly curated by Jessica Powers, exemplifies the value SAMA places on collaboration with other organizations and museums,” said Emily Ballew Neff, PhD, The Kelso Director at SAMA. “An exhibition of this magnitude can only be brought to fruition by working together cross-culturally in support of a shared goal. We are grateful to the international museums that have worked with us to bring together such a unique vision.”

The exhibition is organized around five thematic sections. The first, “Garden Landscapes,” brings together paintings and sculptures from houses in Pompeii and nearby villas on the Bay of Naples to evoke the experience of a Roman peristyle garden. Among these is a wall painting with sculptures and birds in a garden, excavated from Pompeii’s House of the Golden Bracelet, one of several large houses terraced over the city’s western wall, with spectacular sea views. Dating from the late first century BC to the early first century AD, this painting presents a lush, seemingly naturalistic garden, enhanced with elements such as a painted marble statuette of an Egyptian king, a female tragic mask hanging almost menacingly from the top of a painted pavilion, and many lively birds of several different species.

“Coastal Views and Cultivated Landscapes” and “Sacred Landscapes” present mural paintings and relief sculptures that depict seascapes and rustic shrines, images that show how landscape scenes once decorated lavish Roman residences. These works display the imaginary aspects of Roman images of the natural world and connect the genre’s appearance to the political and social upheaval of the late Republic and early Empire. For example, a wall painting of a seaside villa, dating from the mid-first century AD and excavated at the Villa San Marco near ancient Stabiae, just south of Pompeii, presents an elaborately constructed villa on a platform that extends into the sea. This celebrates both the wealth and power of someone capable of paying for such a construction and the engineering mastery of the Romans, whose buildings grew in structural complexity and sophistication. The exquisitely preserved *Mosaic with Plato’s Academy* (Pompeii, second–first century BC) is one of several objects that reflect an ancient Roman fascination with the landscapes of Greece and Egypt. *Roman Landscapes* reveals an array of fantastical views of these celebrated lands that had been incorporated into the Roman Empire, and these images at once served to recall their conquest and underscore their historical and religious importance.

In “The Dangerous Landscapes of Myth,” mythological paintings then reveal landscape scenes as settings for hazardous encounters between humans and the gods, presenting visually the oft-told stories that served as warnings about individual or community behavior. The marble *Relief with a shrine to Diana*, (first century AD) highlights this. In its main scene, it portrays an idealized countryside, where animals and nature thrive in the peaceful atmosphere brought by proper veneration of the gods. Yet looking further reveals a different scene on the shrine’s pediment: a depiction of Actaeon’s punishment for spying on the goddess Diana while she bathed. There he sinks to the ground under assault from a hound at either side, a stark cautionary tale about the dangers of offending the powerful goddess.

The last section, “Landscapes in the Tomb,” compares wall paintings from communal tombs in Rome with those from houses and explores the adaptation of landscape imagery for funerary settings. For

example, multiple panels of the wall paintings from the Large Columbarium in Rome from the late first century BC have landscape scenes that decorate the rows of niches that once held urns of cremated remains. *Roman Landscapes* marks the first occasion when these important paintings will be exhibited outside Italy. Similarly, the marble *Cinerary urn for Titus Flavius Hierax*, made between the first and early second century AD, reflects the prosperity of the man buried by his wife, while a fruitful garland hangs between figures of a sphinx and Jupiter Ammon depicted to protect the deceased.

Roman landscapes did not emerge spontaneously. The arts of the Hellenistic period (323–30 BC) did feature some limited landscape elements and scenes incorporating humans and gods together in the natural world. This was especially true in Macedonian tomb paintings and in relief sculptures from Greece and Asia Minor. However, Roman artists actively expanded the genre in numerous ways, with compositions in which the natural features were as central as—or even more important than—the human figures, while experimenting with new approaches to rendering spatial depth. Although there is no single Latin word for this body of images, it does appear that the Romans were themselves conscious of the novelty of such works, as evidenced by their proliferation in numerous contexts and the application of the landscape genre to a variety of uses, from household decoration to civic burial ground.

About the San Antonio Museum of Art

The San Antonio Museum of Art serves as a forum to explore and connect with art that spans the world’s geographies, artistic periods, genres, and cultures. Its collection contains nearly 30,000 works representing 6,000 years of history and is particularly strong in ancient Greek and Roman art, Asian art, and art of the Americas. The Nelson A. Rockefeller Latin American Art wing spans the ages from the ancient Americas to the present and includes an outstanding collection of popular art. In recent years, the Museum has placed particular emphasis on strengthening its contemporary collections to reflect the true diversity of voices shaping the trajectory of art. This has included an emphasis on works by women artists, artists of color, and artists from San Antonio and across the state of Texas.

San Antonio is the nation’s seventh-largest city and is consistently listed as one of its fastest-growing. The Museum is housed in the historic Lone Star Brewery on the Museum Reach of San Antonio’s River Walk and is committed to promoting the rich cultural heritage and life of the city. It hosts hundreds of events and public programs each year, including concerts, performances, tours, lectures, symposia, and interactive experiences. As an active civic leader, the Museum is dedicated to enriching the cultural life of the city and the region, and to supporting its creative community.

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