



British Museum: Pompeii installation view - garden frescoes



Victoria and Albert Museum: Treasures of the Royal Courts: Tudors, Stuarts and the Russian Tsars

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Undoubtedly the season's hottest ticket, if you can excuse the pun, is the **British Museum's** ground-breaking exhibition, *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, which runs throughout the summer until 29 September. It features an unprecedented array of works from the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, allowing many of these objects to be seen outside Italy for the first time.

And if Herculaneum is not a place name familiar to you, you will learn that this smaller seaside town north of Pompeii and closer to Naples, was first to be buried under the ashes and excavations there have not been as extensive. Because of the way Vesuvius exploded, the two cities suffered different fates. In Herculaneum the heat was so intense it carbonised everything instantly, leaving objects such as a wooden table intact, while from Pompeii the grim casts of people in their death throes lends a sombre tone to this fascinating exhibition.

The British Museum takes as its focal point a Roman home of the time, laid out with everyday objects in the different rooms, from a stamped loaf of bread and a contraption in which one could fatten dormice in the kitchen to a baby's cradle in the bedroom. The most magnificent of the many frescoes on display are the three that form the garden alcove, from the House of the Golden Bracelet in Pompeii. In endless shades of green, we can decipher a host of birds and plants in gardens both wild and structured.

The status of women is highlighted by works such as the wall painting showing the baker Terentius Neo and his wife posing as equal business partners, or the life-sized statue of Eumachia, one of the richest people in the city, who erected the largest building in the forum.

The statue of a head with a disjointed penis attached at an appropriate height on its plinth (known as a herm) is a reminder that the sexual taboos of today were not in place. Whether it is a marble statues of Hercules so drunk he is unable to pee, the god Pan in the act with a she-goat or a fresco of a slave looking on while her owners make love, sex is an integral part of Roman life.

Taking inspiration from the hugely successful live screenings of staged productions of opera, theatre and ballet, the museum presents a live broadcast in June, where the curator and other experts take the viewer on a tour of the exhibition. The screening is planned to be shown abroad as well during the summer, but details have yet to be released.

A splendid loan of English silver from the Kremlin vaults forms the hub of what should be a more spectacular exhibition than it is at the **Victoria and Albert Museum**. Great craftsmanship from the 1600s, which would have been melted down for Cromwell's army, survived only because it was given as part of diplomatic exchanges between England's royalty and Moscow. *Treasures of the Royal Courts: Tudors, Stuarts and the Russian Tsars* (until 14 July) has some exquisite pieces at its heart, but an

awkward display dissipates much of its impact. It opens grandly with four enormous mythical creatures, the Dacre beasts, hewn from a single oak in Cumbria in 1507, including the original 'red bull' and a crowned dolphin. There are impressive pieces on display throughout: armour showing Henry VIII's ample girth, jewels such as Drake's Armada brooch, cameos and painted miniatures, as well as large period portraits. The Kremlin silverware is not given sufficient viewing space, so it is difficult to admire properly. There is also little of the Russian Tsars, besides their English presents and a portrait of the first Romanov tsar. I can't be the only visitor disappointed to find that, despite the title, instead of presenting both sides of 500 years of diplomatic trading, the show is simply an opportunity for the V&A to display its Tudor and Stuart treasures.

A strange collection entitled *Souzu: Outsider Art from Japan at the Wellcome Collection* (until 30 June) raises the age-old question of what exactly art is. Used as a tool for self-expression by untaught artists diagnosed with various mental or behavioural illnesses, it has been closely aligned with social care in Japan since the start of their welfare system after the war. The word souzu means both creation and imagination, and the work of these 46 artists certainly reveals oodles of that. While much of it is interesting perhaps from a psychiatric angle, it looks like a random selection from the school-room. The theme of primitive art, often with crude and repetitive figures, runs throughout. Particularly the final selection though, shows a startling finesse, which elevates it to another level: the fine needlework cubes by Toya Hagino, the sheer scale and detail of Norimitsu Kokubo's ongoing cityscapes and Shinichi Sawada's spiky ceramic demons, which will be displayed at the Venice Biennale this year. Marie Suzuki's bright colours, obsessive circles, endless eyes and repetitive patterns reminded me strongly of Yayoi Kusama's work, another inhabitant of a Japanese institution.

The **Tate Modern**, no doubt thanks to their German director, never contents itself simply with crowd-pleasers, but over the years has steadily introduced the British public to new names. One of these is the Lebanese artist *Saloua Raouda Choucair* (until 20 October). Now 97 and living in Beirut, she spent her early years in Paris under the tutelage of Ferdinand Leger. Back home, she was a lone voice using abstraction and although her art has a distinctively Islamic feel to it, it has echoes of other Western artists such as Naum Gabo and Barbara Hepworth. This is Choucair's first major museum showing and combines painting and sculpture from the Fifties to the Eighties, often small maquettes which she hoped would lead to public commissions. Although the large section of mobiles feels very much of a period, it is in the interlocking sculptures, small and large, stone and wooden, that the artist brings her unique vision to the fore, combining eastern and western aesthetic.



Wellcome Collection: Souzu: Outsider Art from Japan



The Tate Modern: Saloua Raouda Choucair

