

The Getty Villa: Stunt Double for the Villa of the Papyri



Just north of Los Angeles, California as one drives along the Pacific Coast Highway towards Malibu, there is a feeling that it just doesn't get anymore American than this. These same beaches littered with surfers and outdoor enthusiasts served as the set for many classic films and television shows. The Hollywood Hills and its neighbourhoods house some of the most recognizable faces in the world. Music blaring from the car radio also has a distinctly west coast sound. And the food? California's cuisine draws its inspiration heavily from Hispanic and Oriental flavours, and uses ingredients found locally to create dishes uniquely Californian. Visiting the Getty Villa in Malibu, California is equally a multi-sensory experience.

J. Paul Getty's vision for his collection of Greek, Roman and Etruscan antiquities was to exhibit them in an environment, in which they may naturally have been displayed. Therefore, care has been taken to ensure that what visitors see, hear, feel, smell and taste are true to the experience of visiting a Roman estate in the first century.

Nestled in a canyon overlooking the Pacific, the Villa's approach is long and winding, paved with stones intended to resemble the volcanic rock used to construct the roads in towns around Mount Vesuvius. Admission to the Villa is free, but there is a charge for parking. In order to control traffic and accommodate parking needs, a ticket is needed in order to access the parking garage. Visitors must pre-book their arrival time at <http://www.getty.edu/visit/>. From the parking garage, the villa is accessed by following a path that takes visitors higher and higher, until it seems as though they have reached the canyon's summit. Once the villa is in sight, it appears several stories below the path, as if visitors were approaching the villa in the process of excavation. The flight of stairs leading down along a fountain to a pool at the base takes one past layers of rock to the base stratum, where one might find water seeping into the site. Even the outdoor cafe is built to resemble a temporary structure, as if only there during the excavation. All the while, flora native to the Bay of Naples has been cultivated here, and thrives due to the similarities in climate.

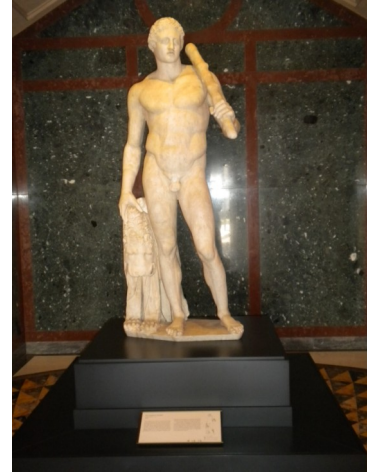
At the entrance to the museum, visitors can gather to catch one of the many guided tours offered by docents on a variety of topics. While waiting for the next tour to start, one can admire the recently constructed auditorium and outdoor theatre, which lie directly opposite and each feature productions of ancient works, most recently Sophocles' *Elektra*. In fact, with the Getty's vicinity to the film and television capital of America, the cast and crew of such a production is littered with recognizable names such as Manoel Felciano (Orestes), Pamela Reed (Clytemnestra) and Olympia Dukakis (Chorus leader).

Naturally, visitors may also guide themselves through, beginning with a short film shown in a small theatre off the atrium about J. Paul Getty himself, as well as the history and setting of the Getty Villa. The collection is organized thematically, and moving through the galleries will allow one to explore topics such as mythology, theatre, athletics, religion, women and children.



The functional atrium leads to an inner peristyle from which radiate several gallery rooms. Each room's theme is reinforced by the collection of artefacts contained within: Gods and Goddesses, Monsters and Minor Deities, Mythological Heroes, Stories of the Trojan War and Dionysos and the Theater. The prized possession on this floor, however, is the Lansdowne Herakles inside the Temple of Herakles. It was this piece that inspired Getty to build the Villa museum.

The second floor of the inner peristyle continues the thematic journey through climate controlled galleries featuring Animals in Antiquity, Athletes and Competition, Men in Antiquity, Prehistoric and Bronze Age Arts, Religious Offerings and Women and Children in Antiquity. The featured treasure here is the bronze Victorious Youth, crowning himself with an olive wreath. Not to be missed either is a kouros in the daedalic style and a mosaic of a boxing scene. Also a delightful addition to the Museum experience is a reading room, where visitors can rest and thumb through some of the literature discussing topics on these ancient themes. Many of these titles are also available for sale in the Gift Shop.



However, by far the most recognizable and impressive area of the Villa is without a doubt the outer peristyle. The covered walkway surrounding the formal garden features fresco paintings on the interior walls. The roof is the typical red clay tiles, complete with decorative antefixes. Throughout the garden are bronze statues, replicas of the originals found in the exact location of their discovery. And of course the giant pool running the length of the garden cannot be missed. Gravel paths circle around it and lead those out for a stroll past the shrubs, bushes, flowers and statues.

When exiting the colonnade and heading back towards the entrance, the path leads one past the herb garden. Planted with fruit trees, flowering shrubs and herbs native to the Mediterranean, it

would have originally supplied the owner with what he needed in his kitchen and in his medicine cabinet. Particularly strong scents from the rosemary trees follow visitors as they return to the main entrance area. Where this smell fades, the appetizing aromas of the Museum's cafe begins. The cafe's menu is therefore typically Californian: light fare with Mediterranean inspired flavours.

Finally, the North Campus of the Museum is a completely separate and removed building from the Villa. Known as the Ranch House, it was the original residence of J. Paul Getty in the 1950s. Once his collection outgrew the house, construction on the Villa began. The Villa opened to the public in 1974. The Ranch House has since been used as a dedicated site for offices, meeting rooms and a 20,000 volume research library. In addition, it serves as the base for the UCLA/Getty Masters Program in Conservation of Ethnographic and Archaeological Material.

For Classicists based in North America, the Getty Villa is a solid alternative to an ancient Roman site worth visiting. Its vicinity to Los Angeles airport and its variety of tours on architecture, glassware, the gardens, theatre and more, offers itself up as a perfect Classical-inspired weekend getaway. As true as it may be that there is no comparison to visiting Herculaneum in Italy, realistically, it cannot be done and appreciated as the Getty can, being so close to home and offering so much to visitors, who perhaps cannot afford the time and expense that a journey across the Atlantic would demand. For time-pressed North Americans looking for a place that looks, sounds, feels, smells and tastes of the Mediterranean, the Getty Villa awaits.

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