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Culture and History at Pompey's Museum

In 55 BCE in Rome's Campus Martius, Pompey the Great carved from his villa grounds and dedicated for his triumph over Mithridates a vast precinct, now destroyed: a temple to Venus Victrix ruled a theater cavea, and beyond, a portico framed an Asian-style plane-tree park, where a curia at the garden's far end overlooked an official pleasure landscape (Gleason). In this Pergamene-style garden museum were assembled old-master paintings and a horde of collected, new and `replica' sculpture series - narratives, tableaux and literary and royal portraits, mostly Greek in subject. The sculptural series' themes were empire, monitory myth, divine providence, literary inspiration, and also a novel emphasis on female exemplarity - in sex and generation as wife and as meretrix, and in cultural authorship; the seriated author portraits, new to Rome, and a focal group of Apollo and the Muses added the precinct to the great Republican Mouseia. (For all of its obviously Roman and triumphal elements, equally striking is how much Pompey's visual language "spoke Greek" to his Roman audience.)

This alluring stage for politics, love and sacralized culture was much saluted by Greek and Latin writers at Rome, from poets of Pompey's and Augustus' day , to the vicious 2nd-c. AD Christian homiletics which now help document its originary program (Coarelli). Pompey's monumentum was a spectacular climax to the estates and sanctuaries with which the Republican elite made their Rome an elegant Hellenistic capital. In turn it fast became paradigmatic, for villa and palace gardens and for the Imperial autocrats' public theaters and porticoes (fora); texts and inscriptions show that city prefects maintained it into Late Antiquity, honoring alike formal excellence, and historical and literary associations. Now, however, the complex is among the least-understood of all the once-famous spaces of the ancient city. Historians of the arts tend to know its elements partially and separately; other histories (literary, social, political) tend to discuss only its theater's supposedly novel permanence, and its cults' relevance to theologies of ruler charisma. In reviewing the nature of the evidence for Pompey's project, this paper, obviously, posits the utility of exchange between historians of texts and of "art", Greek and Latin language, Hellenic and Roman arts. It posits also two premises to mediate such exchange: that texts and things constitute parallel sorts of artifacts, for histories of representation and response; and that making art happen, and paying attention to it, are part of the substance of political and social history, not (only) its illustration.