

Ancient Roman Bathing: Influences of Architecture and Art as an Immersive Experience

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Abstract

Bathing rituals in ancient Rome were an integral part of everyday living and were unique for many reasons. A tradition adopted from the Greeks, the Roman-style bathing experience was available to anyone who could pay a small entrance fee. This bathing sequence was specific to Roman design, as every Roman bathhouse included three main rooms: the Caldarium, the Tepidarium, and the Frigidarium. Art and architecture found in these bathing facilities worked in conjunction with one another to produce an ethereal and immersive experience for the bather. This paper examines Roman bathhouse art and architecture, specifically in the Baths of Caracalla and Pompeii, to demonstrate how progressive engineering worked in conjunction with the arts to create a captivating and interactive environment.

1. Introduction

Roman baths of the Early Empire were at the forefront of architectural and technological developments. Literary and archaeological evidence support the emergence of daily bathing practices in Rome, Italy, as early as the first and second centuries B.C.E. during the Late Republic. These bathing practices were adopted from the Greeks and transformed into a Roman tradition through the use of different architectural and artistic design elements. The Greeks had a long-standing practice of public bathing, first seen in their gymnasiums that featured the *loutron*, an open-air space with basins or simple shower arrangements delivering cold water.¹ The Greek Hellenistic culture of the *gymnasia* may have offered inspiration to many architects in Rome, including general and architecture patron Marcus Agrippa.

Agrippa, the right-hand man to the Roman emperor Augustus, oversaw many architectural projects during the Early Roman Empire and began to construct the first large-scale Imperial bath complex in Rome, the *Thermae Agrippa*, which were completed by the end of the first century B.C.E. This large-scale public bathhouse gave Romans the opportunity to engage in the luxurious style of bathing, which soon became a part of their everyday rituals. A census taken in 33 B.C.E by Agrippa recorded that 170 bathhouses were found in Rome, highlighting their increasing popularity, and by the early fifth century C.E. there were more than 856 bathhouses recorded there.

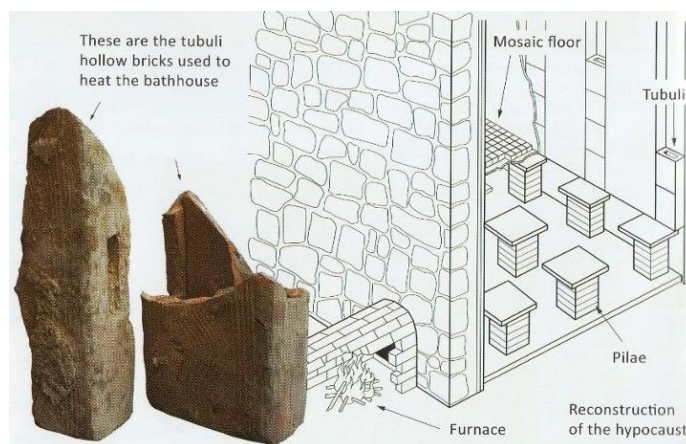
Bathhouses were not only a place to maintain one's hygiene, but the architectural, sculptural, and design elements that were incorporated into their construction played an important role in the overall experience and ritualistic process of Roman bathing. The research in this paper explores the different architectural and sculptural elements that supported the Roman style sequence of bathing during the early first and second centuries B.C.E in Rome, Italy. Through a close examination of Roman archaeological and textual evidence that includes both primary and secondary sources, in this research paper I argue that the architectural and sculptural features in conjunction with the progressive Italian engineering associated with Roman bathhouses, namely the Baths of Caracalla and the Pompeii bathhouses, all worked

together to create a unique and immersive environment -- one that moved the bathers through a sequential experience and enriched the overall experience of the bather.

2. Bathing in the Ancient World

Although bathing was a practice adopted from the Greeks, the Romans took the foundation of the Greek ideals and perfected it with many enhancements including the hypocaust, an advanced heating system. It was once believed that Sergius Orata, a Campanian entrepreneur of the first century B.C.E., was the Roman inventor of the hypocaust system. However, it is now widely accepted that this invention was of Greek origin.² Greek-style baths found in southern Italy support the idea that the Romans adopted this practice from them, but later added Roman-specific elements to the design, method of bathing, and architecture used to construct these bathing facilities. Roman-style bathing became rapidly popularized during the Middle Republic in Campania, an area in southern Italy which was a notably Hellenized part of the Roman world.³ The Middle Republic witnessed a mass migration of Romans from the southern Italian countryside into the city of Rome, bringing with them many different cultural ideas.

Minimal heating systems can be found in early Greek baths, but the Romans fully refined the use of the hypocaust system (Fig. 1) to add an extra sense of lavishness to the bathing experience.



(fig.1) Roman Hypocaust System.

<https://peterborougharchaeology.org/fane-road-roman-villa/roman-heating-system-bathhouse/>

This under-floor system was widely used to warm the water of the pools, including the floors and passageways inside that ran between the different temperature pools. It was an advanced engineering feat for the Romans during this time period. The Roman hypocaust extends over the full area of the room in which it was used, with an upper floor supported on a regular grid of piers of *hessales* or *suspensurae*, or the other terracotta supports. Hot air would heat the floor and the high temperatures required for a sweating room were achieved by lining the walls with *tubuli* to provide a narrow space through which the hot gases from the hypocaust passed, turning the walls into the main heating surfaces.⁴ Hollow walls maintained an even temperature throughout the room in both the highest and lowest spaces which helped keep the visitors comfortable and relaxed during their visit to these facilities.⁵ The new and improved heating system became very popular in the construction of all bathhouses and attracted many Roman citizens to partake in this adopted practice. This construction was not only an architectural embellishment, but also an enhancement for the overall quality of the bathing experience.

Bathing complexes were seen as a vital component of ancient Roman daily life and their importance is noted by their increasing numbers throughout the early first century B.C.E. in Rome. Due to the intense heat that the Italian climate brings, the Romans neither wore linen nor used stockings with their shoes, thus frequent bathing was necessary for properly maintaining one's hygiene. Although bathing was an adopted practice from the Greeks, Romans had a very distinctive style of bathing that differed from the Greeks, especially in architectural and artistic styles. The Greeks were first known to use hip-baths, or sitz-baths, which were only deep enough to sit or crouch in. These small baths were constructed with a crude heating system that was not fully developed yet. The Romans took this initial idea and enhanced the hypocaust system by adding a fire and furnace component, located underneath the bathhouses to provide

warm water and floors for the bathers. Their new system attracted many more visitors to the bathhouses and significantly enriched the bather's experience.

3. Public Bathing

Public bathing became routine to Roman daily life and was likely due to its increasingly sophisticated engineering and amenities that are previously noted above. Romans are well known for the importance they placed on public baths and public bathing. Public bathhouses were open to everyone in Rome to use during the allotted bathing hours and were utilized by many. The bathhouses were so popular that the emperor himself would come and use the facilities and mingle with his subjects, possibly to increase his own popularity, according to scholar of Roman architecture, Fikret K. Yegül. They also served as a place to create the illusion of a classless society where the rich and the poor bathed together.⁶ Those who did not wish to go to the public baths usually had a pool in their own home to enjoy the luxury of the water by themselves. Private bathhouses had to supply their own hot water and means of allowing sunlight in; thus, they were very expensive and not found in the common Roman household and reserved exclusively for the wealthy citizens of Rome. Public baths were popular and were of large-scale to accommodate many people that wanted to indulge in the luxury of bathing as their popularity in society grew.

A well-to-do Roman was accompanied to the public baths by his enslaved workers that carried bathing paraphernalia: exercise and bathing garments; sandals; linen towels; and his toilet kit (which contained anointing oils and perfumes in flasks, several strigils, and probably a sponge).⁷ If one was not wealthy enough to have assistance to the baths, they were responsible for carrying their own supplies. However, most Romans could afford the service of at least a single servant. In most establishments, there was a special room in which servants waited while their master bathed as a means to provide exclusivity and privacy to the bather. These extra spaces added additional luxury and grandeur to the bathhouses, while providing a space for the assistants to wait, converse, and also enjoy some of the amenities of the bathhouses.

Inside these public bathhouses were a multitude of different rooms with varying purposes. Many bathhouses included an exercise room called the *palestra*, where one could engage in light exercises such as walking, running, and playing handball before heading to the baths. Activities before entering the baths were crucial in achieving a relaxed bathing experience but were not meant to be strenuous. Exercise was seen as a vital part of the bathing ritual because it was thought to be one of the key elements for maintaining a regimen of good health, along with bathing and massages.⁸ Since exercise was equated with good health, it was something all men partook in at the bathhouses to show off their physical strength and possibly seem more attractive to the female bathers that were present. Additionally, there were sweat baths (*sudatoria* or *laconica*), strigiling rooms (*dstrictaria*), ball courts (*sphaeristeria*), and open-air pools (*natationes* or *piscina*)⁹ that were utilized in the bathhouse to add variety and plenty of space for the bathers to relax in. These additional rooms offered larger spaces to engage in activities, providing the chance to socialize with the other guests in a natural way and adding diversity to the construction of the Roman bathhouse. The person who oversaw the baths was called the *Balneator* and had slaves under him, called *Capsarii*, who took care of the clothes of those who bathed.¹⁰ Without these enslaved peoples, there would not have been such a strict order to the way the bathing rituals were conducted additionally, there were slaves who had the job of anointing the bathers with different oils to cleanse themselves after a dusty, hot Roman day. These oils were seen as a vital component in the bathing process, as one used the oils as a way to cleanse oneself before entering into the public pools to help maintain the cleanliness of the bathing waters, and also as an important part of upkeep personal hygiene.

4. Roman Bathing Features

In order to achieve this sequence of Roman bathing, ample water supply was essential to the functioning of the many bathhouses in Italy. The aqueduct, an early Roman invention that improved the way to transfer water from one location to another with minimal effort, was invented in 114 B.C.E (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Roman aqueduct system. Marcus Agrippa. Pont Du Gard. 1st century AD, 160 feet high. Yellow Limestone. <https://thegoodlifeFrance.com/roman-pont-du-gard-aqueduct-france/>

The first aqueduct in Rome was built by Appius Claudius, who was a Roman censor before engaging in one of the city's most valuable and historically significant inventions in engineering. After the major success of the first aqueduct, seven or eight more were built to supply water to Rome from many miles away, in such abundance that no city was better supplied.¹¹ Roman engineers used gravity and the aqueduct systems relied on an average slope of 0.20 percent incline to transfer the water to the city without manual labor.¹² This slope helped regulate water speed and was critical because, if the aqueducts were too steep, the fast water flow would cause damage to the building materials and degrade them over time. If the slope was not steep enough, the slow water flow would lack the speed to make it past the siphons.¹³ The improvements made on the Roman aqueduct system was a highly influential component in the rising popularity of bathhouses in Italy during this time.

Since the city had ample water supply due to the aqueduct systems, baths were built in abundance for everyone to use, further increasing their popularity. This feat of progressive Roman engineering showed a level of sophistication and attention to detail that was not common during the Early First century in Italy. The earliest of the Roman aqueducts were constructed above ground and consisted of carefully cut and fitted blocks of stone, consisting of a series of piers and arches, designed with the utmost regard to symmetry and proportion.¹⁴ The dry, cut stonework used to construct the aqueducts characterized the republican period in Italy and has been studied in both modern and ancient regards. Tufa was the most available material to the Romans and was heavily used in the construction of the aqueducts during this time. Tufa is composed of a variety of porous, soft volcanic stone that is common in Italy and was extensively used not only for temples, tombs, and walls in Etruscan and Republican Roman times but also to construct the Roman aqueduct system.¹⁵

While smaller aqueducts became the custom under the rule of Augustus, the greatest of all the Roman aqueducts were constructed under the rule of Emperor Claudius and were monumental to Roman engineering. In later years, the stonework of the aqueducts grew to be more embellished. Roman architects drew on inspiration from Greek art to create decorative details, while simultaneously going to great lengths to conceal the true origin of their construction.¹⁶ Greek influences can be seen here in even the earliest of Roman inventions.

Two features define the Roman bath. First, it comprises gradations of heat in a clear sequence of rooms (usually termed in modern studies *frigidarium*, *tepidarium*, and *caldarium*) that channel the bather purposefully from one room to the next. The *frigidarium* is the room with the cold pools, the *tepidarium* contains the room with the tepid water pools, and the *caldarium* is the hottest of the pools. Romans moved through these pools and different rooms in a sequence that had been improved over time, starting with the hot water pools and ending with a nice cool bath at the end. Secondly, the Roman-style bath features a heated communal bathing pool (termed *solia* or *alvei*).¹⁷ For a bath to be considered fully Roman, these two elements must be present in conjunction with one another. Greek style baths did not incorporate communal bathing or a developed heating system like the Romans did. The Romans chose to include many other rooms inside their bathhouses which were used for various purposes including the *vaporium*, or the stove room, which was warmed via an underground furnace, and the basin, where they bathed in was called the *baptisterium natatio*, or *piscina*. These rooms were built to specifically enrich the quality of the experience a Roman visitor had at the bathhouse by offering sophisticated engineering qualities.

According to first century B.C.E author and architect Vitruvius Pollio, a Roman bathhouse should contain diverse architectural elements that help create a relaxing and immersive experience when bathing. The bathhouse must be built on a location that will be the warmest, facing away from the north and the northeast to allow for optimal time in the sun.¹⁸ According to Vitruvius, since bathing time spans from midday into the evening, the rooms for the hot and tepid baths should be lit from the southwest. The bathhouse must also contain three bronze cauldrons that are to be set over the furnace: one for hot; another for tepid; and the third for cold water, placed in such positions that the amount

of water which flows out of the hot water cauldron may be replaced from that for tepid water, and in the same way the cauldron from the tepid water may be supplied from that for cold water.¹⁹

The hanging floors of the hot bathrooms are to be constructed according to a strict set of rules. First, the surface of the ground should be laid with tiles a foot and a half square sloping towards the furnace in such a way that, if a ball is thrown in, it cannot stop inside but must return of itself to the furnace room. In this way, the heat of the fire will more readily spread under the hanging flooring. Upon the tiles, pillars made of eight-inch bricks are built and set at such a distance apart that two-foot tiles may be used to cover them. These pillars should be two feet in height, laid with clay mixed with hair, then covered on top with the two-foot tiles supporting the floor.²⁰

According to Vitruvius, the vaulted ceilings will last longer if they are made of masonry, but if they are not built of masonry, they should have tilework on the underside. The entire vaulting structure is completely supported by iron and has joints on the upper side that are supported by a mixture of clay and hair, while the underside is plastered with pound tile mixed with lime and then covered with stucco for extra support. The materials used to construct these buildings were vital to its existence, as this region is known to be susceptible to earthquakes and other forces of nature due to the terrain these structures were built on.

Vitruvius also mentions how large the bathhouses should be and clarifies that the size of the baths should depend upon the population which varied from location to location.²¹ The breadth should be one third of the length, excluding the niches for the washbowl and the bath basin, which should be placed under a window so that the shadows of other sculptural pieces will not obstruct the natural lighting. The bath basin should be no less than six feet from the wall to the edge, with the lower step and the cushion taking up two feet of this space. The bathhouses were carefully constructed to allow for sufficient lighting from the sun and to also be spacious enough to house the Roman population. With a clear guide given by Vitruvius, uniformity amongst Roman bathhouses was the defining quality of a Roman bathing facility.

5. Designing Roman Baths for Efficiency and Aesthetics

As noted earlier, Roman style bathhouses were built consciously to utilize natural light sources that enhanced their architecture. The time of day for bathing was important to the Romans because of the naturalistic effects created by architectural elements. Romans built these bathhouses with careful consideration of both aesthetic and environmental aspects which ultimately enhanced the overall experience one had upon entering the bathhouse as all these elements work in conjunction with each other to produce an immersive environment.

One element that was specifically built to capture and enhance natural daylight was the construction of the oculus (Fig. 3).



(fig. 3) Roman oculus and windows, Pompeii Bath House. (Photograph by author)

The oculus is a circular-shaped opening often placed in the ceiling of a room which allows the light above to filter in, introducing a natural source of light. The effects that the oculus design produces can be ethereal, as the light refracts off the glistening water and is mirrored and shimmered onto the walls and ceiling of the room in which it was built which greatly enhances the bathing experience. This design was not only intended to produce light, but also to act as an air flow system that kept the rooms well ventilated. Furthermore, the oculus served as a way to include a bit of fresh air into the rooms that contained hot pools, producing a more enjoyable experience for the bather. This construction element offered a way to maintain the amount of water vapor that was produced, keeping it at a

manageable level and controlling the humidity in the room.²² The careful use of the oculus underlines the Romans' thorough attention to architecture and the way it could be manipulated to affect experience. This type of opening reflects the Roman design aesthetics that sought to create an immersive environment and interior and exterior spaces.

Other architectural elements that were commonly found in Roman bathhouses were large-scale windows, vaults, and domes. Like the oculus, windows were important in the architecture of bathhouses to allow for optimal sun and also to keep the bathhouse sufficiently lit as the day passed. These large windows were architecturally placed to face south, allowing for the longest exposure time.²³ There is evidence from other bathing sites, excluding the Baths of Caracalla, found primarily between the first and second centuries C.E. in Italy which offer evidence to support the idea there was once glass used in the windows.²⁴ Glass panes and fragments have been documented by scholars that indicate the nature of Roman bath window construction. Bathhouses depended on large and well-situated windows for their illumination and were closed per imperial (or municipal) order before daylight had completely faded due to safety concerns.²⁵ These carefully designed bathhouses demonstrate an expressed interest in using solar power to heat the rooms naturally and enhance the bathing experience. In addition to the hypocaust system, these large-scale windows not only provided an ideal source of light but helped heat the rooms inside the bathhouse organically. The average temperature inside the bathhouse was around one hundred degrees Fahrenheit and the heat was welcomed by all who used these facilities, creating an enjoyable and relaxing visit.

Vaults were also utilized inside Roman bathhouses to create connecting passageways between the various pools and chambers. As noted earlier, inside a Roman style bathhouse, one could find different temperature rooms ranging from hot to cold with accompanying pools to go with the room temperature. These walkways offered a transitional space to be incorporated as a way to connect one room to the other. The vaulted ceilings were built out of masonry for better support and contained arcs that were made from iron bars that were placed at such distances apart that each pair of them would be self-supporting.²⁶ Vaults in hot bathrooms were more serviceable if they were double layered with a mixture of clay and hair, for then, the moisture from the heat would not be able to spoil the timber in the framework and lower the inside temperature.

Domes created the illusion of more space, adding to the grandeur of these spaces. They were built to serve as an illusion to the viewer as the size and curvature of the dome tricks the eye into thinking that the space is larger. Domes were thus frequently included to play upon viewer spatial perception. These aforementioned architectural elements played key roles in enhancing the quality of Roman bathing which is evident in the utilization of many of these features.

There were other factors that affected when bathing occurred during the day. Regular bathing hours were set to allow sufficient time for cleaning and maintenance and usually took place in the afternoon, or the eighth hour in the Roman system, which is noon in the contemporary.²⁷ Bathing time commenced after a light lunch and perhaps a short siesta. Men and women went to the baths and stayed there for several hours to socialize and enjoy the bathing facilities.²⁸ Nighttime bathing was not unheard of but was highly discouraged due to the lack of light and other safety and security reasons. There are occasional references to artificial lighting of public bathhouses, and oil lamps have been found in large quantities in the excavation of certain baths.²⁹ For the most part, however, the extra cost and difficulty of artificial lighting confined bathing to daytime hours. Daytime bathing was a luxury all Romans could partake in and most took advantage of daily at a very little monetary expense that most could afford. The ritual of daytime bathing was vital to the creation of the immersive experience. Roman architecture produced due to the need for natural light being present to utilize the large windows and other design elements mentioned that pushed to create an immersive and interactive experience.

6. Artworks at the Baths of Caracalla

The Imperial *thermae* of Caracalla was a lavishly decorated bathhouse and began during 212 C.E. and 216 C.E, ranking as the second largest bathing facility in Rome. These *thermae* were commissioned by Emperor Septimius Severus for his son but Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Bassianus, popularly known as Caracalla, completed the bathhouse's final construction.³⁰ From the start of its construction in the beginning of the third century, the decoration of this bathhouse was viewed as an integral part of the baths themselves; that is, the artworks were an inseparable component of their patron's benefaction.³¹ The emperor along with his architects and artists made unusual and highly decorative choices that include mythical sculptures and references to military themes. The surviving decorations of the Baths of Caracalla reveal a refined taste for extravagant ornamentation, yet the level of preservation demonstrates how well these works were made. Although most of these bathhouses' statues were destroyed during the Middle Ages, enough remain to give some impression of what the sculptural decoration of one of these great bathhouses was like.³² One must assume

there was a high volume of loss of sculptural art due to the numerous pieces that are catalogued by scholars and the countless other fragments found during excavations. Wall paintings and other decorative stucco details can only be imagined within an ancient context due to the color that has faded away over decades.

The bathhouses of Caracalla, constructed and finished to the highest of standards, were considered monumental for the time. This bathhouse was designed to occupy 1,600 people at any given time and included the three fundamental bathing rooms, the *caldarium*, *frigidarium*, and the *tepidarium*. The building stood forty meters high, emphasizing its grandeur³³. To complete this massive monument, engineers employed 600 marble workers and 6,000 tradesmen.

During excavation of this site, fragments of the original decorative art were found, supporting the argument that art was a significant factor in the creation of Roman style bathhouses. The remaining fragments and pieces were lost over time as damage from collapsing vaults and walls ruined artworks and other decorative materials. This *thermae* was found at its latest stages of use and would have been maintained by municipal authorities. It functioned as long as the water supply flowed from an aqueduct. There were 108 niches discovered in the walls which were used to place statues inside for decoration around bath house rooms. The surviving sculptures that were found would fill only thirty-seven percent of those niches, thus only forty statues were preserved. This sculptural evidence strongly suggests that only a fraction of the original decorative program was able to be documented and preserved.³⁴

Some of these niches were found to have water pipes at the base of the sculpture's original location to transform it into a fountain figure that had adjustable water pressure to make the water stream vary depending on the pressure. The sculpture inside of the bathhouse was not purely for decorative purposes but served a greater significance in producing a visually stimulating experience while bathing. Many were statues of heroic males, gladiators, significant military generals, or emperors, which held importance to their viewers. While these statues were considered decorative pieces, they were also valuable particularly for the men at the bathhouses as inspiration, guidance, or conversation. These statues found in these bathhouses support the idea that bathing was a very complex ritual that involved numerous aspects to fully experience the Roman style of bathing.

7. Excavation at the Baths of Caracalla

Pope Paul III Farnese was seeking decoration for both his private collection and for the Vatican when he spear-headed the Farnese excavations at the Baths of Caracalla starting in the summer of 1545 through the spring of 1549.³⁵ The *Hercules Farnese* (Fig 4.) and the *Farnese Bull* (Fig. 5) two of the major colossal statues to be excavated during this time, were highly significant since they revealed a key artistic component that added to the experience of the bather in a more interactive way.



(fig. 4) *Hercules Farnese*, Baths of Caracalla. Lysippos. 3rd century B.C.E. 10.5 feet. Marble.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/343588>



(fig. 5) *Farnese Bull*, Baths of Caracalla. Lysippos. Farnese Bull. 3rd century B.C.E. 22.5 inches tall. Marble.
<https://archaeology-travel.com/artefacts/farnese-bull-naples/>

These two sculpture pieces are the only securely documented works from the excavation of the Baths of Caracalla. These statues would have been found in the *frigidarium* which is a very large room allowing enough space for such colossal statues.

The *Farnese Bull* was particularly positioned to articulate to the visitor which way they were supposed to go to reach the next room.³⁶ Similarly, it acted as an effective incentive for the bathers to move through the bath spaces. This particular piece of sculpture is widely considered to be the largest single sculpture recovered from antiquity, according to Pliny the Elder, and was excavated in the eastern palestra.³⁷ This sculptural piece is also known as the *Punishment of Dirke*, it is a replica of the original Greek version. This sculpture depicts punishment carried out by human revenge and represents the punishment of Dirke, who was originally the wife of King Lykos of Thebes, carried out by the sons of Antiope, who was her niece, for an ill-treatment inflicted upon her. Antiope's twin sons avenge her by killing her pursuer who then tie Dirke to the horns of a raging bull which is the moment of punishment that is depicted in the *Farnese Bull*.³⁸ The sons, Amphion and Zethos, are symmetrically arranged on either side of Dirke who is shown reclining semi-nude. The figure of Antiope standing behind the bull along with a shepherd seated on a rock in the right-hand side with a dog in front have been added by the Romans in their version found in the Baths of Caracalla.

The *Farnese Bull* depicts violence and power and alludes to the theme of punishment which was a pervasive theme in Greek culture as they believed acting out against divine and human authority entails punishment, which was an integral part of Greek society, that is now seen incorporated into Roman culture. This Roman replica takes inspiration from the Greek version but embellishes it with additional figures and content that can be easily connected to Roman society and cultural practices.³⁹ The *Farnese Bull* is a dramatic sculpture that is typical of the Hellenistic-baroque style and incorporates themes from both periods in a uniquely Roman way.

The *Hercules Farnese* is also a Roman replica of a marble statue created by sculptor Lysippos during the Greek late Classical period. This image of Hercules is often replicated due to the significance it holds within both Greek and Roman cultures. In ancient Greek mythology, Hercules is a half-human, half-divine, child of Zeus and Alcmene. Zeus was unfaithful to his wife Hera with Alcmene, and she discovered the acts of his infidelity and sought revenge. Hera sent a fit of rage to consume Hercules that resulted in the death of his wife, Megara, and children during this outburst of anger. To atone for his sins of killing his wife and children, Hercules was told by Apollo that he was to serve Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns and Mycenae for twelve years to absolve him from his murderous acts against his family. Each of these twelve labors was created by Eurystheus and designed to destroy Hercules and test not only his physical strength, but also his character as well.⁴⁰

This sculpture that represents Hercules stands at almost ten and a half feet tall, a colossal statue. Here, the hero is depicted after he has completed the eleventh labor (Fig. 6), which was to steal the Zeus' golden apples that were a wedding gift, from the garden located at the northern edge of the world that was guarded by a hundred-headed dragon.⁴¹



(fig. 6) Hercules Farnese, Baths of Caracalla. Goltzius, Hendrick. Engraving.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.18658366>

The *Hercules Farnese* is carved in the round to give the viewer an opportunity to fully experience this sculpture, further adding to the immersive qualities that already incorporated, offering a 360-degree view of him. The apples that he obtained can be seen in his hand that is behind his back, obscuring the frontal view of the golden apple. The hero is shown bearing his weight on a wooden club that is draped in the fur of the Lion of Nemean, from the kill of his first labor that now provides a cushion for his arm and weary body. After Hercules completed all twelve labors, he was considered Greece's most admirable hero for his strength and perseverance and was the perfect embodiment of the Greek idea called *Pathos*, the experience of virtuous struggle and suffering which would lead to fame and sometimes, as in this case, immortality. These attributes give emphasis to why this particular representation is replicated.

Historical excavations have revealed that statues such as the *Hercules Farnese* were common in baths as it resembles heroic qualities perceived as desirable attributes which inspired its viewer.⁴² Romans who are coming to the bathhouse, men in particular, can view statues like the *Hercules Farnese* and identify admirable traits that they personally want to implement into their daily lives by looking at artistic heroic statues for guidance and direction. These statues give evidence to the attention paid to the details of the interior of the bathhouse but also how sculpture could enhance a visitor's experience. Sculptural pieces prove that they not only served as a function of design, but also possessed a symbolic meaning that was significant to Roman viewers.

Other artistic elements that were discovered inside the Baths of Caracalla were numerous mosaics of athletes that were in the space adjacent to the *frigidarium*⁴³. With the excavation underway, more mosaics were found in a pendant, polychrome composition that also depicted different athletes and judges. In the main bathing block, portraits of emperors and famous Romans, including both Caracalla and Antonius Pius were found, along with a headless statue that has been identified as Cato. Free-standing sculptures of gods and goddesses were also found in this main room, including Diana, Minerva, Woburn Abbey type, and Maenad. This discovery yields a wealth of decorative materials that have been there for centuries; however, museums and collections only contain a mere fraction of the original relics.⁴⁴

The Farnese excavations of the Baths of Caracalla yielded a large quantity of decorative materials that were made of exceptional quality.⁴⁵ The artifacts found at this bath site offer a deeper sense to how sculpture and statues were employed to add an additional layer of lavishness and connective Roman history to the experience of bathing. The significance of the sculptural pieces excavated to the Roman citizens is evident in the artistic precision of skill used to create them in conjunction with the quality of materials used further emphasize the notion of careful detail given to its construction. Decorative artworks and images that were recovered from the Baths of Caracalla show an expressed attention to detail showing how both architecture and art were used to enhance this bathing space to create an immersive experience.

8. Bathhouses at Pompeii

Similar to the Baths of Caracalla, the buried ancient city of Pompeii reveals how Roman life was lived and what was culturally significant to the Romans, including well-preserved bathhouse structures found amongst the ruins of this once thriving city. Pompeii was a city located at the southeastern base of Mount Vesuvius which experienced a tragic volcano eruption on August 24, 79 C.E. This eruption was witnessed and described by Pliny the Younger, a contemporary scholar of this time, as looking like an Italian umbrella pine--a tall trunk spreading out at the top to a dense cloud shot with flashes of lightning. From that cloud fell a heavy hail of pumice stones, smashing the roofs, riddling the houses, and burying the city under a blanket of pumice more than twelve feet deep. The remaining survivors that had taken refuge in the cellars and vaults tried to escape but were hit with a second wave of suffocating ashes which piled up to a height of six to nine feet.⁴⁶ People were left encased like molds in ash as they were trying to escape to safety. Although this is a tragic event, the ashes that fell from the sky covered the entire city and its people, essentially preserving everything for archeologists to later excavate. A first-hand account of the events by Pliny the Younger offers vital information about the city's last moments of occupation and how the eruptive ash from the volcano helped preserve what has been excavated in modern times.⁴⁷

Excavations at Pompeii began in 1748 under the leadership of Giuseppe Fiorelli and lasted two hundred and ten years⁴⁸, the longest excavation ever made at any city in the ancient world, yielding substantial evidence that gives great insight as to what was significant to them in regard to art, sculpture, and architecture. The original excavational purpose was to recover works of art which would be used to embellish the museums that belonged to the kings of Naples, yet the plethora of artifacts and the city's plan uncovered during the process revealed highly significant artifacts kept well preserved by layers of erupted volcanic ash, serving as a protective layer against the elements.

As the city of Pompeii was being excavated, three large public bathhouses were discovered at strategically placed at points around the city.⁴⁹ These public bathhouses are particularly noteworthy due to the fact that they show the development of Roman institutions from its earliest and most primitive stages of technology. The mass existence of aqueducts found in Pompeii help give an idea of how valued water was to the Romans but also how this access popularized the use of bathing facilities amongst the citizens.

9. Stabian Bathhouse Art in Pompeii

The first and oldest of the three baths is the Stabian Baths, dating to the third century, considered the earliest example of public-bath architecture found in Italy.⁵⁰ The Stabian Baths stood at the intersection of the two main streets that quartered the city and included a small *palestra* as well as rooms for exercise and other recreational purposes. This bathhouse featured five entrance doors to the men's and women's sections with large niches in the six bathing rooms for sculptural pieces to go inside for decoration (Fig. 7).⁵¹



(fig. 7) Statue niches, caldarium, Pompeii Bathhouse. (Photograph by author)

These niches are significant due to the fact that these empty spaces that are intended for sculpture support the importance of artistic design elements incorporated into the construction plan of the bathing facilities.

Architectural elements with a specific decorative function were made of high-quality grey tuff that was quarried regionally in the Sarno River plain.⁵² This artistic importance placed on functional decoration can be seen in the elaborate wall frescoes that are featured throughout the inside of the bathhouse along with the architect's specific attention to design to protect the wall art from any damages. The architect, Vitruvius, describes the elaborate methods employed by wall painters, including the insertion of sheets of lead in the wall to prevent the capillary action of moisture from attacking the fresco (Fig. 8), the preparation of as many as seven layers of plaster on the wall, and the use of marble powder in the top layers to help produce a mirror-like sheen on the surface.⁵³



(fig. 8) Wall Fresco, caldarium, Pompeii Bathhouse. (Photograph by author)

This attention to detail is one of the contributing factors to why the frescoes are still well-preserved, surviving a volcanic eruption and hundreds of years.

Other decorative elements, found in the interior of the bathhouse on the ceilings and walls of the domes incorporate low relief sculpture, further supporting the importance of art within the bathhouses at Pompeii. When entering the main room of the bathhouse, one can readily identify the multitude of artistic elements found ranging in the form of standing sculptures, wall art, and frescoes that were highly decorative in nature (Fig. 9).



(fig. 9) Wall Reliefs, caldarium, Pompeii Bathhouse. (Photography by author)

Here, in the *caldarium* is where most of the decorative art is found, as the warm pools were the most popular to the visitors due to the use of the hypocaust system that heats the water and floors for additional aspects of luxury and relaxation. This warm room was progressive not only in the advanced hypocaust system but also in the careful incorporation and placement of these artistic elements furthered the popularity of the *caldarium*.

Featured in the center of the domed ceiling inside the *caldarium* is a basin that measures nearly thirteen feet in diameter (Fig. 10), illuminated naturally by the oculus directly above.



(fig. 10) Basin and Oculus, Pompeii Bathhouse. (Photograph by author)

The architects of the Stabian Bathhouse took full advantage of the natural light made available by incorporating these circular openings (oculi) in the ceiling and inexpensively provided light throughout the entire bathhouse. These openings not only served as a natural light source, but also helped maintain the amount of water vapor that collects on the walls, adding a glistening quality to the art that is depicted on the walls.

The low relief sculptures that are featured on the domed ceilings are carved in such a way that the sculptural figures are raised from the background, entering into the visitor's space, and creates an interactive experience as the water vapor that has collected on the relief begins to drip off slowly and gathers on the marble floors of the rooms. The natural light reflects off the water droplets which creates a shimmering effect that produces an ethereal experience for the eyes, mind, and body. This effect was highly enjoyed by the bathhouses visitors and one that drew in visitors from afar to experience the Roman style sequence of bathing and the rituals associated with bathing in Italy.

10. Additional Pompeii Bathhouses: Forum Baths and Central Baths

The second public bath is located in the Forum known as the Forum Baths which was the first public bath complex discovered in Pompeii and are one of the four main public baths in the city that was completely restored after the earthquake of 62 A.D. and was largely operational in 79 A.D.⁵⁴ This complex included the necessary rooms (such as the *frigidarium*, *tepidarium*, and *caldarium*) to be considered a Roman bathhouse and offered the visitors with three entrances on the west, east, and north sides (Fig. 11).



(fig. 11) Caldarium, Pompeii Bathhouse. (Photograph by author)

The male sections are larger than the spaces allotted for the women, yet each section was equally decorated with lavish art. Although most of the original decoration is almost impossible to see today, enough remains to support evidence of highly decorative and detailed artistic works inside.

Lastly, the Central Baths, located in another quarter of the city, were the most elaborately decorated bathing structure of the three public bathhouses due to its use of the hypocaust system.⁵⁵ This bathing complex was under construction during the time of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, yet the building was never finished due to the eruption of the volcano. The most significant design element about the Central Baths is that it had only a single series of bathing rooms instead of a multi-room complex like the Forum bathhouses.⁵⁶ This single series of bathing rooms was very different from the traditional Roman style sequence of bathing that required the bather to move through a variety of different temperature pools and rooms to offer a comprehensive experience as it was intended to be by the architects and engineers.

The construction of these baths required significant efforts, in terms of logistics, building materials and technological skills, especially with regard to the necessary water management, heating system and vaulting. This kind of Roman engineering is highly sophisticated when taking into consideration the period and the techniques used. The monumental, luxurious, and statue-filled baths have been the focus of scholarly attention ever since their rediscovery in the Renaissance. Both a cultural and architectural agenda was of great significance to the Roman Engineers and artists who helped bring these structures to life in an immersive way that was highly enjoyed by the public. Without this pertinent archeological evidence that has been excavated over the years, scholars would not have the physical artifacts needed to support the existence and popularity of bathhouses in ancient Rome.

11. Conclusion

Bathing in Roman antiquity was seen as a vital part of everyday life for the citizens and was enjoyed by all. Not only was bathing a way to maintain personal hygiene, but the bathhouse was also a place where one could engage in the illusion of a classless society, as everyone was welcomed to use the facilities, even the emperor himself mingled with his subjects and to gain popular favor. The bathhouses were an opportunity to engage in an entirely immersive bathing experience due to the inclusion of artistic, architectural, and functional elements. Romans did not wear stockings with their sandals or linens, and this in combination with the dry dust of the streets and heat of the sun left the Roman people dirty and lethargic. Therefore, bathing was seen as a perfect way to relax and get clean after a long, hot day outside.

Although the practice of bathing was adopted from the Greeks, the Romans made many enhancements to the process, such as adding the aqueduct system and the hypocaust heating system to allow for hot running water to be supplied to the baths. Important architectural and artistic elements that can be found at the bathhouses in Caracalla and Pompeii are the oculus, domes, windows, and vaults that allow for natural light, ventilation and more space. These elements help enrich the entire experience of the bather by adding additional layers of sophistication, grandeur, and lavishness through the use of specific architectural and artistic design elements, which was evident to me when on my trip to visit the Pompeii bathhouses in Italy. Furthermore, the significance of bathhouses in Rome can be identified by the increasing number of bathing facilities emerging during the first century B.C.E. Sculpture and art are two key components that helped push the immersive experience one has while visiting the bathhouses by strategically placing

statues or frescos in places where they can be fully enjoyed. By displaying mythological and military themed artworks that were significant to its viewers, the Romans successfully created an environment that one could interact with in many different ways, both tangible and visual experiences were facilitated by the incorporation of art and sculpture inside the bathhouses. Sculptural pieces such as the *Hercules Farnese* were significant in the placement inside a bathhouse to inspire physical fitness that is evident when viewing the colossal sculpture, which adds to their relaxation by incorporating visual elements that emulate beauty in all regards.

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