

The Roman House

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson explores the Roman house, including the role of the peristyle garden and atrium, as well as the types of decoration that were common in Roman houses and villas. This lesson covers:

1. [Period and Location: The Roman House](#)
2. [What Is the Roman House?](#)
3. [Interior of the Roman Home](#)
4. [Wall Paintings](#)



BIG IDEA

The domus and villa are the first examples of domestic houses that considered architectural design and stylistic concerns in their construction.



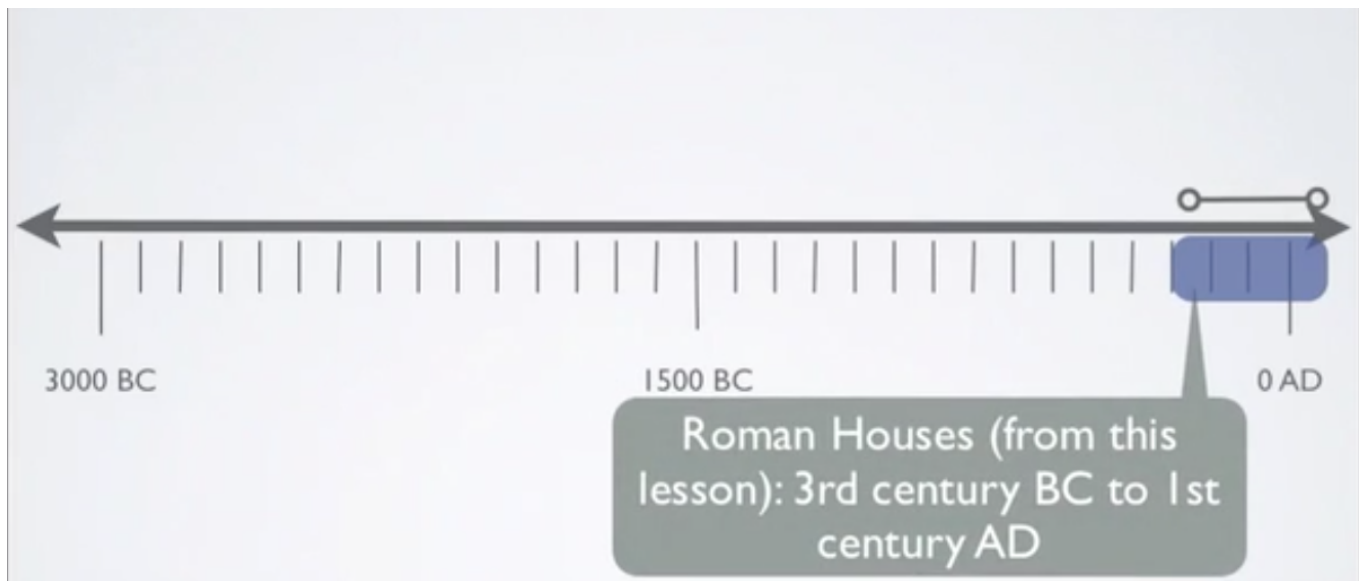
HINT

There is required artwork in this lesson, which is noted with each required image.

1. Period and Location: The Roman House

The architecture-related artwork covered in this lesson ranges from the third century BCE to the first century CE. This lesson focuses on the geographical region of the Italian Peninsula and the area of Pompeii. Pompeii is an ancient city where two of the villas, or vacation homes, in this lesson are located. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE covered the city of Pompeii in lava and ash, preserving everything as it had been at that moment for close to 2,000 years. Much of what we know about Roman houses comes from examples preserved by this eruption.

The timeline below highlights the period that this lesson covers.



This map below shows the geographical region of the Italian Peninsula. Note the city of Pompeii.



2. What Is the Roman House?

The Roman house is important because it is the first example of domestic architecture that considered the design—architectural and stylistic—in construction. Larger homes were located in the city. The larger home, called a **domus**, was for wealthy people. Most of the general population lived in apartments. Members of the patrician class had a home in the city and a larger country villa if they could afford it.



DID YOU KNOW

The city of Pompeii is known for the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, which preserved it almost perfectly for close to 2000 years. Other locations, such as the town of Faleri Novii, located about 30 miles north of Rome, have been surveyed using ground-penetrating radar. This allows archaeologists to know what lies underground without digging into it. Faleri Novii is the largest Roman settlement to be surveyed in this way. The Roman house has an inward focus, as an attempt to keep out the noise and dirt of the city. This means the exteriors of the homes are very plain, but the interior is where the decorative action is. One of the aspects that differentiates Roman architecture from Greek is the emphasis on creating a comfortable and luxurious interior space.



TERM TO KNOW

Domus

An ancient Roman house, usually for the wealthy.

3. Interior of the Roman Home

The primary areas in the interior of the home were central courtyards such as the **peristyle garden**. This area was a garden surrounded by peristyle columns, or a peristyle colonnade. The peristyle garden is where the entertainment of guests would typically take place. The home was built on an axial plan, with the entrance opening into the **atrium**, which was the central courtyard and focus of the home. It was an informal area that might include plantings of fruit trees. Portrait busts of ancestors, the familial shrine, and offerings to the deities of the home, the **Lares and Penates**, all took place in the atrium. This area in turn led past a pool into the peristyle courtyard.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is an example of a peristyle garden in the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, Italy, that was rebuilt after its initial destruction:



Peristyle Garden in the House of the Vetii

Pompeii, Italy

62–79 CE (rebuilt)

Bedrooms, the dining room, and other ancillary rooms were positioned on the edges of the house. These **cubicula** rooms often led directly from the atrium or, in other instances, adjacent to the peristyle. And like other homes of this type, the design was rather open. In addition to small windows, this openness helped in regulating the mild temperatures of the climate.

Homes such as the one pictured above were not typically very furnished, due to space. Beautification came in the form of gardens, and the murals, statues, or mosaics and other decorations that reflected the owner's tastes and their awareness of styles and trends.

While the garden served to entertain, the atrium was an important formal room of the house and really the center of the family's domestic life. It was a religious area where rituals associated with family took place. Ancestry was an important aspect of the Roman religion, and ancestral portraits occupied the family shrines, where offerings were made to the deities of the house. Portrait busts made of wax occupied the family shrines of patrician homes.

➔ EXAMPLE Below is an example of the reconstructed atrium from the House of the Vettii.



Atrium in House of the Vetii

Pompeii, Italy

62–79 CE (rebuilt)

The example above shows the atrium and the impluvium. The atrium usually had an opening near the top of the roof that would let in sunlight and natural light, and it would also let in rain. The Romans put a square basin, known as the **impluvium**, underneath to catch the rainwater so they could use it, and also so it wouldn't go all over the floor.



TERMS TO KNOW

Peristyle Garden

A garden located near a columned porch in a Roman house.

Atrium

An open-roofed court in the center of an ancient Roman house.

Lares and Penates

Minor deities associated with the home in ancient Rome.

Cubicula

Square-shaped rooms in a Roman house.

Impluvium

A rectangular basin for collecting rainwater, usually located in the middle of an atrium.

4. Wall Paintings

Wall paintings were an important part of the decorative program for a home. In the first style, wall paintings were painted depictions of mosaics or simulated masonry. Shaped colored stone was very expensive, as it was all done by hand. Instead, paintings would imitate this effect. The first style of wall paintings were popular for around 200 years, from the third century BCE to the first century BCE.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is an example of the first style of wall painting.



First style wall paintings

Herculaneum, Italy

3rd to 1st century BCE

Simulated masonry

The second style of wall painting was much more elaborate. It depicted rather complicated scenes in open space. This openness of space and simulated architecture, such as marble columns, helped to create a sense of openness in the tiny rooms. The murals may also have been indicative of the function of the room.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The mural below depicts a Dionysiac, after the Greek god Dionysus or his Roman equivalent Bacchus.



Second style wall paintings: Dionysiac mystery festival

Pompeii, Italy

60–50 BCE

This above example is a mystery festival of some sort. The room itself may have been used as a gathering place for a cult dedicated to the god Bacchus, who was an important god in the city of Pompeii.



SUMMARY

The Roman house had unique decorative elements and layouts that served different purposes. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of the Roman house**.

What is the Roman house? This is a question that you explored in this lesson. The Roman house has an inward focus that stemmed from efforts to keep out the noise and dirt of the city. The **interior of the Roman home** was not typically very furnished, due to space. Beautification came in the form of gardens, and the murals, statues, or mosaics and other decorations. The home's layout was important and included an atrium, which was a formal, religious room that was the center of the family's domestic life.

Finally, you learned about **wall paintings**. Remember, the first style wall paintings were painted depictions of mosaics or simulated masonry. Second style wall paintings were much more elaborate. They depicted rather complicated scenes in open space.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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An open-roofed court in the center of an ancient Roman house.

Cubicula

Square-shaped rooms in a Roman house.

Domus

An ancient Roman house, usually for the wealthy.

Impluvium

A rectangular basin for collecting rainwater, usually located in the middle of an atrium.

Lares and Penates

Minor deities associated with the home in ancient Rome.

Peristyle Garden

A garden located near a columned porch in a Roman house.