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"From Herculaneum to Malibu: The Reception of the Getty Museum Villa"

When, in December 1997 Richard Meier's Getty Center opened on a Brentwood hilltop overlooking Los Angeles, the complex was instantly acclaimed a masterpiece of modern architecture, hailed as a major contribution to the recent discourse in museological practice, and embraced as a civic crown by a city long used to being dismissed as culturally second-tier. The reaction was wholly different a quarter of a century earlier. In January 1974, the J. Paul Getty Museum officially opened to the public its first home (now distinguished as the "Villa"). Turning its back on the ideology and imagery of modernism, that edifice evoked tirades of widespread condemnation. This paper explores the context for the initial reactions to the Getty Villa, especially contrasting the differences between its professional and popular reception.

The reactions considered here belong to four primary groups: those of historians of classical art and architecture, the general public, architectural critics, and practicing architects. Before examining the reactions to the building, however, it will be necessary to review the intent of the client and those who participated in the Villa's design. Fortunately, the patron, Getty himself, lucidly and clearly wrote about what he desired in his building. It was decided to model the museum loosely on a specific Roman building, the Villa of the Papyri, a large and sumptuous suburban residence situated on the coast outside Herculaneum.

Art historians and archaeologists have used the Villa for a variety of purposes, illustrating it in studies of classical architecture and landscape design, daily life in ancient Rome, and even for contextual analyses of ancient painting. The reaction of the general public, although more fluid and therefore difficult to assess, can be determined through attendance records and articles in the popular press. Architectural critics professed the most negative reactions. They leveled six basic criticisms at the building: (1) that it is unethical to use past architectural imagery for a contemporary building; (2) that it is unethical to employ a technology different from that which was originally employed; (3) that if one is going to reproduce an object of the past one should reproduce it accurately and in total; (4) that its architectural design should express correct "design judgment"; (5) that its design should fit into and reflect a high art aesthetic rather than popular taste; and (6) that socially the Villa is lamentable because it represents the whims of a single man, not the programmatic desires or needs determined by consensus.

The most fascinating reaction, however, was that of practicing architects and allied theorists. Their reception of the Getty Villa so challenged professional standards that several of the criticisms listed above -- especially "ethical" issues of authenticity heavily grounded in the tenets of modernism -- no longer hold sway. This paper demonstrates that the building's ultimate legacy has been the introduction and legitimization of a classical vocabulary in post-modern architecture, and suggests the role the Villa plays in current discourse now that postmodernism has played itself out.