



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Imagined Worlds

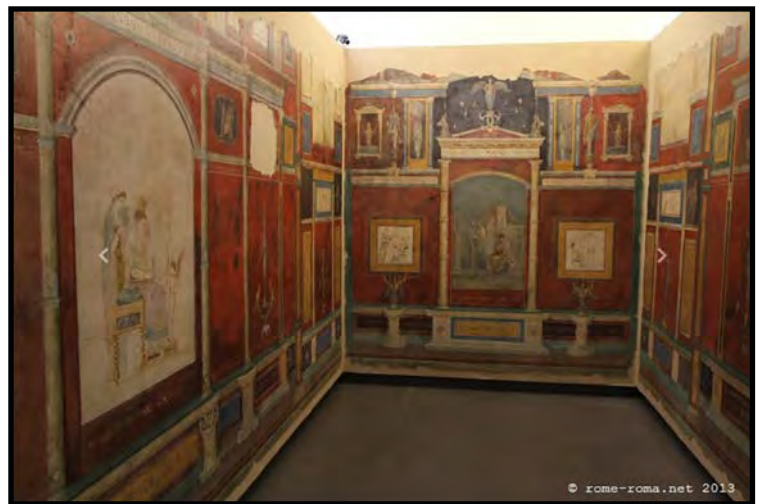
by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

“Imagination will carry us to worlds that never were.” –Carl Sagan

Art is the perfect vehicle for imagination, and artists have ceaselessly let theirs run free throughout this vast and varied material legacy. Imagining the past, future, or alternative versions of the present has preoccupied the artistic mind for millennia. For example, ancient Roman villas had few windows that looked out onto the city since streets were notoriously noisy, dirty, and stinking. Instead, interior walls were decorated with colorful frescoes that cleverly gave the illusion of idyllic vistas just beyond the house. Landscapes, seascapes, and tableaux of Greek mythology artfully extended space as if one were peering through windows into misty panoramas or the imaginary past. As time progressed, the scenes became more fantastic. A preference for spindly, sham “architecture” that defies logic and function became the fashion. Such frescoes would have a profound influence on posterity, particularly from the Renaissance onward, when many were being unearthed. Italian Renaissance artists clearly thought a lot about their ancient forbearers, but knowledge of specifics could be lacking. Ottoman-held Greece was closed to Western travelers, and the jumble of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman remains in Italy must have been puzzling. Nevertheless, the eager did not hesitate to recreate the ancient world, filling in



Fresco Fragment Depicting an Outdoor Arcade
Roman, late 1st century BCE–early 1st century CE
Probably from Italy
Painted plaster
Anonymous gift (80.194)



[Cubiculum B, Villa Farnesina; Palazzo Massimo, Rome](#)

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the gaps with ripe imagination. Raphael (1483–1520) is well-known for his frescos depicting faux-antiquity in the Vatican’s Stanza della Segnatura. Illusionistic arches enhanced by plunging linear perspective sweep viewers into vast spaces populated by historical figures, such as the famed *School of Athens* (completed 1511). The fresco’s grandeur notwithstanding, we should note that its magnificent vaulted chamber looks nothing like the architecture of ancient Athens. But Raphael would hardly be the last to generate such whimsical reconstructions. Gem-cutter and medalist Alessandro Cesati was known for a series of bronze medallions illustrating famous men and women of antiquity, including Dido, the doomed Carthaginian queen whose claim to fame is a histrionic suicide after being jilted by the hero Aeneas. Cesati’s version of the queen gives her a classical profile but a hairdo no woman of antiquity ever wore. On the reverse, Dido’s city of Carthage is shown as a city with classical columns, an arena, and a domed building reminiscent of the Pantheon. Our knowledge of Phoenician Carthage is quite limited, however, given its lack of preservation. Cesati’s fantasy version of the fabled city is thus imaginative but just too Roman.

For centuries following the Renaissance, the obsession with recapturing classical antiquity would be as endless as the license taken with its details. The Modenese Antonio Joli was an acolyte of Giovanni Pannini (1691–1765) who was particularly known for his views of Italy’s antiquities. Joli followed suit but had a tendency to embellish and invent. The *Architectural Capriccio* attributed to Joli does not represent any known Roman ruin, and the grandiose courtyard makes little



School of Athens, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican, Rome



Alessandro Cesati, called “Il Grechetto” (Italian, ca. 1538–1564)
Medallion with Queen Dido (obv) and *View of Carthage* (rev), ca. 1550
Bronze
Museum purchase (66.341)

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Attributed to Antonio Joli (Italian, 1700–1777)
Architectural Capriccio, 18th century
Oil on canvas
Museum purchase (72.59)



Antonio Galli Bibiena (Italian, 1700-1774)
Stage Design: Interior of a Courtyard with Equestrian Statues and Columns
Pen and ink, blue and gray washes
Museum purchase (76.74)

architectural sense and would have no clear function. Like the fanciful frescoes of ancient Rome, Joli gives us an architectural confection that can exist only in the realm of fantasy. Joli's contemporary, Antonio Bibiena, produced similar architectural works. But despite the title assigned to his sketch in the Museum's collection, it remains unclear what it represents (a stage set?) or whether it was ever constructed in reality. By the nineteenth century, recreating the classical past had reached its climax. Painters, sculptors, and architects doggedly continued their romantic visions of it. Generic ruins, which did not represent known sites, abounded everywhere, from wallpaper to jewelry to textiles. Some even rose anew on the grounds of grand estates. The Museum's tortoise shell keepsake box is but one example in an astonishing variety of mediums that featured nostalgic, historical fantasies.

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Anonymous (French)
Box with Classical Scene, 19th century
Paris
Painted tortoiseshell with metal hinge and clasp
Gift of Miss Sarah Catherine France in honor of her brother Charles B. France (69.1047)



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Claes Oldenburg (American, b. 1929)
Spoon Pier, 1975
Color aquatint and etching
Gift of Graduate Student Association (79.80)



Buckminster Fuller (American, 1895–1983)
Submarisle from the series *Inventions: Twelve Around One*, 1981
Serigraph on polyester
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund, purchased
in honor of Dr. Osmund Overby upon his retirement (98.6.10.2)

Twentieth-century artists often broke with the classical past, but they were no less imaginative in their visions of what *might* be. Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) is particularly known for his involvement in the Pop Art movement, often producing sculptures of everyday objects in unexpected sizes. *Spoon Pier* was somewhat different, however, since it was conceived as a functional pier large enough so that boats might sail under it. Unfortunately, this monumental plan remained only an etching.* American architect Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983) often generated blueprints for inventions or imaginative architectural projects that have been described as “sweeping utopian visions” but rarely did they get much beyond the drafting table. The serigraph, *Submarisle*, comes from a series of prints representing works that never came to fruition. An idea for a floating city was first commissioned for Tokyo Bay, but the idea disintegrated when Fuller’s mysterious Japanese benefactor died. Fuller was later approached by the US government about such a project, a twenty-story steel and concrete floating island, allegedly slated for use by the US Navy. Rumor has it that President Lyndon Johnson greenlighted the project but Richard Nixon thought it ridiculous. As of today, “Bucky’s Floating Fantasy” remains an architectural “Spruce Goose.” ■

*An adaptation, *Spoonbridge and Cherry*, which functions as a fountain, was installed in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden in 1988.