

AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME

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American Academy in Rome Honors Pioneering Women of Rome's Archaeological Golden Age Through Photographic Exhibition

Women explorers, archaeologists, and travelers used the camera to shape the study of antiquity



Marion Elizabeth Blake, *Altilia, SW gate*, 1947-1961. American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive.

ROME, ITALY– March 20, 2025 – The American Academy in Rome, a dynamic international institution supporting artists and scholars with the space to learn, create, and work toward interdisciplinary breakthroughs, presents the first exhibition dedicated to the influence of a group of trailblazing women who helped record archaeology and landscapes from new vantage points. On view May 14–November 9, *Women and Ruins: Archaeology, Photography, and Landscape* celebrates women explorers, archeologists, and travelers from the early 1900s who adopted the camera to document excavations that were yielding major new discoveries about antiquity and the radical transformations of Italy in the period. Contemporary social mores constrained women's participation in cultural and scientific activities such as archaeology. The Academy brings to light the ways in which a cohort of American, British, and Italian women used photography as a tool for understanding both the ancient past and for interpreting the social and political transformations of their times.

“From the widely celebrated archaeologist Esther Boise Van Deman to the less known Bulwer sisters, the women whose work is highlighted in this exhibition demonstrate a commitment to advancing our understanding of the ancient world that continues to inspire the Academy's fellows and residents to this day,” stated **Peter N. Miller**, President of the American Academy in Rome.

The pioneering women whose photographs are highlighted in the exhibition include:

- **Esther Boise Van Deman** (1862–1937) – An American archaeologist specializing in Roman architecture who pioneered the study of ancient construction techniques to date Roman buildings across the Mediterranean. She was a Fellow of the American School of Classical Studies in Rome (1909) and is known for her research on the House of the Vestals on the Roman Forum, and her research on brick-faced concrete, the principal technique of construction of imperial Rome.

- **Marion Elizabeth Blake** (1892–1961) – An American professor of Classical Languages and Fellow of the American Academy in Rome (1925), she inherited Esther Van Deman’s research on ancient Roman building techniques, playing a key role in developing the architectural history of the Roman world. *Women and Ruins* exhibits her photographs of Roman monuments and landscapes.
- **The Bulwer sisters, Agnes** (1856–1940) and **Dora** (1864–1948) – British expatriates involved in archaeological research and documentation in the Mediterranean, who worked closely with the director of the British School at Rome, Thomas Ashby, and made photographs to illustrate scientific publications. Based in Rome until 1912, they knew Esther Van Deman, Getrude Bell, and Maria Pasolini Ponti and were active in intellectual circles of archaeologists and scholars. Their photographs reveal a very distinctive approach to photography.
- **Gertrude Bell** (1868–1926) – A British archaeologist, explorer, and diplomat, she traveled extensively through Europe and the Middle East photographing sites and monuments that were later transformed or lost. Bell came to Rome in 1910, lecturing and visiting Roman sites with Giacomo Boni, who led the excavations of the Roman Forum, and others. She and Esther Van Deman met and exchanged ideas about construction techniques. After her Italian travels, she returned to the Middle East, playing a key role in Middle Eastern politics and helping to establish the Iraq Museum.
- **Maria Ponti Pasolini** (1856–1938) – An Italian philanthropist, social reformer, and advocate for women's education as well as archeological preservation. She actively contributed to debates in Rome about urbanism and conservation in Rome by documenting endangered architecture in Rome and the countryside with photographs. Ponti Pasolini held an international *salon* where she regularly hosted some of the most important men and women of letters of the time, artists, archeologists, politicians, and economists.

“Bringing these works together reveals the ways these forward-thinking women deviated from conventional patriarchal norms of landscape and archeological photography. Showing these photographs together gives today’s scholars the tools to explore other facets of these pioneers, to interpret anew their use of the camera,” stated **Ilaria Puri Purini**, Andrew Heiskell Arts Director at the American Academy in Rome. “This exhibition brings to light the international circle of thinkers in early twentieth-century Rome, where women archeologists, travelers, and photographers advanced scientific as well as social issues. The Academy is proud to advance the field of visual culture by offering this new perspective on photography and the female gaze.”

Women and Ruins explores how Rome became a hub for artists, writers, archaeologists, and intellectuals, especially after the unification of Italy known as the Risorgimento, when major excavations attracted experts from around the world. These individuals were deeply connected, both professionally and personally, as they worked to uncover the city’s past. Their discoveries sparked debates about how to balance historic monuments with nature and the emerging modern cityscape. On view in the exhibition are photographic documents by Blake, Van Deman, Bell, and the Bulwer sisters of Rome, the Campagna Romana—the Lazio region’s countryside surrounding Rome—alongside their photographs from travels to Algeria, Tunisia, Croatia, and other parts of the Mediterranean.

About the American Academy in Rome

Since 1894 the [American Academy in Rome](#) has functioned as a residential center for research and creativity. Its purpose has always been to enable highly motivated scholars and artists to immerse themselves in the experience of Rome, ancient and modern, and to be inspired by daily exchange with the other members of this creative community. The Academy has made an outsized impact on the intellectual and cultural life of the United States, and its Fellows and Residents have been recognized with 629 Guggenheim Fellowships, 75 Pulitzer Prizes, 54 MacArthur Fellowships, 26 Grammy awards, 5 Pritzker Prizes, 9 Poet Laureate appointments, and 5 Nobel Prizes.

Approximately 35 Fellows are selected as winners of the Rome Prize each year by rotating juries in the different fields.

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