

Early Romans did not have air-conditioners, but they did have impluvia

By TOM HALL
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Keith EDMIER: Edison Impluvium opens at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery on Saturday, December 5. The exhibition is a site-specific sculptural environment in which the never-before exhibited death mask of inventor Thomas Edison along with three-dimensional self-portraits and life masks of Edmier's family and a host of celebrity friends are embedded in the walls of a swimming pool reminiscent of the concrete pool that Edison had constructed on the grounds of his winter estate in Fort Myers in 1910. In other words, Edmier is converting the walls of the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery into a modern-day impluvium.

But what in the world is an impluvium? Archeological digs in Rome and Pompeii reveal that Roman homes were constructed with openings in their roofs that allowed for ventilation and circulation of air through the hallways, corridors and rooms inside. Houses were divided into two sections, with the atrium being the centerpiece and most lavishly furnished and appointed room in the structure.

The impluvium was a shallow pool sunk into the floor to catch the rainwater pouring in through the opening in the roof. Surviving examples show that impluvia were typically made of marble, mosaic tile or some combination of the two. They were also tastefully decorated, often with sculptures or busts of the head of the household.

A portion of the stone tiles in the impluvium were separated by gaps significant enough to allow a substantial quantity of water caught in the basin to filter through the cracks into a below-ground cistern or holding tank. A circular stone opening in the impluvium afforded easy access by rope and bucket into this private, filtered and naturally cooled water supply. During rainy season, excess water that could not pass through the filter would overflow the basin and exit the building, and any sediment or debris remaining in the surface basin could be swept away. In hot weather, water could be drawn from the cistern and cast into the shallow pool to cool the entire atrium and rooms beyond. The mechanism was ingenious. As the water evaporated, the surrounding air cooled, becoming heavier and causing it to flow into the living spaces in the home. It was, in essence, the Romans' form of air-conditioning in the hot, sticky Mediterranean climate characterized by that region of Italy during the summer months.

So what will Edmier's modern-day variation look like? Come see for yourself. *Keith EDMIER: Edison Impluvium* will run through February 6, 2016 at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery on the Lee campus of Florida SouthWestern State College (FSW). ■

