Memento Mori  Remember that you are mortal
“Memento mori.”
Mosaic from Pompeii (House cum workshop I, 5, 2, triclinium).
30 BCE — 14 CE.
Inv. No. 109992.

Naples, National Archaeological Museum
(Museo archeologico nazionale di Napoli)

Origin: From Pompeii (House cum workshop I, 5, 2, triclinium).

Description: This emblems was significantly displayed in a triclinium and is one of the most striking for the clarity of its allegorical representation. The topic is Hellenistic in origin and presents death as the great leveller who cancels out all differences of wealth and class. It is a theme that has come down to our days, as for example in the famous poem *A livella* by the comic actor A. de Curtis (Totò). In fact the composition is summounted by a level (libella) with a plumb line, the instrument used by masons to get their constructions straight and level. The weight is death (the skull) below which are a butterfly (the soul) and a wheel (fortune).

On each side, suspended from the arms of the level and kept in perfect balance by death, are the symbols of wealth and power on the left (the sceptre and purple) and poverty on the right (the beggar's scrip and stick). The theme, like the skeletons on the silverware in the treasure of Boscoreale, was intended to remind diners of the fleeting nature of earthly fortunes.


Credits: © 2006. Photo: S. Sosnovskiy.
Text: museum inscription to the mosaic.
"The Skull and the Level" Translated

Blogger Halloweened us yesterday with a couple of nasty goblins that made posting impossible. Our erstwhile Web Wizard (Bill) fixed the conundrum of “Boo”, but still a portion of the content about The Skull and the Level was lost. And it was good stuff, as Paul Anater’s comment yesterday reminded me. So here, once again, is the Skull and the Level from Pompeii which now resides in the National Archeological Museum in Naples. There’s an absolutely terrific explanation of the symbolism of the mosaic below from the Institute and Museum of the History of Science. I think it is absolutely fascinating.

Opus vermiculatum; 47 x 41 cm
Naples, MAN; inv, 109982
Pompeii, from the workshop R.I,5,2 (triclinium)
Middle of the first century AD – Second Style
Constituting the emblema of the flooring in a *triclinium*, this mosaic, with its naturalistic depiction of a skull and the tools of a mason, expresses allegorically the transience of life and the impending nature of death. It is the libella, the level, from which hangs the plumb-line - the instrument that serves to control the levelling of a construction - that symbolises all equality: from its ends hang in perfect equilibrium the symbols of power (the sceptre and the royal purple) and on the right, the sack and the stick, symbols of poverty. The skull - with a line of darker tesserae outlining the sutures of the cranium - and the level - an instrument that we known only through depictions from the Roman period, shown here with clearly illustrated bronze elements and its wooden structure - underline the intent to depict them with precision.

Here is Paul Anater’s ([www.kitchenandresidentialdesign.com](http://www.kitchenandresidentialdesign.com)) reaction to seeing this mosaic in person:

> Seeing that Skull and Level (the Memento Mori) in person is but one more reason to go to the National Archeological Museum in Napoli. That thing has more layers of meaning than should be allowed – it’s almost too much to ponder. The skulls is resting on a butterfly and it’s in turn resting atop Fortuna’s wheel. To the left are the trappings of wealth and to the right are the trappings of poverty. Quite a thing to have on your dining room floor when you’re a wealthy Roman.