

Exhibition: Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum

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The monumental importance of the exhibition *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* lies not least in the staggering number of people it has reached. It can safely be called a blockbuster, having attained its visitor goal for the six-month duration of the show – a quarter million visitors – after only three months.⁽¹⁾ At present the exhibition website warns ‘Advance booking essential’, echoing a ticket calendar sold out over a month in advance. Such a hungry public does not simply exist, of course, regardless of Pompeii’s familiarity or even relative popularity among potential museumgoers; such enthusiasm must be made, and is usually hard-won. Herein then the nub that makes this Pompeii show different from numerous others over recent years. While the physical display is indeed spectacular, recreating a Roman house with all the trimmings, this accounts only partially for its wild success. Of greater significance is the canny use of current technologies to allow curious viewers to share, like, tweet, and download various components of the exhibition, encouraging them to engage with the material and spread their enthusiasm as never before. These media extend the show *outside* the museum walls, as well as enhancing it inside, where they transform the usual gallery experience of encountering tangible objects. In achieving such a sophisticated, effective blend of the digital and the physical, curator Paul Roberts, the British Museum, and the cooperating Italian organizations have done an immensely good turn for the ancient world and its ongoing resonance in the modern one.

Precisely this connection between ancient and modern life in fact underlies the whole exhibition. The curators (Roberts with Assistant Curator Vanessa Baldwin) emphasize ‘day-to-day existence, common practice’ in the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, using this very mundanity to make a bygone world more familiar to inhabitants of the present one. Questions as to the appropriateness and hazards of such a tactic are debated among scholars of classical studies, and are briefly revisited below; but it should be said outright (and here I betray my own sympathies) that empathy and familiarity are powerful tools. In this show they are eloquently deployed from the very first display case. Here an ensemble of three objects introduces the visitor to the themes both explicit (‘daily life’ and the titular ‘life and death’) and implicit (ancient life as a mirror for modern): a painting of a couple reclining and drinking, a curving wooden table like that in the painting, and the emblematic plaster cast of a dog who died struggling at his tether. Immediately the viewer is invited to empathize with the human agency behind these things: the portrait of

delicious leisure, the pitiable pup, and the uncannily familiar table – ‘it looks like something you could buy off Ikea today’, as Baldwin commented.⁽²⁾ These objects stand for towns which, because of ‘their very ordinariness,’ reveal a world that ancient scholarly texts (Cicero) and feats of engineering (the Pantheon) cannot.

This apt observation (and the examples) is presented in a video which embodies the exhibition’s marriage of scholarly integrity and popular appeal. It appears on a large screen early in the sequence of rooms, making itself known as the strongly recommended introduction to the galleries to follow. Instead of the dark tone of the promotional video, or the violent pseudo-eruption effects used in other Pompeii exhibition videos, this video rather engages the viewer by energetic ‘kinetic typography’. Pioneered by Hitchcockian movie titles and long popular on YouTube, this text-based art form here shows what it can do in an educational venue – and triumphs. Words are represented on-screen in a font, colour, texture, and most importantly motion that underscores their meaning; kinetic typography is the perfect coincidence of verbal and visual communication. In this video, then, we learn about ‘pyroclastic surges’ by seeing these two words slide down an invisible undulating slope. The ‘VOIDS that would become moulds’ for plaster body casts are figured forth in white block letters that gradually fill up with plaster-like granulation. The city walls of Pompeii that ‘INITIALLY’ held back the ‘flows of hot gas and rock’ are conjured by the vertical disposition of the first word, while the landslide of those following tumbles against the word-cum-barrier. Carbonized ‘WOOD, LEATHER, [and] FOOD’ preserved by the eruption each take on the texture of their referent. This video is a brilliant example of how kinetic text can be harnessed for pedagogy: its novelty, showiness, and just plain fun mask what is in fact a valuable learning experience.

The multimedia presentation does not stop there. Leaving the video room, the visitor is thrust fully into the ancient world: walls and even ceilings are erected to recreate the space of a Roman house. Painted wooden panels hung on the walls imitate Third-Style fresco decor. Four massive columns define a typical Corinthian-style atrium, while engaged half-columns line the garden space. Recessed display cases rather than freestanding ones help preserve the illusion of a real house. A carefully coordinated sightline runs from the front door to the back garden, traversing the ‘beware of dog’ mosaic, the herm portrait of a homeowner, the *impluvium* brimming with digital water, and the marble table set with silver. It is an immersive and erudite delight. Heightening the illusion is a series of soundscapes tailored to each different space: overhead speakers in the ‘Streets and commerce’ gallery ventriloquize churning carts, laughing children, barking dogs, clanging metal, flowing water, singing birds. These last two feature also in the ‘Hortus’ as part of a more relaxing refrain. It is a brilliant move to conjure daily life through sound, a feature integral to human experience yet often overlooked.

A further set of media deployed is digital. Web content of all stripes is available to the visitor before, during, and after his actual entry into the exhibition. The British Museum blog is no new news (a medium used to good effect also by the Getty), but this is just the beginning.⁽³⁾ A short video on the exhibition website follows an Italian baker tasked with recreating ancient Roman bread in the shape of the carbonized loaf on display in the galleries. The video and recipe can be downloaded or shared via Facebook and Twitter – through which the museum also broadcast a 24-hour, real-time retelling of the Vesuvian eruption ‘using an eyewitness account of the event alongside archaeological evidence’.⁽⁴⁾ Cinema showings of a filmed tour through the exhibition continue to play in theatres across the United Kingdom, reaching an estimated 35,000 viewers, and will soon go global in over 1,000 theatres across 60 territories.⁽⁵⁾ Finally, an app for Apple and Android devices can be downloaded either in advance or by using the free Wifi at the exhibition.⁽⁶⁾ Offering numerous avenues for exploration, grouped into four basic sections, the app is ingeniously crafted for navigating the multifarious material. The best example is the section ‘Explore the cities,’ which offers a map of the cities marked with pins and highlights for various categories (‘Commerce’, ‘Relaxing in luxury’, ‘Food and drink’, etc.). Objects in the exhibition are linked to points on the map. A simple concept, perhaps, but this confluence of data is enough to make a professional Pompeianist swoon – precisely this tying of object to place has been sought by many at the mercy of labyrinthine Bourbon excavation records! The ability to zoom in on the objects and hear the curator and other top scholars speak about them is icing on the cake. Many of these elements are carried over to the rentable audio guide device, now reborn with a visual

component: no clunky plastic brick this, but a sleek full-colour touchscreen featuring thumbnails of every object and the capacity to highlight certain details as it narrates.

All this attention to high-tech content has by no means drawn away from the print materials. The exhibition catalogue is gorgeous and glossy, replete with crystal-clear photographs shot specifically for this show – so rich in both quality and number that a separate ‘gift book’ was created in order to showcase a few more, foregoing text almost entirely in favour of ‘page after page of exquisite details’. More souvenir than reference work, the gift book is the popularizing pendant to the full-scale catalogue. This latter, for its part, manages to be a novel contribution to the abundant literature on Pompeii and Herculaneum. As a catalogue it is slightly unusual for being written entirely by a single author, and as a series of chapters without discrete object texts; captions are certainly given, but full object information is wisely relegated to an appendix. A cohesive voice is thus maintained throughout, a narrative achieved that remains tied to the objects. The text is unfailingly considered and intelligent, sprinkled with endnote references to both primary and secondary sources. These latter are blissfully up-to-date, nearly all dating from 2002 and later (with the exception of seminal works from the 18th through 20th centuries, largely publications by the site directors). All these factors, combined with a comfortable, at times conversational style of writing, result in an eminently readable book – one that could usefully serve in an introductory undergraduate class.

This exhibition excels on so many levels, from both an academic and popular perspective, that my reservations about it are limited to two – and constitute musings rather than criticisms. The first concerns the place of dead bodies in museum displays. Squeamishness plays no part in my cavil; instead, a sense of shyness about gratifying an attraction to the lurid. Certainly the curators intend all due respect to the deceased Pompeians, but my question remains: must we examine their throes of agony in order to value their lives? Perhaps my discomfort stems only from a misplaced sense of propriety. Indeed other exhibitions, not only about Pompeii, have similarly juxtaposed cultural history with forensics.⁽⁷⁾ In this show, however, regardless of any personal feelings about displaying human remains, the inclusion of body casts sits uneasily because of aesthetic and thematic considerations. Until the visitor encounters these images of Death, the focus on Life reigns supreme; the nearly equal titular billing does not play out in the galleries. Thus the transition is somewhat jarring.⁽⁸⁾ A more integrated and, to my mind, successful segue was achieved by various methods in other exhibitions: *Pompeii: Stories from an Eruption* took the disaster as its eponymous theme, while *Pompeii the Exhibit: Life and Death in the Shadow of Vesuvius* ⁽⁹⁾ recreated the fire-and-brimstone event with video, surround sound, fog machine, and shaking floor before allowing the viewer to enter the galleries of casts. Although I certainly do not wish to see such dramatics become the rule for museum exhibitions, there they at least justified displaying the human remains; without such a palpable disaster, the dead bodies make an incongruous coda. The strain appears too in the kinetic typography video, where the attempt to intertwine life and death leads to jumping between vivid images of modern street life and dispassionate line drawings of volcanic phases.

The second point of reflection has already been mentioned: the pedagogical method of personal identification. This tack indeed defines this exhibition, focusing on ancient lived experience in order to literally enliven the objects and thereby draw in the visitor. Some may find it unpalatable to think that we must personally identify with the Romans in order to find them and their world worthy of our attention. Highlighting commonalities between the ancient and modern worlds can also risk oversimplification and the promotion of false parallels. Yet it is worth recognizing how astonishingly eager many visitors are to relate to the Romans by drawing on their own experiences: during my visit, one visitor connected the ancient measuring devices to the *tabula mensaria* in the Pompeian Forum, seen on her own trip there; another enthused to her companion that the objects were familiar from ‘those programs we watch’. An attentive mother read aloud to her children several captions from the famous Tavern of Salvius frescoes, laughing, ‘they’re like a cartoon strip!’ Identification and familiarity unquestionably prime the visitor’s engagement with the objects – inevitably so, an empiricist would say, since we necessarily perceive the world through the lens of our own experience. A certain egotism in that perception is therefore unavoidable. In my opinion, then, a pedagogy that conscientiously builds on this phenomenon does not cheapen or betray the material. In the end, if a 21st-century visitor discovers a personal connection to ancient Rome through an iPhone app, we

cannot but revel in this bit of magic.

Notes

1. Charlotte Higgins, 'British Museum has best spring ever,' *The Guardian*, 25 June 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/jun/25/british-museum-best-spring-ever> [2]> [accessed 5 August 2013].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Vanessa Baldwin, 'Pompeii and Herculaneum at the British Museum, with Vanessa Baldwin,' *Classics Confidential*, 15 February 2013 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mracgq0X73U> [3]> [accessed 5 August 2013].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. <http://blog.britishmuseum.org/2013/06/14/ad-79-in-hd-broadcasting-pompeii-live/> [4]> [accessed 5 August 2013]; <<http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/> [5]> [accessed 5 August 2013].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/pompeii_and_herculaneum/pompeii_live/eruption_timeline.asp [6]> [accessed 5 August 2013].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. <http://blog.britishmuseum.org/2013/06/14/ad-79-in-hd-broadcasting-pompeii-live/> [4] >[accessed 5 August 2013].[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/pompeii_and_herculaneum/app.aspx [7]> [accessed 5 August 2013]. A sample is available here: <<http://www.theguardian.com/science/interactive/2013/feb/24/herculaneum-pompeii-british-museum-archaeology-interactive> [8]> [accessed 5 August 2013].[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Recently in the exhibition *Die Medici - Menschen, Macht und Leidenschaft* (Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, Mannheim, Germany, 17 February - 28 July 2013).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Yet the strict separation is intentional: as explained by Baldwin, 'The main crux of the exhibition is their lives, and the life of the home, and the ordinary people who lived in the home. The death of the cities is in its correct place, at the end.' (Vanessa Baldwin, 'Pompeii and Herculaneum at the British Museum, with Vanessa Baldwin', *Classics Confidential*, Youtube, 15 February 2013 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mracgq0X73U> [3]> [accessed 5 August 2013]).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. *Pompeii: Stories from an Eruption* (Field Museum, Chicago, 2005-2006); *Pompeii the Exhibit: Life and Death in the Shadow of Vesuvius* (Discovery Center, New York, 2011).[Back to \(9\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/mar/26/life-and-death-pompeii-review> [9]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/9952882/Pompeii-exhibition-Life-and-Death-in-Pompeii-and-Herculaneum-British-Museum-review.html> [10]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/charles-darwent-on-art-life-and-death-in-pompeii-and-herculaneum--the-day-that-death-hung-on-the-breeze-8555126.html> [11]

London Evening Standard

<http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/exhibitions/life-and-death-in-pompeii-and-herculaneum-british-museum--exhibition-review-8550993.html> [12]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1479>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/76930>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/jun/25/british-museum-best-spring-ever>

[3] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mracgq0X73U>

[4] <http://blog.britishmuseum.org/2013/06/14/ad-79-in-hd-broadcasting-pompeii-live/>

[5] <http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/>

[6]

http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/pompeii_and_herculaneum/pompeii_live/eruption_timeline.asp

- [7] http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/pompeii_and_herculaneum/app.aspx
- [8] <http://www.theguardian.com/science/interactive/2013/feb/24/herculaneum-pompeii-british-museum-archaeology-interactive>
- [9] <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/mar/26/life-and-death-pompeii-review>
- [10] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/9952882/Pompeii-exhibition-Life-and-Death-in-Pompeii-and-Herculaneum-British-Museum-review.html>
- [11] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/charles-darwent-on-art-life-and-death-in-pompeii-and-herculaneum--the-day-that-death-hung-on-the-breeze-8555126.html>
- [12] <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/exhibitions/life-and-death-in-pompeii-and-herculaneum-british-museum--exhibition-review-8550993.html>