

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum, exhibition at the British Museum, 28 March – 29 September 2013

Ewa Czapiewska*

Courtesy of Korean Air, one of the sponsors of the Life and Death exhibition at the British Museum, I was able to visit the exhibition on its very last weekend in London. The high quality and originality with which the ancient Roman life and death in AD 79 in Pompeii and Herculaneum was portrayed in this exhibition - and in the publication by Paul Roberts under the same name - was evident throughout.

The exhibition was divided into three sections: 1) an introductory section, 2) the 'Life' of Herculaneum and Pompeii, and 3) their 'Death.' The media through which the exhibition was presented included images, such as maps and plans, a film, digital reconstructions and projections, sounds, and photographs; it also included texts on large panels, artefact labels, and of course, the archaeological objects themselves carefully placed in the exhibition space with much obvious consideration. Such a wide variety of media and display techniques used in one single exhibition seemed almost necessary to successfully catch the attention of an increasingly demanding audience. As the visitors no longer want to passively view the objects, the British Museum had to deliver an opportunity to actively experience the themes of

'Life' and 'Death' in ancient Roman cities. And they achieved this with much success.

Introduction to the themes of the exhibition

The visitors to the exhibition are first introduced to the geographical, chronological and social contexts of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Introductory panels and maps duly presented the locations of the two cities, the chronology of the era in question (the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 and years immediately preceding it), and a brief description of the two themes, 'Life' and 'Death', illustrated by archaeological objects. These included a plaster cast of a dog which died during the eruption and which is probably one of the most famous objects from Pompeii (House of Orpheus, Pompeii; Roberts 2013, 296).

A short film then demonstrated the uniqueness of Pompeii and Herculaneum for our understanding of ancient domestic lives, and described the events of the volcanic eruption in a step-by-step fashion. While the artefacts and the timeline of the eruption feature in the film, the emphasis is placed on what these objects, and these events, mean to the contemporary audience. The film was used to set the mood and emotions underpinning the exhibition. Images of artefacts and archaeological objects were constantly being compared to the images of everyday

* Institute of Archaeology, UCL, United Kingdom
e.czapiewska@ucl.ac.uk

modern life in Italian communities and households. The effort to make visitors feel emotionally connected to the past peoples of Pompeii and Herculaneum was particularly strong, as can be evidenced by quotes, such as “Each cast a reminder of our own fragility.” Text panels and photographs illustrating the rediscovery of the two cities and decades of archaeological work concluded the introductory section of the exhibition.

‘Life’ in Pompeii and Herculaneum

The most informative and extensive part of the entire project was undoubtedly about the everyday life of ancient people in these two Roman cities. It was focused on the household, or the Roman *familia*, set in the context of the social and urban lives of the two cities. A multitude of text panels and a variety of everyday objects were carefully grouped into several thematic categories. These were organised in a manner which allowed the visitor a progressive insight into the ancient lives from the political and public domain, to the private and intimate spaces of a Roman house. Additionally, photographs from the excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum were displayed at the entrance to each room. These, however, were comparatively small next to the text panels and the show-cases. They were very easily missed (indeed some visitors did not seem to notice them at all).

The panel entitled ‘Changing times’ described these societies as vibrant and dynamically developing in the years before the catastrophe. Artefacts displaying the rising numbers of freedmen (freed slaves), the high visibility of women in public life, and political campaigning for democratic elections, all paint the picture of a young, progressive and reforming society with beliefs and ideas appealing to the modern audience.

In the following room, the cabinets were filled with artefacts found in shops, businesses, taverns and other public establishments uncovered in Pompeii and Herculaneum. They depicted the commercial activities centred around the house fronts. The room

itself was additionally filled with the sound of a busy Roman street to enhance the experience of a public space. The entrance to the next room was based on an ancient house entrance which separated the public sphere from the private life of the household.

The private domain was presented in this exhibition through the spaces and artefacts of an idealised Roman house of a wealthy *familia* in a mid-sized city such as Pompeii. The exhibition rooms’ plans were largely based on the House of the Tragic Poet from Pompeii, whose floor plan, as well as a digital reconstruction of its rooms, were also on display. Thus, the objects of everyday Roman life were shown within the domestic spaces directly linked to the original ancient houses. This helped reflect their meaning and purpose and “encourage a contemporary audience to make connections with people living in Roman times” (Roberts 2013, 18). The distribution of the objects in the exhibition rooms also reflected their original or idealised position in these spaces in the past. Wall frescoes, mosaics and groups of smaller objects, such as jewellery or lamps, were arranged in show-cases built into the walls. Floor mosaics and some of the larger artefacts, such as pieces of furniture and sculptures, were more centrally positioned reflecting their probable locations in houses in antiquity.

Each part of the house was filled with texts and objects describing and illustrating the themes of everyday Roman life: family and self-image in *atrium*, sexuality in *cubiculum* (bedroom), myths and mythological representations in *hortus* (garden), dining and food in *culina* (kitchen). Thus, the visitors not only walked through the physical spaces of an ancient Roman house, but also revisited the activities and beliefs associated with these rooms.

The artefacts from Pompeii and Herculaneum appeared alongside each other as the objects were exhibited thematically rather than geographically or chronologically. The emphasis lied on creating the illusion of entering a single, fully preserved Roman house.

Only through the object labels could the provenance of each artefact be distinguished.

The objects and their meanings, as described on the labels and panels, reflected two approaches as to how the theme of 'Life' in ancient Roman times can be understood. Some artefacts seemed to portray the similarities between ancient and modern lifeways, while others emphasised their deep differences. Portraits of, for example, children's achievements (e.g. frescoes of young men holding scrolls labelled 'Homer' and 'Plato'; Roberts 2013, 115), realistic representations of the house owners (e.g. marble and bronze herm of Lucius Caecilius Iucundus, Pompeii; Roberts 2013, 89), display tables (e.g. from the House of Prince of Naples, Pompeii; Roberts 2013, 86), mirrored in many ways objects found in modern houses. On the other hand, objects with enlarged phalluses (e.g. bronze wind-chime in the form of a phallus with hanging bells, Pompeii; Roberts 2013, 163) and various sculptures and frescoes with explicit sexual content (e.g. marble statue showing the god Pan making love to a she-goat, Villa of the Papyri, Herculaneum; Roberts 2013, 168), contrasted with modern perceptions of sexuality and displayed art.

'Death' of the cities

The theme of 'Death' was presented in a very different way to 'Life'. The change of themes was indicated by entering a darkened room only illuminated by a projection of a timeline of events from the days of the eruption in Pompeii and Herculaneum. A few casts of the bodies excavated at Pompeii, including a family of four (House of the Golden Bracelet, Pompeii; Roberts 2013, 298), showed the exact body positions in which they were buried. Unlike the objects of everyday life, the casts were presented against a plain red background. Any objects found in association with the bodies were displayed in separate show-cases. The domestic context in

which the bodies were found was, however, not illustrated in the exhibition; in sharp contrast with the display rooms of the theme of 'Life'. The casts of the people of Pompeii seemed to have been completely detached from the house spaces and artefacts presented earlier in the exhibition, as though they were never part of the same archaeological record. The emphasis on contextualisation of objects in the 'Life' section was replaced by the emphasis on casts as the sole visual representation of the theme of 'Death' in Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Final remarks

With the use of modern technologies and unique pattern of artefact display the organisers of the exhibition at the British Museum successfully created the desired understanding of the objects and themes that they represent. However, the intent to make the audience relate to the people of the past at times surpassed the aim to teach the audience about the past. I believe that watching scenes from modern day Italian towns and villages, as shown in the introductory film, brought little to the visitors' knowledge of the past. Additionally, showing the history of the two cities in such an emotionally laden way was rather unnecessary. However, the thorough contextualisation of both private and public spaces helped familiarise the visitors with the history of these two cities in a more holistic manner. What eventually turned my visit to this exhibition into an invaluable experience was walking through the rooms of an ancient Roman house from Pompeii and Herculaneum filled with beautiful objects which clearly reflected the life, everyday activities and beliefs of the ancient Roman *familia*.

Reference

Roberts, P. 2013. *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. The British Museum Press, London.

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