Mysteries of the Buried City

Pompeii: Life in a Roman Town 79 CE at the National Museum

By Helen Anco

A garden fresco from a Pompeii home, from the collection of Soprintendenza Archeologici di Napoli e Pompeii; photo by Szan Tan

This is what I remember from my schoolroom history lessons about the devastation of the ancient Roman city of Pompeii: *that on a summer day in August 79 CE, Mount Vesuvius erupted without warning and the city of Pompeii, and all her people, died instantly*.

The discovery in the 16th century of this southern Italian city and its excavations from the 18th century onwards have provided much insight into Roman life before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, which first destroyed and then preserved Pompeii under layers of ash. Thanks to recent discoveries and the continued development of scientific research methods, contemporary historians and archaeologists now question much of the information that has been presented as fact for so many years. For example, if the eruption occurred on 24 August, the middle of summer, why were those who died wearing woollen clothing and *why were the foods on the dining tables those for autumn or winter meals*?

Another example: if the population of Pompeii was about 12,000, as believed for many years, *why have excavations to date (albeit still not completed) revealed fewer than 2,000 human deaths? Where are the other bodies? If the volcano erupted without warning, how did so many escape?*

Recent evidence suggests that the volcano threatened for several days before erupting and that the ground shook as in an earthquake. At the time of the disaster, Pompeii was still recovering from a massive earthquake in 62 CE, so the city's residents knew what might happen when the ground shook.

Pompeii was a coastal city with a 'holiday climate' and many of the grander homes belonged to wealthy Romans who enjoyed vacationing by the sea. *Did these holidaymakers flee with their retinues when they felt the earth shake? Of the 2,000 body imprints found, how many represent people living in the city during the eruption and how many represent later looters who were buried by ash as they tunnelled into the perishing city? Is it true that these looters sent small children into the buried homes through the narrow tunnels they dug through the ash?*

As the city continues to be unearthed and explored, so do many aspects of Pompeii's public and private life. Archaeologists and historians continue to learn about the city's belief systems, as well as its art, agriculture and commerce, politics and leisure, family life, philosophies and sexual proclivities. It seems that nothing has been hidden forever and yet there is so much still to be understood.

You too can explore Italy's famous buried city and its many still unanswered questions by visiting *Pompeii: Life in a Roman Town 79 CE*, an exhibition hosted by the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) from 16 October 2010 to 23 January 2011. In the exhibition you will see copies of the remarkable body casts made by early archaeologists from the highly detailed imprints of the victims' remains when they were first discovered. These casts show us what the people in the city were doing when Vesuvius erupted. Facial expressions provide clues to other questions, such as *Was burning ash the cause of death?* or *Did victims die of gas poisoning or of suffocation?*

One section of the exhibition focuses on public life in the Roman Empire, delving into trade and its sources. *Why were there so many shipwrecks between the second century BCE and the second century CE?* You will see evidence of the liberal belief system that encompassed the worship of Greek gods, reverence of Venus, belief in the Capitoline Trinity, worship of Egyptian gods, followers of the cult of Apollo and more. Learn about common medical practices, major causes of natural death and burial practices. Imagine scenes of public pantomime and theatre and the spectacle of men facing wild animals in the amphitheatre or gladiators and chariots battling for honour. Explore the public bathing rituals (*for cleansing or for entertainment?*) and the multitudes of statues that graced Pompeii; learn about the city's political leadership, its elections and its judicial system.

Body cast of a crouching man

Gladiator helmet

Funerary statue

Another section of the exhibition takes you into the private home of a wealthy citizen. Here you will see the layout of a typical house set around a courtyard and its garden. Discover the secrets of the frescoes, which were painted onto walls when the plaster was still wet to bind the pigment and preserve the art from the outdoor elements. Examine the range of subject matter depicted in the frescoes. *Were these paintings purely decorative or did they have deeper significance?* View a magnificent fountain embellished with mosaics. Discover how the wealthy dined reclining on banquet couches, pampered by slaves who served them lavish amounts of 'finger foods' and wine. See decorative items that adorned the homes of the wealthy and examine the myriad cooking utensils used to prepare the game, beef, pork, fish, sauces, olives, figs, pears, cherries, breads and wines the wealthy enjoyed. Admire jewellery and hair ornaments of gold and bone and look at the oil lamps that provided essential light for long dark evenings. You will learn that upper storeys of homes were often rented to the less wealthy. Those who lived in these apartments ate bread and fruit at home or dined out (in bars!) as there were no kitchens and access to water at home was limited. (Wells were located in the home's central courtyard on the ground level or piped into the main dwelling at high cost.)

Do not miss this opportunity to see the more than 270 artefacts on loan from Italy. The members of the FOM Special Exhibition Team have enjoyed learning about ancient Pompeii and its neighbouring village of Herculaneum and are eager to share their knowledge with you. Several team members actually visited Italy this summer to experience Pompeii and the surrounding area firsthand.

Helen Anco *led the Pompeii Special Exhibition Team. She is a docent at NMS and Singapore Art Museum and has served as an FOM volunteer for many years and in many roles, including Vice President and President.*

Check the NMS website www.nationalmuseum.sg for tour schedules and please join one of the guided tours to hear the story of what occurred on whatever date the eruption took place. Also, be sure to mark 1 November in your diary to attend the Monday Morning Lecture on Pompeii and its many still-unanswered questions.

Serpentine gold armband

From Szan Tan, Curator (Exhibitions), National Museum of Singapore: *When I embarked on the Pompeii project, I was excited to be handling frescoes for the first time. As the selection of frescoes for this exhibition was limited, I attempted to negotiate for a few more when I went to Pompeii to view the site. I was immediately struck by the fineness of the painting and the exquisite motifs on fragments of a fresco from the House of the Golden Bracelet. After some consideration, the Head of Conservation agreed to lend us these additional frescoes. He then flipped through past catalogues and books looking for an even more interesting artefact to add to our display, a very kind and unexpected gesture. He offered a mosaic fountain, which was last exhibited in Japan. I jumped at this opportunity to include a substantial (and the only) mosaic work in the exhibition list.The addition of these two artefacts will pose new challenges of display for us - especially the mosaic fountain, (which, as I write this, I still have not seen - but I understand that it is heavy and bulky). With an object list more or less pre-determined by the organisers, I faced a multi-faceted curatorial challenge in presenting an exhibition of one of the world's most historically important archaeological sites and culture. This introduction to the Roman world and to Pompeii is a gateway to understanding the foundation of Western culture. It's not an exhaustive exploration of Pompeii, but a teaser to begin a journey of discovery into the Western world.*

Images courtesy of Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompeii (SANP)