

**Exhibition: *A Day in Pompeii*, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, 26 June
– 25 October 2009.**

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On the 24 August 79 CE Mount Vesuvius erupted. The city of Pompeii was completely buried under pumice and ash. The exhibition *A Day in Pompeii*, presented by Museum Victoria, gives visitors the opportunity to understand what daily life in ancient Pompeii was really like, and to understand the process by which the city came to be destroyed, buried and eventually rediscovered. In contrast to the grim nature of Pompeii's history, the exhibition brings to life the town before the eruption through displays of a wide selection of artefacts that encapsulate various aspects of Pompeian society.

The overall structure of the exhibition works well. It is divided into two main areas; the first half offers insight into the daily life of the residents, with an overview of the various activities, illustrated by a select number of objects. The second half presents the aftermath of the eruption, with information on volcanology, the excavation process, and a brief but insightful delve into the ancient and modern literature that the history of Pompeii has inspired. Dividing the two parts of the exhibition is a short 3D movie, which presents a reconstruction of the eruption and the effect on the city of Pompeii. In this way, the visitor experiences their own version of the event; a normal day in the first half, followed by the destruction and then the aftermath of the eruption in the second half.

The range of objects presented in the exhibition is varied and is designed to inform the visitor about daily life in ancient Pompeii. Some of the more interesting artefacts include weights and measures, drinking vessels, elaborate jewellery, gladiatorial armour and a reconstruction of a Roman style bed. Through these objects the visitors learn about different aspects of daily life, such as trade, domestic activities, death, entertainment, medicine, fashion and religion. Particularly entertaining are the graffiti found on walls throughout the exhibition, which are copies of actual graffiti and give a real sense of the individuals who lived in the city.

The design of the exhibition is outstanding. Painted backdrops, props and sounds of daily life all combine to give the visitor a sense of what life may have been like in Pompeii and the multitude of people vying to get a glimpse of the objects only heightens the feeling of being in a crowded city. Boards display information about each object along with a general overview to place the object in context, while interactive screens are located throughout the exhibition, which allow the younger audience to learn about life in Pompeii through games and short animations. This use of interactive technology is an excellent way to encourage young visitors to engage with the exhibition.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is a 7 minute 3D animated movie of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. It presents snapshots of each stage of the destruction and burial of Pompeii during the eruption. The movie was of high quality and was historically based on the first-hand account of the eruption by Pliny the Younger. The long queues and the reaction of both children and adults to the movie prove it is well worth the funds which must have gone into the production and logistics of including a 3D movie in the exhibition.

Yet the most striking display is the plaster casts of the bodies of individuals who perished in the eruption. This is a particularly emotional sight, made all the more stronger by the stark and largely empty space and the simple lighting that draws your attention to the men, women, and even a dog, contorted into the exact postures of their final moments of life. The plaster casts are appropriately arranged at the end of the exhibition, after the significance of the eruption has been made clear.

There is little to criticise about this exhibition. One thing that could be improved is the position of the object descriptions and information boards. In many cases these are positioned very low to the ground or were crowded together, which makes it difficult to read them in the press of the crowd. There is also scope for greater emphasis on the archaeological process. The incorporation throughout the exhibition of information on the basic methods of excavation and the processes of recovery and preservation would complete the visitors' understanding of how the artefacts and

information they are engaging with have been brought to them, and would surely lead to a greater appreciation for them.

The incorporation of multimedia into the exhibit is clearly successful. There is increasing pressure for museums and galleries worldwide to include these new digital technologies in their exhibitions so as to continue to attract new generations in innovative ways. Museum Victoria has proved itself at the forefront of this movement. In addition to the multimedia included within the exhibition, the associated website gives people a chance to take a virtual tour and view the objects from home. A variety of school programs have also been designed for the use of teachers, while a series of lectures and special events are offered over the course of the exhibition, further enhancing the learning experience.

The Pompeii exhibition ran for four months and was undoubtedly a huge success, with thousands of visitors travelling from inter-state, and official numbers standing at more than 327,000 visitors.