

Pompeii the Exhibit: Life and Death in the Shadow of Vesuvius

Francesca Crozier-Fitzgerald (March 10, 2011)



Judith Harris, our Rome correspondent, was asked to apply her expertise on Pompeii for this season's exhibit at Discovery Times Square. She shares thoughts on the exhibit, her attraction to Pompeii, and experiences as a journalist in Italy

Judith Harris was asked to serve as a consultant for the exciting new Discovery Time Squares exhibit "[Pompeii the Exhibit: Life and Death in the Shadow of Vesuvius](#) [2]." Harris has chronicled the impact of three centuries of discoveries in her book, *Pompeii Awakened*. Audiences can read her succinct descriptions in the panels that illustrate the artifacts of the exhibition. For those who have not visited this unique site, here is inspiration.

Besides Pompeii, Harris, who lives in Rome, has many interests. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, she practiced journalism there for three years, moved to Italy nearly fifty years ago with the U.S. Foreign Service. After six years as a diplomat, Harris returned to journalism. Some of her recent contributions as a reporter for i-Italy include, but are not limited to, employee strikes at the Fiat Mirafiori plant, the illegal immigration to Lampedusa, and the ongoing Berlusconi scandal.

Harris, who came to New York for the opening of the Pompeii exhibit in Times Square, spoke to me of her fascination with the buried city, her experience as an journalist, and her personal experiences abroad. Her vibrant personality and enterprise as a journalist are evident in her responses.



Aside from the obvious fascinating elements about Pompeii, what do you think personally attracts you to this place?

Pompeii is of enduring interest to all mankind. I've wandered there with the mayor of Beijing and his wife and with people from all walks of life. Everyone is fascinated by this unique picture of life--all of life--in classical Greco-Roman antiquity.

How has your research, writing, involvement in educating the public through exhibitions changed or evolved over time?

I am first and foremost a writer, not a curator. I still believe the written word conveys messages that will last, but welcome the new media ways of presenting information. The Australian production of the video shown in the exhibition's "Eruption Theater" is archaeologically correct and gives a real sense of how Pompeii was destroyed, for example. And increasingly I appreciate curatorial efforts to exhibit artifacts with photos or drawings of their context. Context is all!

Elements from the final film that really struck me were the comments of Italian residents in the immediate area around Vesuvius...they are not concerned and they view the mountain as a very natural part of their daily life. What are your thoughts on this, having studied the magnitude of disaster that this mountain is capable of causing?

Today's geologists explain that the risk of a devastating eruption like that of 79 AD is today reduced because of changes deep within the earth that have--if I understand correctly--altered the substrata of lava. Prof. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, author of a new book on [Herculaneum](#) [3], was speaking at Cambridge University in September and said that the greatest concern today is of an earthquake. Obviously any quake will bring terrible devastation to those excavations already open to view. Moreover, though we do not perceive them, a constant shaking of the terrain endangers edifices. This may have been a contributing factor to the collapse of the Domus of the Gladiators.

Have you received any criticism about the exhibit, if so, what was your response?

One academic objected to the presence of plaster casts of Pompeian panels. Indeed, there are four panels depicting gods honored at Pompeii and one bas relief panel showing the destruction of the Forum temple. Her comment was that their presence was misleading, suggesting that many of the artifacts are in fact duplicates. This is a valid criticism, for the 200-plus authentic objects may have been seen, erroneously, as copies when they most definitely are not.

I think that the interactive videos and clear descriptive captions were the two strengths of the exhibit; they really gave you a sense of "place" and the lifestyles of those living at the time. Is there anything you would add to the exhibit that strikes you as an integral element of Pompeii?

Before the exhibition opened I had dreamed up a wish list of objects I would have liked included. The main one would have been a fairly large statue of the Egyptian goddess Isis, perhaps with a model or drawing of the temple to Isis. Compensating for this is the splendid Timeline, which I hope visitors will take the time to read, and the excellent video visit to a Pompeian home.

What were some of the difficulties that you faced in representing Pompeii to the American people?

What could possibly make Pompeii difficult is that it is so complex because it is a complete site, reflecting all of life at a given moment in time, but also with a 700-year backstory that few people can be expected to grasp immediately. Nevertheless, most people love Pompeii and are eager to know more.

What are some of the primary difficulties you have found working as a journalist in Italy? Are there still cultural barriers that you encounter and how do you get around them?

The primary difficulty is time! There is so much going on, so many exciting exhibitions to see, concerts to attend, conservation efforts worth reporting about--not to mention the colorful politicians, the struggles to promote the economy, the efforts to deal with toxic waste, the sad problems of the immigrants and the Roma people, and the challenges to those who must feed and house desperate people fleeing war.

So the primary difficulty is not any cultural barrier, but the shortage of time to try to do it all--and just getting around (poor public infrastructure and traffic) is real barrier. Graffiti at Pompeii are interesting, but less so on the commuter train, inaugurated only 11 years ago, which I take into Rome; its windows are so covered in graffiti that you cannot see out to know where your station is. In addition, the stations are rarely announced, and you don't know where you are. How can we work when things don't work? Not getting around barriers but getting anywhere takes too much time.

There are certainly stereotypes surrounding the Italian culture and subculture. In what ways, in your own work, have you tried to dismember these stereotypes and represent only truth?

To be honest, such stereotypes about the Italian culture (or subculture for that matter) date back



half a century and really are not applicable today. An exception is organized crime, whose spreading presence during the past decade is not a stereotype, but documented by Italian researchers. It is not a journalist's role to campaign against stereotypes, but to try to be an honest witness—as honest as possible. This was a real challenge during the “years of lead” when terrorism and the battle against it put Italian democracy at risk.

How do you think i-Italy is accomplishing its goal in representing Italian issues—politics art, to the American and Italian American people?

i-italy is simply terrific! I especially like the mix of young writers, established academics and professional journalists.

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Links

- [1] <http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/room1jpg-0>
- [2] <http://www.discoverytsx.com/pompeii>
- [3] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herculaneum>