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Editor in Chief:
Giampaolo Pìoli

The First Italian English Digital Daily in the US

English Editor: Grace
Russo Bullaro

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Pompeii Unveils First Permanent Overview of Life, Death, and Rediscovery Today

New exhibition traces the ancient city from the 79 AD eruption to excavations honoring victims and revealing daily Roman life



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



The remains of a door. Images of Pompeii are Courtesy of the Ministry of Culture

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Gestisci consenso

On March 12th, the site's first permanent overview, "Casts and Organic Relics," opened in Pompeii's Great Gymnasium, the perfect starting point for a visit to the world's probably most popular archaeological site. For in 2024 and 2025, Pompeii counted over 4,000,000 visitors each year, forcing the administration to issue nominal tickets to no more than 20,000 visitors per day.

This new overview offers a chronological synopsis of the entire site: from Mount Vesuvius's eruption in 79 AD (the exact date still to be decided), to Pompeii's earliest rediscoveries in 1592 and in 1748, its ever-growing popularity with northern-European tourists on the Grand Tour during the 18th century, and ending with excavations still ongoing.

At the press conference the day before "Casts and Organic Relics"'s inauguration, both Italy's Minister of Culture, Alessandro Giuli, and the Director of Pompeii's Archaeological Park, German-born Gabriel Zuchtriegel, said "Casts and Organic Relics" shouldn't be considered an exhibition, but rather a permanent memorial to the victims of, if not history's worst natural disaster, certainly its most famous. The goal here is to reconstruct its complete history: not only an account of how the Pompeians died, but also how they'd lived. For in addition to memorializing a historical disaster, the message here is that life is precarious, precious, and deserves respect.



Gabriel Zuchtriegel and Alessandro Giuli arriving at Casts and Organic Relics

In 79 AD, Pompeii had a population of some 20,000, and only approximately 1,150 bodies have so far been found on site, likely confirming that most of its inhabitants had the foresight to escape.

In the Great Gymnasium's north wing are plaster casts of the human remains of 22 victims seconds before they died from thermal shock and suffocation. They're this tragedy's most moving testimonies and a reminder of our own fragility and vulnerability. Often mistaken for petrified bodies and nicknamed "the imprints of pain," they were discovered in many different neighborhoods of Pompeii and were only recently brought permanently to the Great Gymnasium.

Starting in 1863, the archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli made over 100 of these casts; the 22 here are the best preserved (the other some 80 have remained where Fiorelli created them). These 22 include a 3-year-old child, a couple embracing, and a curled-up young man with his knees pulled up to his chest and his head resting on his

hands. From CT scans, 3D scanning, and DNA analysis, we've learned their approximate age, their sex, and details about their health.



Casts of an embracing couple

The next section explains Fiorelli's technique. The victims' bodies were buried under the hot ash, which rapidly solidified. Over time, the bodies' organic tissues decomposed, leaving voids in the hardened ash. Fiorelli poured liquid plaster into these cavities. Once the ash was brushed away, human figures re-emerged with incredible detail: postures, expressions, and even clothing.

The south wing begins with a video explaining the different phases of the earthquakes and 32-hour eruption, which spewed upwards columns of poisonous gas and lapilli, or pebbles of pumice, reaching a height of 20 miles before burying Pompeii. The first phase of destruction, a rain of pumice that caused roofs to collapse, lasted around 18 hours. A series of pyroclastic flows—hot, fast-moving, dense clouds of hot ash—followed and quickly buried everyone and everything under nearly 20 feet of ash.



Alessandro Sanquirico's set design of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius for Giovanni Pacini's opera, *L'ultimo giorno di Pompeii*, which premiered at the Teatro San Carlo, Naples, in 1825. Photo: Wikipedia

Displays include casts of farm and domestic animals: a pig, several horses and donkeys, a pet turtle, and a contorted dog with a leash once tied to a stake. Also here is a section about food, all charred, of course: bread, olives, almonds, fruit, beans, dates, walnuts, meat (cow, sheep, pork, chicken) bones, and clam and oyster shells, which illustrate the Pompeians' diet. Nearby are displays of wooden furniture: benches, chests, beds, wardrobes, and doors, also all charred, as well as tools, games, especially dice, coins, jewelry, baskets, and fragments of clothes and sandals. In short, a picture of daily life.

The ticket to "Casts and Organic Relics" is included in the site's numerous entrance fees based on age and citizenship, averaging c. 20 euros for the day, and open daily from 8:30 AM to 5 PM from November through March and from 8:30 AM to 7:30 PM from April through October.

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Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalist.