



Q&A with Eugene Dwyer, author of *Pompeii's Living Statues*

In AD 79, Mt. Vesuvius erupted in two stages. While the first stage was incredibly destructive, it was the second stage, a so-called pyroclastic flow that inundated Pompeii with a combination of superheated gases, pumice, and rocks, killing tens of thousands of people and animals and burying them in ash and mud.

Pompeii's Living Statues is a narrative account, supported by contemporary documents, of the remarkable discovery of those ancient victims preserved in the volcanic mud of Vesuvius.

Eugene Dwyer is Professor of Art History at Kenyon College. Trained at Harvard and the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, he has contributed articles to numerous volumes on Italian architecture and archaeology published by presses including Cambridge University Press, Getty Publications, and the University of Michigan Press. He is the author of *Pompeian Domestic Sculpture: A Study of Five Pompeian Houses and Their Contents*.

The University of Michigan Press: How were the statues that your book's title refers to first created?

Eugene Dwyer: The "statues" – I use the term while recognizing that they are partly composed of actual human remains—were made by a combination of natural processes that took place during the volcanic eruption and artificial interventions that began in 1863. To begin with, the victims were enveloped in hot, wet volcanic ash which molded their features as it deprived them of life. As their bodies decayed beneath the surface of the ground, they left hollow impressions of their flesh together with skeletal material that survives today. In 1863, Giuseppe Fiorelli, director of the Pompeii excavations, had the idea to inject a mixture of plaster of Paris and glue into cavities as they were encountered during the digging. After the plaster set, Fiorelli removed the surrounding ash and the "statues" appeared.

UMP: How detailed were they?

ED: The casts struck observers at the time as being extraordinarily lifelike, offering an unexpected vision of antiquity. Some felt that the ancient victims had been miraculously preserved and carried forward into the nineteenth century, while others felt that they, the observers, were carried back to antiquity. Details of clothing struck modern observers as surprisingly contemporary, and unlike anything they had expected the ancients to wear, since exposure to classical sculpture had made people think that the ancients went about largely unclothed.

Some of the casts produced between 1863 and 1900 were better than others with regard to surface detail. This depended upon the skill of the individuals making the casts, and especially on the effort to remove the envelope from the plaster. Sometimes details of a victim's hair could be made out. Sometimes pleats and stitches in their clothing and details of the shoes were apparent.

UMP: What importance do they hold in the study of life in that place and period?

ED: Initially, Fiorelli believed that the victims would supply evidence for life and manners in antiquity, so he tended to treat each individual as a separate discovery. Eventually, he came to understand that the

specific archaeological context in which the victims lay was also extremely important, and provided clues to understanding the actions of the volcano.

It is important, therefore, to distinguish at least three different contexts. First, the bodies testify, by means of their clothing and the items they carried, to the lives of the Pompeians before the eruption. Second, they demonstrate the manner in which they died – both in their attempts to escape and in succumbing to the conditions that killed them. Third, they affected the lives of those who viewed them after their resurrection. These effects were both psychological and cultural. Among other things, experience of the Pompeian victims shook people's confidence in the authority of ancient statuary as they had known it from museums.

UMP: What happened to the statues after they were created?

ED: Each statue was cast in the place where it was originally discovered. In most cases, this was in the middle of the street, usually high above the ancient ground level, since the victims had died while struggling to run through the accumulation of volcanic ash that had fallen over the course of the previous day. The plaster casts had to be removed to a place of shelter, so they were taken to a series of temporary homes until a proper site museum could be built. Such a museum opened in 1875, and that became the home of the first and subsequent casts until about 1900, when it could hold no more. That is the simple reason why many of the casts made later than 1900 are less well known than the ones made earlier.

UMP: Is there the opportunity for this kind of discovery in any other locations?

ED: Yes, wherever volcanic eruptions of the "Vesuvian type" have occurred, there may be layers of volcanic ash that replicate the conditions at Pompeii that preserved these bodies without destroying them. The conditions at Herculaneum, located closer to Mount Vesuvius, were not so favorable. The temperature of the comparable ash was much hotter, resulting in the incineration of soft tissue, so that only the bones survive. On the other hand, in Greece, on the island of Santarini, organic materials such as wooden furniture have been successfully cast from the matrix of the surrounding ash.

UMP: Why are the casts of interest today? (i.e. of perennial interest)

ED: As human beings, we are intensely interested in the appearance, habits, and fates of other humans. The archaeological site of Pompeii would still be of great interest without the bodies – or casts of the bodies – of its inhabitants. That is because we would go about imagining what the original inhabitants looked like and how they used their streets, houses, and rooms. The sight of the preserved forms of actual Pompeians however, is an irresistible sight to visitors. It is at once possible to stare at them and to think, "there but for the grace of God go I."

To read more about *Pompeii's Living Statues* by Eugene Dwyer, visit The University of Michigan Press at <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=1268484>.

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