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Pompeii comes to Australia, and ancient and contemporary stories of disaster and loss converge

Published: January 8, 2025 6.06am AEDT

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DOI

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AA.r7sucqxfh>

<https://theconversation.com/pompeii-comes-to-australia-and-ancient-and-contemporary-stories-of-disaster-and-loss-converge-246236>

Pompeii: Inside a Lost City at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra depicts life in the flourishing Roman city of Pompeii before it was destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE.

It pictures an ancient city frozen in time, eerily preserved by volcanic ash. It also tells the story of the city's rediscovery in the late 16th century and the archaeological excavations that have been underway ever since.

The exhibition's representation of a natural disaster that has reached timeless proportions has the potential to say a lot about the risks and costs of the urgent environmental crises facing humans today.

It offers a crucial opportunity for contemporary audiences to look at a lost city from the perspective of a world on the verge of collapse, but could have done more to consider what this level of destruction might mean now.

Ancient artifacts and technical precision

The exhibition's main intention is to create human understanding across millennia. "Beauty and fashion were no less important in the 1st century CE than they are today", says one wall-text.

A highlight for many visitors will be the authentic, vividly coloured frescoes recovered from the site. A wide curved screen plays a montage of digital images in situ near a selection of tiny clay pots holding the remains of pigments the painters used immediately before the eruption.



A highlight for many visitors will be the brightly coloured frescoes. National Museum of Australia

The exhibition is split into three parts. The first emphasises domestic life before the eruption. The second explores the remains of Pompeii and documents the work of researchers bringing the site and its fragments back to life.

These "before" and "after" sections are connected by a wide central *corso* (thoroughfare) reflecting the urban plan and textures of the ancient city. It provides a space of civic engagement and interaction between exhibition visitors and the residents of Pompeii.

The thoroughfare leads to a vast projection of Vesuvius that erupts every 15 minutes, giving the impression volcanic rain is falling across the exhibition. The panoramic area relies heavily on large-scale digital reconstructions and soundscapes to bring a contemporary treatment to an ancient story.



A vast projection of Vesuvius erupts every 15 minutes. National Museum of Australia

But it is more than a space of technical precision. Walking around in the crowd, the heat of visitors' bodies moving around each other offers a nod to the unsettling and perhaps unspeakable experience faced by the 20,000 people estimated to live in Pompeii at the time of the eruption.

A small alcove to the side of the exhibition holds historical copies of faceless casts of four people and a dog in their moments of death.

Most Pompeiians survived by fleeing the city when the early tremors hit, but many did not. Over a thousand victims have been excavated. In 1863, a technique was developed to inject plaster into the ash cavities left by the eruption to create casts from those who perished. This process has been extensively developed and analysed in the centuries since, and laser scanners and 3D printers now make more accurate casts.

Beautiful, often ordinary

Exhibition designers and curators have relied as much on spectacle as they have on information to create an emotive atmosphere to accentuate the feeling of travelling through time and space.

This effect is not solely produced through media supplementation but by the objects on display – including the terrible casts but also by the decayed frescoes, from which ever-young faces return our gaze.



Over a thousand victims have been excavated. National Museum of Australia

The excavated artifacts are beautiful, often ordinary: things like tweezers, cups, storage containers and lamps. Other everyday but less familiar items include small, mass-produced figurines of deities included in small shrines in a kitchen space or atrium.

Visitors can lean into displays to consider how similar – or different – the objects and the lifestyles they represent are from our own.

The excavated artefacts are beautiful, often ordinary.

They complement the only existing eyewitness account of the eruption, written by Pliny the Younger:

People bewailed their own fate or that of their relatives, and there were some who prayed for death in their terror of dying. Many besought the aid of the gods, but still more imagined there were no gods left, and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore.

This description is presented in large text in a small anteroom that has the purpose of helping visitors suspend disbelief as they enter the exhibition. There are no objects in this room.

The moment of pause it demands prepares visitors to:

Walk the city streets and immerse yourself in both the ancient city and the archaeological site – but beware the ever-present volcano.

Our own at-risk planet

There is a certain irony in being encouraged to step out of our everyday life to enter a past world in which we are directed to find common experiences. This is more a function of immersive blockbuster exhibitions in general than it is a complaint of Pompeii.

Pompeii is a polished, beautiful exhibition about an endlessly fascinating topic that will draw, enthrall and enlighten crowds.

And yet, Pompeii misses an opportunity to demonstrate connections between a long dead civilisation and our own at-risk planet. Its approach to building human understanding across time could have been extended to ask visitors to consider how they would react to an equivalent catastrophe or what it might mean today.

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We do not need to look far to generate a conversation about crises in different eras: last month, we saw the 50th anniversary of Cyclone Tracy; we are now five years on from the Black Summer bushfires.

These events are featured in the museum's Great Southern Land exhibition, which shows the damage they caused to communities as well as their legacies. It also features salvaged artifacts with similar everyday characteristics to those included in Pompeii.

This exhibition makes the case that distant civilisations are not too far from our own. But by placing us in a highly immersive exhibition we are – despite its opposite intention – disconnected from our own daily lives, and the true connection we have to the past. This can weaken society's collective will to take the urgent action required if we are to survive the next 2,000 years.

Pompeii: Inside A Lost City Package is at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, until May 4.