I interviewed Mary Beard, Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge, on the subject of the forthcoming exhibition at the British Museum. Busy as ever, she had recently given a lecture at the Getty Villa Museum in Malibu California, where the exhibition ‘The Last Days of Pompeii: decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection’ had been on show. The following conversation will I hope be of use to teachers in dealing with several of the exhibits in the BM exhibition, and explore some of the issues that may – perhaps ought to – arise from the exhibition and in the course of teaching Classics generally. For details of the outreach programme which is referred to, see the BM website.

So how are you actually involved in the exhibition?

The curator is Paul Roberts, but because I’ve worked a lot on Pompeii for ages I’ve had quite a lot of chats with Paul but only in a very informal way. More formally I’ve been helping arrange some of the outreach and public events to go with it. So I’m not really involved in the archaeological ones; they been done by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill. We’ve been trying to get together some more general kind of classical programme. It seems to me that what we all agreed in the end was that Pompeii was very important but that it was too good an opportunity to miss not to have something about more general classics. We were going to have a discussion with Robert Harris about Pompeii – there’ll be a Latin element there too.

So you haven’t had that much to do with the exhibition itself?

No. Well, I wrote the catalogue. I talked to Paul when the exhibition was first thought of – thinking about what was good and what worked. We went through the list of art. I’ve done a bit of the audio guide.

Richard Woff [Head of Schools and Young Audiences Education at the British Museum] and I had a long conversation about how you deal with the issue of the casts.

Did you hear my piece on the radio?

Well I saw your article on the BBC radio website – well, they’re not really plaster casts, are they? They’re casts of casts of casts.

I don’t know which ones are coming. Some of the plaster casts which are the originals still survive, but they are very fragile. I suspect that these are casts of casts.

I know that there’s going to be the cast of the dog, for example, and – do you think that there is an issue about children seeing these things, about the effect it might have on them?

They’ll love them! I mean, do you say that about the mummies?

Do you think they’re different?

Well, these are different, because with mummies – there’s somebody dead in there somewhere. What I think they are good for – I’m surprised that people are not more reflective about their status. I think they are good at raising those issues. What I was listening to kids at the Getty Museum where they’ve just got a couple of casts actually was how they made sense of them. Look, they revolutionised the touristic appeal of Pompeii – you saw people – would you do that at Aberfan? But they help kids raise issues about what does it matter, that what are these – they are the most puzzling objects. Even supposing they are the original casts (some of them have got some bones), basically they are the cast of a hole, a hole that has been made by a body that is no longer there. It’s very interesting - as a body, they’re not the body. And then, when they’re the cast of a cast, what are they? But then, they’re also extremely real because you see how they were clothed and how they were. I wouldn’t say that this is disgusting, but I would raise the issue about how people feel about them, and also how they would feel – well, what if this were just a model? Would it be different? I mean, is it different because it is kind of, by a very long process, - like a kind of apostolic succession -

Yes. And do we mind? Do we mind? So, I think it’s a very nice argument.
Richard was worried that parents would agonise over it more than the children – children would see it as a story.

Yes, but if you go to the site now and see how people on the site look at them -

- they go down and look at them with their camera. They go down with their friends.

You want to raise their consciousness – they’re wonderful – they’re amazing!

There’s one in the exhibition which is different – one of the resin ones.

Oh, the one from Oplontis. What’s interesting here is that there’s a museological issue here. No-one’s ever liked her. She’s toured around a lot. Everyone thought, when she was first done, it would be brilliant, because you could see all the details, the jewellery and so on. Perhaps it’s because it’s never had the sob-a-slash! appeal of the casts.

Because it’s too close to looking like a real body?

Well, it’s quite interesting. Partly it looks like resin – but it looks a bit like skin -

- like those plastic casts of that German artist [Gunther von Hagens] - a bit too anatomical?

My impression is that when I was seeing her, there are things inside her, and, compared with the other casts, she doesn’t seem to have the wow! factor. And partly I think it’s the other ones’ position – and she’s not in a position: she’s just lying down. There’s the muleteer, for example -

- the one in the crouching position -

Yes, but he wasn’t actually found like that at all. He was found with his head on the ground. He’d fallen forward, and he’s been put back up. In the meeting with Richard we focused really carefully on that one because we wanted to focus on one in the classroom, and we felt it looked like he’d been anaesthetised. I think Richard is more worried that the parents would be more concerned than the children.

In the Getty, they said, ‘Here’s a body,’ and then they moved on. There’s a wonderful 19th century German cartoon about an English family going through the casts. There’s a girl and the girl says, ‘Oh, look at that poor doggy, mummy!’ And mummy says, ‘Darling, he’s as dead as a doornail!’ So when you go to Pompeii, is it like visiting Aberfan or is it like going to a museum? And if you can get people talking about that, then that’s good - without it becoming too heavy. You see, it was a very long, long time ago, and they’re not bodies.

Let’s go back to the muleteer. We chose that because we thought that it looked like he was about to get up and go -

- great trick! But he wasn’t found like that. When I see him in that position of crouching – he’s often locked up in the forum of Pompeii - but people take his picture. He’s like the thinker, by Rodin. He’s sitting there, and there’s nothing he can do about it.

But he’s not like the ones sprawled on the ground. And we thought that -

But he was. He was tipped over. And you can see how it must be, you just rotate him, and you can see.

We were also disturbed about the dog.

Have you seen the artist’s dog: The Dead Dog from Pompeii – and it’s Pompei with one ‘i’, so it’s modern. They’ve got some of them in the Getty. It’s actually saying: this is a commodity, a replication. And that’s saying that’s what’s been done: the authorities keep making more and more of these things. But it’s only a dog.

But is that more moving, a dog, more moving for the small child?

It may be.

It’s the one in the Cambridge Latin Course and they all cry over the dog.

And it’s all tied up. You can see it can’t get away, and it fits with the cave canem mosaic. Everyone knows about Pompeii and that guard dog.

We shouldn’t be worried then?

We think about them. They are very, very problematic. They’re like our Cast Gallery – we take them for granted, but there’s something very strange about them because they’re a whole load of copies which are more fragile than the originals! How can that be? You can’t break them! Don’t break the originals – and don’t break these! The way the cast speaks to you - it fits with lots of artistic practice. Like Damien Hirst – one of things Alan McCollum [the artist of The Dead Dog from Pompeii] is saying is, ‘What turns it into an art object? Is it reputation that turns it into an art object?’ When I saw them – his dogs – the material is interesting. It’s much shinier. You don’t notice in the pictures. They’re more synthetic. Thinking about the material of these things is interesting and it’s making an impact. There’s the dull plaster of the original ones, there’s the resin, and then there’s this shiny stuff. It’s not plaster – and so the texture is interesting, even though you don’t touch; it’s the texture of them.

So, where’s Latin going? Do you think the exhibition will do to help get Latin more prevalent in schools?

There’s a great danger to have a debate on Latin, because you are preaching to the converted. The ones who don’t believe it won’t come. But we have got some people to talk more reflectively about what our priorities would be. We want to try and put this
in the context of a bigger debate about the curriculum, and also in a way that isn’t just lecturing people - that isn’t just navel gazing. And there are issues that are worth debating. How do you justify Latin in an already packed curriculum? I think you’ve got to do it in better ways than it helps you to learn French better, because why not just learn French better? I gave a lecture in New York: ‘Do the Classics have a future?’ It wasn’t my title, but it worked and the audience was packed. There was a long discussion. We need to think about how to make sure it would be more edgy. ‘Does Latin have a future?’ We’re thinking of debating big questions about learning: what we value in society. What is the role of Latin in the classroom? Or in broader society? Is it irrelevant? I think we’ll get people for that. I’d like to get some kids too. Does Pompeii have a future? Who knows? But there are different forms of classical learning and culture. It’s not just a six month exhibition and then it’s all over.

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i. Although the exhibition has now closed, for further details, see [www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/pompeii/](http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/pompeii/). The catalogue is still available.


iv. Allan McCollum’s The Dog from Pompeii (1991). Originally the artist wanted to replicate the carbonised loaf of bread in the Naples archaeological museum – a kind of replication of something banal, simple and in its own way replicated constantly in the ancient world – not just in Pompeii. However, the Italian authorities decided that the loaf was too delicate to be submitted to the casting process.

v. The Cast Gallery, properly called the Museum of Classical Archaeology, is housed above the Faculty of Classics in Cambridge. It contains Victorian (mostly) plaster casts of sculptures and friezes from the ancient world.

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**Five Great Representations of Pompeii in Popular Culture**

by Juliette Harrisson

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Poor Pompeii. If Roman Britain has a PR problem, being known only for rain, Boudicca and the non-disappearance of the Ninth Legion, Pompeii has it much worse. Pompeii is known for one thing and one thing only: being destroyed by a volcano. This is inevitable, really, as Pompeii’s destruction was so dramatic and spectacular, it would seem a waste to take one’s fictional Roman characters there and not cover it in some way (besides, if anyone goes to the Bay of Naples in earlier-set Roman fiction, they go to Baiae, the party town, as do actual Romans in historical sources). And so, in this article we list five especially successful representations of Pompeii in modern popular media; but the list might as well be called ‘Five Great Representations of the Eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79.’

It’s worth noting here that among the best known images from Pompeii are the famous ‘bodies’, which are actually plaster casts (Mary Beard recently reflected on these for BBC Radio 4’s A Point of View). There were no human remains in the city when it was excavated. Instead there were holes in the solidified deposits that were human-shaped, and so Victorian archaeologists poured plaster into the holes to produce statue-like images of the attitudes in which these people died, where the ash and stones originally encased their bodies after they’d been killed by the pyroclastic flow. More human-looking than skeletons, they’re very moving to look at and dominate representations of the eruption.

5. **The Simpsons, ‘The Italian Bob’**

Why are we in Pompeii? The Simpsons does Italy, taking the title characters on a tour in Mr Burns’ new car. They don’t even have to come up with a reason to hit a list of random Famous Things About Italy (in an order than makes no geographical sense). The Roman Forum and the Colosseum are kept for the climax, but Pompeii makes it into Italy’s Greatest Hits alongside the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a picturesque Tuscan village and a McDonald’s that serves wine.

Are we here for anything other than an erupting volcano? No. We’re here for a single, volcano-based sight gag.

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**Do we see the famous plaster casts?**

Sort of.

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Worth a watch: Lisa inaccurately claims that the victims of Pompeii (which is given the spelling of the modern town, Pompei, not the ancient Roman spelling) were frozen in whatever position they died, implying that the ‘bodies’ are actually petrified corpses. Which, of course, they’re not. It’s probably worth it, however, as it allows the show to revisit one of its favourite jokes. Throughout the twenty-plus years The Simpsons has been on air, Homer has frequently been seen choking Bart when angry (a ‘horrible act of child abuse,’ as documentary-spoof episode ‘Behind the Laughter’ pointed out, that ‘became one of our most beloved running gags’). So, of course, when the family discover a Roman family who look just like them, Roman-Homer has been killed in the act of choking Roman-Bart.

4. **Pompeii: The Last Day**

Why are we in Pompeii? For a BBC docu-drama whose title was presumably inspired by Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s famous nineteenth century novel, The Last Days of Pompeii, and its various adaptations.

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Are we here for anything other than an erupting volcano? No. Bulwer-Lytton’s novel was full of preachy stuff about terrible Roman morals and how somehow this led to death by volcano; but that sort of thing’s gone out of fashion (partly for being untrue) and this docu-drama is all about getting to everybody’s horrible deaths.