When Walls Could Talk

The walls of Pompeii were not used merely to hold a roof overhead; they were prime real estate for all kinds of graffiti. The walls were used to describe the merits of a favorite prostitute in the city, as endorsements for political candidates, as praise for a kind deed, and as a way to express frustration with the government or other individuals. As you look at the graffiti displayed in A Day in Pompeii, think about how we express these sentiments today and how graffiti of today is different than that of Pompeii.

Merchants of Pompeii

In the heydays of Pompeii, the city was a bustling port positioned in the middle of a prominent trade route. Many ships would have entered and exited the mooring platforms on a daily basis. Salts, oils, animals, slaves, wine and food were among the goods traded in Pompeii and throughout the empire. Trade was the source of income for merchants and others in Pompeii who owned inns, ale, houses, brothels and entertainment venues. The trade route kept Pompeii thriving. What evidence do you see in the exhibit of the importance of trade in Pompeii?

A Clash of Cultures

When Pompeii was conquered and taken as part of the Roman Empire, the Roman citizens brought new elements to the city's culture. The Greek citizens of Pompeii were accustomed to theater where death and violence took place off stage. The Roman idea of entertainment was to revel in death and violence as the centerpiece of an event. Matters were further complicated by the excesses and obsessions of the emperor Nero, who had strong ties to Pompeii through his mistress and then second wife, Poppaea Sabina. As you look through the recreation of a gladiator tunnel under the Coliseum, think about what this type of entertainment was like for the early inhabitants of Pompeii and what it was like for the young Romans brought up under the reign of Nero.
The Art of Pompeii

Commissioned artwork has been found throughout the ruins of Pompeii. It documents important events, captures the images of homeowners, honors gods and heroes, and creates the appearance of space where none is available. The authors of Pompeii: The Living City believe that the works found on the walls and floors and in the statues of Pompeii are rooted in actual events, some of which may seem like fantasy in today's culture. What do the frescos on display in A Day in Pompeii say about the painting’s commissioners? What do they say about Roman society?

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

The earthquake of 62 A.D. was a warning for the citizens of Pompeii. Many lost their lives and others abandoned the city altogether, which left fewer citizens to clean up and stabilize the city's structures. There is evidence that many repairs had not been completed at the time of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. when the citizens of Pompeii once again faced the decision: should I stay, or should I go? Knowing the dangers presented by the earthquake, and fearing the horrors of the ash clouds, many Pompeians chose to stay in order to be with a family member who could not make the journey. Some stayed to protect their wealth and goods. Others had the choice made for them. The casts displayed in A Day in Pompeii tell us a bit about some of those who stayed behind and allow us to ponder their decision. As you view the casts, think about what you would do if given their choices and circumstances.