Importance Of The Preservation Of Herculaneum And Pompeii

Architecture held within the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum has been preserved on a level that no other art from the time period has been able to reproduce. An unfortunate tragedy occurred in 79 CE when a large volcano, Mount Vesuvius, erupted taking the cities by storm. These Roman towns were soon flooded with volcanic material. From 79 CE until the 18th century, these two towns were buried and forgotten under several layers of volcanic ash measuring more than 50 feet deep (The Getty Conservation Institute). The city was left undisturbed until archaeologists began exploring the grounds in 1738 with the use of tunnels (Gordan, Alden pg. 54). Thousands of pieces of art, buildings, food, art, clothing, workshops, restaurants, and more were recovered from this volcanic ash (Tronchin, Francesca), revealing architecture that has been preserved beautifully for hundreds of years. The towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum are now living museums that can be visited by the public to experience the daily life in the Roman Empire. This unfortunate tragedy has returned a donation to modern-day history, as we are now able to fully understand their culture that would have been otherwise impossible. While these towns were nearby and shared many similarities, the vast differences that were uncovered were surprising.

It’s said that Pompeii, also known as the “city of death”, tells us more about life in first-century Italy than the city of Rome (Tronchin, Francesca). The recovery of Pompeii has been going on for nearly three centuries, still leaving work to be done. The most beautiful Roman sites have been preserved in the town of Pompeii, ranging from temples, villas, take out restaurants, and houses. Though the city of Pompeii was not always Roman, the majority of the standing buildings in the city of Pompeii today are from the Roman period (Tronchin, Francesca). The city of Pompeii had a large amount of agricultural land, but with the rapidly expanding population, this farmland was quickly built over with houses, markets, and other urban buildings. Most of the commercial and industrial buildings in Pompeii were created with city blocks, which were generally rectangular in shape. The production of these buildings often followed very similar methods to the construction we still use today. In Pompeii, the decoration of buildings usually consisted of mosaic, stucco, and marble. These decorations were often seen in public gathering areas such as the forum bath, in which Pompeii contained five of. A method found by archaeologists that was used to retrieve the shapes of victims to the volcano, now known as the 'Fiorelli method', was also used to recreate the forms of common household objects and structures such as doors, shutters, and furniture. Religion was a large piece in the construction of Pompeii, as there are many religious temples still standing today that were used to worship the various gods. A temple to the Egyptian goddess Isis was among the most popular worship grounds, which was decorated carefully in stucco, surrounding a marble statue of Isis herself. Pompeii followed a longstanding tradition of Mediterranean culture, stating that burials are prohibited within cities walls. Today, roads leading from city gates can be seen lined on both sides with graves (Tronchin, Francesca).

Herculaneum was discovered in 1709 with formal excavations beginning in 1738 (The Getty Conservation Institute). Unlike Pompeii, the city of Herculaneum was recognized for uncovering organic materials like clothing, wood, and food. Due to the nature of the volcanoes effect on the town, more delicate objects were commonly found as the ash has more deeply preserved these

fragile objects. Household items were found in abundance, anywhere from wooden chests to cupboards and chairs. The special conditions of the ground humidity in the Herculaneum made the conservation of wooden frameworks of houses, wooden furniture, and pieces of cloth possible. Herculaneum is one of the very few ancient towns in which upper floors of homes were successfully preserved. The town of Herculaneum contained richly decorated buildings containing paintings, wood, bronze sculptures, and fine marble. The House of the Bicentenary is one of the best-preserved houses in Herculaneum, with highly refined wall paintings and mosaic pavements (The Getty Conservation Institute). This house contained tablinum which was a decoration of great artistic and archaeological significance, displaying mythological figures and scenes in a unified pattern containing specific colors and design. A large number of antiques were recovered from Herculaneum when Charles III purchased the land and used inexpensive methods of excavation to locate the paintings and sculptures. The most well-known findings of Herculaneum consist of the Basilica, Tombs, and the Theater. Today, the Theater is still one of the parts of the Herculaneum that is very difficult to reach, as it is most deeply buried by layers of volcanic ash and is thoroughly covered by the hardest of volcanic lava (Gordon, Alden pg. 62).

While the towns had major differences in the architecture found, they both went through the same tragedy that in return made a mark on history. There are active conservation projects for both Pompeii and Herculaneum, where archaeologists scramble to preserve these delicate artefacts.

The preservation of the Herculaneum and Pompeii is vital to modern-day society as it lets us actively experience and understand the Roman culture. Since these towns are still being preserved every day, the public is able to walk through the town to see the world from the perspective of the citizens who lived in the Empire.