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## Grant Drumheller, Professor of Art, travels to Italy

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# International Perspectives

Center for International Education

## GRANT DRUMHELLER, PROFESSOR OF ART

*In June, Professor Grant Drumheller, Department of Art and Art History, traveled to Italy where he explored archaeological sites, taking photos and making sketches for future paintings.*



*Prof. Drumheller in Pompeii*

On June 25, I traveled to Sorrento, Italy, and stayed for four nights. I had planned to visit the surrounding Roman excavations near Naples. Initially I had planned to stay in Naples downtown but the news of a trash strike and the closing of the landfills in the Campania region changed my plans to Sorrento, a cliff-side vacation town on the Bay of Naples. In hindsight, the trash problem was not as evident as I had feared. Nevertheless, Sorrento, while a touristy place, proved a fine base from which to explore the local ruins of Herculaneum, Pompeii and Oplontis. My objective had been to return to some familiar sights (Pompeii, Naples and the National Museum of Archeology), explore new ones (Paestum, Herculaneum) and generally gather photos for my own use in future works. Since I derive “sketch” material from photos, and some drawings, and much prefer my own source materials to commercial photos, it was incumbent that I make the journey and do the work myself. Given the brevity of the trip, I am happy to report that I did succeed in my objectives. Mainly I am interested in the extant spaces and the way light carves them out of the archeological sights and how Roman decorative painting embellished the residences that still stand. Herculaneum was the revelation on this trip. I did not realize that the city had been inundated with up to 50 meters of molten magma and ash that completely negated its existence until it was discovered by someone drilling for a well (unexpectedly finding empty caverns where

rooms now stood). The sense of how the excavation sits in its enveloping rock with the contemporary city built above at its edges is quite remarkable.

Italy is the land of restoration, which means half of a museum may be surprisingly shut to the public or an entire area of an archeological sight may be off limits. This was a reoccurring experience. I found much of the ancient estate of Oplontis with its paintings still in place roped off from visitors, the entire floor of Roman wall paintings from Pompeii normally on view in the

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Naples National Museum locked to the public as well.

Since some of the oldest parts of Naples retain the same street plan and building style as in Roman times, one can sense the compression of time and the similarities between a sight such as Herculaneum and the historic center of Naples; i.e., cramped, dark and filled with fish shops, metal “ferramente”, and bakeries. Visiting Naples provided as much inspiration as the ruins themselves. It is a city that thrives in vital disarray and was a great antidote to the quiet and the surprisingly somber feel of the ruins. One can't escape the sense of violent death that befell the residents of Pompeii and Herculaneum. It was something I had not anticipated. On June 29, I left Sorrento and proceeded with the remainder of my trip.

In conclusion, the romance of the ruins is a 19th century trope that I am not trying to revive. My work is ambiguous in that the images may not even appear ancient, despite the sources I use. Nevertheless, I wish that I had seen Rome and the cities that were buried by Vesuvius before they were stripped bare of the trees, roots and overgrowth that inspired earlier artists and writers. While there is an effort to use a more garden like treatment, especially in some of the older excavations where mature trees have been fostered, it is far from the untamed wildness that once prevailed at these places. My hope is that one day I will experience a freshly discovered archeological sight -“pre restoration” i.e., before the defoliant and archeologists lay it bare.

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