

From Fragments to Icons: Stages in the Making and Exhibiting of the Casts of Pompeian Victims, 1863-1888

Eugene Dwyer

Abstract

In retrospect, we can indeed look back upon the introduction of the Pompeian casts in 1863 as the invention of a new art form. From our vantage point nearly a century and a half later, the process can be seen as having several distinct stages of technical achievement and corresponding stages of popular reception. The process started with the 'discovery' that impressions left in the soil by the bodies of Pompeian victims could be cast in gesso. Six imperfect specimens were made during the decade following the discovery. Study, exhibition, and commercial exploitation of the casts ensued, with other experimental agenda paralleling the search for technical improvements in the casting process. In 1875 a new museum opened, with the casts featured as chief exhibits. By this time, due to a number of related factors, the casts had achieved the status of works of art.

A view of the interior of the Pompeii Museum taken about 1890 speaks volumes about the nature and purpose of the famous casts of victims made on the site of Pompeii and exhibited there since 1863 (fig. 1). The objects on display – casts of bodies, wine storage jars and other pots, architectural revetments – were all considered important enough to keep, but not artistic or precious enough to send to the Naples Museum with the rest of the loot. Yet there is undeniable artistry in the casts, and the other items as well, and many a traveller has taken home a photograph or a postcard of the bodies as the most memorable image of a visit to Pompeii.



Fig 1. Figure1 Interior of Pompeii Museum before 1889. Photo: Edizioni Brogi. Author's collection.

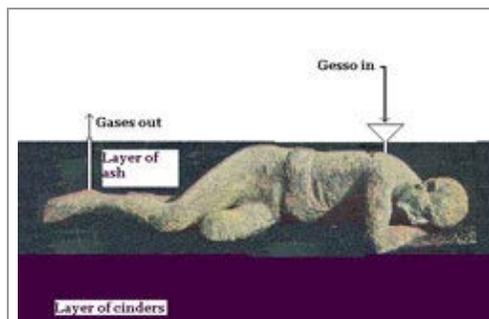


Fig 2. Casting diagram.

What precisely are the casts – are they archaeological artefacts, or are they works of art? The casts are the products of both natural ceramic process and artistic intervention. The layer of hardened ash that surrounds and retains the impressions of organic forms in the so-called 'surge layers' of Pompeii's volcanic fill arrived as a

The Threshold of the Real: Canalizing the Body as Object Art

by Tessa Adams

Embodying Transformation

by Christie Brown

Heads and Bodies: Fragments and Restoration

by Jeanne Cannizzo

Partial Figures and Psychic Unease: an Artist's Perspective

by Wilma Cruise

Presence and Absence: edited transcript of presentation

by David Cushway

From Fragments to Icons: Stages in the Making and Exhibiting of the Casts of Pompeian Victims, 1863–1888

by Eugene Dwyer

EVENTual BodieSpaces

cloud of superheated and oxygen-depleted gas. The gasified material, which later hardened as mud, covered all as it swept from the direction of Vesuvius southward over Pompeii. It encapsulated those who were attempting to flee atop the nearly three metres of cinders that had been deposited in an earlier phase of the eruption, and it even penetrated the ruined houses to entomb those who were still sheltering within.

Pompeii's unique conditions make it possible to cast in gesso the impressions of the bodies of some of the victims trapped in the layer of hardened ash. (fig. 2) To do so successfully, however, requires the eyes of Lynceus (who could see things concealed beneath the earth) or the imagination of Michelangelo (who could see forms present in the matrix). For once the earth surrounding the impression has been removed, the form is gone as well¹. At the first appearance of a cavity in the mud, gesso must be introduced. After the gesso has been allowed to harden, the resulting cast must be exhumed and the adhering mud – which formed the original impression – carefully removed: a destructive process that permits no corrections. Every casting contains the element of surprise, since it cannot be known beforehand what forms will emerge when the surrounding ash has been removed – whether the figure will be complete or the impression of forms will be lost due to imperfections or anomalies in the original burial. Although a gesso cast of the complete body was the ideal, no 'un-fragmented figure' was ever made by this process at Pompeii.

The history of cast-making at Pompeii is a history of lost opportunities and destroyed evidence. More than a hundred years of digging took place before the first cast was made. In that time at least six hundred skeletons had been unearthed and the bones either collected or discarded depending on the policy at the time. In some noteworthy early cases, impressions of the flesh and of clothing in the hardened ash that surrounded the bodies were noted, and some bits of volcanic mud, like that forming the breast of a young woman, had even been taken to the museum in Naples. Plaster casts of inanimate objects had been made as early as the 1770s, and some attempts had been made as early as 1831 to cast human figures in whole or in part, but apparently without success.²

In 1863, in the effort to preserve the archaeological record, the director of the excavations, Giuseppe Fiorelli, succeeded in making casts of four whole figures. These casts showed the victims' clothing and permitted a much better forensic examination, and were an immediate success. For a period of about ten years Fiorelli treated his casts as archaeological evidence, showing them to visiting archaeologists, anthropologists, physicians, and the like. But Fiorelli, who was an even better administrator and promoter of the excavations than a scientist, was also aware from the beginning of the casts' potential to draw visitors to Pompeii. About 1873 he conceived the idea of a museum with the casts as principal works of art. This was an idea almost as stunning as his 'discovery' of the first casts themselves.

Despite their celebrity, however, the casts continued to be a feature exclusive to Pompeii. Only in the anniversary year of 1979 did two of the casts – or reproductions of them – venture forth in the famous blockbuster exhibition, 'A.D. 79'. Only in 2003 did the casts reach Naples and subsequent museum venues in the exhibition 'Tales from an Eruption'. By that time, however, the casts' claim to legitimacy as works of art had been established by artists like Allan McCollum, as evidenced here by his work based on the casts, *The Dog from Pompeii* (1991) (fig. 3).³



by Fiona Fell

Material Evidence: Use of the Figurative Fragment in the Construction of a Social Sculptural Subject

by Sheila Gaffney

Things of Nature Unknown

by Edith Garcia

Mapping Figure and Material: Some Remarks on Fragment and Material in Modern and Contemporary Sculpture

by Arie Hartog

Giuseppe Spagnulo: Material > < Body = Form > < Idea

by Lisa Hockemeyer

Cut, Torn, and Pasted: a Female Perspective

by Charlotte Hodes

Cheating Time

by Doug Jeck

Watchers and Memory

by Alison Lochhead

Fragments and Repetition: Extending the Narrative of Sculptural Installation

by Virginia Maksymowicz

The Body Undone: Fragmentation in

Fig 3



Fig 3. Allan McCollum, *The Dog from Pompeii* (1991).

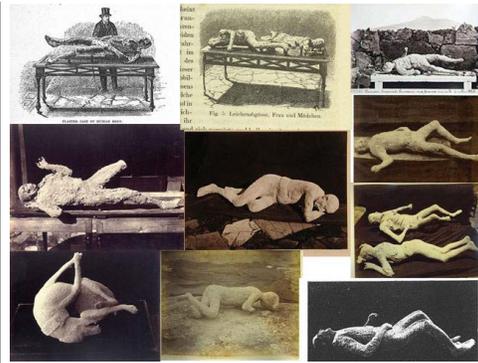
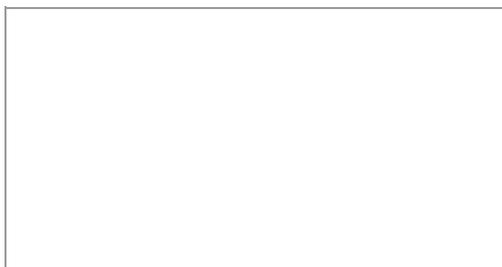


Fig 4. Composite image of the first twelve casts. Photo: Various nineteenth-century.

Given the fanfare with which the new discovery was announced to the world in 1863, and the seeming ubiquity of casts in popular impressions of Pompeii, it is not generally appreciated that the number of casts is finite, and that their appearance at Pompeii was gradual. Six were made in the decade between 1863 and 1872, and it was another fifteen years before a dozen had been accumulated – enough, as it were, for a celebration (fig. 4). In retrospect, we can indeed look back upon the introduction of the Pompeian casts as the invention of a new art form. From our vantage point nearly a century and a half later, the process can be seen as having several distinct stages of technical achievement and corresponding stages of popular reception.⁴

The first stage: discovery

Like the ‘primitive’ or archaic phase of a style as defined by the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, the first stage in the invention and reception of the casts held all of the potential of the ensuing periods, but was apt to be somewhat confused in its methods, both from a technical point of view and a museological one. The first stage corresponds to the first decade, 1863–72, when the casts were primarily intended as scientific documentation, and only secondarily as exhibition material. It began with the dramatic discovery of the technical process that first made the imprints of the victims visible to the eyes of archaeologists and tourists. If we are to believe later accounts, at the beginning of 1863 Fiorelli instructed his workmen to cease digging at the first sign of any cavity in the layer of volcanic ash that lay atop the approximately two metres of pumice laid down in the early stages of the volcano’s eruption. We may assume that previous, unrecorded experience prepared the director for events on 3 February, when just such a cavity presented itself.⁵ As reported, Fiorelli himself used a pair of iron tongs to extract the bones of a skeleton from the cavity, and then filled – or had someone else fill – the cavity with liquid gesso. On the following day the skeleton – or the form (*impronta*) – was unburied and freed of the surrounding ash. The result was a male figure, almost entirely preserved, with traces of his clothing. The giant size of the man – over six feet – and his military bearing impressed those who examined him at the time and those who viewed him during his subsequent exhibitions (fig. 5).



Process

by Babette Martini

Visualizing Mortality: Robert Arneson’s Chemo Portraits

by Mary Drach McInnes

Interrogating the Human Figure in Bridging the Ceramic- Sculpture Divide: Practice in Nigeria

by Tonie Okpe

Ceramic Sculptures by Wilma Cruise: Fragments and Feminist Transgressions

by Brenda Schmahmann

Figuratively Speaking

by Shelley Wilson

The Obsolete Body

by Gavin Younge

Touching the Body: A Ceramic Possibility

by Bonnie Kemske

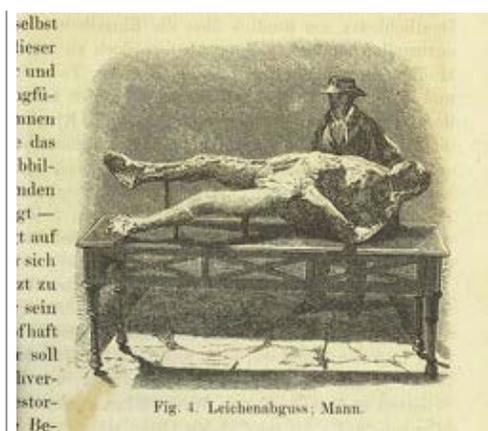


Fig 5. The first cast, *The Soldier*, from J. Overbeck, *Pompeji*, 2nd edn, Leipzig, W.

William Dean Howells, who saw the cast not long after it had been excavated, admired him for his Stoic calm.⁶ In sharp contrast is the attitude of the woman who was found nearby. Mark Twain wrote:

The woman had her hands spread wide apart, as if in mortal terror. And I imagined I could still trace upon her shapeless face something of the expression of wild despair that distorted it when the heavens rained fire in these streets so many ages ago⁷ (fig. 6 and fig. 7).

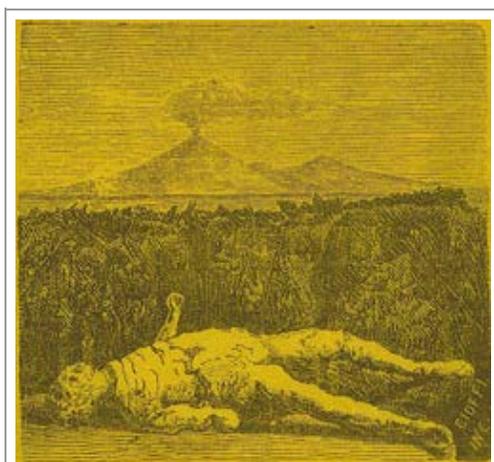


Fig 6. The fourth cast, *The Pregnant Woman*, from Cioffi (after photograph), c.1900. Author's collection.



Fig 7. *The Pregnant Woman*. Photo: Edizioni Brogi. Author's collection.

Together with the other casts from the same location, made within days of each other, these casts were removed from the spot for protection from the elements and installed in the re-named 'House of the Cadavers of Gesso'. It was there that Howells saw them: 'The guide takes you aside from the street into the house where they lie, and a dreadful shadow drops upon your heart as you enter their presence.' There is no doubt that the macabre sight was exploited by Fiorelli both to draw tourists to Pompeii and to enhance his own reputation.

The fame of the casts spread immediately by newspaper accounts, and by the graphic media of engraving and photography. The authentication of the victims' fate provided by the casts was so ideally suited to the new medium of photography that, in the words of a writer in the *Photographic News* for September 1868,

it is difficult to divest the mind of the idea that they [the photographs of the casts] are not the works of some ancient photographer who plied his lens and camera after the eruption ceased, so forcibly do they carry the mind back to the time and place of the awful immurement of both a town and its people.⁸

While the casts were impressive and horrific when viewed from a distance, closer inspection revealed many imperfections in the casting process. The early photographs and the wood-engravings made after them were quite limited in their selection of views. Closer examination through the objective lens of a later photographer reveals that the casts were seriously flawed to begin with, or that they had deteriorated significantly over a period of about 20-25 years. Each of the six casts produced during this first period must be described as fragmented. At least part of the effect that the casts had upon contemporary visitors was certainly due to the grim surfacing of the underlying skeletons, as in this startling image from 1868. (fig. 8) The victim's body was actually found face-down, but has been arranged for the camera in the more dramatic supine position. Even without the archaeologists, this cast – seen here in a trophy-shot, and compared with the earlier convention of viewing skeletons (fig. 9) – added a new chapter in the history of the grotesque.



Fig 8. *Suffocated Man*, cast of 1868.
Photo: G. Sommer. Author's collection.



Fig 9. From J. Overbeck, *Pompeji*, 1st edn, Leipzig, W. Engelmann, 1856, p.28.

The second stage: unity and the formation of icons

During the second decade the technical difficulties attending the making of casts were better understood, and a select number of successful castings of nearly perfect – unfragmented – figures resulted in an iconic series of images like the *Sleeping Man*, (fig. 10 and fig. 11) the *Watchdog* or chained dog (fig. 12), and the universally admired *Body of a Young Woman*. By the 1880s the individual casts had become favourite subjects of photographers, leading to a kind of iconography of the casts. Prominent commercial photographers like Michele Amodio and Giorgio Sommer offered a stock of photographs of Pompeian subjects, among them the popular casts, in formats ranging from the diminutive *carte de visite* to large 11 by 14 inch prints. It was possible to purchase made-to-order albums, and many albums of the period contain a selection of photos of the casts.





Fig 10. *Sleeping Man*. Photo: Unknown (Roberto Rive?). Author's collection.



Fig 11. *Sleeping Man*, top half. Photo: Edizioni Brogi. Author's collection.



Fig 12. *Watchdog*. Photo: G. Sommer. Author's collection.

The emergence of a market for photographs was accompanied by a change in the exhibition of the casts. About 1873 Fiorelli began to plan a museum on the site of Pompeii. This became a reality in 1875, when the casts were moved from the houses where they had previously been kept. The new museum was less grim than the houses because it was better lighted, but it gave the distinct impression of a morgue. The casts in their glass cases literally held centre stage. In spite of the grim appearance of the place, the opportunity that it presented for closer study of the casts seems certainly to have contributed to the formation of a new canon of showpieces: archaeological artefacts as works of art. Fiorelli's original casts of the 1860s occupied glass cases of their own, along with more complete casts made during the 1870s and 1880s. I refer to the latter as 'icons' because, owing to their striking attitudes, to the success of their castings, and the photogenic quality of the subjects, these particular victims together account for the greatest number of illustrated postcards and book illustrations among the casts. As frequently reproduced images from Pompeii, they have taken their place alongside the Dancing Faun, Narcissus, and other famous works of painting and sculpture from Pompeii. The Sleeping Man, found in 1873, was universally admired, being selected for the first photogravure-

printed plate in the third edition of Overbeck's monograph on Pompeii published in 1875. In Fiorelli's words, the man, having sought refuge in a vacant spot just inside the city gate, 'sensing that he was being suffocated by the volcanic gases, and that he was losing his strength, . . . lay down on the ground and there fell calmly into his eternal sleep'.⁹ Its popularity extended to the masses of visitors to the city and its new museum. An anonymous visitor's comment, written on the back of a postcard of the Sleeping Man, about 1900, reveals much about the search for works suitable for exhibition: 'There are several such in the museum at Pompeii, including a child and a dog in terrible contortions. But this is the most complete and perfectly preserved. It is much less agonizing than some of the others.' Giorgio Sommer's photograph, made between the time of his discovery in 1873 and his transfer to the museum in 1875, shows him 'asleep' in the courtyard of the Archaeological School of Pompeii (where the cast of 1868 had been photographed). A photograph made after the move to the museum shows him to be less relaxed when viewed from above.

In the following year, 1874, the *Watchdog* was cast. Like the *Sleeping Man*, the dog is a spectacular technical achievement, though contrasted by his agonized attitude. The watchdog had been held to the door by his chain and thus was prevented from escaping. The form is so complete that the means by which the gesso was introduced into the impression is nowhere to be seen in photographs.



Fig 13. *Man and Woman from Strada Stabiana.* Photo: G. Sommer. Author's collection.



Fig 14. *Woman from Strada Stabiana.* Photo: Edizioni Brogi. Author's collection.

In 1875 the impressions of a man and a woman were found within the city, in the vicinity of one of the northern gates to Pompeii. Giorgio Sommer's photograph shows them side by side on pavement, perhaps that in the courtyard of the Archaeological School. The woman lay face down, and appears to have buried her face in her dress, leaving only her waistband in place. In another Sommer photograph she lies face down upon a board draped in black cloth and is viewed from the prospect of someone standing over her. (fig. 13) Her removal to the museum permitted photographers to treat her figure in a manner that was both more objective and more revealing¹⁰ (fig. 14). A fourth icon emerged in 1882, when the body of a child, perhaps a boy of about ten, was found together with the arm of his mother who had once held him (fig. 15). Unlike the other casts in this series, this cast was part of a group of two figures, one of which could not be cast. Because the mother lay in the layer of stones, her cast was not successful, but the full figure of the boy – who may have been unable to walk by himself – was successfully cast. He is shown here as he appeared in the *Illustrated London News* for 1882, engraved after a photograph submitted to the paper by an English resident of Naples¹¹ (fig. 16). He took his place in the museum as a pendant to the *Watchdog*, on the opposite side of the door.



Fig 15. *Little Boy*, cast of 1882.
Photo: G. Sommer. Author's collection.

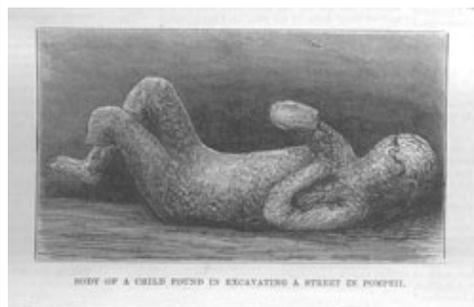


Fig 16. *Little Boy*, from *Illustrated London News*, 80, no. 2236 (11 March 1883), p.228.

By 1888 the number of casts in the museum had reached an even dozen – not much to show for twenty-five years of trying, but several of them had already become quite famous. The culmination of the second stage came with the production in 1888, on the occasion of a visit by Kaiser Wilhelm II, of a series of twelve reductions of the first dozen victims by the Neapolitan sculptor Achille d’Orsi. When the prospect of a state visit of the German emperor, Wilhelm II, arose, someone in Rome, perhaps Fiorelli himself, had the idea of presenting the royal visitor with a set of reproductions of the Pompeian casts, and d’Orsi was hired to make them. He advised making half-scale reductions in terracotta, which might then be cast in gesso. He worked on them in August and September so they would be ready for the emperor to examine beside the originals during his visit in October. D’Orsi’s copies were apparently a success – and, incidentally, demonstrated the artistic side of the undertaking. They were subsequently shipped to Berlin each with its own specially made glass case. In Berlin the casts were given permanent exhibition space in their own room in the Antiquarium on the second floor of the Altesmuseum. (It is presumed they were destroyed during the Second World War.)

The third stage: context and multiplicity

By 1889 the Pompeian museum had run out of space in which to absorb new casts. A photograph of the museum taken in the 1890s shows casts from 1889 in cases stacked one atop the other, creating a bizarre effect.¹² In some ways the progress of the excavations and the remodelling of the museum necessitated by continued progress had little effect upon the newly attained icon status of the casts. The *Sleeping Man*, the *Watchdog*, and the *Body of a Young Woman* continued to sell postcards and to draw visitors to the site.

A third stage in the development of the casts occurred when the excavators – and the photographers – began to develop the potentials of contextualized groupings, noted as early as 1863 but, for technical reasons, left undeveloped by the excavators.¹³ Emphasizing groups, however, meant taking attention away from the individual bodies and so the third stage may appear to be distinctly ‘post-classical’ in the production of iconic images. This third stage in the history of the Pompeian casts saw the appearance of site-specific casts – and the return of (or the refusal to exclude) fragments. In this grouping from 1914 some fine casts are to be seen together with a larger number of skeletons in a photographic ensemble which seems to have served the purpose of final record (fig. 17). In any event, the only cast made subsequent to the 1880s to achieve the status of an icon is the *Crouching Man* found by Maiuri near the Grand Palestra in the 1930s.¹⁴





Fig 17. Casts at the excavations of 1914, from *Notizie degli scavi archeologici*, 1914, p.366.

A brief survey of the history of the early casts, 1863-88, shows a rapid development in technical proficiency, the introduction of a new medium – photography – which was to have drastic consequences, and a radical shift in popular taste which led to the acceptance of the display of human remains in a scientific context. It appears that the intent of Fiorelli and his colleagues was at first scientific rather than artistic. During the first decade of their existence, Fiorelli's casts led a dual and somewhat compromised life as objects of study among selected visitors and as objects of curiosity for most of the others, like William Dean Howells. A second phase followed the first, dating from around 1873, when Fiorelli began to develop his ideas for an on-site museum at the Pompeii excavations. Casts made between 1873 and 1888 were more consciously made as works of art intended for exhibition. When the museum was filled to capacity after three excellent casts were made in 1889, it again became necessary to re-evaluate the nature of the casts, and they once again became archaeological artefacts.

Notes

1. Various terms have been used to describe the different properties of the matrix. The hardened ashes of the 'surge and flow' layers are often described simply as 'mud' (Italian: *fango*). For example, 'cavity' (Italian: *vuoto*) may denote the impression (or *impronta*) of the victim's flesh formed at the time of the eruption, but surviving only as an empty shell. [back to text](#)
2. The first human casts did not happen accidentally, but were preceded by a series of unsuccessful castings. As early as 1831 an attempt had been made to cast the body of a woman found in the House of the Faun in plaster of Paris, but without success. The idea surfaced again in 1861 with the discovery of a woman whose jewellery box and clothing had left perfect impressions in the mud. See Austen Henry Layard in *London Quarterly Review* (American edition), 115, January–April 1864, pp.161–80, esp. p.180. [back to text](#)
3. The sculptures of George Segal are frequently compared with the casts from Pompeii. [back to text](#)
4. Three successive stages bear an uncanny similarity to J. J. Winckelmann's characterization of three phases of ancient art as successively embodying the *necessary*, the *beautiful*, and the *superfluous*. See J. J. Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, trans. G. Henry Lodge, New York, Ungar, 1968, vol.1, p.29 (1,1,1). [back to text](#)
5. Witthaus, 'A Mother's Shout', p.27. [back to text](#)
6. 'The man in the last struggle has thrown himself upon his back, and taken his doom sturdily – there is a sublime calm in his rigid figure.' Although this cast was repeatedly described and documented, it seems that it no longer exists. [back to text](#)

7. Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*, 1867, chapter 31. [back to text](#)
8. J. Werge, 'Photography and the Immured Pompeians', *Photographic News*, 4 September 1868, p.427. The passage is cited in Adam D. Weinberg, *The Photographs of Giorgio Sommer*, Rochester, NY, Visual Studies Workshop, 1981–2, pp.31–2. My thanks to Dan Younger for directing me to this valuable study. [back to text](#)
9. Giuseppe Fiorelli, *Descrizione di Pompei*, Naples, 1875, pp.452–3. [back to text](#)
10. Amazingly, her nudity does not seem to have offended visitors to the museum, as this card, sent by her father to a young lady of Glasgow, bears witness. The overhead photograph never achieved much popularity, but it offered a better look at critical details, such as the manner in which the victim has wrapped her dress over (and perhaps around) her head in an effort to protect herself from the suffocating ashes and fumes. [back to text](#)
11. *Illustrated London News*, 80, no.2236, 11 March 1883, pp.228 (figure) and 230: 'A Child of Pompeii.' [back to text](#)
12. Anderson 26540. The casts of 1863 seem to have been moved out of the museum at this time in order to accommodate the casts of 1889. [back to text](#)
13. The group of two women that emerged from a single casting in February 1863 is the most notable example to stimulate discussion of the psychological connection between individual figures. To some extent, all four of the figures cast in 1863 had been treated as a group by guides and by some authors. Of course, groups of skeletons had already by that time been appreciated for their collective fate. [back to text](#)
14. The most famous group of victims consisted of eighteen adults, mostly women, and a child found in the cellar of the Villa of Diomedes in the eighteenth century. This story can be found in all of the guidebooks. More recently, A. Maiuri has written eloquently and memorably about the group of fugitives found in the 'Garden of the Fugitives' in the excavations near Porta Nocera in the 1950s. See 'Le vittime di Porta Nocera', in G. Clemente, ed., *Pompei ed Ercolano fra case ed abitanti*, Florence, Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, 1998, pp.83-8. [back to text](#)

[Top of the page](#) / [Download Word document](#) / [Next](#)