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The Oplontis Project

THE MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY OPLONTIS PROJECT

MSU is utilizing an innovative approach, based on a museum exhibit, to develop curriculum across many disciplines. Montana State University's Museum of the Rockies (MOR), a Smithsonian affiliate, is host to an innovative and unique talent development program based on an art history and archaeology project. "Leisure and Luxury in the Age of Nero: The Villas of Oplontis" opened to the public at MOR in June. MSU is one of only three U.S. venues for this exhibit. Utilizing archaeological digs and a museum exhibit for curriculum and talent development, [the project integrates creative research and teaching practices in an innovative, interdisciplinary collaboration.](#)



Typically, museums and universities employ parallel rather than integrated missions. Museums have historically offered opportunities for training students in curricula such as art, archaeology and museum studies programs. We have come to expect that museums offer few opportunities to train students in unexpected areas. MSU and its Museum of the Rockies broke down those barriers when offered the opportunity to study and exhibit artifacts and art from Oplontis.

Oplontis was a seaside town five kilometers west of Pompeii, buried in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius around 79 A.D. Excavations have uncovered two villas, one of which is the focus of the exhibit. Art historians, including a MSU faculty member, and archaeologists are leading research into this rare find that captures a vacation village of second homes for the Nero-age elite, with unexpected applications across time and place to land use and social issues prominent in some vacation and second-home communities in Montana today.

More than a museum exhibit and traditional fieldwork, Oplontis is a significant collaboration between MOR and diverse MSU academic departments. The project integrates the three elements of a land-grant university: discovery (innovation) through original research, learning (talent development) through new courses and the exhibition itself, and engagement with visitors to MOR and K-12 school audiences, all while crossing real and imagined boundaries, within the university, throughout the state, and across the globe (place).

The Oplontis project funded twelve educators from MSU to travel to the site and develop thirteen interdisciplinary courses across the fields of agriculture, earth sciences, art, ethics, philosophy, politics, archaeology, education, and architecture. Thirty-five seminar instructors will also employ this material in MSU's required first-year seminar, which will utilize the MOR exhibition as a source of inspiration and inquiry to examine how place, time, and identity form experience, whether that experience is in the first-year classroom at Montana State University, or in the villas and landscapes of ancient Naples.

More than 400 students and counting have registered for Oplontis-specific courses for the fall semester, and [an additional 1000 first-year students will engage the work in their seminars.](#) Many other MSU classes will utilize this exhibition as a component of their classwork. Beyond the campus, a Bozeman High School teacher also traveled to the site and helped prepare K-12 curricula. An art history class at Bozeman High already has 25 students, the maximum allowed, registered for the coming school year.

Students have been integrally involved in the project from the beginning. While still in Italy, four

students from the School of Architecture and the Department of Earth Sciences began to imagine, design and fabricate a three-dimensional model of Mt. Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples. Faculty and students helped the museum think creatively about engaging the community with exhibit content. Students found ways to interpret and spatially model how geology impacted culture and urban development in the Bay of Naples. Students had to meet museum timelines while fulfilling requirements for their course. This model will be gifted to the Vesuvian Institute after the exhibition at the museum ends. Small-scale models were created and sent to rural Montana libraries around the state so that more K-12 students and teachers could personally engage with the exhibition.

Project Archaeology, a program created by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and hosted at MSU, developed curriculum to accompany this model. The curriculum ties together many aspects of this project – art, archaeology, earth sciences, history, political science and mathematics in a unit on “Investigating a Roman Villa.” Supported by the Bozeman Public Schools, district curriculum coaches tied these lessons into every grade level. Students from across Montana will see, touch and learn from this activity.



MSU students also worked with faculty and museum employees to create the exhibit: painting, building and placing replicas of frescoes to complete the visual areas of the villa into the exhibit. A graphic design student created handouts for museum visitors detailing family life, life of slaves and slave children during this period, details of what is known of Nero’s wife who is thought to be the owner of this villa, and how the elite lived.

Faculty at MSU have now been exposed to the creative nature of developing coursework based on museum exhibits and work across a range of disciplines, extending beyond those faculty involved in this project. Connections that were developed among university faculty and professionals at the museum have provided a foundation for the future. This precedent will continue to impact MSU colleges and departments who may have previously assumed that no opportunities exist within the museum for their curriculum. The impact will continue to be felt across campus and such interactions will become ordinary instead of extraordinary.

Oplontis leverages new partnerships on and off campus, across disciplines and roles, and around the world to develop talent at MSU and in local K-12 schools. It has unexpected alignment with contemporary land-use issues in Montana, volcanic similarities to our own Yellowstone region, tourism in Montana and the consumption of beautiful natural phenomena, and how an agrarian economy both impacts and benefits from our place. Finally, the Oplontis project is innovative pedagogy and discovery that empowers new outreach efforts.