

# FOCUS

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## LIVING WITH EXTREMES

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A volcano in pop art:  
Andy Warhol  
created a series of  
Vesuvius paintings  
for an exhibition in  
Naples in 1985.

IMAGE: ANDY WARHOL, MUSEO E REAL BOSCO DI CAPODIMONTE, NAPLES



# MARKED BY DISASTER

*TEXT: MARC PESCHKE*

The volcanic cone of Vesuvius looms over Naples – as both a landmark and a fateful reminder for the southern Italian metropolis. For centuries, its eruptions and earthquakes have left their mark here. Elisabetta Scirocco, a researcher at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, the Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome, examines how these natural phenomena have shaped the city's art and architecture.

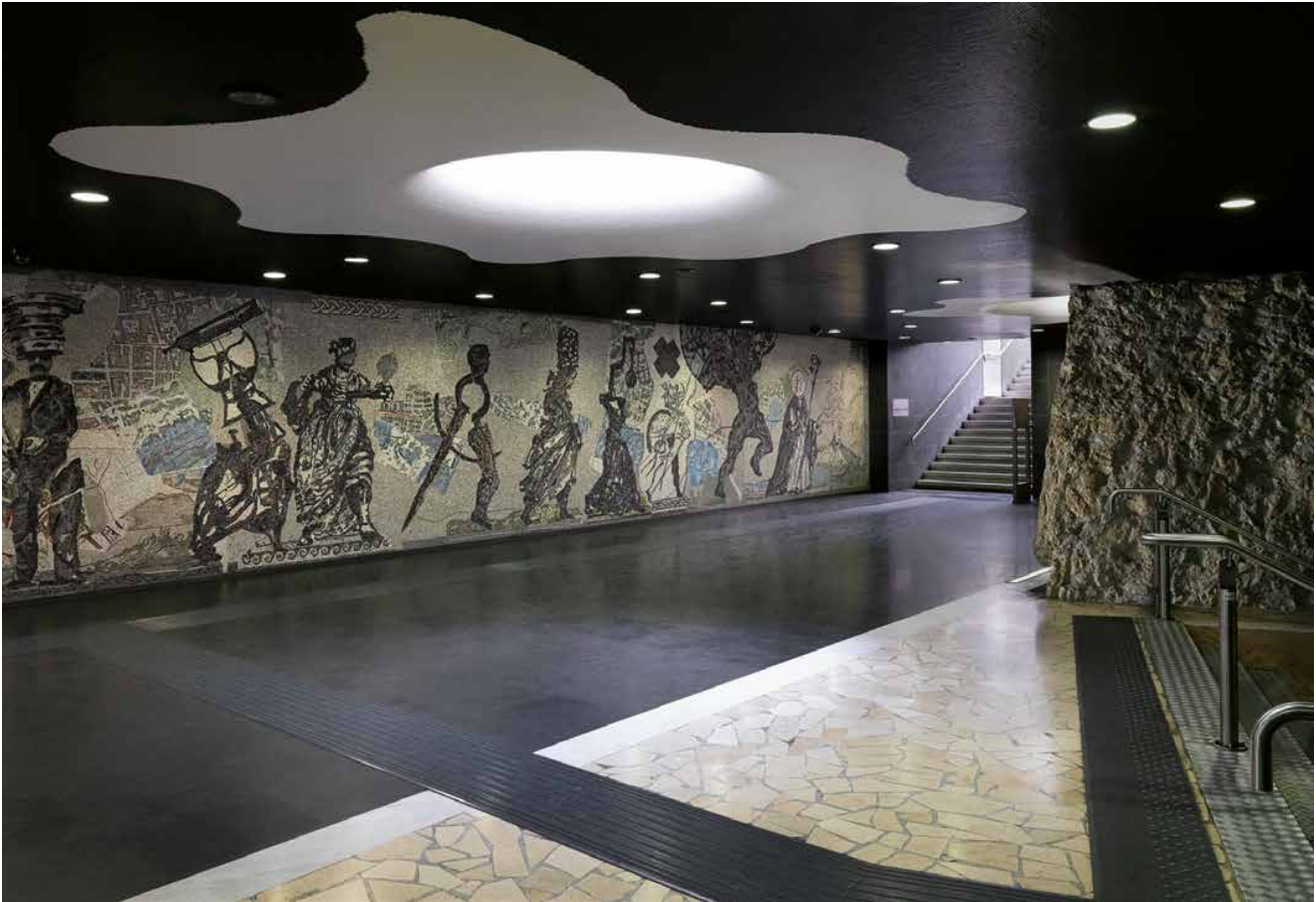


PHOTO: PEDICINI FOTOGRAFI, NAPLES/BIBLIOTHECA HERTZIANA, MPI FOR ART HISTORY

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Artistically designed station: a mosaic by South African artist William Kentridge has adorned the Toledo subway station in Naples since 2012. It depicts figures from Neapolitan history moving in a procession towards the smoking Vesuvius.

In 2012, the South African artist William Kentridge created an extraordinary work for the Toledo subway station in Naples. The large-scale mosaic *Central Railway for the City of Naples, 1906 (Naples Procession)* depicts a procession of various prominent figures from the city's history. It is led by San Gennaro, the patron saint of Naples. Next to him is the smoking Vesuvius – rendered harmless by the protection of the saint. The internationally renowned artwork in the entrance hall of the subway station, part of a series of stations along the Neapolitan subway line, is extremely fascinating. Not only as a work of contemporary art but also because it combines multiple references to the city of Naples and its history. “Passing travelers take part in the procession in which Kentridge has condensed the entire urban, artistic, and cultural history of Naples – from its Greco-Roman origins to the present,” explains Scirocco.

It is led by San Gennaro, a Christian martyr who was beheaded in Pozzuoli near Naples and who is of parti-

cular importance to Neapolitans. The saint's head and a few drops of his blood are the most valuable relics preserved in the city of Naples since the Middle Ages. Neapolitans await the “blood miracle” at all three annual festivals in honor of the saint. It is hoped that the blood of the city's patron saint will liquefy. According to popular belief, this is a good omen for the city's future. Throughout the centuries, the relics have always been presented in processions in times of great peril in the hope of averting impending natural disasters. “This is a good example of how disasters etch themselves into the history of a particular place,” says Scirocco. “Not only in the past but also in the present and in the future.” Thus, Kentridge's powerful image not only reflects history but also alludes to the threat that looms over the city of Naples to this day.

Disasters make history. And this is precisely Scirocco's subject area. “Naples and natural disasters: an art historical disaster research” – is her research project at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, the Max Planck Institute



for Art History in Rome. Here, under the leadership of Tanja Michalsky, Director at the Institute, a forum for new research on Naples has been created. It also includes the research area “Palimpsest Naples”. “Palimpsest” is actually the technical term for parchments that were scraped or washed in the Middle Ages to be re-used for later works. In reference to Naples, this means: throughout the history of the city, the one constant has been perpetual change. Construction, reconstruction, and destruction by wars and natural disasters are a fundamental part of Neapolitan and southern Italian history.

## A collective trauma

In a Zoom interview, Scirocco explains that this transformation of the city is only partial and inadvertent and that at no point in its history has Naples ever been completely destroyed. “I’m studying the palimpsest-like character of Naples, especially from the point of view of its re-birth after catastrophic events. It’s not about just the destruction and reconstruction of structures but also the creation of landmarks and rituals related to disasters.” Examples include the reconstruction of places of worship and representational buildings as well as the emergence of new devotional rituals and the institutionalization of these. Like most of Italy, Naples and its surroundings are prone to earthquakes. In addition, the most dangerous volcanic area in Europe, Vesuvius and the Phlegraean Fields, are in the immediate vicinity. No other Italian city of this size and cultural relevance has experienced catastrophic events as regularly as Naples, which in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was one of the most densely populated cities in Europe.

Scirocco explains that the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 C.E. is deeply etched into the historical memory of the area as a primordial catastrophe. At that time, the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were buried under a layer of ash and rock up to 20 meters thick. An estimated 5,000 people died. From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Naples was repeatedly shaken by strong earthquakes. But Vesuvius remained dormant for a long time. In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, it was considered extinct.

But in 1631, disaster struck once again. “What happened when Vesuvius awakened – a violent explosive eruption accompanied by earthquakes – was akin to the imminent end of the world: the experience of absolute destruction,” says Scirocco. “The collective trauma was

recorded in texts and images and had enormous cultural and political implications – both locally and throughout Europe.” Scirocco further explains that, at that time, natural disasters were not yet explained from a scientific point of view but rather in a religious context, as a punishment from God. Prayer, public penance, and processions were thus an essential part of what anthropologists call “emergency rituals”. Every year on December 16<sup>th</sup>, a festival is held in the city. It features a procession carrying the relics of St. Gennaro; the very same relics that were carried in a procession through the city towards Vesuvius in 1631. According to legend, when the procession arrived at the outskirts of the city, the saint appeared in the sky and stopped the eruption of the volcano. A votive monument to the saint was erected on this spot. Many of the towns and villages around Naples have their own artistic and ritual memories of their co-existence with the volcano. But the eruption of 1631 had another effect: Vesuvius became a constant presence in Neapolitan art. With this event, “Vesuvius entered the iconography of the city of Naples,” says Scirocco. The depictions of the city now changed, expanded, and showed the volcano. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the interest in its regular activities and eruptions led to the creation of numerous paintings, drawings, and studies of Vesuvius. Naples developed into one of the most important stops on the Grand Tour – the obligatory journey taken by young European nobles and the upper middle classes through Central Europe, Italy, Spain, and into the Holy Land. In Naples, the volcano was one of the main attractions for these young travelers. All this led to the city identifying itself with the volcano. Vesuvius was – and is – also a symbol of the destructive forces of nature. This can be seen, for example, in the 2019 exhibition *Vesuvio quotidiano – Vesuvio universale* at the Certosa di San Martino Museum in Naples.

Nevertheless, the threat posed by the volcano has played hardly any role in the research into the history of Neapolitan art. For a long time, it focused on the periods of the French Capetian House of Anjou from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century as well as on the Baroque period with its magnificent church interiors and the paintings of the Neapolitan School from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the Neapolitan Renaissance under the royal house of Aragon was predominantly viewed as a cultural import rather than a genuinely Neapolitan creation. It is precisely this 20<sup>th</sup>-century perspective that the research group at the Bibliotheca Hertziana is challenging: the idea that Naples was quasi-colonized because the city has been ruled by various foreign dynasties. Scirocco also says that for too long, the emphasis was on the dependence of Naples on artistic centers like Rome and Florence. The goal of the “Naples Forum” of the Bibliotheca Hertziana is there-

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### SUMMARY

Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions have shaped the culture and society of Naples for centuries.

This can be seen in the architecture of reconstructed and renovated buildings, in the visual arts, and in religious rituals.

The focus on natural disasters creates a whole new art historical perspective on the city’s multifaceted cultural development.

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fore also to critically examine these traditional and canonized research results and to emphasize the strictly localized nature and specific characteristics of Neapolitan artistic production.

## The entanglement of several time layers

However, art history research in Naples is more difficult than elsewhere. This is due to what the author and philosopher Walter Benjamin described in the 1920s as the “porosity” of the city. The city’s cellular structure, the dense juxtaposition, the intergrowth of different architectural styles from different layers of time resembles webbing, a living organism. Naples has often been described in this way throughout its history. The old town of Naples, which was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1995, is a prime example of a highly diverse community with enormous social problems yet a fantastic assortment of cultural assets. In Naples, the cultural-historical vestiges from the Greek and Roman times and from later periods are layered and overlapped everywhere. A particularly impressive example of this overwriting of history as a result of the frequent earthquakes is the Cathedral of Naples where the relics of the Neapolitan city patron San Gennaro are kept. According to Scirocco, the cathedral amalgamates layers of artistic history dating from antiquity to the 19<sup>th</sup> century; this is typical of the city.

The baroque church of San Paolo Maggiore on the Piazza San Gaetano is also an excellent example of the changes and transformations caused by natural disasters. Larger parts of the Roman temple of the Dioscuri were preserved here until its collapse after the earthquake of 1688. According to Scirocco, the facade was the backdrop for urban life for centuries: “The Piazza San Gaetano was once home to the Greek agora and later the Roman forum. It was thus the heart of the city center. To this day, the private and public life of Neapolitans takes place there. When the facade of the Roman temple collapsed in 1688, the backdrop for centuries of city life was destroyed in one fell swoop. The collapse was continually evoked in texts and imagery. During the reconstruction, it was decided to preserve only two columns of the temple with an inscription commemorating the earthquake of 1688.” But Scirocco’s research subject is not medieval and pre-modern art alone. She also examines the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Andy Warhol’s 1985 Vesuvius series – a sort of homage to the volcano as a symbol of Naples that translates the theme of the volcanic eruption into the language of Pop Art. Scirocco has called Warhol’s depiction of the erupting volcano a “synecdoche”, an image that has symbolized

the city of Naples itself ever since the catastrophic eruption of 1631. Joseph Beuys, on the other hand, produced an unsettling work for the influential Italian gallery owner Lucio Amelio. Exhibited in Naples in 1981, *Terremoto in Palazzo* is a composition of four fragile, unstable wooden tables salvaged after the 1980 earthquake, shards of glass on the floor, and an egg placed on one of the tables. One year later, in 1982, Warhol created the work *Fate presto*, based on the front page of the newspaper *Il Mattino*.

The works of both Beuys and Warhol are part of a collection later entitled *Terrae Motus*, which resulted in response to Lucio Amelio’s call for contemporary artists to create works related to the terrible earthquake of 1980. At that time, violent earth tremors had shaken the Irpinia region some 80 km east of Naples, killing more than 2,700 people and causing nearly 400,000 to lose their homes. “The memory of the 1980 earthquake and its aftermath is still very much with us – as are its echoes in the media, which Warhol translated into a work of art,” says Scirocco. “The date itself, November 23<sup>rd</sup>, is common knowledge. Last year, on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a series of events, debates, and exhibitions were held.” Thus, traumatic disasters of the past and the risk of repetition in the future are part of the collective memory and the everyday visual experience in the city of Naples.

Dangerously close: the area around Vesuvius is densely populated. The satellite image shows the few undeveloped areas in red.

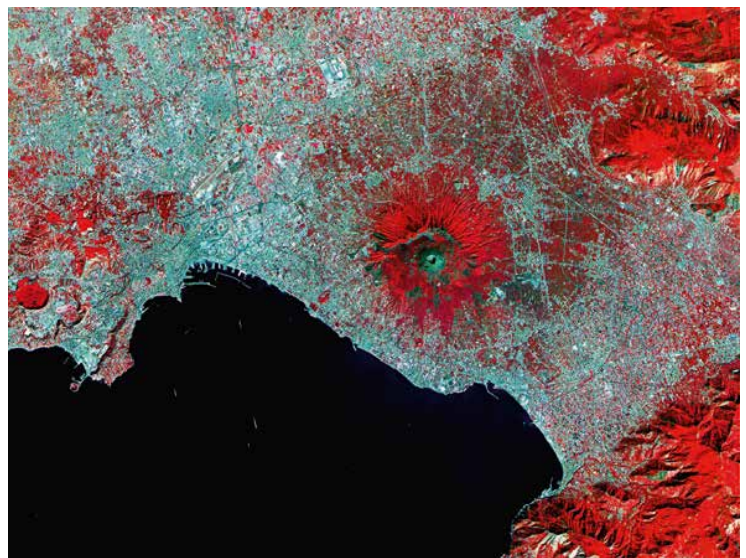


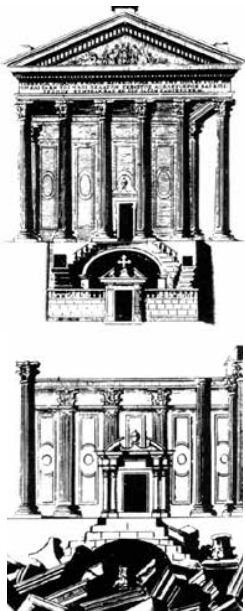
PHOTO: NASA/GSFC/MITI/ERSDAC/JAROS & U.S./JAPAN ASTER SCIENCE TEAM

Focus on natural disasters: Elisabetta Scirocco researches the art history of the city of Naples at the Bibliotheca Hertziana.



PHOTO: KATARINA KRAVČIKOVÁ, BRNO

ILLUSTRATION: CARLO CELANO, NOTTIE DEL BELLO, DELLA ANTICO E DEL CURIOSO DELLA CITTÀ DI NAPOLI, NAPLES 1692



Before – after: until the earthquake of 1688, the church of San Paolo Maggiore in the center of Naples stood behind the largely preserved facade of the Roman Temple of Dioscuri (above). Only two of the ancient columns were preserved during the reconstruction.

## The volcano as an identity-forming feature

Today, historical disaster research is a highly productive field of research in which the various historical disciplines establish a dialog with the social and natural sciences. A trans-disciplinary approach to this topic has been developed since 2014 at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, which is also a Max Planck Institute, with the project “Storia dell’arte e catastrofi”. Along with Scirocco, who was doing research in Florence at the time, Gerhard Wolf, Director at the Institute, and Carmen Belmonte led the group. Natural disasters are recurring events in the history of Italian cities and landscapes – right up to the present day, which underlines the relevance of the research. Recent earthquakes in L’Aquila in Abruzzo (2009), in Emilia-Romagna (2012), and in central Italy (2016/2017) have

also shown how prevalent the seismic problem is. For research on Naples, Scirocco broadened the perspective, starting from the Middle Ages and continuing through the pre-modern period to the present. In her project on Neapolitan history, she combines historical, seismological, and volcanological research with architectural history, archeology, philology, the history of science, historical anthropology, and sociology.

“We are examining from a historical perspective how disasters were dealt with through the ages and how living with the volcano has become an identity-forming feature of Neapolitan art and culture,” says Scirocco. “However, the role art history has played in disaster research has been marginal and mainly limited to the depiction of catastrophic events. This opens up an area for art history that has great potential for multidisciplinary dialog.”

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