Wilhelmina Jashemski

Pompeian scholar Dr. Wilhelmina Feemster Jashemski (1910 –2007) was a professor of ancient history at the University of Maryland. After visiting Pompeii in the 1950s, Jashemski focused on this ancient city and the flora that had once inhabited it. Her research concentrated on the archeological evidence of gardens and horticulture in the ancient city.

In 1961, Professor Jashemski was invited to launch excavations at Pompeii. She was the first non-Italian to excavate at the site. For the next twenty-two years, she directed archaeological investigations of Pompeii, Boscoreale, and Oplontis. As a result of her pioneering work, Professor Jashemski is credited with establishing the field of garden archaeology. Her summers of digging and research culminated in the publication of The Gardens of Pompeii: Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Vesuvius, Volume 1 (1979) and Volume 2 (1993). In 1999, she published A Pompeian Herbal: Ancient and Modern Medicinal Plants, on which this exhibit is based. With longtime colleague Frederick Meyer, director of the National Arboretum herbarium, Dr. Jashemski co-edited The Natural History of Pompeii (2002).

Jashemski probably knew more about the gardens of Pompeii than anyone in the nearly two millennia since the residents were buried under Vesuvian ash. She discovered that gardens were an integral part of everyday life in the ancient town, where most of the dwellings were single-family row houses, each with a bit of green space to grow figs, olives, cherries and other fruits and vegetables. Gardens were a favorite site for religious activities, from animal sacrifices to meditation. Some of the larger gardens had commercial uses, such as vineyards and nurseries, while others were the settings for small restaurants. Jashemski’s discovery of the first intact remains of a good-size vineyard from the era revised perceptions of how the Romans planted and managed grapes, stored and used wine, and worked the land.