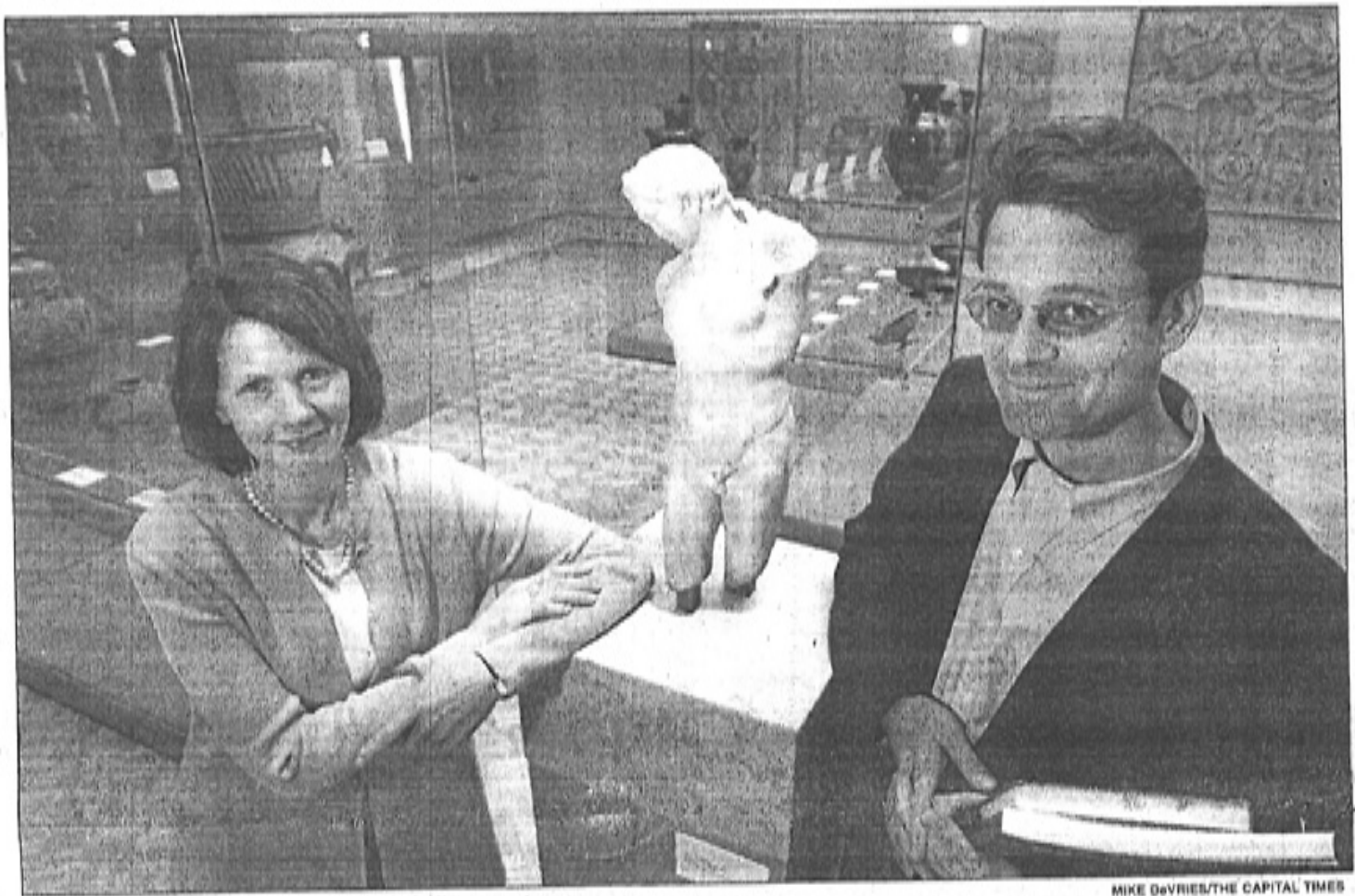


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Ancient civilizations popular again
for study and entertainment

Back to the classics



MIKE DEVRIES/THE CAPITAL TIMES

UW classics professors Laura McClure (left) and William Aylward, in the Greco-Roman gallery of the UW Chazen Museum of Art, say the classics are enjoying a boom that is fueled by the popular media and possibly the war in Iraq.

By Jacob Stockinger
The Capital Times

Writer Robert Harris recently appeared on the popular "Today Show" on NBC-TV to discuss his latest historical novel "Imperium," which is about Cicero's rise to power in ancient Rome.

University of Wisconsin senior Sarah Rous watched approvingly. "It definitely seems that popular culture is taking a bigger interest in classical things, and references keep popping up," Rous said. "I saw the movie 'Troy' and enjoyed it as entertainment. You just have to overlook the historical inaccuracies, but those inaccuracies also open up the question of what really happened and get people interested in the classics."

From an upcoming Chazen Museum exhibit on Pompeii to the HBO series "Rome" to enrollment in Greek language classes at the UW, one thing is clear: The



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Classics

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and also highlighted the history of the Middle East — may have helped to reawaken the public's appetite for the classics.

"We certainly are in a boom right now," said Laura McClure, head of the UW classics department and a teacher of Greek and Latin language and literature. "And we're certainly glad for the interest in the classics."

McClure said her department has the highest enrollment in the 15 years she has been teaching in Madison. The number of students taking Greek courses has doubled, and enrollment in Latin courses is up by 20 or 30 percent.

"We've never had more majors," she said, noting that some 80 UW students are choosing to major or double-major in classics.

Over in the UW art history department, the same phenomenon is occurring.

"It is happening here and nationwide," said Professor Nicholas Cahill, an archaeologist and art historian whose spring semester course on Roman art filled up two days after registration opened and has been expanded twice. His fall semester course on Greek art also was packed to capacity.

"I've had to turn a lot of people away," said Cahill. "I could easily double the enrollment, and the courses would still fill. There is a boom going on in classical art as well as in classical languages and literature. I hate to get into the psychology of students and why they take the classics. But for me, (the classics are) extremely relevant."

Why the newfound interest in ancient history, art and culture?

"I don't know if it's because of books, TV shows and films about ancient Greece and Rome," McClure said. "But nationally there has been more

Classic theme

From Shakespeare to the silent era to today's pay cable channels, the classics have been a popular theme in entertainment.

'The Last Days of Pompeii': An Italian silent film is available now on DVD. **1913**

'Cleopatra': This early Cecil B. DeMille epic starred Claudette Colbert. **1934**

'Caesar and Cleopatra': This adaptation of a George Bernard Shaw play starred Vivien Leigh and Claude Rains. **1946**

'The Robe': An Oscar-nominated Richard Burton starred as a Roman tormented after being in charge of Christ's crucifixion. **1953**

'Julius Caesar': Marlon Brando starred in the Shakespearean classic.



'Ben-Hur': This holds the record for most Oscars (11), a mark it shares with 'Titanic.' **1959**

'Spartacus': Kirk Douglas as a gladiator slave. **1960**

'Cleopatra': The most expensive film ever made brought together Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. **1963**

'Gladiator': The epic starring Russell Crowe won five Oscars, including Best Picture. **2000**

'Troy': Heartthrobs Brad Pitt and Orlando Bloom starred in a story based on

about the ancient roots of Western culture.

"When students say

Why the newfound interest in ancient history, art and culture?

"I don't know if it's because of books, TV shows and films about ancient Greece and Rome," McClure said. "But nationally there has been more interest in the media. I see coverage touching on the classics every day."

"I don't know if it's cyclical," she added. "And I don't know if the resurgence of interest might be connected with the Iraq war and our connection to the Middle East. But they are hard languages — especially Greek — and not something that you do on a lark."

"The revival is coming from different angles," she noted, citing such popular culture events as the HBO series "Rome" (which she calls "excellent"), now in its second season, and popular movies like "Troy" with Brad Pitt and Orlando Bloom, "Alexander the Great" and "Gladiator" with Russell Crowe. She also pointed to poet Anne Carson's "Grief Lessons," which is a new translation of four tragedies by Euripides, and best-selling historical fiction by Robert Harris such as "Pompeii" and his current title "Imperium." Biographies of Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus have just been published. And this spring, "300," a movie based on a graphic novel about Spartan soldiers at the battle of Thermopylae, will be released.

"For the most part, these are not bad," said William Aylward, a colleague of McClure, about these movies and books, some of which have benefited from advice from Harvard classicists. "The works all try hard to tell a good story. If that's what they achieve, it's not a bad thing for the classics. They help to raise awareness of the past, which has lessons for today."

Universal stories:

McClure said, "There's always interest in the classics. There's something so ancient and mysterious about them, they're fascinating to every generation. Periodically, pop culture gets interested in them."

Still, it's not clear if the popular culture is driving the interest in the classics or vice versa.

"I don't know if students are going to the classics because of this, but I hope they come away from a study of the clas-



including Best Picture.

2004



'Troy': Heathrobs Brad Pitt and Orlando Bloom starred in a story based on 'The Iliad.'

2005

'Rome': The HBO series began its second season last week.



Source: Internet Movie Database

sics with a better understanding of the relevance of the classics to today," said Cahill. "It goes both ways. Hollywood responds to popular interest and, in turn, creates it."

But some credit, Cahill added, must go to the subject matter as well as to the mass media and to newly published translations and histories that are accessible yet scholarly.

"These are great stories," Cahill said. "They are thousands of years old, so there must be something of interest in them. It's a testament to the universality of these stories that they translate into all these different media. They're not always great, but they're fun and they make you think."

That opinion about the relevance of the classics is shared by Aylward.

An archaeologist, Aylward has been teaching at the UW for six years. He has worked for the Discovery Channel on a show about the Roman city of Zeugma, which was covered by water when the Euphrates River — which also flows through Baghdad — was dammed in western Turkey. He also spent more than 10 years excavating at Troy and consulted with Wisconsin's best-selling biographer and historical fiction writer Margaret George on her current book, "Helen of Troy."

The classics appeal for many reasons, the professors say.

Some students want to know more about the languages, Aylward noted, because it is knowledge that helps them with the etymology and meaning of words in English, especially in medical and legal terminology and in rhetoric or oratory.

Others want to know more

about the ancient roots of Western culture.

"When students read the classics in the original language, it helps to enhance the experience," McClure said. "It makes learning the original more exciting."

Ancient fascination: Aylward said there is a fascination with the ancient world.

"You saw it in the last Olympics in Athens," he said. "These things capture the imagination of Americans. That's what I hear from the students."

Students, he said, also like the chances to travel and study abroad that the classics offer.

"Students are extremely enthusiastic about the classics," McClure said. "They're a great mental discipline, even if you don't major in them. The trend is for interdisciplinary studies — like combining women's studies or history with the classics — and not pursuing a single track."

The renewed interest in the classics will continue, the professors predict.

"There's a lot going on in classics right now," McClure said, citing recent news about the Getty Art Museum in Los Angeles and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City agreeing to return antiquities to their homelands. "And it's bubbling up into popular culture and media."

"Movies, books and TV have fed student interest — perhaps not for the reason we would like," Aylward said. "But it gets them in the classroom, and I mention these things in class. I try to get them to think critically about portrayals of antiquity in the popular media and to see what they get wrong."

"In many cases, these movies do the best job they can with the sources we have," Aylward said. "There are a lot of unanswered questions about the past. We try to convey the idea that Greek and Latin are not dead languages and that Greece and Rome aren't forgotten civilizations. These civilizations of the past are alive and well today. Students just need a little bit of direction to see that they are looking at the same things today."

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