

## Making Trajan's Column in the Classroom

Art historians have long debated the relative visibility of the reliefs on Trajan's Column in Rome. The winding relief spiral and the lack of good viewing angles would seem to render the composition as a whole hard for viewers to engage with. The possibility that the reliefs were painted has been suggested as a way to resolve the question of visibility, if not of overall comprehension. Apart from the visual challenges this monument posed to ancient viewers, it presents additional difficulties to American students and educators, who are removed from the monument by sheer distance and the need to encounter it only through photographs.

In an attempt to address some of these issues, in Spring of 2024 the Roman Art class at Central Michigan University undertook to recreate, at life size, a portion of Trajan's Column as an exercise in ancient viewing, modern engagement and the possibilities of 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital and physical reconstruction. Over 15 weeks under my direction, the class organized itself into teams with responsibility for creating two digital models, translating those models into physical form, coloring one of the models, mounting and displaying the models to modern viewers at the historical height and viewing angles, and surveying those visiting the installation to gauge their subjective impressions about visibility.

This paper describes the project, its development and the results primarily from a pedagogical viewpoint. It illustrates both the great potential and the likely pitfalls of manifesting a monumental physical object into the space of the classroom. The project turned out to be enormously popular with the students, stimulating their intellectual curiosity and inspiring many to engage with art of the past in a new way. At the same time, the need to coordinate a large group led to problems of unequal participation and occasional frustration both with technology and between fellow-students. This paper is intended to provide both inspiration and information to those who are contemplating engaging in large-scale experimental archaeology involving student participation.