CCU teams up to replicate past

Class plans to create computer models of ancient monuments

BY JESSICA FOSTER
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Coastal Carolina University is working with Arkansas State University for the first time this semester on a project that will allow anyone to see elaborate, three-dimensional, digital re-creations of ancient Grecian monuments — a resource that university professors say is not widely available.

This is the first time another university has joined CCU’s Ashes2Art program, which lets students re-create monuments, since it started in 2005. The collaboration brings in more grant funding and also means students will accomplish more because they are working together, professors say.

The monuments in Delphi, Greece, that they will reconstruct — such as the Temple of Apollo, the sanctuary of Athena Pronaia and the gymnasium — were once centers of bustling activity but now lie in varying states of ruin.

At a glance

Ashes2Art program | Reconstructions from Renaissance Florence are online at www.coastal.edu/ashes2art.
Digital reconstructions of the monuments are available to select groups at universities such as the University of California in Los Angeles, but those who can’t actually go to those schools can only imagine what the monuments looked like in 3-D or from the inside.

“Fortunately, exciting stuff, you have to actually go to UCLA and go into this theater where you can be immersed in a huge IMAX-type screen and walk through the Roman forum, and it’s amazing. But unless you go to UCLA, you can’t do that,” said CCU art history professor Arne Flaten, who works with art studio professor Paul Olsen to teach the course.

And most of those models are created by graduate students, he said.

The work that CCU and Arkansas State undergraduate students will do this semester in Ashes2Art will let anyone see the buildings online as they were about 2,300 years ago by using panoramic photos, excavation reports, and computer software such as Panoweaver, Reel Viz Stitcher and Photoshp to bring the monuments back to life.

“These ancient monuments have sort of crumbled and been destroyed, and we’re hoping to see them reborn again,” Flaten said.

Students at the two schools will split up projects and will be able to hold discussions or ask each other questions through a chat board.

At the end of the semester when the reconstructions are posted online, viewers will be able to navigate around and through the buildings, and access essays that students write about the structures’ histories.

“They’re not just digital models, but they’re digital models that you’ll be able to walk around inside of, like you would in a video game,” Flaten said. Experts in the field will also review the models and offer suggestions, he said.

Reconstructions from Renaissance Florence are already on the class site, www.coastal.edu/ashes2art, along with a list of grants that the program has received.

About $7,500 comes from the Center for Effective Teaching and Learning at CCU, and Olsen hopes to get additional grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Olsen has also gotten a $4,000 travel grant to use when he returns to Greece this summer with students and faculty from both universities to take more panoramic photos.

The group has even gotten permission from the Hellenic Ministry of Culture to shoot photos from inside the temples at Delphi, which are usually not open to the public, said Alyson Gill, the Arkansas State professor working on the project.

That “unprecedented” access, she said, will help them refine the models when they get back.

The interactive format of the class will also help students learn more about art history, archaeology, graphic design and digital photography than they would if they were just studying textbooks and listening to lectures, she said.

“You can learn a lot more when you’re making it and when you’re inside of it putting it together,” she said.

Amanda Smith, a CCU senior, said that she decided to take the course because advisor recommended it for her art studio minor. But after learning more about the class, she became excited about the interactive approach they’ll use to explore the ancient structures.

“I’m more of a hands-on person, so it’ll just help me learn and apply things a lot better,” she said. “It has the potential to be nationally recognized, and for us to be able to put our names on that and to have some part in the Web site, I think that’s really awesome.”

Olsen hopes the program will grow to include more universities in future projects, which could include sites in Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt and the Near East, according to the Web site.

Presentations they will give this year in Berlin and next year in Dallas could spread the word about the program, Flaten said.

“We’re looking to collaborate with more and more schools as we go along,” Olsen said. “That’s what’s so exciting about it — we don’t know where it’s going to end up.”

Contact JESSICA FOSTER at 626-0351 or jfoster@thesunnews.com.