

## The Drawn Garden: Historical, Iconographical and Representative Analysis through Time of the “Villa Di Livia” in Rome

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*“Villa di Livia” at Prima Porta is an archaeological complex located in the suburban area of Rome. This villa was built in 39-38 B.D. at the behest of Livia Drusilla Claudia, the wife of Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus. The discovery of this complex took place in 1863 and brought to light several archaeological finds: one of particular aesthetic value are the frescoes with naturalistic motifs, where the attention to detail, the pictorial technique and the variety of flora and fauna make it one of the most famous examples of Roman garden motif painting. The aim of this research is to analyse the wall fresco decoration of the Villa. The investigation is historical, iconographic-representational and symbolic, in order to understand -on the one hand- the origin of these frescoes and the motivations that led to the choice of this particular type of representation and -on the other hand- to study the decorative, perspective and colouring techniques. The work will try not to exclude the analysis of the fact that the architecture and the decorative apparatus are -currently- in different locations, which is certainly a benefit from the point of view of restoration and conservation, but may have an impact on the perception of the frescoes.*

### Introduction

Livia's Villa at Prima Porta, located in the Roman countryside, is an important Italian archaeological site that has become famous mainly due to the discovery of an entire underground room frescoed with astonishing “garden” motif decorations of imperial ownership. These decorations, due to their stylistic uniqueness, size, quality of execution and the perfect condition in which they were found, are presented as a *unicum*, making them the oldest Roman “garden” paintings ever.

The research conducted investigates, on the one hand, the architectural composition of the Villa, through historical, socio-cultural and architectural analysis (spatial, volumetric and construction phases) trying to understand the socio-political thinking and the motivations that at the time led to the construction of this complex and its main architectural characteristics; and on the other hand, a symbolic, iconographic-representative and geometric study of the “garden” frescoes to learn about the decorative, perspective and figurative techniques used.

The architectural and decorative study will be conducted jointly in order to understand the relationships and to study the two parts as a single organism; this analysis will be carried out without however excluding the fact that, today, the villa and the frescoes are no longer in the same place and therefore there is no

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longer a close dialogue between them. While this is certainly advantageous for conservation and restoration practices, it certainly has an impact both on the perception of the frescoes and of the underground environment of the villa in which they were located. Although it is not impossible, thanks to new technologies, to reunite, even virtually, the two parts, we will ask whether this union is actually fundamental for the understanding and correct perception, in the eyes of the observer, of a stylistic-architectural unity or if is only one more technological possibility of virtual display.

### **Villa di Livia: From its Origins to its (Re)discovery [A.M.G.]**

The Villa di Livia is a building complex believed to have been built from the first half of the 1st century BC<sup>1</sup> onwards, and is located on the outskirts of the city of Rome. The Villa was a place of retreat from the hectic city life in order to accommodate those who could afford some periods of rest and relaxation. In this case, the site was built by Livia Drusilla, wife of Emperor Augustus, the main protagonist of the site's history as the original owner of the land and the main commissioner of the villa.

Much has been written about the history of this marriage, as it is narrated by the emperor himself in his chronicles, in which he describes his marital relationship as an exception, as it was born out of love and not out of political or economic interests.<sup>2</sup> The chronicles allow us to reflect on the timeliness of his words -in terms of positioning his wife as a peer in both private and public tasks<sup>3</sup>- and it can also be known that Livia is a woman "of character", perhaps precisely for this reason it is that the historical tradition has been generally hostile or ill-disposed towards Livia.<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging her intelligence, acumen, charm and loyalty

1. The Villa has undergone various modifications and alterations over the centuries.

2. "I have been married three times...marriages take place "lightly" because we usually get married for political or family reasons; many marriages are arranged for convenience (...); however there are some marriages, among which I include mine - and I thank the Gods for this -, which provide inexhaustible joys and which give both the man and the woman the capacity to grow in sympathy and understanding...". [Quotation from the transcription by the author Maria Pia Partisani within her article *Le galline e gli allori dell "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas* of the text A. Massie "Augusto, il grande imperatore", in *I Big Newton* (Roma: Newton Compton Editori, 2001)].

3. The same is true when we learn that not only were they both married at the time they met, but that both divorced and married while Livia was pregnant by her former husband Tiberius Claudius Nerone. This is how Augustus himself narrates it in his chronicles: "We divorced from our respective spouses and Livia's second child was born three days after our marriage. Her ex-husband warned me about Livia's temper: then he asked me to take care of his second son...". [Quotation from the transcription by the author M. P. Partisani within her article *Le galline e gli allori dell "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas* of the text A. Massie "Augusto, il grande imperatore", in *I Big Newton* (Roma: Newton Compton Editori, 2001)]

4. This invisibilization or -as in this particular case- misinterpretation of the figure of the woman occurred with her as with so many other female protagonists of history. Particularly within the discipline of architecture, in recent years, the tendency has been to revive, recover and revalue - from a feminist point of view- those women whose personality and participation were fundamental to the development of history.

to her authoritative husband, she offered a portrait of a tough woman, unscrupulous and wicked calculator, who with subtle and diurnal work, and with extraordinary tenacity managed to impose her ambitions in the dynastic and political events of early imperial Rome.<sup>5</sup>

As already mentioned, the relevance of Livia as the main client of the Villa dates back -in part- to the fact that the sources agree in attributing ownership of the site to her, but do not specify whether she had received the Villa from her family, the gens Livia, or -less probably- by her first husband, Tiberio Claudio Nerone. Be that as it may, the two gentes belonged to the Roman aristocracy and the property must have complied with the choices of the wealthier families of the late Republican period who preferred, for their estates, the surroundings of the city, in this case the territory of the ancient Etruscan city of Veio.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, another fact from which the figure of Livia takes on relevance is that she was responsible for defining the location of the villa at the precise point where it was built. This decision was taken after -according to Svetonio- an eagle prodigiously dropped a white hen with a laurel sprig in its beak on the empress's lap.<sup>7</sup> And it is from this fact that the Villa was also called *ad Gallinas Albas* (“*alle Galline Bianche*”).

The Villa is located fifteen kilometers from Rome, in the suburb of Prima Porta, and was built on the hill overlooking the crossroads between the Via Flaminia and the Via Tiberina. According to Umberto Pappalardo it has an area of about fourteen thousand square meters, which makes it one of the largest in Lazio; but according to Gaetano Messineo it is still impossible to determine the limits of the property (*praedium*) in which the villa was inserted, or the relevance to it of the numerous remains of other residences, partly also of a rural nature, located in the Prima Porta district.

Located high up on the top of a hill, the large reinforcement walls -which serve to support the natural terrace on which the Villa is strategically positioned- are still visible today through the lush vegetation, announcing the existence of the Roman archaeological remains. These reinforcement walls were first made only of *opus reticulatum* walls<sup>8</sup> and were modified at a later time -probably due to problems related to the static nature of the hill- when counterforts were added in *opus mixtum* walls with the aim of further consolidating the hill on which the Villa stood.<sup>9</sup>

The decision to build the Villa on this large terrace -called *basis villae*- and therefore in an elevated place, dominating the surrounding area, was most likely

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5. M. P. Partisani, “Le galline e gli allori dell ‘Ulisse in gonnella’. Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas,” in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell’Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

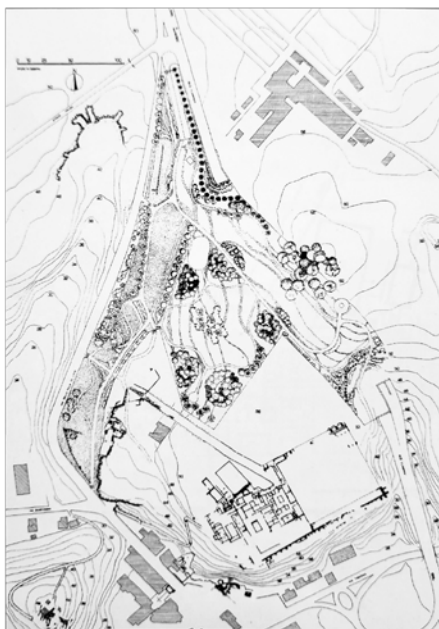
6. M. P. Partisani, “Le galline e gli allori dell ‘Ulisse in gonnella’. Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas,” in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell’Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

7. U. Pappalardo, *Affreschi Romani* (Verona: Arsenale Editrice, 2009).

8. The construction system allows them to be dated around 50 BC.

9. M. P. Partisani, “Le galline e gli allori dell ‘Ulisse in gonnella’. Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas,” in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell’Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

made to avoid the danger of flooding from the river and the ditches connected to it.<sup>10</sup> This choice could also have a relationship with finding an isolated place, with large panoramic views to take advantage of the view of the Via Flaminia and looking out over the Tiber to Fidene and the Crustumini hills (see Figure 1). Without forgetting that the Villa was a complex architectural entity which -especially at the beginning of the second century BC- was transformed into a place destined for comfort, escape, isolation and literary and artistic leisure.



**Figure 1.** Area where the Village is located

Source: G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

In this sense, the Villa of Livia represents a recurring form of lifestyle starting from the second century BC in Roman building history, and that is the place where to spend the *otium*<sup>11</sup> in the best possible way, which with Lucio Anneo Seneca<sup>12</sup> in the sixth book called "De Otio" placed within the "Dialoghi" of the 1st century AD, took on a meaning not only of free time, which is opposed to the practice of the *negotium*,<sup>13</sup> but as a time of spiritual retreat aimed at the aspiration of basic wisdom for good governance. That is, this place presents the possibility of relieving and free from daily worries (*rilaxatio animi*), proposing intellectual, meditative,

10. M. Carrara, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta da praedium suburbanum a villa Caesarum," in *Roman villas around the Urbs. Interaction with landscape and environment. Proceedings of a conference held at the Swedish Institute in Rome, September 17–18, 2004*, ed. B. Santillo Frizell & A. Klynne (Rome: The Swedish Institute in Rome, 2005).

11. *Otium*: in ancient times *otium* means self-care and taking care of one's own wisdom, which passed through contemplation and study as the only way that leads to happiness.

12. Lucio Anneo Seneca (Cordoba, 4 BC - Rome, 19 April 65) was a Roman philosopher and politician, one of the greatest exponents of eclectic stoicism of the imperial age.

13. *Negotium*; nec-otium indicated all those activities necessary for individuals to guarantee their survival and therefore opposed to free time. It consisted, for the most part, in carrying out practical activities, public duties and governmental commitments.

recreational and restorative activities, which they understand not only as an essential need of the soul and body, but also as fundamental elements of the lifestyle and the moral character.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Villa Becomes Archaeological Site: The Discovery of the Underground Room**

The famous residence of the third wife of Augustus already aroused interest in the topographers of the late Renaissance, but it was only with the first scholars of the Roman countryside, at the beginning of the 19th century, that the ruins dominating the medieval village of Prima Porta were identified with certainty as those of the famous imperial residence mentioned by ancient literary sources.<sup>15</sup>

Giovanni Antonio Guattani and Antonio Nibby were the first ones that recognized the remains of the Villa di Livia over the hill at the crossroads between the Via Flaminia and the Tiberina.<sup>16</sup> In fact, in 1828 Giuseppe Antonio Guattani,<sup>17</sup> in his work dedicated to northern Sabina from Rome to Norcia, attributed the founded ruins to the Villa of Livia and, a few years later, it is done also by Antonio Nibby<sup>18</sup> -author of a "guide" to the surroundings of Rome- and by the architect Luigi Canina.<sup>19,20</sup>

In the years 1863-64, on the private initiative of Count Francesco Senni, who was a tenant of the land together with two partners, archaeological excavations began. Important discoveries of great value, not only architectural but also artistic and archaeological, were quickly made. The two most important of these -not only in terms of their state of preservation, but also because of the fame they acquired at the time- were the statue of Augustus, discovered on 20 April 1863, and the underground room painted with frescoes with garden motifs, found on 30 April of the same year.

The statue of Augustus, also called *Augusto loricato*<sup>21</sup> -which was in an astonishing state of conservation and still with traces of the original, lively polychromy- was transferred and is now on display in the Vatican Museums in

14. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

15. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

16. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

17. Cfr. G. A. Guattani, *Monumenti Sabini* (Roma: Tipografia di Crispino Peccinelli, 1827).

18. Cfr. A. Nibby, *Analisi storico-topografica-antiquaria della carta de'dintorni di Roma*. Vol III. (Roma: Tipografia delle Belle Arti, 1837).

19. Cfr. L. Canina, *Gli edifizii di Roma antica e sua campagna*. Sez II, Vol V: Edifizii dei contorni della città. (Roma: Stabil. Tipog. Di G. A. Bertinelli, 1856).

20. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

21. The Latin etymology *lorica* indicated the cuirass of the legionaries: a piece of armor that covered the chest, belly, hips and back up to the belt, like a cuirass.

Rome. However, the enthusiasm aroused by the frescoes on the underground room was so great that this complex was restored and left visible.<sup>22</sup>

At the time of the discovery of the room only the first part of the vault was preserved and the whole room, evidently after a destructive event, was filled with rubble.<sup>23</sup> Several authors refer to this event as an earthquake that, occurred in 17 BC, would have been the cause of the destruction of the barrel vault that originally covered it, and the reason why it was decided to abandon it -filling it with rubble and earth- and build another one to replace it, although this time at the same level as the rest of the Villa's rooms. According to G. Messineo, the underground room was given a new roof that served as the floor of the newly built room, which was transformed -somehow replacing the previous one- into the main room of the complex. It is not known, however, whether the use assigned to the new room was the same as that assigned -by various authors- to the underground room (to which we will refer later); nor is there any data regarding its decorative motifs, and it is not known whether -if there were any- they were similar to those of the underground room in terms of their theme and the technique used. In other words, it remains to be known whether the new room replaced -not only in size and importance- the underground room, but also in terms of its use and the spatial and decorative quality that the latter had.

In addition, it is not known whether this new room was still standing (or at least part of it) at the time of the archaeological discoveries of 1863-64, although -in any case- the discovery of the underground room with the frescoes in an excellent state of preservation attracted the attention of archaeologists and historians, leaving the later room in the background. From that construction part of its long perimeter walls are still recognizable to the present day. Also the holes for the plugs that held the marble cladding slabs are still recognizable on the sides of the deep 19th century<sup>24</sup> cavity created to insulate the frescoed walls from humidity.<sup>25</sup>

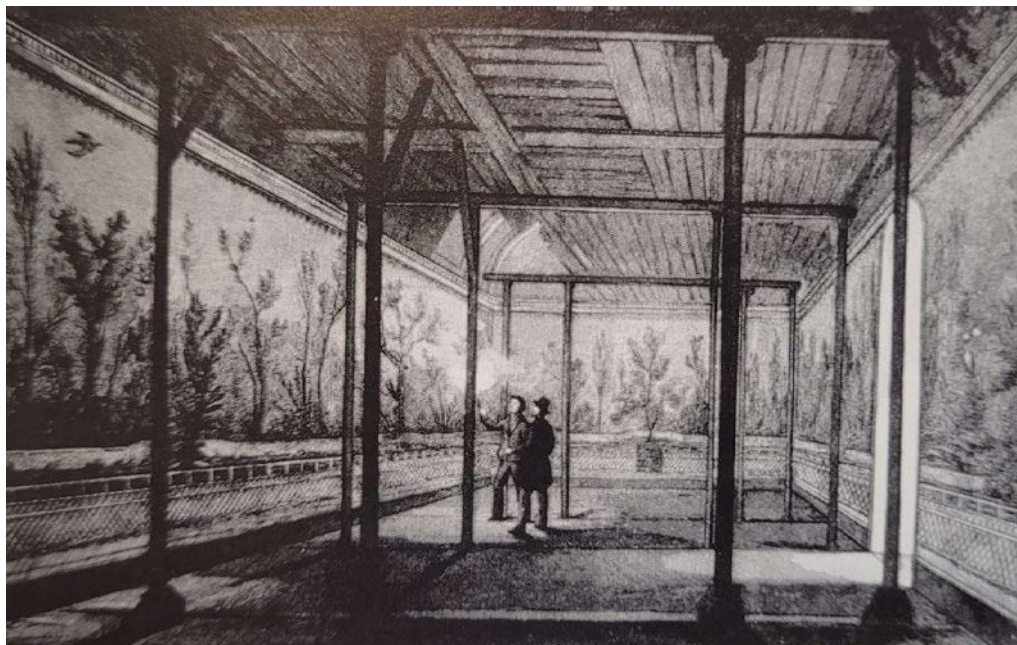
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22. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

23. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

24. Although he refers to the empty space around the underground room as having been created in the 19th century shortly after the archaeological discoveries on the site, G. Messineo clarifies that this space had to have been foreseen in the past, with the same aim of preventing humidity from rising on the walls of the room with the fresco.

25. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).



**Figure 2.** *The Underground Room Soon After its Discovery*

Source: G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

As can be seen in Figure 2, the underground room was quickly covered after its discovery -with what appears to be a temporary wooden structure- in order to allow it to be visited by the public. According to M. P. Partisani, this structure was built to support the ceiling of the room with the frescoes, evidently subject to collapse; however for G. Messineo the wooden structure was built to cover the area while the existing roof was demolished and the barrel vault was rebuilt. This vault, which covered the space in imitation of the original, is still standing today.

Shortly after the work carried out by the archaeologists, and despite the strong interest aroused by the discoveries at the time, only the underground room was left visible, while the rest of the villa returned to being part of an agricultural estate, which after 1870 became private property and was subjected to damage from ploughing, to which were added, in 1944, those of a heavy bombing which devastated the hill, also damaging the frescoes in the underground room, already used as a bivouac by the German troops.<sup>26</sup> At that time the few archaeological remains visible on the hill overlooking the small town of Prima Porta definitively lost their interest, to the point of suggesting a disappearance of the ancient imperial residence.

Finally, after the Second World War, in 1948, archaeological restrictions were imposed on the area, to protect the area from agricultural works which continued to threaten the buried structures. However, it was not until the year 1951 in which, having ascertained the deterioration and after various restoration interventions, the painted plasters were detached by the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro and taken to

26. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

safety in the Museo Nazionale Romano, where they can still be admired today after a long restoration work.<sup>27</sup>

The painting was carried out on six layers of plaster, five of *arriccio*,<sup>28</sup> that is lime, sand and pozzolana, and one of preparation, in Roman stucco, that is a mortar with added marble dust. This plaster was not placed on the wall directly, but on a curtain of tiles fixed to the wall by T-shaped iron clamps, and the joints carefully cemented with mortar. The poor conservation conditions were not due only, or rather were not due so much, to an aggravation of the humidity conditions of the environment or to carelessness due to the war period, but rather to the progressive constant alteration of the substances spread with incautious imprudence on the paintings in distant and not so distant times.<sup>29</sup>

From the reports written by Pietrogrande to the Consiglio Superiore,<sup>30</sup> a number of details are known about the decision to dismantle the fresco and move it to another site, as a solution to the possible gradual disappearance of the frescoes due to their constant degradation. In this regard, one of his letters states that:

“the detachment (...) should not be carried out in “massello” as advised by Venturini-Papari, since in that case, by preserving the plaster and the wall, it would not remove the causes of the ailment, but would preserve them by transferring them to the Museum. Instead, it will be necessary to detach the paintings with the plaster, which will then have to be thinned out until all the altered parts and those likely to produce new faults are removed. In other words, it will be necessary to adopt the type of transport that has been successfully tested for the paintings in Livia's house on the Palatine and for the paintings in the Farnesina in the Museo Nazionale Romano.”<sup>31</sup>

The technique of detaching the paintings consisted of several stages, beginning on 4 June 1951. First, “it began with the removal of mold from the surface of the paintings and with the removal of the saltpetre which dulled the colors almost everywhere. The raised color flakes were then welded (...) by soaking them in a solution of shellac and alcohol and crushing the raised parts with spatula strokes”, after which “we proceeded (...) to glaze the frescoes by means of large hemp canvases applied with soft glue”. According to the same Dr. Pietrogrande “in some points the plaster still tenaciously adhered to the tegulae [also called tiles], while in others it was completely detached. This led to some difficulties in the detachment, which were however happily resolved. The *arriccio* was then removed, leaving

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27. M. P. Partisani, “Le galline e gli allori dell’“Ulisse in gonnella”. Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas,” in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell’Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

28. *Arriccio*, in Italian, is the second of the three fundamental layers of the historical technique for the base of a fresco or the finishing of rough walls.

29. M. Cagiano De Azevedo, “La sala dipinta della Villa di Livia a Prima Porta,” in *Bollettino dell’Istituto Centrale del Restauro* no. 13 (Roma: Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1953).

30. These reports are transcribed by Cagiano De Azevedo, M. in his text “*La sala dipinta della Villa di Livia a Prima Porta*”.

31. M. Cagiano De Azevedo, “La sala dipinta della Villa di Livia a Prima Porta,” in *Bollettino dell’Istituto Centrale del Restauro* no. 13 (Roma: Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1953).



only the layer of *intonachino*<sup>32</sup> composed of lime, sand, marble dust and alabaster, for a thickness of 1 cm". Thus, using the technique described above, it was possible to remove the entire fresco in just seven working days: the first was on 19 June, the second on 21 June, followed by 9, 14, 20, 25 and -finally- 31 July. During each of these days, sections of the fresco were extracted from the wall, which after being separated from the wall "the *arriccio* was removed before extracting it from the room and then transported to the Museo Nazionale Romano".

From the moment when the room loses its most important frescoes, the few visible parts of the Villa remain of no interest, so much so as to make the monument look completely unnoticed.<sup>33</sup> Apart from a few historical studies on the Villa and its archaeological remains found in the second half of the 19th century,<sup>34</sup> it was not until during and after the excavations started in 1982 by Gaetano Messineo for the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma, that it was possible to define the extension of the building complex and reconstruct the various phases of its life.<sup>35</sup> These excavation and reorganization interventions in the area have returned to life a monument characterized by sophisticated architectural solutions and splendid decorative pieces, including many mosaics and wall paintings of the highest executive level.<sup>36</sup>

### The Villa: Spaces and Functional Organization

As mentioned above, the architectural typology of "*villa romana*" was characterised by the fact that it was a space for relaxation and leisure, activities which are presented as simple but which nevertheless required the creation of large architectural complexes, with multiple and varied functions taking place simultaneously throughout its spaces -both interior and exterior, open and closed- destined for this purpose. Of all these spaces and activities, the dining room was the place most dedicated to the ostentation of rank and heritage, but there were other environments and services for leisure: libraries, gymnasiums, terraces, roof gardens, massage rooms, private thermal baths, arcades and avenues for strolling, fountains and *nymphaeums*, all furnished with the best the market could offer, that is precious marbles, sparkling bronzes, elaborate mosaics, masterpieces of art.<sup>37</sup>

The remains that are still preserved from the Villa allow us not only to know, but also to understand the way in which these spaces were made, how they were

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32. *Intonachino*, in Italian, is the last layer of plaster; it is a coating mainly intended for external surfaces for protective and aesthetic purposes.

33. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

34. According to the author M. P. Partisani: the study of the architectural layout of the Villa, was started by Giuseppe Lugli in 1923, continued by Heinrich Sulze in 1932, and further deepened by Heinz Kahler in 1959.

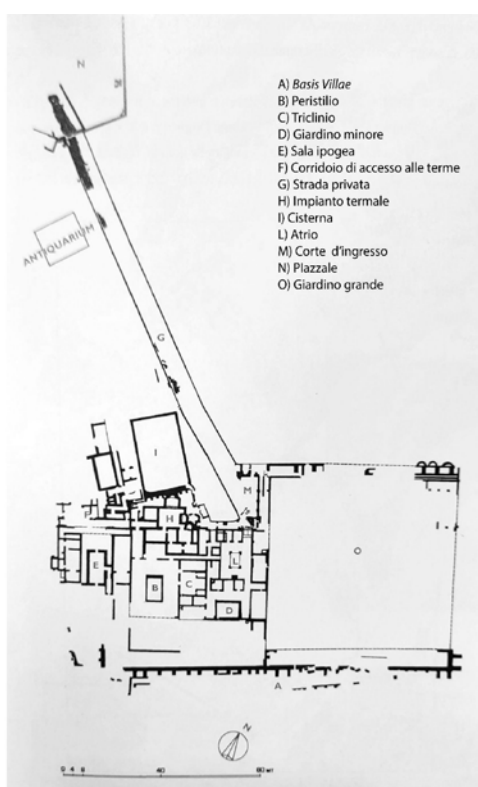
35. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

36. U. Pappalardo, *Affreschi Romani* (Verona: Arsenale Editrice, 2009).

37. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

organised, what the dimensions and characteristics of each of the rooms were and how they were related to each other. In fact, to a certain extent, the level of conservation of spaces and their decoration allows us to perceive the way in which this site was inhabited.

The architectural structures of the Villa are set out along nine chronological phases ranging from the Republican age (although the site was already frequented in the Etruscan age) to the second half of the 4th century AD. Within these chronological extremes are the renovations undergone by the complex after the Octavian/Livia wedding in 38 BC, and the changes in use of some rooms caused by the earthquake of 17 BC mentioned by Giulio Ossequente, with the relative abandonment of the underground room; followed by the Flavian arrangement of the thermal area (last quarter of the 1st century BC), the floor and decorative reconstructions of the Antonine age (late 1st-2nd century AD), and the complete restructuring of the thermal plant under the Severi (late 2nd -early 3rd century AD).<sup>38</sup>



**Figure 3.** *Plan of the Entire Villa*

Source: G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

At a general level, the villa is made up of two quadrangular blocks (see Figure 3), one intended for greenery (called the Great Garden) and the other for residence

38. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

(*pars urbana*). Inside the residential complex we can find various functional areas: private rooms, representative rooms, rooms intended for guests -placed behind a large room built above the underground summer triclinium-, a thermal facility -served by an imposing cistern that is still visible-, and finally several service rooms with the relative accesses (both surface and underground).<sup>39</sup> We will divide the block called residence -according to the organization made for G. Messineo in his book "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta", which is also observed in the itinerary of the visit to the archaeological area- into three large areas: the private district, the area of the thermal complex and the residential district (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** *The Residence Area: The Private District (A), The Area of the Thermal Complex (B) and the Residential District (C)*

Source: G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

The access to the Villa was through a private road, which branched off from the Via Flaminia just beyond the crossroads with the Tiberina (see Figure 3). It was originally just over two meters wide but was later enlarged, paved with paving stones of flint and leucidic trachyte, a material suitable for sloping paths (see Figure 5).<sup>40</sup>

This road made it possible to make a short tour -or perhaps a promenade through the garden- which led to the entrance to the villa, from where it was possible to enter the private district directly. This entrance (no. 40 in the image), flanked by a small basin, is marked by a travertine threshold with hinges (the lead casting for fixation remains in one of the recess) and the holes for the posts of a double door: this gives access to the denominated area of the private district (see Figure 4). Crossing a short vestibule one arrives at an atrium with a mosaic with a black background and a decorative motif of city walls around the basin of the central "impluvium".<sup>41,42</sup>

39. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

40. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

41. *Impluvium*: in archaeology, a lowered and framed part of the floor of the atrium in the Etruscan-Italic and Roman house, with a rectangular basin, a flat bottom and drainage for rainwater, which fell there from the *compluvium*. [Treccani Vocabolario].

42. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).



**Figure 5.** *The Access to the Villa*

Source: Photo by the authors.

To the right of the entrance and atrium with the impluvium was the large garden, however, these two spaces are not connected, as the atrium is enclosed on this side by a series of rooms (no. 41, 42, 47, 49). The most important part of this area is the “*portico*” (no. 48), which is a space open onto a small garden, surrounded on three sides by columns or pilasters. Around this space are located some living rooms and bedrooms, through which it is possible to reach the peristyle (or courtyard) surrounded by porticoes (no. 22), which contains a marble-clad “*natatio*”<sup>43</sup> in the centre.

Connecting the area of the private district with the area of the thermal complex (see Figure 4) is a long corridor (no. 44) which still has its black and white curved paving. This area was the result of enlargement work carried out in the 2nd century AD, and is made up of various rooms, the most important of which is the “*caldarium*”<sup>44</sup> (no. 29).

The district defined as residential -also called representative- includes a series of rooms (see Figure 4) located side by side and intercommunicating with each other: in the part closest to the peristyle it is located the underground complex including the decorated room with the famous frescoes with garden views, to which the villa mainly owes its fame. The access to the room is via a staircase which ends, with an ancient travertine step, in a vestibule with an Augustan mosaic with a black background and rows of white tiles. From there, there are two symmetrical arched passages: the one on the left opens to the fresco room and the one on the right goes into a cellar with a barrel vault, partially dug out of the rock.<sup>45</sup>

43. *Natatio*: it is an outdoor (cold water) pool.

44. *Caldarium*: in the ancient Roman baths, a heated room for taking hot baths and sweating.

45. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

## The Frescoes' Underground Room

There are at least three reasons why the room attracted attention at the time of its discovery: its underground location, its decoration -not only because of the "garden" motif with which it was decorated, but also because of the quality of its execution- and the high level of conservation with which it was found. In this sense, such characteristics lead to certain conjectures regarding its function within the Villa, the way in which it was used and the reason for the choice of using a "garden" motif (with the use of a certain type of specific vegetation) to decorate it. The archaeologists all appear to agree on the fact that this underground room was located near an external environment, probably the garden of the villa itself, and that it was mostly used in the summer period when the heat did not allow external moments of conviviality and therefore interior spaces were preferred,<sup>46</sup> given that - from its position- it certainly allowed a greater feeling of refreshment and it is therefore assumed that its function was precisely that of conviviality even if there is no certainty.

Both the architectural and decorative features suggest that the room is a *nymphaeum*<sup>47</sup> or a summer *triclinium*,<sup>48</sup> which re-proposed the charm of the real garden in the coolness. In the Hellenic-Roman civilization the *nymphaeum* was a place, with a rectangular or elliptical plan, characterized by niches or exedras and peristyle elevations, used to contain fountains, pools and basins. The Roman *nymphaeum* was usually a space where banquets were held overlooking a garden-peristyle; it was an ideal place to spend the so-called *otium*. The *triclinium*, on the other hand, was an environment in which meals were served and guests were entertained, who could lie down on beds, also called tricliniums, covered with cushions around a central low table. This room was decorated with mosaics or frescoes on the walls usually with joyful images or with divinities such as Dionysus or Venus to recall an atmosphere suitable for relaxation and fun.

The painted underground room -covered with a barrel vault- measures 53 palms long and 28 wide (5.90 x 11.70 meters) and is perhaps one of the first Roman examples of naturalistic/landscape representation, as on all four walls of the room reproduce a garden with ornamental plants and fruit trees, enlivened by birds and flowers.<sup>49</sup>

The landscape, rendered in an extremely meticulous and analytical way, appears as a continuous naturalistic setting, that is, not interrupted at the corners of the room.<sup>50</sup> If we look at the painting from bottom to top, we can see a composition

46. G. Messineo, *Ad gallinas albas. Villa di Livia* (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2001).

47. *Nymphaeum*: originally a sanctuary for nymphs, it later became a place characterised by the presence of water with a remarkable scenic splendour. [Treccani Vocabolario].

48. *Triclinium*: In the stately homes of ancient Rome, the dining room, so called because of the three beds (also called triclinium) placed on three sides of the table and on which, three by three, the diners were arranged. [Treccani Vocabolario].

49. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

50. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

divided into three large areas: first a plinth, which is followed by a set of elements that could be called "closing elements" whose purpose is to separate the viewer from the painted garden, and -at last- the garden, that is located at the back and forms the third part of the composition.

The barrel vault is decorated with stucco squares painted with figurative elements.<sup>51</sup> It is separated from the paintings with "garden" motifs by a sinuous motif -perhaps a recurring row of stalactites- which hangs all around from the edge of the vault, as if wanting to introduce the observer/guest in the center of a hypothetical cave (or natural cavity) from which to enjoy the panorama that unfolds around him. However, of the decoration of the barrel roof only remain some of the squares (lacunar) with a white and blue background.<sup>52</sup>

This clear desire for artificiality makes the room almost become the scene of a theatre. The illusion and alienation must have become even stronger if the room received light from an opening in the ceiling.<sup>53</sup> This hypothesis -advanced by several archaeologists- speaks of the possibility that a diffused light could illuminate the frescoes and the room from above so that the painting is visible without another type of lighting and that the environment can remain cool and comfortable. According to G. Messineo, among the numerous examples of these particular environments, characterized by the underground position, the presence of water, the reference to natural caves in the structure or the imitation of the rock in paint and stucco, we can mention in Rome the so-called "*Auditorium de Mecenate*" on the Esquiline or numerous Pompeian frescoes, in which landscapes similar to those of the Villa of Livia return within false windows.

However, the choice of the "garden" decorative motif may have other reasons, unrelated to the architecture of the Villa, the location of the room or the possible uses assigned to it. The use of this type of landscape -rich in trees, flowers and birds of all kinds- can be related to the fashions of the imperial court (ancient sources tell that Augustus owned a talking magpie, as well as a crow and a parrot) and therefore with the symbolic messages of prosperity and well-being transmitted by the Augustan art in favour of the new imperial regime.

The authorship of this painting is still unknown, although several hypotheses have been put forward. M. P. Partisani transmits the words of Vitruvio and Plinio, both of whom describe paintings -executed at the same time as the Villa and the fresco- with some of the general characteristics of the period, even referring, in the case of Plinio, to the representation of the landscape motif as a novelty:

"... Vitruvio Pollione, in a famous passage of his treatise *De Architectura* dedicated to structural decorations, recalls among the characteristic themes of the wall paintings of his time (1st century BC) views of ports, promontories, coasts, rivers, springs, canals,

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51. G. Messineo, "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta," in *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia* no. 69 (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 2004).

52. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

53. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).



sanctuaries, groves, mountains, sheep, shepherds and other amenities of nature. Plinio senior, who lived at the time of the emperor Vespasian, recalls how in the middle of the Augustan age a certain Ludius (or Studius, according to the handwriting of some manuscripts) had been the first artist to pictorially evoke panoramas and animated landscapes, drawing direct inspiration from reality (*ex veris rebus*) and “specializing” in topiary work”.<sup>54</sup>

Based on this description by Plinio, several authors have attributed the authorship of the work to Ludius, although there is still not enough evidence to support this hypothesis. Although it is not known who was the hand behind the work of art, it is recognised the importance of the work not only as an expression of Roman art and culture, but also for its historical value and as a source of knowledge of the cultural skills developed by that society at that precise moment in history, between the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Imperial Age. A time when -as the author R. Bianchi Bandinelli expresses it in his book “*Roma: l’arte romana nel centro del potere, dalle origini alla fine del II secolo d.C.*”- an artistic civilisation was formed in Rome derived fundamentally from Hellenistic art, which was characterised not only by imitating it but also by the recent possibility of obtaining and transporting such works of art. In this sense, this appropriation of the Hellenistic art model attempts -at the same time- to compete with it, and allows the shaping of the character attributed to villas, gardens, and residential decorations of the time.

### **The Drawn Garden: The Frescoes of the Villa [M.C.]**

Inside the Villa di Livia a Prima Porta there was a basement room, which had a barrel vaulted roof, illuminated by a modest skylight placed in one of the lunettes on the short side of the room. Of this environment there are no reliable sources that agree on its function but archaeologists are mainly divided into two main streams of thought. Whatever the intended use of this room was, what is certain is that it was a place where one could spend leisure moments enjoying the beauty in which one found oneself and, thanks to its underground location, a place of refreshment especially in the summertime. Since their discovery in 1863-64, due to their size and very few gaps, these decorations have been considered the oldest fresco of its kind, dated to the 1st century BC, and for this reason considered unique. The fame was also such because, at the time of the discovery, the frescoes were perfectly preserved despite their underground location; the reason for these fortunate conditions lies in the fact that these decorations were made on a layer of plaster adhering to tiles which, in turn, kept detached from the wall, formed an air gap preventing humidity from affecting the frescoes.

This underground environment has no columns or architectural elements placed in the center that could alter the total perception of the room which has a

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54. M. P. Partisani, "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas," in *La riscoperta della via Flaminia più vicina a Roma: storia, luoghi, personaggi: atti dell'Incontro di Studio*, ed. F. Vistoli (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010).

rectangular proportion. The life-size garden is painted along the full height of the walls, seamlessly from the floor to the impost of the barrel vault, which was probably also frescoed with a continuous sky; here were arranged relief frames (33 partially intact ones remain today only along the long sides of the room), in white and blue with alternating red borders, housing images of Pompeian grotesques. The room is accessed through a staircase adjacent to the eastern wall in which, in the center, the small access door opens, the only point where the frescoes are interrupted. The depth of the fresco is rendered by the representation of a double fence, which runs across the entire room, one of which is placed just above the plinth and the other on a second floor not far from the previous one. The perspective expedient of inserting these two fences not only serves to give depth and a sense of three-dimensionality to the surface, but also to make the observer realise that he is in the presence of a place inhabited and built by man and not in front of unspoilt wilderness. Geometrically, the frescoed walls can be divided into three sections: the lower part with plinths and fences, which is predominantly brown in colour; the central part characterised mostly by flowers, plants and small animals, which is predominantly green in colour with coloured patches in shades of yellow, orange and pink; and finally, the upper part with tree tops and some birds in flight, which soften the light blue of the sky.

The relationship of the environment, underground indoors, with the subject represented on the walls appears oxymoronic: a lush, brightly coloured garden set in an airy, light-filled environment. This contrast has prompted many scholars to look for a symbolic interpretation in these frescoes, convinced that this place, and its paintings in particular, were almost certainly also and above all a means of communication widely used in Roman times. This type of depiction was probably conceived because rooms such as the *nymphaeum* and *triclinium* were usually built in front of the garden or otherwise adorned with plants and floral elements. However, it seems highly unlikely that the representation was conceived and executed purely for aesthetic and narrative pleasure, as a simple description of the nature that surrounded the villa.<sup>55</sup>

A further possible hypothesis on the choice of subject depicted, perhaps, leads us to believe that it was an expedient desired by the commissioner, of a purely scenographic nature, to involve the spectator to the point of making him feel as if he were really standing in front of a Roman garden despite being below ground level. Another, even more symbolic interpretation, alludes to the prosperity of the imperial age in fact, all the plants depicted are in full bloom at the same time, even though they flower at different times of the year; the garden theme thus seems to be a clear reference to the perpetual peace guaranteed by Augustus, husband of the commissioner Livia.<sup>56</sup>

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55. G. Caneva, "Ipotesi sul significato simbolico del giardino dipinto della Villa di Livia (Prima Porta, Roma)," in *BCAR - Bullettino Della Commissione Archeologica Comunale Di Roma C* (1999): 63-80 (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1999).

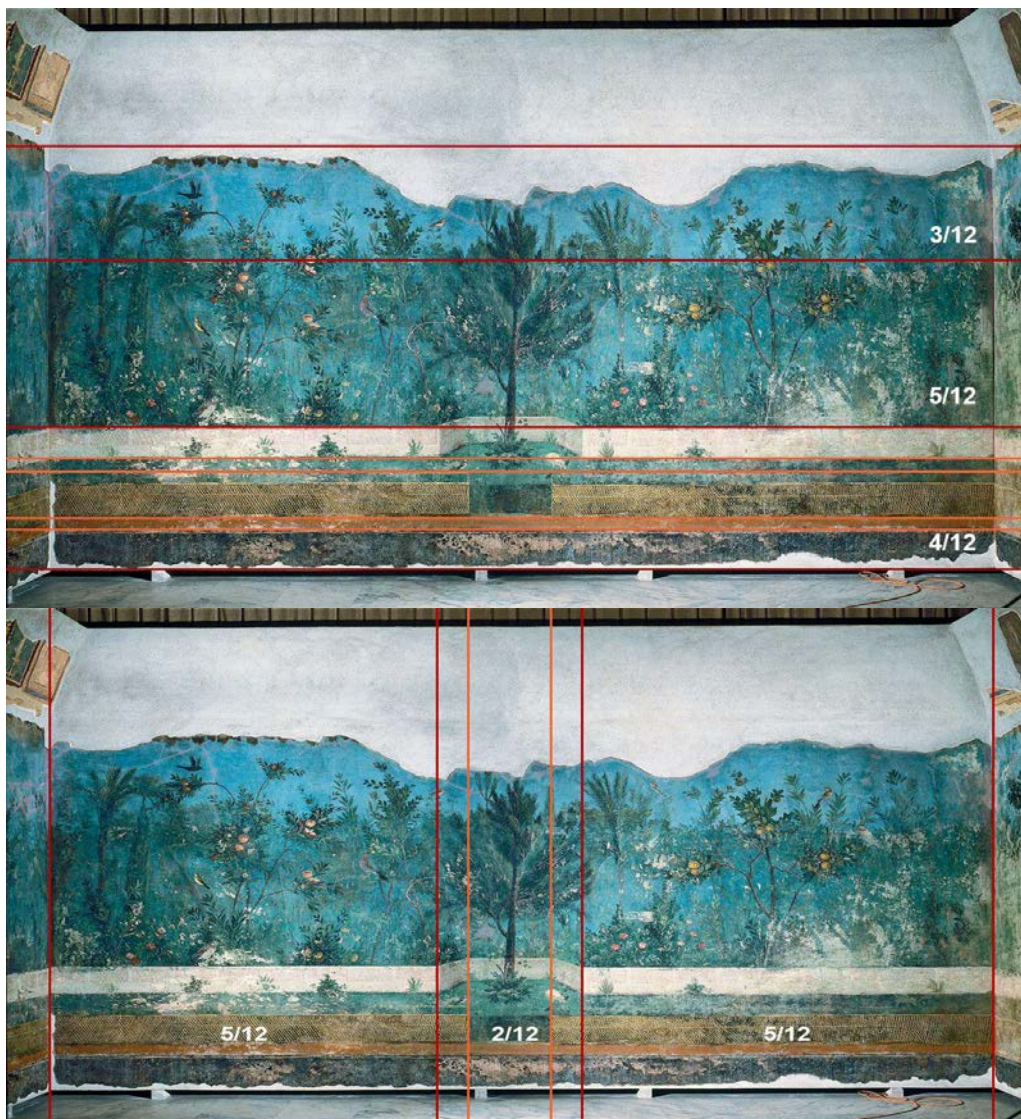
56. U. Pappalardo, *Affreschi Romani* (Verona: Arsenale Editrice, 2009).



### The Representative and Iconographical Description of the Frescoes

Livia's work in her Prima Porta villa, therefore, was perhaps precisely to create a new space to entertain guests, giving them the refreshment they needed to face the sultry summer days and at the same time creating the illusion of being in an open-air place to enjoy the beauty of nature, the result of her remarkable painterly precision and knowledge of botany and zoology.

In order to better illustrate the description of the fresco, it has been divided into horizontal and vertical bands as in the image (see Figure 6); in particular, the burgundy lines divide the fresco into the main bodies horizontally and vertically, while the orange ones serve to identify the subdivisions within the former to better specify certain specificities of the fresco.



**Figure 6 A/B.** Study of the Horizontal and Vertical Proportions of the Frescoes of the Villa di Livia placed on the Short Northern Wall

Source: Elaboration by the authors.

Horizontally, the bands run along the four walls of the room as follows: the plinth that is approximately 4/12 of the entire fresco; the body that is approximately 5/12, and the crowning that occupies the remaining approximately 3/12.

Vertically, the subdivision is as follows: on the short sides of the room, a central body that occupies approximately 2/12 of the entire fresco and two symmetrical lateral portions that occupy approximately 5/12 respectively, while on the long sides, the room can be divided into five parts that two exedras alternate with three continuous parts. The entire environment, therefore, sees the organisation of a careful symmetry of the garden that is, however, partially masked by elements that animate the scene such as the arrangement of birds in flight and the tops of the tallest trees bent by the wind.

Horizontally, the base plinth is subdivided into five parts: the first two bands, i.e., the plinth and the thinner band, which run without interruption throughout the room; the two bands that house the parapets and the grassy band that divides the previous two.

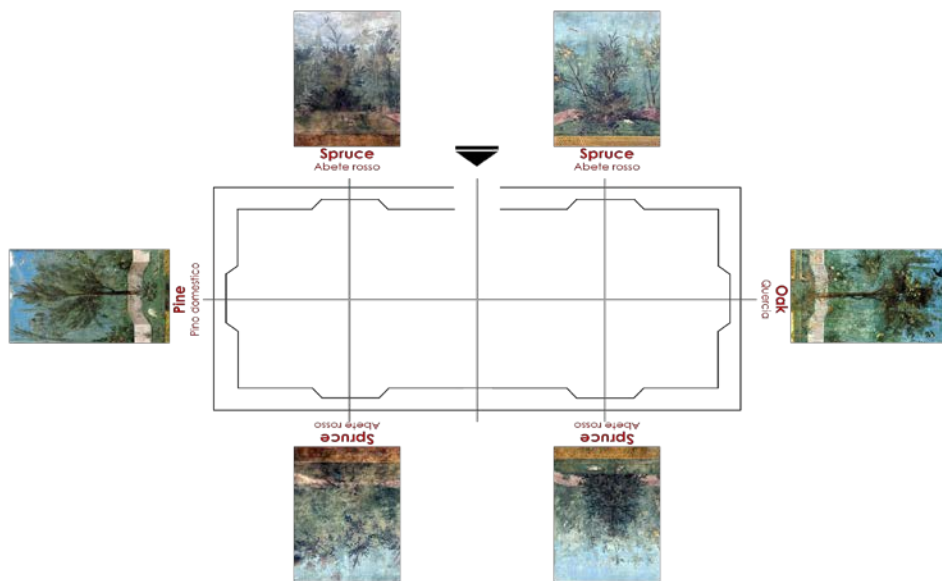
The actual plinth has a uniform grey-brown hue; above it is another, thinner band with the typical colour of rammed earth, which may represent a step through which one enters the garden; Still above this is a third band housing the first fence, this one depicted with a detailed rhombus motif, probably made of wooden or reed strips, as also betrayed by the colouring in shades of ochre, reinforced by a current placed about two-thirds from the base and two stringers at the top. The parapet is then completed by a light handrail, supported by thin uprights at regular intervals. The fence appears light and would seem to reveal the garden belonging to the house, reached through the four openings left along the perimeter. They are placed: one in front of the entrance, the other two on the smaller walls, suggesting the most suitable position for symbolically accessing the garden, and a last one, which in fact interrupts the entire composition, at the entrance to the room accessed through an opening with a round arch. Beyond this first fence, a fourth band identifies the garden, a space left to turf with the planting of a few shrubs, which give a sense of three-dimensionality and spontaneity to the scene, even if arranged at regular intervals, clarifying the intervention of 'man'. The garden extends until it meets the second fence, the fifth strip, which gives the observer another feeling of depth.

This too is of modest height and it can be assumed to be a solid structure, in light-coloured brick or, more probably, marble given the rank of the owners, which is depicted as a gate, which is represented as worked in the *guise of a gate*<sup>57</sup>, with three different motifs: lozenges, overlapping arches and rectangular geometric figures with diagonal elements. This second covering, unlike the one in the foreground, is never interrupted, with the exception of the correspondence with the entrance to the room, but its rhythm is broken by square-shaped exedras in each of which a large tree is depicted down to the smallest detail. These exedras meet symmetrically, one on the short side and two on the long side, the latter larger, for a total of 6; the symmetry is partially masked by the planting of

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57. AA.VV. (1863), *Bullettino dell'Instituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica per l'anno 1863*, May-June. Editoriale Tipografia Tiberina, Roma.

different trees: four spruce, an oak and a pine, all curiously without flowers or fruit (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Identification in Plan of the Plant Species Arranged in the Niches of the Frescoes of the Villa of Livia

Source: Elaboration by the authors.

In the central body of the fresco, behind the second fence that acts as a wall, an apparently spontaneous nature is represented where, following an orderly and systematic cadence, another series of small trees and shrubs are depicted in great detail, some of them with floral or fruit elements; nests and various species of birds complete the representation. In this part of the fresco, where the parapet does not meet the exedras, the fruit trees arranged symmetrically in the composition are depicted in greater detail; these, like the plants depicted in the exedras, are painted with a very high degree of detail that not only makes pomegranates, quinces and strawberry trees recognisable, for example, but also helps to identify an initial compositional arrangement of the trees. Along the second fence, again in correspondence with the exedras, are instead arranged a series of small shrubs, also very detailed, which enliven and colour the scene thanks to the notable presence of brightly coloured flowers and leaves.

Behind this second line of trees, the vegetation gradually fades more and more and appears with less detail until it blends into the background with a predominantly green hue.

The crowning band, representing the last horizontal band, depicts the tops of the tallest trees silhouetted against a clear, turquoise sky, enlivened by the presence of birds in flight and the sinuous movement of the tallest tree branches caused by the breeze. The frescoed composition concludes with a band with a motif imitating the stalactites of a cave.

Vertically, looking at the short sides of the room, the fresco can be divided into three main parts: side part - central body - side part; while on the long sides

into five parts according to the following arrangement: side part - exedra - central part occupying a double space - exedra - side part.

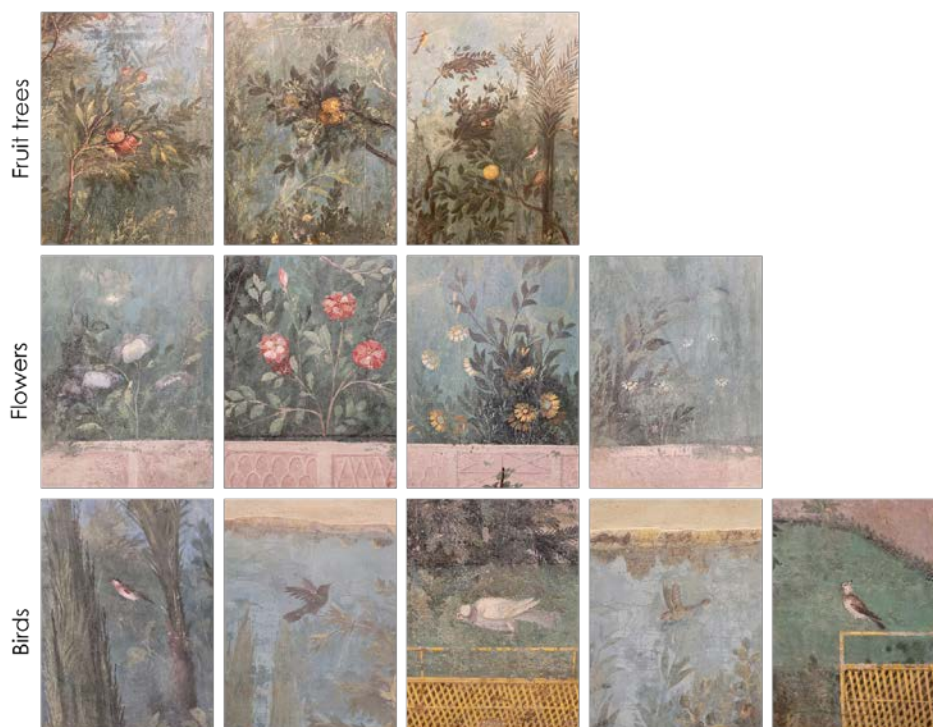
Analysing the short wall of the room, the central band is the centrepiece of the garden with the entrance to it, through the gateless opening in the first lattice fence, the exedra in the background, created in the boundary wall, and the main tree planted within the garden itself. The orange lines show how the opening to the garden optically corresponds to the recess of the fence in the background. The two side parts, substantially symmetrical, represent the plinth, the manicured garden serving the house adorned with a few small shrubs without floral elements; while beyond the second wall develops what should be the natural part apparently devoid of human intervention, but which instead betrays a certain human interference with the presence of well-tended fruit trees and shrubs that are certainly not spontaneous. Scholars have also noted the inconsistent presence of flowers and fruit that in nature do not belong to the same season, and this further reinforces the hypothesis of human control even on the part apparently not shaped by man; using a description by Settis, the garden presents itself as a "*botanical catalogue and in no way a portrait of a garden at a specific time*"<sup>58</sup>. The further presence of human intervention is revealed by the presence of a small aviary, placed above the boundary wall, with a goldfinch inside.

Thanks to the abundance of detail and pictorial precision, together with the painter's already in-depth knowledge of botany and zoology, it was possible to identify with certainty the floral and faunal species animating the scene (see Figure 8). By carefully observing the nuances of the plumage, the color of the foliage, which varies from the darkest of laurel to the silvery of oak, and the color of the various fruits and flowers, such as the reds of pomegranates and the ocher of quinces, it is it was possible to identify 69 different varieties of birds and 23 trees belonging to 20 distinct families. Among the birds you can meet goldfinches for the most part, one of which is inside the aviary, sparrows, pigeons, blackbirds and robins; all these birds are typical of the Mediterranean fauna and can be found perched on trees, pecking seeds on the turf and in flight in the highest part of the composition.

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58. Settis S. (2008), *La villa di Livia. Le pareti ingannevoli*, Mondadori Electa, Roma, p. 6





**Figure 8.** Identification of the Species of Fruit Trees, Flowers and Birds Most Frequently Represented in the Frescoes of the Villa of Livia

Source: Elaboration by the authors.

From a floral point of view, different tree species typical of the Mediterranean maquis have been identified with the exception of the date palm, native to warmer climates, and the spruce, typical of northern Europe and more rigid climates in general. The species in the niches see on the two short sides the representation of a stone pine and an oak, both protagonists being represented only once but certainly common to the eyes of the observer, while in the remaining four niches, on the long sides of the wall, the spruce. The pine tree has a rather complex symbolic meaning in Greco-Roman mythology, but certainly linked to the myth of generation; the oak tree, on the other hand, was sacred to the god Jupiter and was a symbol of strength and used in civic wreaths; finally, the fir tree, which according to Pliny was a symbol of mourning and used in funeral celebrations. The choice of depicting these trees without flowers or fruit may have been deliberate so that the human eye would not focus on the elements that give colour and liveliness to the plant, focusing rather on the symbolic meaning of the plant. The most frequently depicted species is the laurel, which has always been a symbol of royalty and triumph as well as a plant sacred to the god Apollo, probably, in a hypothesis put forward by Settis, because Suetonius, Pliny and Cassius Dione all agree that “around the villa of Prima Porta there was a laurel forest from which branches were taken for the triumph of the Caesars”.<sup>59</sup> Other essences include the cypress, a tree sacred to Pluto and symbol of mourning; the holm oak, a tree consulted by the oracles; trees with fruit such as the pomegranate (6 plants), an oxymoronic symbol

59. Settis S. (2008), *La villa di Livia. Le pareti ingannevoli*, Mondadori Electa, Roma, p. 6.

of fertility and death; the myrtle or quince (6 plants), which in ancient Greece were symbols of good luck; and the strawberry tree (4 plants), a plant protective of evil spirits; trees with flowers such as oleander (4 plants), considered to be deadly due to the toxicity of its juice, and viburnum, a triumphal plant; finally, various budding shrubs such as chrysanthemum, often used in funeral rites with protective functions; rose, a flower associated with love and the goddess Venus; and wild violet, a symbol of love and linked to the myth of the generation of the pine tree.

### The “Garden” Fresco: Historical and Geometrical Analysis

In late republican and imperial Roman thought, the ornamental garden was conceived in such a way that the architectural and natural components were inseparable from each other, where each built part dialogued with the garden.

Thanks to various literary documents that have come down to us, we can understand the love the Romans had for the natural world and for gardens; examples of this are the treatises of Varro, Pliny the Elder and Virgil in which relevant information is provided on plants, their uses and the introduction of new species to the Italian peninsula; the main problem with this type of source is the nomenclature, which in many cases can be misunderstood; pictorial representations then come to the rescue as more reliable sources. The genre codified as 'garden' painting originated within Roman wall painting in the last decades of the 1st century B.C. precisely within the 2nd-3rd Pompeian style, reaching its peak in the 4th style. The 3rd Pompeian style overlaps chronologically with the 2nd and takes up some elements such as cornices and friezes with plant shoots, but eliminates perspective and the feeling of three-dimensionality in favour of flat, monochrome backgrounds; the 4th style, on the other hand, presents elements and decorations that had already been experimented with such as false architecture, *trompe-l'oeil* and decorations with candelabra, winged figures and plant shoots.

The origin of the "garden" painting is not certain but there are already some references attributable to the Alexandrian era, where plant decorations on a 1:1 scale have been found, others are of strictly Hellenistic and Roman influence. The first example, Roman, of this decoration can be found in complementary or semi-open spaces in direct connection with the real garden; rooms like the *impluvium*<sup>60</sup> frescoes and mosaics with bucolic and vegetal motifs and depictions, which often decorated these rooms, are a real introjection of nature inserted into the house, were able to transform the opaque walls into wide views of countryside landscapes. Archaeologists all appear to agree on the fact that the birth of the Roman garden is connected to the acquisition by the Romans of the architectural element of the peristyle; the latter, in fact, was born as a partially open internal room in continuation with the external areas. The frescoes with garden motifs were created, perhaps, precisely to recall the connection with the typical peristyle garden of Roman country villas and to reproduce the amenity of nature in this environment. It was not just a decorative element for its own sake but also an illusionistic extension, an ostentation of the owner's aesthetic taste and social and intellectual

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60. From the lat. *in* = inside and *pluvia* = rain, it was a quadrangular basin with a flat bottom typically located in the atrium and designed to collect rainwater.

status. Usually the Roman "garden" paintings are made as decoration of entire rooms with real proportions, they are placed inside architectural frames occupying the entire wall, only portions of them or only in the plinth, configuring themselves as a fictitious barrier, decorated in a trellis or low wall, from which bushes and plants emerge in an apparently spontaneous order. These gardens are often animated by animal species such as birds and small terrestrial animals typical of the Mediterranean fauna; while from an architectural point of view the elements that are sometimes depicted are mostly decorative objects such as fountains, sculptures, herms or masks as well as elements typically of exotic-Egyptian taste, mainly attributable to the Augustan era, such as sphinxes, statues of the goddess Isis and animals like hippos or crocodiles. The background shades of the garden paintings can be different depending on the symbology and the place where they are represented: blue and dark green for the sky and the dense vegetation; black especially in Pompeii and Herculaneum used to symbolize the shady coolness of the garden; yellow or red, in Pompeian paintings typical of the IV style and finally white if linked to the sacral or funeral sphere.<sup>61</sup>

In the perception of represented space today, there is a tendency to read ancient paintings almost always according to the laws of linear perspective with a single vanishing point codified in the Renaissance. The reconstruction of cities, and the consequent representation of them, during the 15th-16th centuries saw the creation of symmetrical street axes, the use of clear geometries and the creation of simple, related volumes. The studies of architects and intellectuals such as Leon Battista Alberti, Piero della Francesca and Filippo Brunelleschi shaped today's way of studying and codifying perspective techniques, changing the logic of study and representation up to the present day.

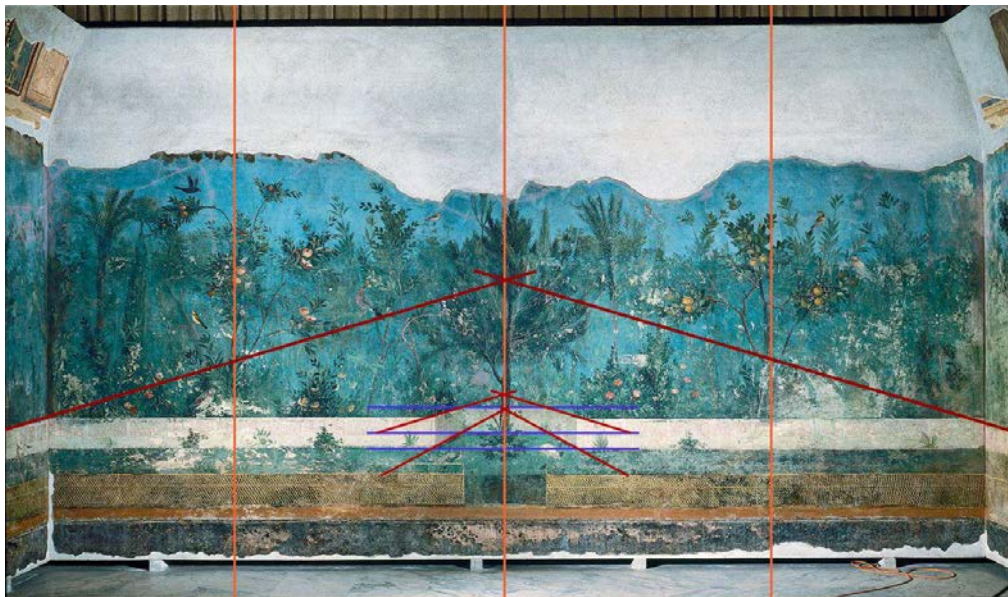
All these studies are based on the study of the proportions between the parts, in fact the etymology of the word proportion derives from the Latin *proportio-onis*, "according to the portion", and indicates the correspondence of measurement between two or more closely related parts. These correspondences are mathematical relationships and in architecture they find a field of application in the Middle Ages, through the use of geometry, while in the Renaissance through numerical correspondences. In ancient Rome, on the other hand, the buildings did not have an urban-architectural relationship deriving from the study of the proportions between the parts, rather they were designed and legible as a singularity. As for urban planning, also for wall decorations, the Romans did not concentrate on the construction of a three-dimensional space that followed the rules of perspective and they did not even let nature be uncontaminated, not shaped by the hand of man, and the wild environment, to govern the delimitation of the environment itself. Architectural and figurative planning were therefore an illusionistic device used to convey an idea of depth of architectural spaces often inserted in natural contexts modeled by man.<sup>62</sup> The Romans, taking up Greek painting, rejected "*the depth of field towards infinity and for the natural landscape*" preferring to it the

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61. U. Pappalardo, *Affreschi Romani* (Verona: Arsenale Editrice, 2009).

62. E. La Rocca, "Paesaggi che fluttuano nel vuoto. La veduta paesistica nella pittura greca e romana," in *Roma. La pittura di un impero*, ed. E. La Rocca, S. Ensoli, S. Tortorella, M. Papini (Milano: Skira Editore, 2009), 39-55.

clarity and precision of the elements of the composition. The individual detailed representations, however, do not find a unitary and coherent dialogue within a single environment, but each appear to be fragmented in a precise spatial delimitation. This type of figurative composition in the "garden" frescoes of the Villa di Livia therefore does not present the spatial depth dictated by the use of the single-focus perspective system, which would see the convergence of the lines towards a fire at the back of the scene (see Figure 9), but rather presents a relationship that makes the different parts of the representation dialogue thanks to the extreme attention to details in the foreground which tend to fade away. This scaling of details in the representation of tree species gives a precise sense of spatial depth and creates a feeling of real atmosphere thanks to the color variations of the background; the latter is iridescent with green tones up to the horizon point beyond which the sky with turquoise pigments stands out. According to Settis, this technique was an expedient, probably unknown to the artist, which however suggests to the observer the depth of the fresco.<sup>63</sup>



**Figure 9.** *Study of the Lines of Symmetry and Depth of the Frescoes of the Villa di Livia*

Source: Elaboration by the authors.

The underground environment of Prima Porta presents itself to the observer as a theatre scene where the human figures are not represented but the painter makes them coincide with the observer himself; the spectator is therefore not a passive figure who limits himself to watching the scene but unknowingly is also an active part of it by animating it. From an architectural point of view, the only elements depicted are the two fences; in fact, there are no columns, pillars or vertical elements which optically interrupt the fresco. Among the most common practices in "garden" painting is the creation of optical wings that simulate depth through the scansion of planes of depth which in this case is given by the two low fences

63. S. Settis, *La villa di Livia. Le pareti ingannevoli* (Roma: Mondadori Electa, 2008).



enlivened by niches and exedras behind which the garden. Probably this representation of an open view towards the garden was also dictated because, in the Roman villas located in the countryside, the garden opened externally, surrounding a peristyle patio with a slightly protruding cover with respect to the axis of the columns which left the eye with the possibility to wander without encountering obstacles. The part inside the peristyle, on the other hand, was a patio that housed beds, small tables and everything needed for moments of conviviality. All the walls of the room in Livia's Villa show extreme attention to detail that binds and relates the different levels of depth but never in the Renaissance logic of a unitary composition from an illusionistic-spatial point of view, but in the narrative expansion of the fresco according to a composition that develops in length and not in depth, creating a planar and non-spatial system. The fact that Livia's frescoes, but Roman and Greek paintings in general, are not represented according to the rules of perspective does not mean that the Hellenic-Roman culture was unaware of perspective techniques, it simply reveals how they did not attribute the importance which was attributed to her during the Renaissance. In fact, there are different examples of Hellenic-Roman painting dating back to the 5th century BC where the use of a linear perspective can be understood mainly in the creation of theatrical sets and in some examples of wall painting in the domus.

### **Conclusion: The Villa as a Cultural Heritage**

#### **One Masterpiece, Two Museums [A.M.G]**

More than two thousand years separate us from the time when Livia Drusilla thought of and built her villa together with her husband Emperor Augustus. The villa was inhabited not only by them, but also by other owners who -without a doubt- left their physical mark through a series of varied modifications that the villa underwent throughout its many centuries of existence. Long years went by in which the village was forgotten, abandoned to vandalism and the passing of time, which - albeit in a slow process - deteriorates and destroys it.

Compared to its years of existence, it is relatively recent the (re)discovery - carried out in 1863- of the remains of the villa. However, it has already undergone a series of modifications that made it impossible to return it to its original state. This refers above all to the decision to dissect and move the frescoes of the underground room, which is the most important room in the Villa, the one that attracted attention due to the quality and level of conservation of its decorative elements.

A museum project has been developed in the place where the remains of the Villa are still preserved today. The quantity and quality of the preserved remains make the site a place of particular historical interest. The museum is constituted as a route that takes the visitor along an ordered walk from the original access and through the interior of the Villa.

The most important intervention carried out on the site for the museum project is a large roof that covers the archaeological remains, respecting the

dimensions of the spaces and attempting to reproduce the original heights of each one of them. In this sense, the visitor takes the tour under the roof, in a space circumscribed between the floor and the roof which -thanks to the remains of the existing walls, paving and frescoes- allows the observer to recreate a clear image of the Villa (see Figure 10). Furthermore, the roof -painted light blue- has the walls of the villa represented on it, which means that the museum space is configured, read and understood on the basis of the archaeological remains and the roof as a whole.



**Figure 10.** *The Archaeological Remains of the Villa di Livia: The Roof*

Source: Photo by the authors.

However, the most interesting thing is that the museum functions at the same time as a protection for the archaeological remains, as the roof is intended to prevent the archaeological remains of the Villa from degrading. In this sense, although the roof is perceived and noticed, it tries to be as ethereal as possible through the use of metallic structures that make it possible to obtain a thin roof with few supports and reduced dimensions. These supports rest on the archaeological remains in an orderly manner, generally at the corners of two walls -although not always- and never do so with the full section of the metal profile, but diminish its section a few centimetres before reaching the archaeological wall, resulting in a rather subtle support on the ruin (see Figure 11).



**Figure 11.** *The Archaeological Remains of the Villa di Livia: The Supports of the Roof*

Source: Photo by the authors.

One space in the museum where the well-achieved relationship between perceiving the exhibition space and the real space of the Villa is lost is the underground room, since, despite the gradual change in temperature as one descends the stairs, the sensation on arrival is one of discomfort: A cool -or, rather, cold- space in semi-darkness which, with its bare walls, does not allow the visitor who is unaware of the existence of the frescoes to understand the importance of the site or even to perceive the presence of the decoration (see Figure 12).



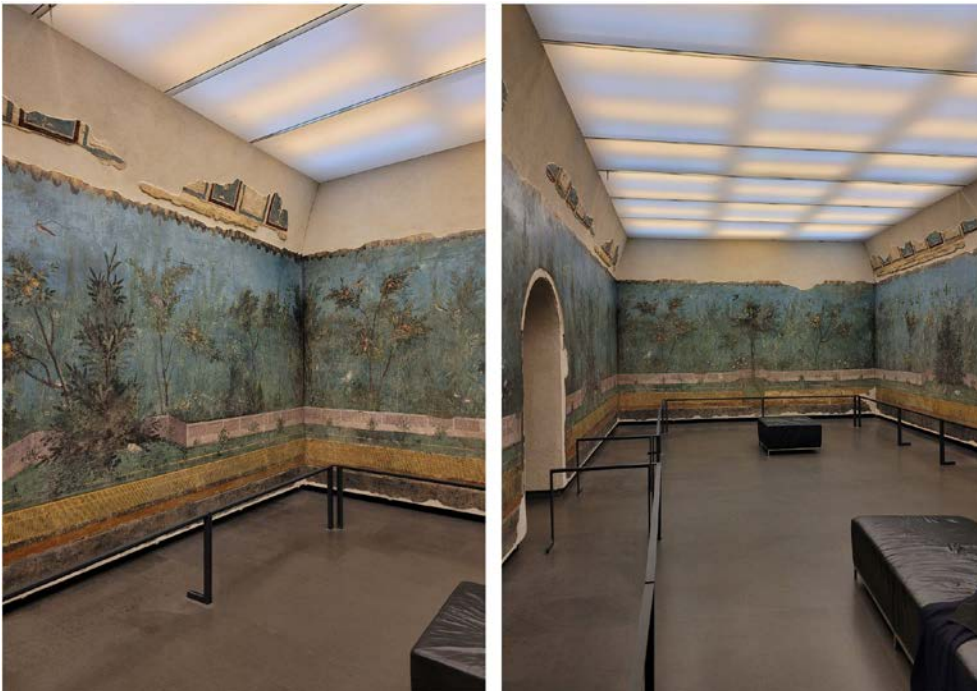
**Figure 12.** *The Archaeological Remains of the Villa di Livia: The Underground Room*

Source: Photo by the authors.



A similar experience occurs when visiting the Museo Nazionale Romano in the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, where the frescoes are on display (see Figure 13). A perfect setting and lighting allows one to observe them properly and examine the details of their exquisite execution. However, the experience of observing the frescoes is incomplete when their context is missing, that is without the cool, dimly lit environment, viewing the frescoes becomes an action of simple observation rather than an immersion within a space that was certainly intended to be a complete sensory experience.

This phenomenological experience of the space is incomplete also because the architectural context is different; although the proportions of the room are maintained, the barrel vault -although sketched- has not been reproduced in the museum's exhibition, which translates into a lack of understanding on the part of the visitor. In other words, the fresco is admired as a pictorial work in itself, without adding to it the value acquired by the fact that it was made for a specific architectural space, with particular characteristics regarding form, materiality, lighting and atmosphere, which are undoubtedly essential for knowing and understanding the work of art as a unit.



**Figure 13.** *The Exhibition of the Frescoes at Palazzo Massimo alle Terme*  
Source: Photo by the authors.

### **Echoes of History: Symbolic Representation [M.C.]**

This research work studies the Villa di Livia starting from its beginnings, trying to understand the reasons why it was decided to build this architectural space. And -from there- to understand how the passage of time and the hand of man have brought modifications to the architecture of the Villa that -beyond categorising them as good or bad interventions- are understood as part of the

history of the site: as a succession of layers of history that, together, form a kind of narrative, a story of the site over the years.

It is impossible to separate the figure and life of Livia from the history of the Villa, the underground room or the frescoes. Not only because it is thought that she was the main commissioner of all of them, but also because it is likely that she also participated in the decision-making process. It is undeniable that architecture and art transmit and communicate -even over the years- a code that those who know history can certainly decode with greater precision and depth.

From the representative, iconographic and geometric analysis of the frescoes, it is reasonable to think that the depicted garden is the transposition of an ideal place in which floral and zoological species that could not coexist in the same environment coexist. The use of frescoes, in classical times, was widespread not only with merely aesthetic-decorative functions but also and above all as a vehicle for messages charged with symbolic meanings. The botanical species found in this garden carry meanings of a spiritual and religious nature that would seem to allude to the transience of human life, such as box and cypress trees, which are able to renew and regenerate themselves cyclically, like the flowers and budding fruit symbolising fertility.

Livia and her husband Augustus, through the remains of the villa and the fresco, convey luxury and comfort, recreation and amusement, but at the same time they speak of ostentation, the search for beauty, precision and the use of a symbolic language. The Villa and the painted room speak to us of a period of transition, of the passage from republic to empire, of the relevance of personality and individual power behind both private -as in this case- and public commissions. In this sense, the villa was certainly also a vehicle for political messages; in fact, the recurring representation of the laurel plant is certainly a reference to Roman culture, where all victories and acts of peace were consecrated to the god Apollo, considered the symbol of wisdom and intelligence. This plant thus probably also alludes to the emblem of the supreme power of the imperial family and the restoration of peace throughout the empire.

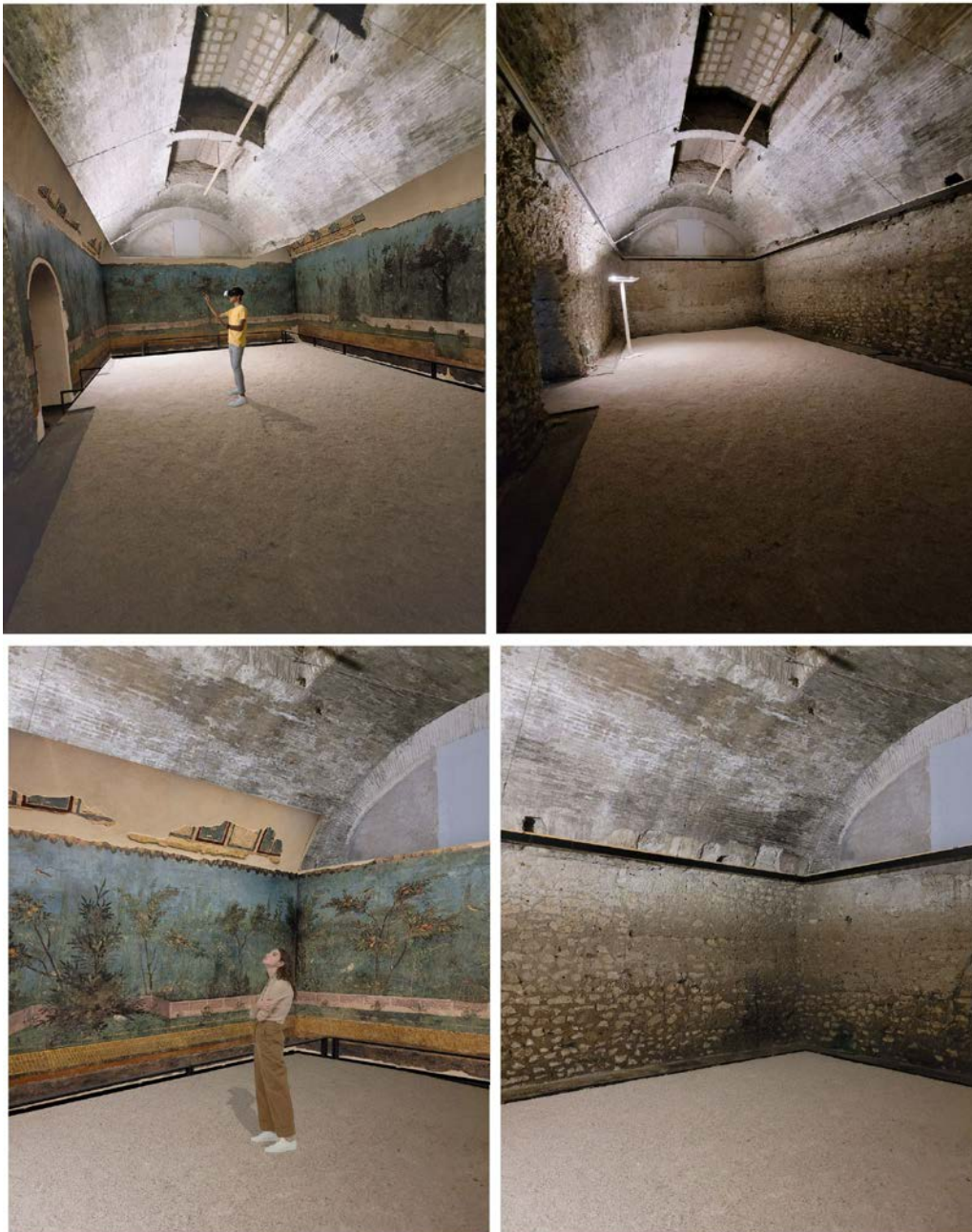
### **The (Re)United Masterpiece: New Technologies at the Service of Art and Architecture [M.C. e A.M.G]**

Although it is impossible to see the room in its original and unitary physical state, it is not impossible to recover -using new technologies- the stylistic/architectural unity. But what are the technologies that allow it? In what way? How can the visitor be incorporated? Or rather, what would be the role of the visitor?

A more or less recent example is the project -released in 2008- 'Villa di Livia reloaded' in the Virtual Museum of the Ancient Via Flaminia. The installation allows a more 'natural' and intuitive interaction and the involvement of a much wider public through virtual scenarios where one can explore the 3D space. There are two scenarios that can be accessed: the reconstructed villa from the Augustan period and the present one. In the latter, the visitor has the sensation of flying above the archaeological structures, while in the 3D scenario he follows a path at

human height, encountering personalities from the period, from Livia and Augustus to the painter or the villa's gardener.

This example -although interesting and well achieved- does not yet allow us to achieve the stylistic/architectural unity referred to above, which could be carried out in two ways: by bringing the frescoes into the actual underground room in the Villa, or by bringing the underground room into the actual frescoes exhibited in the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme.



**Figure 14A/B.** *Elaboration of Design Hypothesis, with VR or Projector, for the Archaeological Site of the Villa of Livia*

Source: Elaboration by the authors.

Both ideas are not impracticable projects for the future, but have great potential to be developed today. In this sense, new reflections and unknowns arise: what possibilities exist to carry them forward? With what methodology and methods? How would these digital installations modify the museum experience? (see Figure 14). And, in this sense, what are the future prospects for museums? These are all open questions, as yet unanswered, which nevertheless generate new reflections and concerns for further research activities.

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