

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

“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.

Keywords: *Villa di Livia - Frescoes - Cultural Heritage*

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 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 BC¹ 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 interests². 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 tasks³- 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 Livia⁴. While acknowledging her intelligence, acumen, charm and loyalty to her authoritative husband, she offered a portrait

¹The 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" del testo Massie A. (2001) Augusto, il grande imperatore. In: *I Big Newton*. N. 60. Newton Compton Editori, Roma.]

³The 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 Maria Pia Partisani within her article "Le galline e gli allori dell' "Ulisse in gonnella". Note sulla villa di Livia ad Gallinas albas" del testo Massie A. (2001) Augusto, il grande imperatore. In: *I Big Newton*. N. 60. Newton Compton Editori, Roma.]

⁴This 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.

1 of a tough woman, unscrupulous and wicked calculator, who with subtle and
 2 diurnal work, and with extraordinary tenacity managed to impose her
 3 ambitions in the dynastic and political events of early imperial Rome [Partisani
 4 2010].

5 As already mentioned, the relevance of Livia as the main client of the
 6 Villa dates back -in part- to the fact that the sources agree in attributing
 7 ownership of the site to her, but do not specify whether she had received the
 8 Villa from her family, the gens Livia, or -less probably- by her first husband,
 9 Tiberio Claudio Nerone. Be that as it may, the two gentes belonged to the
 10 Roman aristocracy and the property must have complied with the choices of
 11 the wealthier families of the late Republican period who preferred, for their
 12 estates, the surroundings of the city, in this case the territory of the ancient
 13 Etruscan city of Veio. [Partisani 2010]. On the other hand, another fact from
 14 which the figure of Livia takes on relevance is that she was responsible for
 15 defining the location of the villa at the precise point where it was built. This
 16 decision was taken after -according to Svetonio- an eagle prodigiously dropped
 17 a white hen with a laurel sprig in its beak on the empress's lap. [Pappalardo
 18 2009]. And it is from this fact that the Villa was also called *ad Gallinas Albas*
 19 (*“alle Galline Bianche”*).

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

28 Located high up on the top of a hill, the large reinforcement walls -which
 29 serve to support the natural terrace on which the Villa is strategically
 30 positioned- are still visible today through the lush vegetation, announcing the
 31 existence of the Roman archaeological remains. These reinforcement walls
 32 were first made only of *opus reticulatum* walls⁵ and were modified at a later
 33 time -probably due to problems related to the static nature of the hill- when
 34 counterforts were added in *opus mixtum* walls with the aim of further
 35 consolidating the hill on which the Villa stood. [Partisani 2010].

36 The decision to build the Villa on this large terrace -called *basis villae*-
 37 and therefore in an elevated place, dominating the surrounding area, was most
 38 likely made to avoid the danger of flooding from the river and the ditches
 39 connected to it. [Carrara 2005]. This choice could also have a relationship with
 40 finding an isolated place, with large panoramic views to take advantage of the
 41 view of the Via Flaminia and looking out over the Tiber to Fidene and the
 42 Crustumini hills (see Figure 01). Without forgetting that the Villa was a
 43 complex architectural entity which -especially at the beginning of the second
 44 century BC- was transformed into a place destined for comfort, escape,
 45 isolation and literary and artistic leisure.

⁵The construction system allows them to be dated around 50 BC.

Figure 1. Area where the Village is located



Source: Messineo, Gaetano (2004) La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta. In: Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia. N. 69. Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, Roma

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*⁶ in the best possible way, which with Lucio Anneo Seneca⁷ 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*⁸, 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, 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. [Partisani 2010].

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

⁶*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.

⁷Lucio 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.

⁸*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.

1 with certainty as those of the famous imperial residence mentioned by ancient
2 literary sources. [Partisani 2010].

3 Giovanni Antonio Guattani and Antonio Nibby were the first ones that
4 recognized the remains of the Villa di Livia over the hill at the crossroads
5 between the Via Flaminia and the Tiberina. [Messineo 2004]. In fact, in 1828
6 Giuseppe Antonio Guattani⁹, in his work dedicated to northern Sabina from
7 Rome to Norcia, attributed the founded ruins to the Villa of Livia and, a few
8 years later, it is done also by Antonio Nibby¹⁰ -author of a "guide" to the
9 surroundings of Rome- and by the architect Luigi Canina¹¹. [Partisani 2010].

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

18 The statue of Augustus, also called *Augusto loricato*¹² -which was in an
19 astonishing state of conservation and still with traces of the original, lively
20 polychromy- was transferred and is now on display in the Vatican Museums in
21 Rome. However, the enthusiasm aroused by the frescoes on the underground
22 room was so great that this complex was restored and left visible. [Messineo
23 2004].

24 At the time of the discovery of the room only the first part of the vault was
25 preserved and the whole room, evidently after a destructive event, was filled
26 with rubble. [Messineo 2004] Several authors refer to this event as an
27 earthquake that, occurred in 17 BC, would have been the cause of the
28 destruction of the barrel vault that originally covered it, and the reason why it
29 was decided to abandon it -filling it with rubble and earth- and build another
30 one to replace it, although this time at the same level as the rest of the Villa's
31 rooms. According to G. Messineo, the underground room was given a new roof
32 that served as the floor of the newly built room, which was transformed -
33 somehow replacing the previous one- into the main room of the complex. It is
34 not known, however, whether the use assigned to the new room was the same
35 as that assigned -by various authors- to the underground room (to which we
36 will refer later); nor is there any data regarding its decorative motifs, and it is
37 not known whether -if there were any- they were similar to those of the
38 underground room in terms of their theme and the technique used. In other
39 words, it remains to be known whether the new room replaced -not only in size

⁹Cfr. Guattani G. A. (1827) *Monumenti Sabini*. Tipografia di Crispino Peccinelli, Roma.

¹⁰Cfr. Nibby A. (1837) *Analisi storico-topografica-antiquaria della carta de' dintorni di Roma*. Vol III. Tipografia delle Belle Arti, Roma.

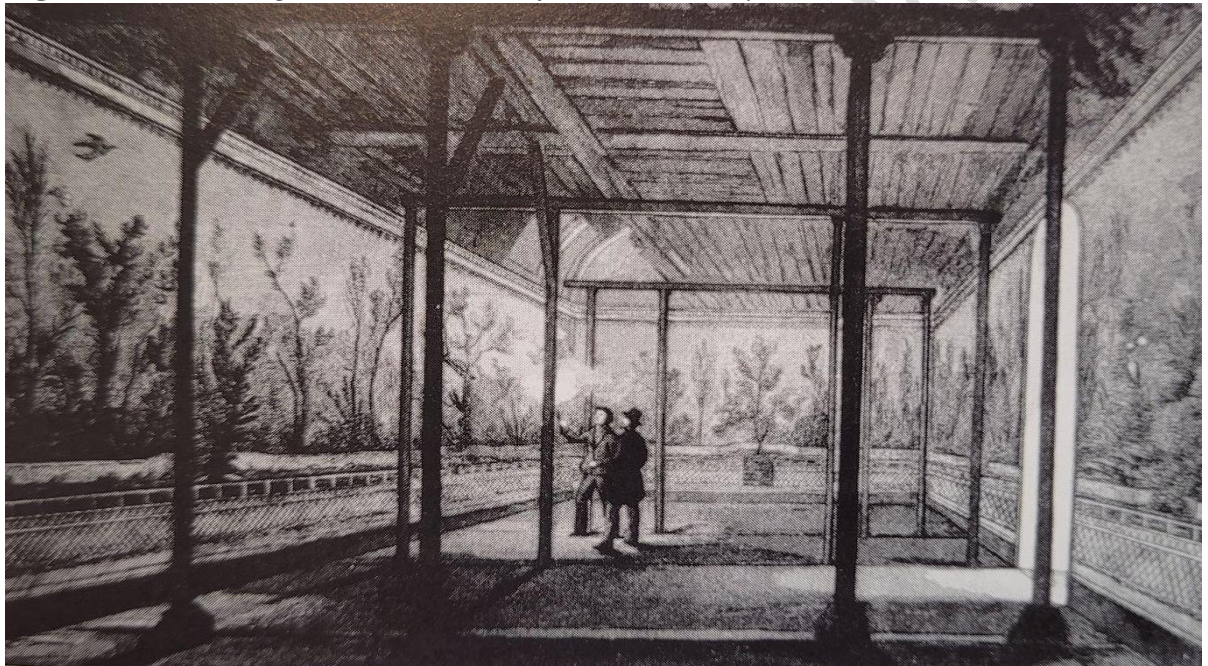
¹¹Cfr. Canina L. (1856) *Gli edifizii di Roma antica e sua campagna*. Sez II. Edifizii dei contorni della città, vol V, Roma.

¹²The 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.

1 and importance- the underground room, but also in terms of its use and the
2 spatial and decorative quality that the latter had.

3 In addition, it is not known whether this new room was still standing (or at
4 least part of it) at the time of the archaeological discoveries of 1863-64,
5 although -in any case- the discovery of the underground room with the frescoes
6 in an excellent state of preservation attracted the attention of archaeologists and
7 historians, leaving the later room in the background. From that construction
8 part of its long perimeter walls are still recognizable to the present day. Also
9 the holes for the plugs that held the marble cladding slabs are still recognizable
10 on the sides of the deep 19th century¹³ cavity created to insulate the frescoed
11 walls from humidity. [Messineo 2004].

12 **Figure 2.** *The Underground Room soon after its Discovery*
13



14 *Source:* Messineo, Gaetano (2004) *La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta*. In: *Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei*
15 *musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia*. N. 69. Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, Roma
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17
18 As can be seen in figure 02, the underground room was quickly covered
19 after its discovery -with what appears to be a temporary wooden structure- in
20 order to allow it to be visited by the public. According to M. P. Partisani, this
21 structure was built to support the ceiling of the room with the frescoes,
22 evidently subject to collapse; however for G. Messineo the wooden structure
23 was built to cover the area while the existing roof was demolished and the
24 barrel vault was rebuilt. This vault, which covered the space in imitation of the
25 original, is still standing today.

¹³ 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.

1 Shortly after the work carried out by the archaeologists, and despite the
 2 strong interest aroused by the discoveries at the time, only the underground
 3 room was left visible, while the rest of the villa returned to being part of an
 4 agricultural estate, which after 1870 became private property and was
 5 subjected to damage from ploughing, to which were added, in 1944, those of a
 6 heavy bombing which devastated the hill, also damaging the frescoes in the
 7 underground room, already used as a bivouac by the German troops. [Messineo
 8 2004] At that time the few archaeological remains visible on the hill
 9 overlooking the small town of Prima Porta definitively lost their interest, to the
 10 point of suggesting a disappearance of the ancient imperial residence.

11 Finally, after the Second World War, in 1948, archaeological restrictions
 12 were imposed on the area, to protect the area from agricultural works which
 13 continued to threaten the buried structures. However, it was not until the year
 14 1951 in which, having ascertained the deterioration and after various restoration
 15 interventions, the painted plasters were detached by the Istituto Centrale per il
 16 Restauro and taken to safety in the Museo Nazionale Romano, where they can
 17 still be admired today after a long restoration work. [Partisani 2010].

18 The painting was carried out on six layers of plaster, five of *arriccio*¹⁴, that
 19 is lime, sand and pozzolana, and one of preparation, in Roman stucco, that is a
 20 mortar with added marble dust. This plaster was not placed on the wall
 21 directly, but on a curtain of tiles fixed to the wall by T-shaped iron clamps, and
 22 the joints carefully cemented with mortar. The poor conservation conditions
 23 were not due only, or rather were not due so much, to an aggravation of the
 24 humidity conditions of the environment or to carelessness due to the war
 25 period, but rather to the progressive constant alteration of the substances spread
 26 with incautious imprudence on the paintings in distant and not so distant times.
 27 [Cagiano De Azevedo 1953]

28 From the reports written by Pietrogrande to the Consiglio Superiore¹⁵, a
 29 number of details are known about the decision to dismantle the fresco and
 30 move it to another site, as a solution to the possible gradual disappearance of
 31 the frescoes due to their constant degradation. In this regard, one of his letters
 32 states that:

34 “ the detachment (...) should not be carried out in “massello” as advised by
 35 Venturini-Papari, since in that case, by preserving the plaster and the wall,
 36 it would not remove the causes of the ailment, but would preserve them by
 37 transferring them to the Museum. Instead, it will be necessary to detach the
 38 paintings with the plaster, which will then have to be thinned out until all
 39 the altered parts and those likely to produce new faults are removed. In
 40 other words, it will be necessary to adopt the type of transport that has been
 41 successfully tested for the paintings in Livia's house on the Palatine and for
 42 the paintings in the Farnesina in the Museo Nazionale Romano ”. [Cagiano
 43 De Azevedo 1953].

¹⁴ *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.

¹⁵ These reports are transcribed by Cagiano De Azevedo, M. in his text “*La sala dipinta della Villa di Livia a Prima Porta*”.

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 only the layer of *intonachino*¹⁶ 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. [Messineo 2004]. Apart from a few historical studies on the Villa and its archaeological remains found in the second half of the 19th century¹⁷, 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. [Partisani 2010]. 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. [Pappalardo 2009]

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

¹⁶*Intonachino*, in Italian, is the last layer of plaster; it is a coating mainly intended for external surfaces for protective and aesthetic purposes.

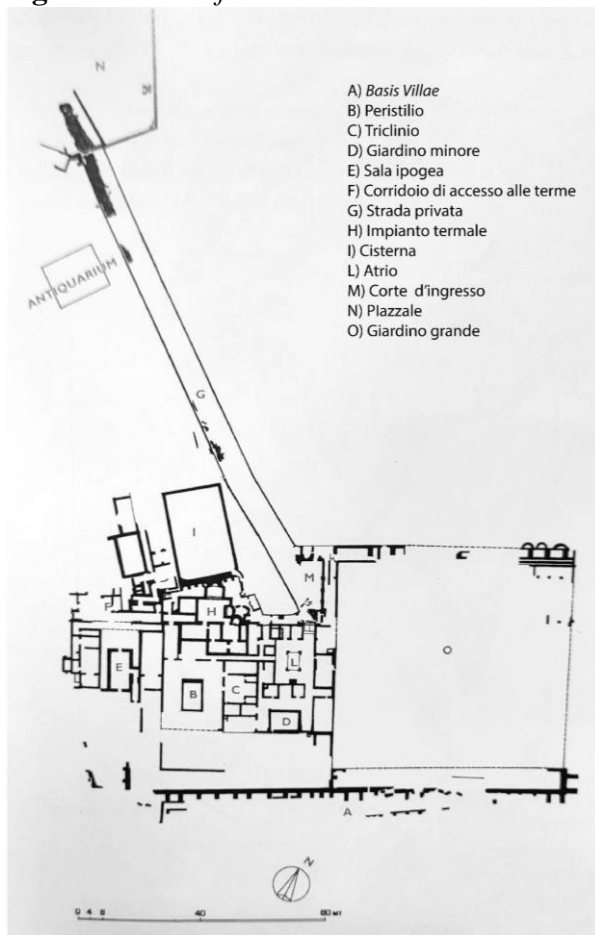
¹⁷According to the author M. P. Partisani: the study of the architectural layout of the Villa, was started by Giuseppe Lugli in 1923, continued by Heinrich Sulze in 1932, and further deepened by Heinz Kahler in 1959.

1 there were other environments and services for leisure: libraries, gymnasiums,
2 terraces, roof gardens, massage rooms, private thermal baths, arcades and
3 avenues for strolling, fountains and *nymphaeums*, all furnished with the best
4 the market could offer, that is precious marbles, sparkling bronzes, elaborate
5 mosaics, masterpieces of art. [Partisani 2010].

6 The remains that are still preserved from the Villa allow us not only to
7 know, but also to understand the way in which these spaces were made, how
8 they were organised, what the dimensions and characteristics of each of the
9 rooms were and how they were related to each other. In fact, to a certain extent,
10 the level of conservation of spaces and their decoration allows us to perceive
11 the way in which this site was inhabited.

12 The architectural structures of the Villa are set out along nine
13 chronological phases ranging from the Republican age (although the site was
14 already frequented in the Etruscan age) to the second half of the 4th century
15 AD. Within these chronological extremes are the renovations undergone by the
16 complex after the Octavian/Livia wedding in 38 BC, and the changes in use of
17 some rooms caused by the earthquake of 17 BC mentioned by Giulio
18 Ossequente, with the relative abandonment of the underground room; followed
19 by the Flavian arrangement of the thermal area (last quarter of the 1st century
20 BC), the floor and decorative reconstructions of the Antonine age (late 1st-2nd
21 century AD), and the complete restructuring of the thermal plant under the
22 Severi (late 2nd -early 3rd century AD). [Partisani 2010].
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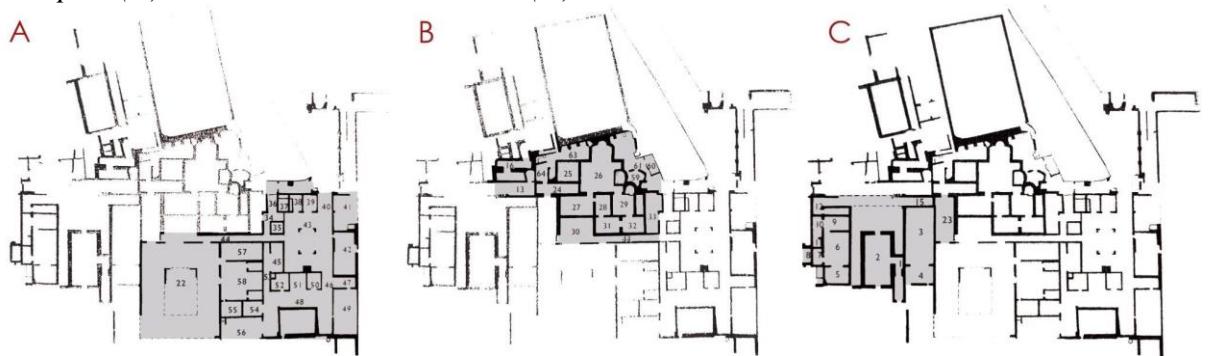
1 **Figure 3. Plan of the Entire Villa**



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3 Source: Messineo, Gaetano (2004) La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta. In: Nuova Serie. Itinerari dei
4 musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia. N. 69. Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, Roma

5
6 At a general level, the villa is made up of two quadrangular blocks (see
7 Figure 03), one intended for greenery (called the Great Garden) and the other
8 for residence (*pars urbana*). Inside the residential complex we can find various
9 functional areas: private rooms, representative rooms, rooms intended for
10 guests -placed behind a large room built above the underground summer
11 triclinium-, a thermal facility -served by an imposing cistern that is still visible-
12 , and finally several service rooms with the relative accesses (both surface and
13 underground). [Partisani 2010]. We will divide the block called residence -
14 according to the organization made for G. Messineo in his book "*La Villa di*
15 *Livia a Prima Porta*", which is also observed in the itinerary of the visit to the
16 archaeological area- into three large areas: the private district, the area of the
17 thermal complex and the residential district (see Figure 04).

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



3
 4 Source: Messineo, Gaetano (2004) *La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta*. In: *Nuova Serie. Itinerari*
 5 *dei musei, gallerie, scavi e monumenti d'Italia*. N. 69. Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato,
 6 Roma
 7

8 The access to the Villa was through a private road, which branched off
 9 from the Via Flaminia just beyond the crossroads with the Tiberina (see Figure
 10 03). It was originally just over two meters wide but was later enlarged, paved
 11 with paving stones of flint and leucidic trachyte, a material suitable for sloping
 12 paths (see Figure 05). [Messineo 2004]

13 This road made it possible to make a short tour -or perhaps a promenade
 14 through the garden- which led to the entrance to the villa, from where it was
 15 possible to enter the private district directly. This entrance (no. 40 in the
 16 image), flanked by a small basin, is marked by a travertine threshold with
 17 hinges (the lead casting for fixation remains in one of the recess) and the holes
 18 for the posts of a double door: this gives access to the denominated area of the
 19 private district (see Figure 04). Crossing a short vestibule one arrives at an
 20 atrium with a mosaic with a black background and a decorative motif of city
 21 walls around the basin of the central “*impluvium*”¹⁸. [Messineo 2004].
 22
 23

¹⁸*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].

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*”¹⁹ in the centre.

Connecting the area of the private district with the area of the thermal complex (see Figure 04) 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*”²⁰ (no. 29).

The district defined as residential -also called representative- includes a series of rooms (see Figure 04) 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,

¹⁹*Natatio*: it is an outdoor (cold water) pool.

²⁰*Caldarium*: in the ancient Roman baths, a heated room for taking hot baths and sweating.

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. [Messineo 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 [Messineo 2001], 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*²¹ or a summer *triclinium*²², 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. [Messineo 2004].

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. [Partisani 2010]. If we look at the painting from bottom to

²¹*Nymphaeum*: originally a sanctuary for nymphs, it later became a place characterised by the presence of water with a remarkable scenic splendour. [Treccani Vocabolario].

²²*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].

top, we can see a composition 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. [Messineo 2004]. 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. [Partisani 2010].

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. [Partisani 2010]. 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, 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

1 *Ludius (or Studius, according to the handwriting of some manuscripts) had*
 2 *been the first artist to pictorially evoke panoramas and animated landscapes,*
 3 *drawing direct inspiration from reality (ex veris rebus) and “specializing” in*
 4 *topiary work”.* [Partisani 2010].
 5

6 Based on this description by Plinio, several authors have attributed the
 7 authorship of the work to Ludius, although there is still not enough evidence to
 8 support this hypothesis. Although it is not known who was the hand behind the
 9 work of art, it is recognised the importance of the work not only as an
 10 expression of Roman art and culture, but also for its historical value and as a
 11 source of knowledge of the cultural skills developed by that society at that
 12 precise moment in history, between the end of the Republic and the beginning
 13 of the Imperial Age. A time when -as the author R. Bianchi Bandinelli
 14 expresses it in his book “*Roma: l’arte romana nel centro del potere, dalle*
 15 *origini alla fine del II secolo d.C.*”- an artistic civilisation was formed in Rome
 16 derived fundamentally from Hellenistic art, which was characterised not only
 17 by imitating it but also by the recent possibility of obtaining and transporting
 18 such works of art. In this sense, this appropriation of the Hellenistic art model
 19 attempts -at the same time- to compete with it, and allows the shaping of the
 20 character attributed to villas, gardens, and residential decorations of the time.
 21
 22

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

24
 25 Inside the Villa di Livia a Prima Porta there was a basement room, which
 26 had a barrel vaulted roof, illuminated by a modest skylight placed in one of the
 27 lunettes on the short side of the room. Of this environment there are no reliable
 28 sources that agree on its function but archaeologists are mainly divided into
 29 two main streams of thought. Whatever the intended use of this room was,
 30 what is certain is that it was a place where one could spend leisure moments
 31 enjoying the beauty in which one found oneself and, thanks to its underground
 32 location, a place of refreshment especially in the summertime. Since their
 33 discovery in 1863-64, due to their size and very few gaps, these decorations
 34 have been considered the oldest fresco of its kind, dated to the 1st century BC,
 35 and for this reason considered unique. The fame was also such because, at the
 36 time of the discovery, the frescoes were perfectly preserved despite their
 37 underground location; the reason for these fortunate conditions lies in the fact
 38 that these decorations were made on a layer of plaster adhering to tiles which,
 39 in turn, kept detached from the wall, formed an air gap preventing humidity
 40 from affecting the frescoes.

41 This underground environment has no columns or architectural elements
 42 placed in the center that could alter the total perception of the room which has
 43 a rectangular proportion. The life-size garden is painted along the full height of
 44 the walls, seamlessly from the floor to the impost of the barrel vault, which was
 45 probably also frescoed with a continuous sky; here were arranged relief frames
 46 (33 partially intact ones remain today only along the long sides of the room), in
 47 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 [Caneva 1999].

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 [Pappalardo 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.

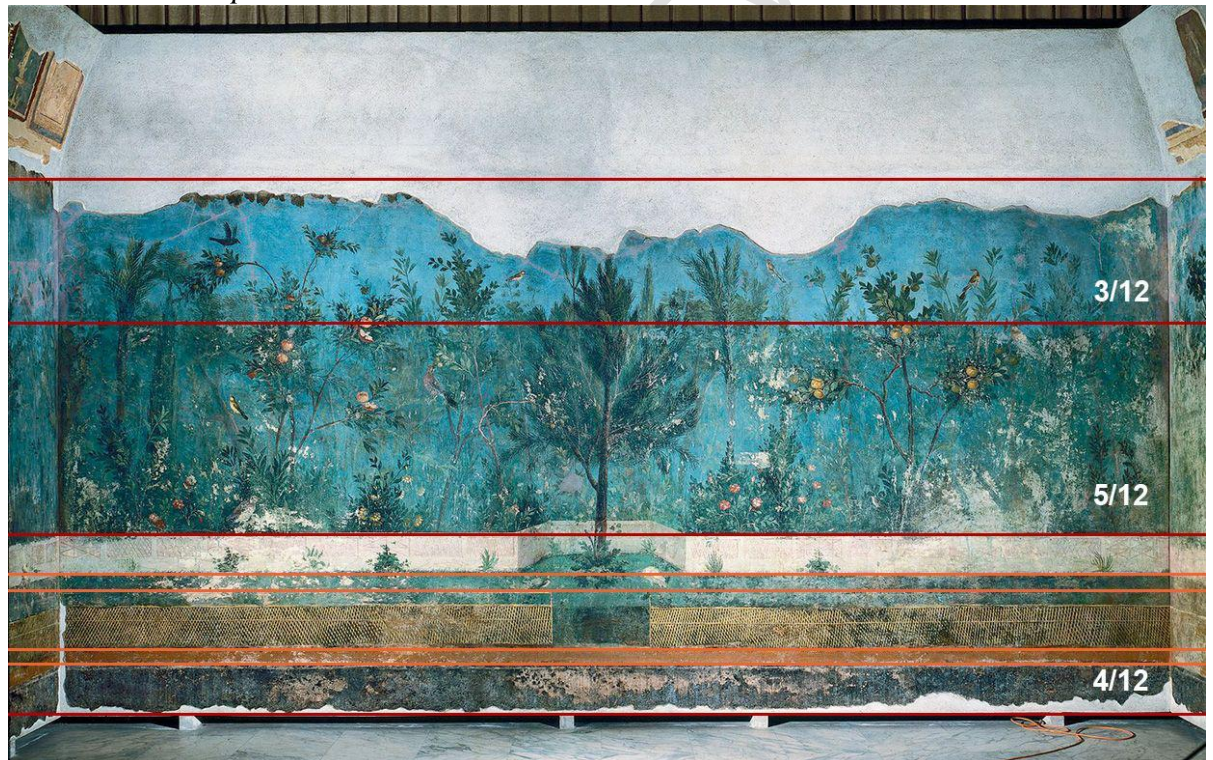
In order to better illustrate the description of the fresco, it has been divided into horizontal and vertical bands as in the image (see Figure 06); in particular,

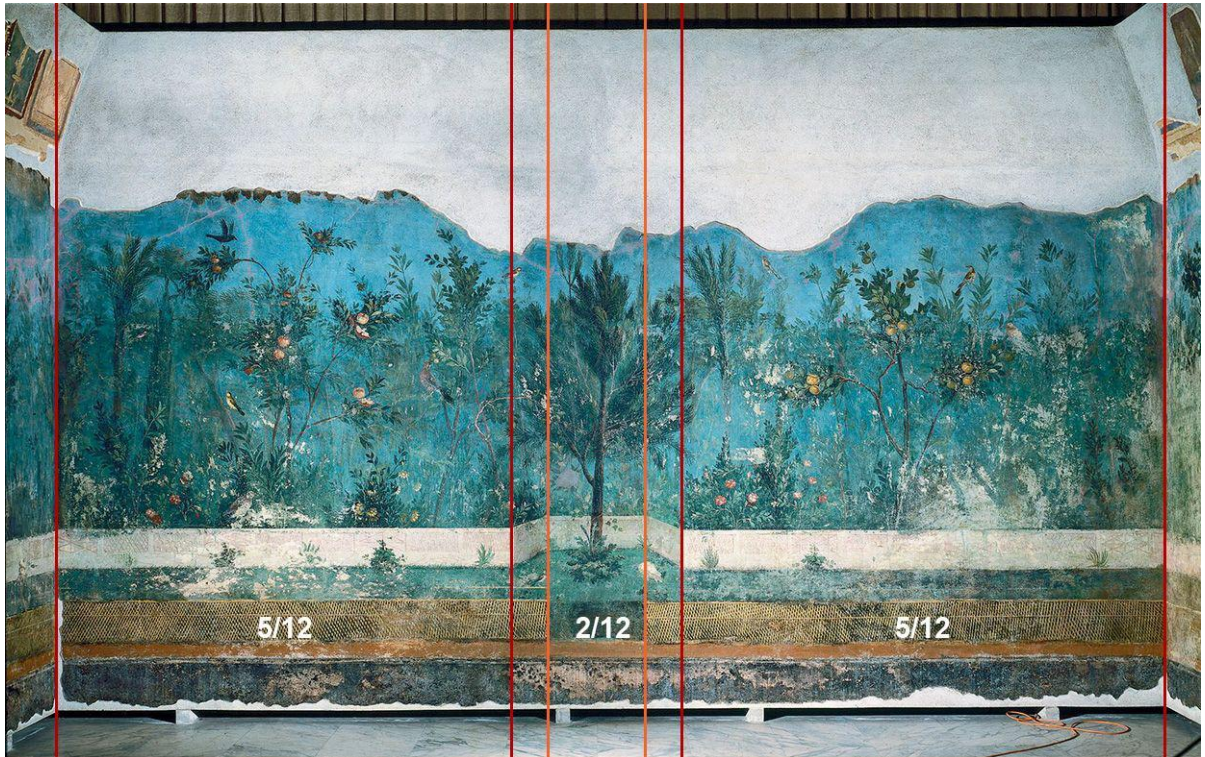
the burgundy lines divide the fresco into the main bodies horizontally and vertically, while the orange ones serve to identify the subdivisions within the former to better specify certain specificities of the fresco.

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

Vertically, the subdivision is as follows: on the short sides of the room, a central body that occupies approximately $\frac{2}{12}$ of the entire fresco and two symmetrical lateral portions that occupy approximately $\frac{5}{12}$ 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.

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*





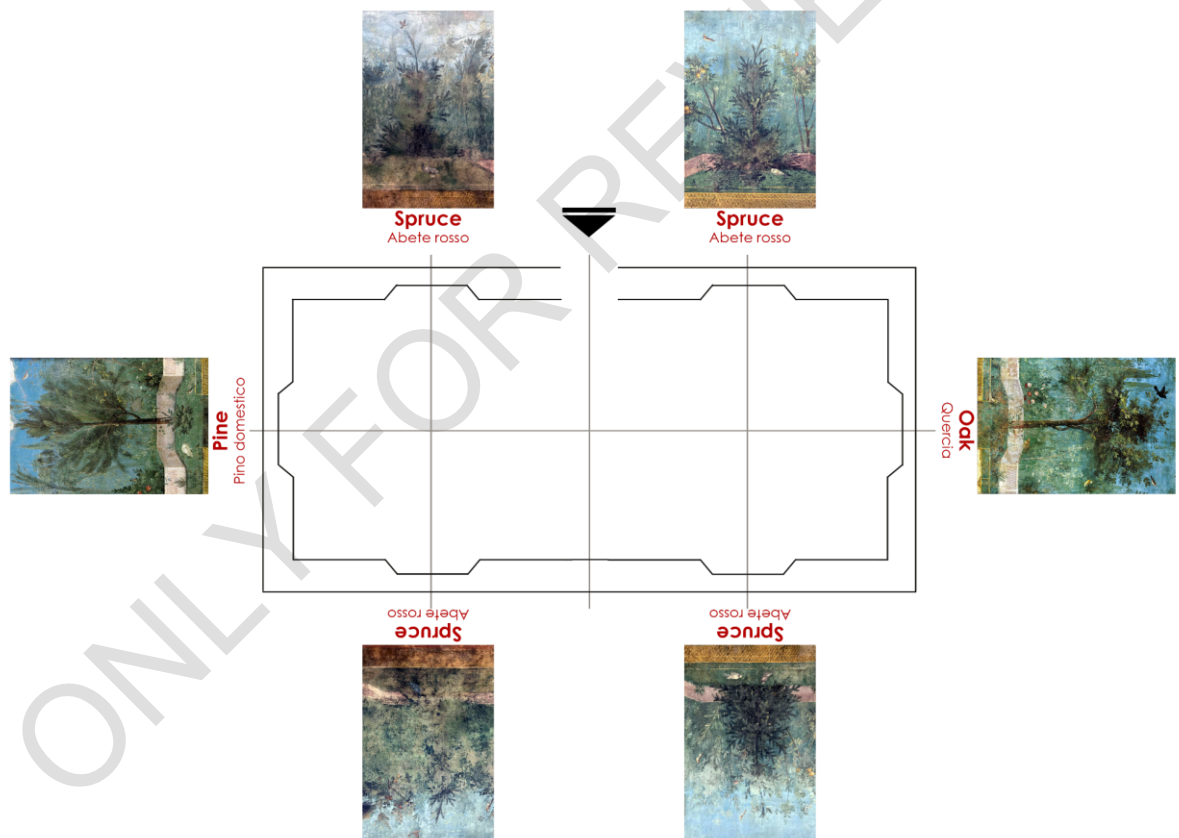
Source: Elaboration by the authors.

Horizontally, the 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*²³, 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 different trees: four spruce, an oak and a pine, all curiously without flowers or fruit (see Figure 07).

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

²³AA.VV. (1863), *Bullettino dell'Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica per l'anno 1863*, May-June. Editoriale Tipografia Tiberina, Roma.

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*"²⁴. 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 08). By carefully observing the nuances of the plumage, the color of the

²⁴Settis S. (2008), *La villa di Livia. Le pareti ingannevoli*, Mondadori Electa, Roma, p. 6

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.

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*”²⁵. 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 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

²⁵Settis S. (2008), *La villa di Livia. Le pareti ingannevoli*, Mondadori Electa, Roma, p. 6

1 influence. The first example, Roman, of this decoration can be found in
 2 complementary or semi-open spaces in direct connection with the real garden;
 3 rooms like the *impluvium*²⁶ frescoes and mosaics with bucolic and vegetal
 4 motifs and depictions, which often decorated these rooms, are a real
 5 introjection of nature inserted into the house, were able to transform the opaque
 6 walls into wide views of countryside landscapes. Archaeologists all appear to
 7 agree on the fact that the birth of the Roman garden is connected to the
 8 acquisition by the Romans of the architectural element of the peristyle ; the
 9 latter, in fact, was born as a partially open internal room in continuation with
 10 the external areas. The frescoes with garden motifs were created, perhaps,
 11 precisely to recall the connection with the typical peristyle garden of Roman
 12 country villas and to reproduce the amenity of nature in this environment. It was
 13 not just a decorative element for its own sake but also an illusionistic extension, an
 14 ostentation of the owner's aesthetic taste and social and intellectual status. Usually
 15 the Roman "garden" paintings are made as decoration of entire rooms with real
 16 proportions, they are placed inside architectural frames occupying the entire
 17 wall, only portions of them or only in the plinth, configuring themselves as a
 18 fictitious barrier, decorated in a trellis or low wall, from which bushes and
 19 plants emerge in an apparently spontaneous order. These gardens are often
 20 animated by animal species such as birds and small terrestrial animals typical
 21 of the Mediterranean fauna; while from an architectural point of view the
 22 elements that are sometimes depicted are mostly decorative objects such as
 23 fountains, sculptures, herms or masks as well as elements typically of exotic-
 24 Egyptian taste, mainly attributable to the Augustan era, such as sphinxes,
 25 statues of the goddess Isis and animals like hippos or crocodiles. The
 26 background shades of the garden paintings can be different depending on the
 27 symbology and the place where they are represented: blue and dark green for
 28 the sky and the dense vegetation; black especially in Pompeii and Herculaneum
 29 used to symbolize the shady coolness of the garden; yellow or red, in Pompeian
 30 paintings typical of the IV style and finally white if linked to the sacral or
 31 funeral sphere [Pappalardo 2009].

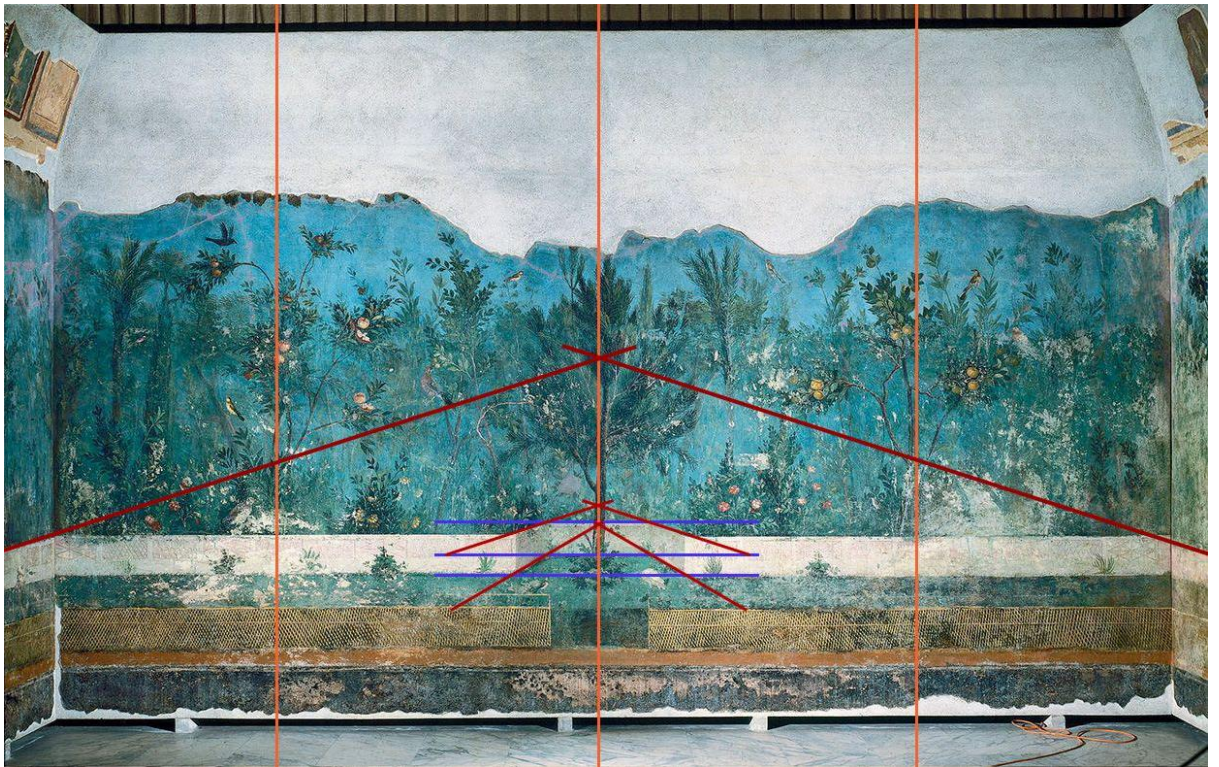
32 In the perception of represented space today, there is a tendency to read
 33 ancient paintings almost always according to the laws of linear perspective
 34 with a single vanishing point codified in the Renaissance. The reconstruction of
 35 cities, and the consequent representation of them, during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

42 All these studies are based on the study of the proportions between the
 43 parts, in fact the etymology of the word proportion derives from the Latin
 44 *proportio-onis*, "according to the portion", and indicates the correspondence of

²⁶From 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.

1 measurement between two or more closely related parts. These correspondences
2 are mathematical relationships and in architecture they find a field of application in
3 the Middle Ages, through the use of geometry, while in the Renaissance through
4 numerical correspondences. In ancient Rome, on the other hand, the buildings did
5 not have an urban-architectural relationship deriving from the study of the
6 proportions between the parts, rather they were designed and legible as a
7 singularity. As for urban planning, also for wall decorations, the Romans did not
8 concentrate on the construction of a three-dimensional space that followed the
9 rules of perspective and they did not even let nature be uncontaminated, not
10 shaped by the hand of man, and the wild environment, to govern the
11 delimitation of the environment itself. Architectural and figurative planning
12 were therefore an illusionistic device used to convey an idea of depth of
13 architectural spaces often inserted in natural contexts modeled by man [La
14 Rocca 2009]. The Romans, taking up Greek painting, rejected "*the depth of*
15 *field towards infinity and for the natural landscape*" preferring to it the clarity
16 and precision of the elements of the composition. The individual detailed
17 representations, however, do not find a unitary and coherent dialogue within a
18 single environment, but each appear to be fragmented in a precise spatial
19 delimitation. This type of figurative composition in the "garden" frescoes of the
20 Villa di Livia therefore does not present the spatial depth dictated by the use of
21 the single-focus perspective system, which would see the convergence of the
22 lines towards a fire at the back of the scene (see Figure 09), but rather presents
23 a relationship that makes the different parts of the representation dialogue
24 thanks to the extreme attention to details in the foreground which tend to fade
25 away. This scaling of details in the representation of tree species gives a
26 precise sense of spatial depth and creates a feeling of real atmosphere thanks to
27 the color variations of the background; the latter is iridescent with green tones
28 up to the horizon point beyond which the sky with turquoise pigments stands
29 out. According to Settis, this technique was an expedient, probably unknown to
30 the artist, which however suggests to the observer the depth of the fresco
31 [Settis 2008].
32
33

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



3
 4 Source: Elaboration by the authors.
 5

6 The underground environment of Prima Porta presents itself to the
 7 observer as a theatre scene where the human figures are not represented but the
 8 painter makes them coincide with the observer himself; the spectator is
 9 therefore not a passive figure who limits himself to watching the scene but
 10 unknowingly is also an active part of it by animating it. From an architectural
 11 point of view, the only elements depicted are the two fences; in fact, there are
 12 no columns, pillars or vertical elements which optically interrupt the fresco.
 13 Among the most common practices in "garden" painting is the creation of
 14 optical wings that simulate depth through the scansion of planes of depth which
 15 in this case is given by the two low fences enlivened by niches and exedras
 16 behind which the garden. Probably this representation of an open view towards
 17 the garden was also dictated because, in the Roman villas located in the
 18 countryside, the garden opened externally, surrounding a peristyle patio with a
 19 slightly protruding cover with respect to the axis of the columns which left the
 20 eye with the possibility to wander without encountering obstacles. The part
 21 inside the peristyle, on the other hand, was a patio that housed beds, small
 22 tables and everything needed for moments of conviviality. All the walls of the
 23 room in Livia's Villa show extreme attention to detail that binds and relates the
 24 different levels of depth but never in the Renaissance logic of a unitary
 25 composition from an illusionistic-spatial point of view, but in the narrative
 26 expansion of the fresco according to a composition that develops in length and
 27 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.

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



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3 Source: Photo by the authors.
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5 However, the most interesting thing is that the museum functions at the
6 same time as a protection for the archaeological remains, as the roof is intended
7 to prevent the archaeological remains of the Villa from degrading. In this
8 sense, although the roof is perceived and noticed, it tries to be as ethereal as
9 possible through the use of metallic structures that make it possible to obtain a
10 thin roof with few supports and reduced dimensions. These supports rest on the
11 archaeological remains in an orderly manner, generally at the corners of two
12 walls -although not always- and never do so with the full section of the metal
13 profile, but diminish its section a few centimetres before reaching the
14 archaeological wall, resulting in a rather subtle support on the ruin (see Figure
15 11).
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1 **Figure 11.** *The Archaeological Remains of the Villa di Livia: The Supports of*
2 *the Roof*



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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.

1 **Figure 13.** *The Exhibition of the Frescoes at Palazzo Massimo alle Terme*



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3 Source: Photo by the authors.
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5 *Echoes of History: Symbolic Representation* [M.C.]
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7 This research work studies the Villa di Livia starting from its beginnings,
8 trying to understand the reasons why it was decided to build this architectural
9 space. And -from there- to understand how the passage of time and the hand of
10 man have brought modifications to the architecture of the Villa that -beyond
11 categorising them as good or bad interventions- are understood as part of the
12 history of the site: as a succession of layers of history that, together, form a
13 kind of narrative, a story of the site over the years.

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

20 From the representative, iconographic and geometric analysis of the
21 frescoes, it is reasonable to think that the depicted garden is the transposition of
22 an ideal place in which floral and zoological species that could not coexist in
23 the same environment coexist. The use of frescoes, in classical times, was
24 widespread not only with merely aesthetic-decorative functions but also and
25 above all as a vehicle for messages charged with symbolic meanings. The
26 botanical species found in this garden carry meanings of a spiritual and
27 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.

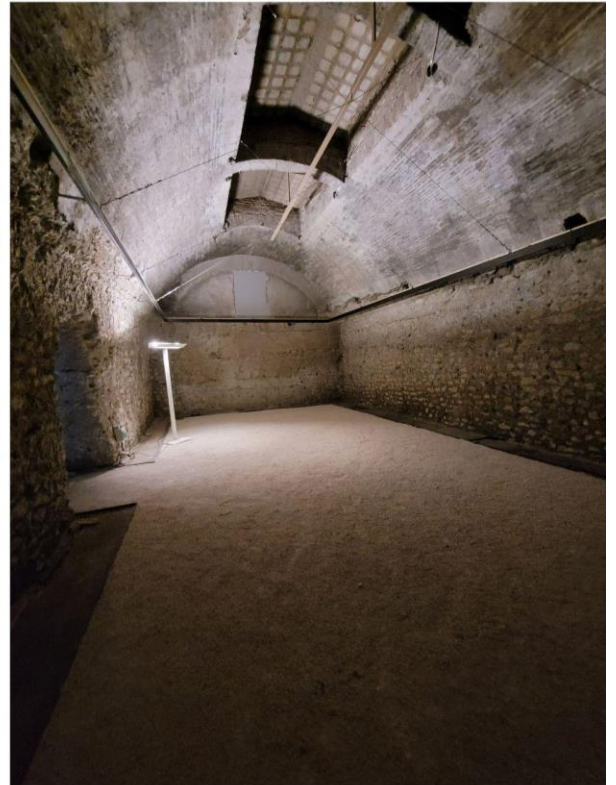
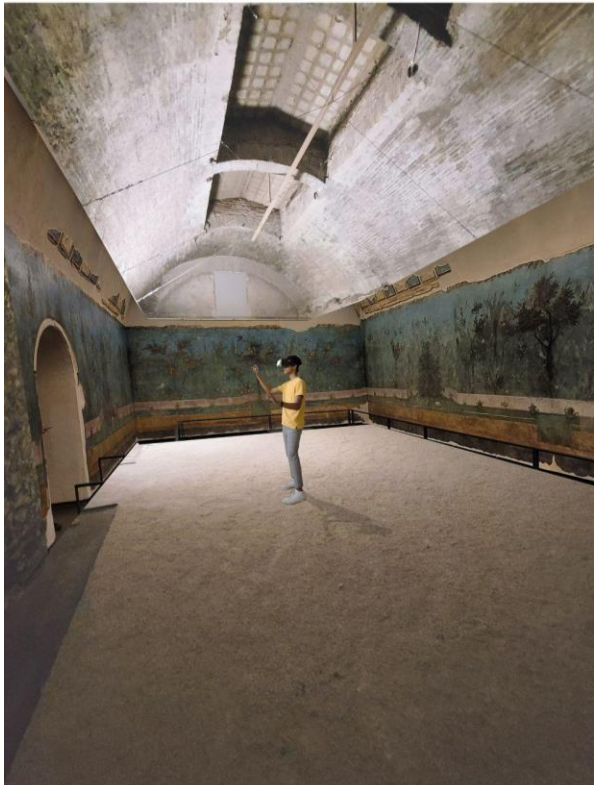
The (re)united Masterpiece: New Technologies at the Service of Art and Architecture [M.C. e A.M.G]

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.

- 1 **Figure 14 A/B.** *Elaboration of design hypothesis, with VR or projector, for the*
2 *archaeological site of the Villa of Livia*



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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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