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LIVIA'S GARDEN: A PARADISE FOR THE TABLE

Throughout time, the search for Paradise has materialized in the arts, oscillating between the memory of a 'Lost Eden' and the vision of a 'Heavenly Jerusalem' to be conquered. The *giardino felice* appears like a *paradeisos*, a citadel of Nature beyond time, like a timeless image of a paradise on earth.

The elements of Livia's garden appear to celebrate nature by offering a glimpse of the seasons, while the senses transform the garden into the grand theatre of the table. Livia's extraordinary *triclinium*, instead of looking out onto the real gardens of the villa, was an indoor garden of the imagination painted on its walls in ca. 30-20 BCE. The enclosure - an underground barrel-vaulted hall 40 feet long by 20 feet wide - was most impressive for the spatial play of the room itself, with its illusionistic quality, and the incredible accuracy and variety of plant species, which provided a unique landscape.

The superb painting conveyed a sense of luxury and a certain kind of prosperity, which held the strong political message that Augustus seems to have wanted to convey. With insight, Giulia Caneva describes the language of plants in the *Augustus botanical code*.¹ Understanding the human-plant relationship is critical to understanding culture. We seem to have lost touch with the immediacy of our

very lives' dependence on plants, but the ancients were extremely aware of this, and often expressed the idea by drawing similarities between humans and plants. While Caneva emphasizes the subtle significance of the images of nature, both our vision and understanding are richly rewarded. While various exotic birds play in the marvellous vegetation which springs from the regeneration of Mother Earth, she expertly describes 24 diverse species, bringing date palms, strawberry trees, and pomegranates to life.² Symbolic of abundance, fertility, virtue and knowledge the pomegranate was the only tree planted by Aphrodite, hence it represented love.³

This magical Eden appeared as an idyllic expression of a moving, sublime art whose beauty evoked a sense of the sacred. The outside garden entered the interior of the villa, and permeated into the soul. The walls themselves exulted all embellished and adorned to perfection and "so marvellously painted with Art that they put Nature to shame."⁴

Mythology tends to mark a sacred beginning. As narrated by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia*, XV (136-137), one day a flying eagle dropped a white hen from its claws into Livia's lap, holding a branch of laurel with berries in its beak. As advised by the oracles, Livia took care to raise

the bird's offspring and planted the twig, creating a sacred grove that would provide laurel wreaths to crown emperors and for the triumphs of the generations to come. In time the vicinity became known as *Ad Gallinas Albas*.

The Empress Livia was a powerful historical figure - the first woman to be depicted on coins and portrayed in sculpture.⁵ Able, intelligent, and astute, she was an outstanding influencer and counsellor during fifty years of marriage to Augustus. Her personal life, however, was fraught with suspicions of shady conniving and aberrant conduct to attain her goals and to assure the imperial crown for her son. A legend recounts that Rome's first emperor, Augustus, was poisoned with figs from his garden, reputedly smeared by Livia. But such a reputation might just as easily be the result of a smear campaign instigated by her son Tiberius, resentful of her persistent authoritarian attitude and meddling in his affairs. For this reason, or perhaps because of her horticultural expertise, a variety of fig known as the *Liviana* was cultivated in Roman gardens.

Although women were not permitted to drink alcoholic beverages,⁶ it is not difficult to picture Livia transgressing in the garden at sunset, sipping her favourite wine. Pliny the Elder describes the vines which produced *Vinum Pucinum*, today well known as Prosecco. This special, rare wine came from the sunny slopes northeast of Barcola close to a place called Prosecco near the historic Castellum Pucinum. According to Pliny, Livia loved this wine for its particular medicinal properties and at 87, nearing the end of her long life, she attributed her healthy old age to the regular consumption of the only known psychotropic beverage, which she recommended as a true "elixir for a long life."

The empress was renowned for her beauty and resembled the modern woman of today, inasmuch as she took an active interest in her health and appearance. Not by chance was Livia associated with Venus and Cybele. She studied and grew many fruits, vegetables, herbs, and is still remembered for her potent 'Livia's Inula,' to which she attributed her good health and handsome appearance. For those interested in following suit, *Enula campana*⁷ is a wild

plant with yellow flowers similar to daisies. The well-cleaned, ripened root is chopped into small pieces, boiled in vinegar, and left to dry for three days in the shade, then placed in a ceramic container with *sapa* (wine must) to marinate. Finally *mulsum* (honeyed wine) and *defrutum* were added, to preserve the liquor.⁸

The garden was a superb sanctuary, an idealized haven which captured the imagination and all the senses including taste. A theatre of memory was revived. In time, replicas of gardens and *natura architecta* for grand dinners have been documented from the fourteenth century and were present especially in the Renaissance and Baroque period.⁹ Among the several historical treatises was a spectacular creation called "The Garden" in *Libro della cocina* (late fourteenth or early fifteenth century), written by an anonymous Tuscan. The table was animated with 'cavorting beasties,' fountains spurting white wine and a lake of jumping fish, eels, giant crabs, and baby turtles. For grand feasts a tree made of pastry, was erected in a beautiful garden on the table.¹⁰ All studded with apples, pears, birds, grapes, and multi-coloured figs according to the season.

Luscious violet figs were exalted in the splendid frescos of Pompei, while black figs strutted among gorgeous peacocks at the *Casa degli Amanti*. They were depicted with other dried fruits, such as dates, on the walls of the *Casa dei Cervi* at Herculaneum. The blonde figs of Chio, considered a rare delicacy, were praised by Martial. The fig, and not the proverbial apple, was considered to be the original fruit of primordial sin.

Figs were a familiar source of food for the ancient Romans, and centuries later became a staple food for the poverty-stricken in the *Meridione* (the Italian South). Cato the Elder, in his *De Agri Cultura*, (ca. 160 BCE) lists several strains of figs grown at the time: Mariscan, African, Herculanean, Saguntine, and the black Tellanian. Figs were also used to fatten geese for the production of an evident precursor of *foie gras*. *Perna* shows up the sophisticated taste of the aristocratic Romans with whole hams covered with

figs and cooked. When ready, the skin was sliced into diamond shapes, covered with honey and baked in a pastry case, similar to the contemporary Virginia ham.

Athenaeus of Naucratis, in *Deipnosophistae* converses on the art and philosophy of dining in fifteen volumes, providing us with an inestimable wealth of knowledge on biodiversity, including the numerous species lost today. Here Magnus¹¹ declares, "(...) for on the subject of figs I will yield to no man, even if I am hanged on a fig-branch, I am so extraordinarily fond of them; I will tell what occurs to me - the fig tree, my friends, was made to be the guide of civilization. This is proven by the fact that Athenians call the place where it was discovered the Sacred Fig-tree, while they call its fruit the Leader because it was the first cultivated fruit to be discovered."¹²

Androtion, in *The Farmers' Handbook*, makes an impressive list of current figs: Laconian, phibalian, autumn queen, swallow-fig, regal-fig, yellow-belly, wild-fig, venison-fig, white-fig, cake-fig, bitter-fig, wake-robin, dusty-white, dusty-black, fountain-fig, mill-fig, scallion-fig, dwarf figs, phormynians, and double-bearing Megarian, to begin with.

Aristophanes joyfully exclaims in *The Olynthian*, "That god-given heritage of our mother country, the darling of my heart, is a dried fig, brought to light from a Phrygian fig-tree." That figs were more healthy to man than all other tree fruits is sufficiently proven by Herodotus of Lycia in his treatise on figs, and he clearly states that new-born children grow sturdy if nourished with fig-juice.

Livia was well aware that grand dining was a ritual of immense social and political significance and she cultivated the important pleasures associated with the final presentation of sweetmeats for the banquet. It is of interest to note how these confections have continued to please through the centuries. At this time, sugar was almost unknown although Theophrastus and Pliny mention a honey not produced by bees, but from a cane. According to Martial, the *pistore* (pastry chef) used *caroenum*, *defructum e sapa* obtained from boiling grape must in three different concentrations as a sweetener.

Many confections, amply described by Athenaeus were prepared with *tractae*, sheets of pastry made with wheat flour, filled with fresh cheese, honey, and pepper, not unlike the Greek baklava. Cato leaves us a good recipe for *spira*, redolent of the contemporary cheesecake and he also cites the *mustaceus*, a simple spicy biscuit made in anthropomorphic shapes still produced in Calabria today.¹³ A very similar biscuit of a feminine figure with three breasts recalling the cult of the Great Mother can be found in the Roman hill towns even today, although she sometimes wears an anachronistic garter. Doubtless a precursor of the well-known *crème brûlée* is evident the *tiropatinam*, a sort of baked custard, made with milk, honey then sprinkled with pepper. The Romans also enjoyed *aliter dulcia*, a semolina cake cut into diamond shapes, fried and covered with honey which continued all through the Renaissance. A recent novelty in Italy are *crêpes* of all sorts. In imperial Rome, *ova sfongia ex lacte*, thin fried, *crêpes* were already popular, all covered with honey and pepper as described by Apicius in *De re coquinaria*.¹⁴

Marcus Gavius Apicius was a gourmet - gourmand who indulged in spending extravagant amounts of money on food, and when he became unable to continue squandering lavish sums on luxury fare, he committed suicide. The first cookery book has been attributed to him, but in point of fact there were three Romans with this very name and there is no proof whatever of his authorship. Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti,¹⁵ a major authority on Ancient Roman dining, categorically excludes this possibility. Anecdotes of all kinds abound on Apicius from Athenaeus to Seneca, from Plinius the Elder to Martial.¹⁶

The art of staging the supernatural in interior gardens in the villas in Pompei was not an infrequent phenomenon.¹⁷ Pompeian indoor gardens were multimedia environmental experiences often populated with insinuating satyrs, (sometimes dancing), deities, *situla* (silver vessels) and many male sex symbols. The renowned archaeologist Wilhelmina F. Jashemski discovered an orchard where masonry *triclinia*, shaded by wooden pergolas and the spreading branches of large trees, offered Pompeians an

opportunity to immerse themselves completely in a rich environment, essentially to live an experience through all the senses.¹⁸ She pioneered the interdisciplinary study of ancient Roman gardens, utilizing ancient literary, documentary, archaeological, and archaeobotanical evidences.

A spell seemed to be cast on nature, creating an enchanted realm. Interior gardens allowed the Pompeian homeowner to enjoy his wealth and afforded a fleeting experience of the elite life of Roman citizens. The abundant, sometimes fantastic scenarios in Pompeian houses boast the fruits of conquest in ingenious installations and breathtaking illusions. These document contemporary style, while also creating visionary worlds in which wild animals rambled and heroes and gods sojourned.

Livia's garden of Paradise represents the quintessence of the elements vital in the mythical *Aetus Aurea*, the Golden Age governed by divine providence. This wondrous splendor recalls the timeless utopian *banquet of the gods*. Here Augustus and Livia acquire an arcane aura to become archetypes of the Great Mother and Father of the Gods, an emblem of supreme power. Miraculously this inimitable idealized paradise of classical antiquity has survived until today.¹⁹ Enraptured with its unique magic, all will be transported into a new dimension of Ancient Rome. This superb botanical banquet represents a *summa* for the senses and the spirit.

Notes

- ¹ Giulia Caneva, *Il codice botanico di Augusto. Roma, Ara pacis: parlare al popolo attraverso le immagini della natura = Speaking to the People Through the Images of Nature* (Rome: Gangemi, 2010).
- ² Giulia Caneva, “Ipotesi sul significato simbolico del giardino dipinto della villa di Livia (Prima Porta, Rome),” *Bullettino della Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma C* (1999): 63-80; Giulia Caneva and Lorenza Bohuny, “Botanical Analysis on the Livia’s Villa Painted Flora (Prima Porta, Rome),” *Science and Technology in Cultural Heritage* 4 (2003): 149-155.
- ³ August Pauly and Georg Wissowa (Pauly-Wissowa) et al, eds. *Realenzyklopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft. Neue Bearbeitung*. (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1894-1980), Vol. XIV, pp.926-42.
- ⁴ June di Schino, *Tre Banchetti in Onore di Cristina di Svezia 1668* (Rome: Académie Internationale de la Gastronomie, 2000). An interpretation of the Hebrew *pardes* (the orchard, generally citrus fruits) introduced the biblical concept of the “veiled to the unveiled.”
- ⁵ See: Livia’s well-preserved bust in the Museo Oliveriano, Pesaro.
- ⁶ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* (14, 89-90) It was not permitted to women at Rome to drink wine. Among the examples is the case of the wife of Egnatius Maetennius who was clubbed to death by her husband for drinking wine from the jar. He was acquitted of her manslaughter by Romulus. Fabius Pictor wrote in his *Annals* of a lady who broke the seal on the cupboard in which were the keys of the wine-cellar, and was compelled by her relatives to starve herself to death. Cato wrote that this was the reason why close relatives (to the fifth degree) gave women a kiss to perceive if they smelt of wine.
- ⁷ *Inula campana*.
- ⁸ Tom Stobart, *Il libro delle erbe, delle spezie e degli aromi* (Milano: Mondadori, 1972).
- ⁹ Mirella Levi d’Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1978).
- ¹⁰ Anonimo Toscano, *Libro della cocina*, Biblioteca dell’Università di Bologna, Ms 158, cc. 86r-91v.
- ¹¹ One of the 24 characters (or *sophists at dinner*) who take part in the banquet described by Athenaeus of Naucratis in the *Deipnosophistae*.
- ¹² Quote after: “The *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus published in Vol. I of the Loeb Classical Library edition, 1927,” Excerpts from Book III (Part 1 of 5), entry “Figs,” LacusCurtius, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Athenaeus/3A*.html. The LacusCurtius website project is based on The Loeb Classical Library. Quote from a publicly available source. However, the author is working on a text in Latin.
- ¹³ Soriano Calabro is famous for its traditional specialized production of *mustazzoli*.
- ¹⁴ *Pompeii and the Roman villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples*. Edited by Carol Mattusch et al. Washington: National Gallery of Art and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2008. Exhib.cat. *Pompeii and the Roman villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples*. Curator Carol Mattusch. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., October 19, 2008–March 22, 2009. Other Venues: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, October 19, 2008–October 4, 2009; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, February 24–May 18, 2008; February 24–May 18, 2008, November 8, 2008–January 25, 2009.
- ¹⁵ Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti, *L’Arte del convito nella Roma antica* (Rome: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider, 1983).
- ¹⁶ Annette Giesecke, “Outside In and Inside Out: Paradise in the Ancient Roman House,” in *Earth Perfect: Nature Utopia and the Garden*, eds. Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012), 118-135.
- ¹⁷ Bettina Bergmann, “The Gardens and Garden Paintings of Villa A,” in Elaine K. Gazda and John R. Clarke, *Leisure and Luxury in the Age of Nero: The Villas of Oplontis near Pompeii. Kelsey Museum publication, 14* (Ann Arbor, MI: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 2016), 96-110; Bettina Bergmann, “Staging the Supernatural: Interior Gardens of Pompeian Houses,” in Carol Mattusch et al., *Pompeii and the Roman villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples* (Washington: National Gallery of Art and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 53-70. Exhib. cat.
- ¹⁸ Wilhelmina F Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii: Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Versuvius* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Wilhelmina F. Jashemski, *Gardens of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- ¹⁹ Annette Giesecke, “The Afterlife of Paradise: Near Eastern Origins of the Ancient Roman Garden,” *Dumbarton Oaks: Art – Nature – Scholarship*, accessed May 10, 2022, <https://www.doaks.org/research/garden-landscape/fellows/giesecke-2019-2020>; “From Paradise to Pompeii: Q&A with Annette Giesecke,” <https://www.doaks.org/newsletter/from-paradise-to-pompeii>; Annette Giesecke, “Autopsy and Empire: Temporal Collapse in the Designed Landscapes of Ancient Rome,” *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 36 (4) (2016): 225-244.

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Ancient Authors

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*

Quintus Fabius Pictor, *Annales Graeci*

Athenaeus of Naucratis, *Deipnosophistae*