

Ernesto De Carolis, **Il Mobile a Pompeii ed Ercolano. Letti, tavoli, sedie e armadi. Contributo alla tipologia dei mobili della prima età imperiale**. Editor L'Erma di Bretschneider, Rome 2007. 264 pages, 8 color plates, 107 black and white photographs, 30 digital reconstructions.

The topic of ancient Roman furniture is one which has been in need of a detailed study, having not been treated synthetically since Gisela Richter's examination of classical furniture, first published in 1926 and updated forty years later (*The furniture of the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans* [London 1966]). Indeed there have been publications on individual aspects of Roman furnishings like Christopher Moss' dissertation (*Roman Marble Tables*. Diss. Princeton Univ. [1988]), Stephan T.A.M. Mols' studies of wooden furniture in Herculaneum (*Wooden furniture in Herculaneum. Form, technique and function* [Amsterdam 1999]; in: W. F. Jashemski / F. G. Meyer (eds.), *The Natural History of Pompeii* [Cambridge 2002] 225–234), and even Aileen Ajootian's publication of a single example of a sculptural marble table from Corinth (*Hesperia* 69, 2000, 487–507). Ernesto De Carolis' volume on the furniture from Pompeii and Herculaneum will thus prove to be an extremely useful catalogue of this genre of finds not only for archaeologists working on material from the Bay of Naples region, but also for anyone concerned with Roman crafts or domestic decoration. The book is comprised of three main sections: a general introduction to Roman houses in this area and their contents, a more specific chapter on different types of furnishings, and a typological catalogue of the most prevalent furniture types. Tables list and organize representations of furniture in wall paintings from Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Stabia (pp. 195–214). A number of computer-generated reconstructions of various types of furniture – based upon archaeological and pictorial evidence – is presented after the catalogue.

The author states the aim of the book: to create a catalogue of furniture which takes into consideration the archaeological evidence, the secondary pictorial representations, and the ancient textual sources (pp. 9 f.). The archaeological evidence discussed in the book is comprised of both plaster casts made from voids in volcanic material at Pompeii and the carbonized remains of wooden objects in Herculaneum, as well as the remains of fittings in bronze and other metals. Wall paintings from both the Bay of Naples region and Rome itself serve as secondary evidence for our knowledge of furniture and in some cases can be in fact more informative than the archaeological remains (p. 115). For example, frescoed depictions of wooden objects show differently colored materials employed in the construction of furniture – different types of wood, ivory, bone, and metals. The archaeological material is frequently discolored or too badly damaged to give a reliable impression of these multi-colored effects. Although De Carolis' intent in this book is to create a more complete picture of domestic interiors, he understands that this might not be possible

(p. 70), given the dearth of information about tapestries, upholstery, and other decorative elements made from highly perishable materials.

We should perhaps not be troubled by the focus on Pompeii and Herculaneum in this volume, for as De Carolis explains, the typology of furniture is relatively consistent throughout the Roman world with only little local variations on the major types (p. 70) and the Vesuvian sites provide a broad corpus of actual ancient furnishings. Nevertheless, there exists a body of comparable material from elsewhere in Italy which could have created a more complete picture of Roman furniture than what this book presents. The author includes analysis of wall paintings like those from the Farnesina Villa, so why not incorporate more objects like the funerary couch with bone inlay from a tomb on the Esquiline, now in the Centrale Montemartini in Rome? The bronze couch from Amiternum with highly decorated fulcra is only briefly discussed (pp. 80 f., figs. 44 and 47). While this reviewer appreciates the difficulty of creating a catalogue of all Roman furniture and the benefits of a tight geographic and chronological focus for such a volume, it seems somewhat arbitrary to include some evidence from the city of Rome itself (i. e. frescoes), but not all. Moreover, the frescoes from Rome depicting furniture are not included in the tables of other pictorial representations of these types of objects.

The first chapter of the book (*Le abitazioni ed i loro apparati decorativi*, pp. 11–67) begins with a now-familiar discussion of the role of ancient Roman houses in shaping the reputation of their owners and the villa-imitation paradigm in which more modest urban domus reproduced the decorative and architectural features of luxurious rural estates. De Carolis notes that even furniture participated in these two phenomena; variations in such accouterments were closely tied with the socio-economic status of the residence's proprietor (p. 15). The chapter then turns to a discussion of the uses of various rooms throughout the house and how those functions can be construed from the furniture and other objects in specific spaces (pp. 16–25). Although there are useful citations from ancient texts to assist in the understanding of rooms and their uses, sadly there is no discussion of Penelope Allison's research on room function and archaeological material, nor does any work by Allison appear in the author's bibliography (in: E. M. Moormann [ed.], *Functional and Spatial Analysis of Wall Painting*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress on Ancient Wall Painting, Amsterdam, September 1992. Bull. Ant. Beschaving, Suppl. 3 (1993) 4–11; *Pompeian Households. An Analysis of the Material Culture* [Los Angeles 2004]). As such, the present volume falls into one of the many »Pompeii problems«: the nature of the excavations at the site has turned archaeology upside-down, for it should be standard practice to determine the function of spaces from the actual objects found there, at least in part. De Carolis perhaps relies too strongly on the traditional textual source material, without acknowledging the issues raised by both Allison and Eleanor Winsor

Leach (in: S. Bon / R. Jones (ed.), *Sequence and Space in Pompeii* [Oxford 1997] 50–72) with regard to the ancient terminology and functions of space in Roman houses.

The author's analysis of textual sources like Cicero, Varro, Vitruvius, and Martial is in many cases rather helpful in creating a more complete understanding of Roman furniture. Some sources provide very useful information about conventional placements of certain types of furnishings in Roman homes. The discussion of the *cartibulum* is particularly informative (pp. 109–113). Although we have come to designate any table placed near the *impluvium* of a house as a *cartibulum*, De Carolis cites Varro's definition of such a table as one standing on a single support, but not necessarily positioned in the atrium (l.l. 5, 125). In this respect, our conventional modern terminology is imprecise. The author also notes a helpful distinction between two types of benches: the *subsellium* was for official public spaces while the *scamnum* was for common use in domestic settings (pp. 127–129).

Throughout the volume, De Carolis also cites ancient textual evidence for the types of materials used in ancient furniture, including imported precious woods like ebony and citrus which fetched high prices, according to Pliny the Elder (e. g. nat. 13, 29, 92) and others. These materials were frequently used for inlays and veneers, with the beautiful grains of burl wood also highly prized (pp. 77f.). Although the fame of such precious woods echoes through many an ancient text with an anti-luxury bent, the furniture recovered from Pompeii and Herculaneum was mostly made from more familiar trees; the European silver fir (*Abies alba*) was by far the most prominent wood employed for furnishings in this region (p. 27). More study of archaeobotanical data is perhaps necessary to expand upon these compelling assertions with regard to the coloristic and other physical properties of the wood used by Roman carpenters.

The second chapter (*L'arredamento degli ambienti*) provides in a narrative fashion the typology created by the author for the main examples of furniture from the Bay of Naples region. Each of the four types – couches, tables, seats, and cupboards or cabinets – are broken down into sub-types, which are further specified in the third chapter (*Tipologia degli arredi di area vesuviana*). This chapter itemizes average dimensions for such furnishings and notes depictions of them in wall painting, correlating with the tables on the following pages. The descriptions of furniture types in the third chapter repeat some of the information found in the previous section, but will nevertheless prove to be the most useful part of the volume.

The book is fairly well illustrated. Particularly helpful are the reconstructions of ancient furniture based upon CAD vector drawings and three-dimensional models for they include line drawings and models as well as a human figure for scale (median dimensions of furniture are also given in the images). While the reconstructions are an excellent addition to the volume, the remaining illustrations are somewhat disappointing. The black and

white reproductions are of wide-ranging quality, with many photographs of wall paintings being rather dark and unclear. A great number of illustrations are reproductions of nineteenth-century paintings by Lawrence Alma-Tadema and other contemporary artists. These are presented uncritically throughout the volume, side-by-side with photographs of archaeological material, as if to suggest the paintings were as reliable as actual objects. The combination of these Victorian-era depictions of ancient domestic interiors and the computer-generated images suggests an interesting historiographical commentary on the methods of archaeological reconstructions, but the author makes no remark at all on this point. What is more, the modern paintings comprise most of the color plates while not a single ancient fresco is reproduced in color. (A few of the nineteenth-century works are even reproduced in both color and black-and-white.) This is surprising, given De Carolis' assertion of the importance of ancient frescoes for revealing the coloristic effects of different materials used in ancient furniture (p. 115). For eighty-five Euro, one expects higher-quality images and a more logical selection of them. It would also have been practical to have cross-referenced the catalogue entries and reconstruction illustrations in the body of the text itself. Naturally, these unfortunate aspects are not entirely the author's fault.

Some drawbacks notwithstanding, this book is a welcome addition to the corpus of material on domestic decoration and furnishings in the Bay of Naples region, giving a more complete picture of the interiors of Roman houses. This study reminds us that Roman domestic spaces were much richer than the relatively empty rooms one sees when visiting the *domus* of Pompeii and Herculaneum today. Such houses even could have been relatively crowded – by modern standards – with furniture and storage containers, colored by a variety of materials or added pigments (p. 78), further elaborating an environment already made vibrant with frescoes, mosaics, tapestries, and the like. De Carolis notes in the introduction that his study is not conclusive, but that he wishes to bring the topic of Roman furniture to the attention of scholars (p. 10). Indeed that goal has been met and even surpassed in this volume.

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