

Peter H. von Blanckenhagen und Christine Alexander, *The Augustan Villa at Boscotrecase*. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, Sonderschriften Band 8. Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz 1990. 76 Seiten, 3 Abbildungen, 72 Tafeln.

The volume under review is a revised and updated version of a classic monograph originally published as *The Paintings from Boscotrecase* (Röm. Mitt. Ergänzungsheft 6) in 1962. While Christine Alexander, curator of classical art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from 1949 to 1959, contributed a preliminary chapter (on the decorative system of the paintings), the bulk of the book was the work of Peter von Blanckenhagen, then Professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and the author of important studies on Roman architecture, sculpture and painting. Von Blanckenhagen died shortly after completing the revision and writing a new preface; so this volume is in effect his last contribution to classical scholarship. It forms a fitting epitaph to a distinguished career already marked by various honours and by a Festschrift published in 1979 by his friends and pupils (G. KOPCKE and MARY B. MOORE, eds., *Studies in Classical Archaeology*: see further the obituary by E. B. HARRISON, *Am. Journal Arch.* 95, 1991, 155–6).

The Boscotrecase paintings, now divided between the Naples Archaeological Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are of fundamental importance in the study of Roman painting. They are among the earliest surviving examples of the so-called Third Pompeian Style, which evolved in the last two decades B. C.; their quality puts them on a par with the finest murals of the Roman world; and there is good evidence for identifying the villa from which they come as an imperial property. The bulk of the surviving pieces belong to three rooms, called for convenience the "Black Room", the "Red Room", and the "Mythological Room". In each of these the central positions on the walls were occupied by a different genus of landscape painting: small vignettes in the Black Room, large sacro-idyllic panels in the Red Room, and mythological landscapes (here featuring the stories of Andromeda and Polyphemus) in the Mythological Room. It was Von Blanckenhagen's principal contribution to have evaluated these pictures in the context of the evolution of Roman landscape painting and to have established the nature of their originality and achievement. He shows how each series took a number of pre-existing motifs and fused them into something essentially new. The Red Room panels, for example, are the earliest surviving specimens of large-scale sacro-idyllic landscape pictures: their choice of motifs, their lack of coherent perspective and of consistent proportions, their use of dark figures in the foreground and lighter elements in the background – all set the tone for numerous similar landscapes in the succeeding period. The landscapes of the Mythological Room combine the same peculiar perspective and some of the same bucolic elements with mythological subjects which for the first time employ a kind of continuous narrative within a single panel.

That his book should now be reissued in a second edition is a measure of its importance, but a more immediate impetus was provided by new discoveries resulting from the cleaning and reinstallation of the paintings in New York. Carried out in 1986–87, this operation revealed or clarified a number of details not apparent in 1962. At the same time research by Maxwell Anderson in Naples unearthed two further panels from the Black Room and one from the Mythological Room. Perusal of the new edition in comparison with its predecessor reveals how carefully the descriptions, both of the decorative schemes and of the central pictures, have been modified to take account of the new evidence.

But the extent of the revision goes much further than this. Superficially it is flagged by the choice of a new title (a title which is strangely inapposite given that the book still deals with the paintings rather than the actual villa) and by the change to a larger format, which has necessitated a complete re-setting. These factors may be bound up with the change of series (Sonderschrift rather than *Ergänzungsheft*) and of publisher (Von Zabern rather than F. H. Kerle). More significant, however, is the improvement in the visual apparatus. Unlike its predecessor, which included only four colour-plates, the new edition is provided with

almost complete illustration in colour. The colour is splendid, and the standard of reproduction far superior to that of the first edition (compare Plates A, C and D in the first edition with Plates 1, 24 and 42 in the second). Colour is used even for comparative material. Overall, the visual documentation is also much fuller than before: 72 plates containing 151 images, as against 62 plates containing 88 images.

Another notable improvement is the appendix on technique by Christel Faltermeier which replaces the first edition's brief note by G. Papadopoulos; Faltermeier's meticulous observations, aided by experience gained in the restoration of 1986–87, are illustrated with over 40 photographs of technical details; together they provide important insights into the way in which the ancient wall-painter operated, clearly establishing *inter alia* that much of the work was executed in *buon fresco*.

The last major addition to the new volume is an appendix by Joan R. Mertens (who played a major part in preparing the book for publication) on the decorative system of the paintings. Her close analysis, incorporating the evidence of the recent discoveries in Naples, results in some modifications to the reconstructions proposed by Christine Alexander, for example in the dado of the east and west walls of the Black Room, but her observations seem at times too ingenious and too speculative, and her use of analogy with the *triclinium* of the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii is a dangerous premise for reconstructing the scheme in the Mythological Room, given that the only certain point of contact between the two decorations is their use of closely related compositions for a pair of mythological pictures. The means by which the iconography of the Polyphemus and Andromeda panels was transmitted from Boscotrecase to the House of the Priest Amandus, decorated forty or fifty years later, are uncertain – they were probably indirect rather than direct –; but they need have entailed no consequences for the decorative schemes in which the pictures were set.

Needless to say the years which have elapsed since the book was first written have seen several important publications in the field of late-Republican and early-Imperial wall-painting. Among those of particular relevance to Boscotrecase we may cite K. SCHEFOLD, *Vergessenes Pompeji* (1962), W. J. T. PETERS, *Landscape in Romano-Campanian Mural Painting* (1963), F. L. BASTET and M. DE VOS, *Proposta per una classificazione del terzo stile pompeiano* (1979), I. BRAGANTINI and M. DE VOS, *Museo Nazionale Romano. Le pitture II 1. Le decorazioni della villa romana della Farnesina* (1982), and W. EHRHARDT, *Stilgeschichtliche Untersuchungen an röm. Wandmalereien von der Späten Republik bis zur Zeit Neros* (1987). In addition, the excavation of major complexes such as the House of Augustus in Rome (only a couple of rooms were known before 1962: see now G. CARETTONI, *La decorazione pittorica della Casa di Augusto sul Palatino*. *Röm. Mitt.* 90, 1983, 373–419; translated into German as *Das Haus des Augustus auf dem Palatin* [1983]) and the villa of the Poppaei at Oplontis (A. DE FRANCISCIS, *La villa romana di Oplontis*. In: B. ANDREAÈ and H. KYRIELEIS, *Neue Forschungen in Pompeji* [1975] 9–38) have enlarged the repertory of comparative material. Von Blanckenhagen kept fully abreast of the new discoveries and publications, and references to them are welded into the notes (which retain the numbers of the first edition) and, where appropriate, the text. The amount of literature that he had to assimilate is demonstrated by the expansion of the List of Abbreviations from 10 titles in the first edition to 22 in the second, and by a comparable lengthening of the bibliographies in the catalogue of landscape paintings on pp. 15–17. Very little seems to have escaped his net: a minor lapse noted by the reviewer is the lack of any reference to Room 7 in the House of Augustus (CARETTONI, *Haus des Augustus*, 30 ff. fig. 2) which with its scattered landscapes in a black field is an immediate precursor to the decoration of Triclinium C in the Farnesina villa. (He also seems unaware that the House of Augustus and the so-called House of Livia almost certainly formed part of a single building programme datable between 36 and 28 B.C., so their decorations were probably contemporary: see most recently EHRHARDT, *op. cit.*, 2 f.)

Despite the progress in wall-painting studies achieved over the last thirty years, there is little in the author's original discussions which has needed, or needs, to be changed. Von Blanckenhagen's sensitive and penetrating analysis has stood the test of time; that is a measure of his achievement. This does not mean to say that his approach is the only right or valid one. The present reviewer, for example, feels that he sometimes reads too much into the meanings of the paintings (that is, what they meant to contemporary observers) or the intentions of the artists. It is difficult to believe that the landscape painting illustrated in Plate 56, 2 (Naples 9482) really possesses a "mysterious power" which tempts one to "interpret it as the Island of the Blessed towards which the boats are sailing over the immeasurable sea that separates the living from the

dead" (p. 27). And one wonders whether the inconsistencies of scale and perspective to which the landscapes of the Red Room, in particular, owe their peculiar charm were quite so deliberate as Von Blanckenhagen suggests. The reviewer remains sceptical as to whether ancient painters, while clearly familiar with the role of vanishing-point or axio-symmetric perspective in giving visual unity to architectural compositions such as those of the Second Style (J. ENGEMANN, *Architekturdarstellungen des frühen zweiten Stils*. Röm. Mitt. Ergänzungsheft 12 [1967]), ever fully appreciated that the same principle could be applied to isolated objects within a picture. If the Boscotrecase painter's use of inconsistent perspective produced unreal and unmeasurable effects which added an evocative quality to his pictures, this was something that he managed empirically rather than by conscious artifice. It is too easy to credit ancient painters with the experience and capacity for making choices exercised by painters of more recent centuries. Similarly, the idea that the supposed master-artist of the Polyphemus panel should have done the *ketos* in the Andromeda panel and left the rest to an apprentice (p. 34) smacks of the practice of Renaissance and later painters; is it a plausible procedure for ancient workshops? Indeed, I would question whether the Andromeda panel, even if inferior in some respects to the Polyphemus panel, is necessarily the work of a different hand at all.

These are minor differences of opinion. As stated at the outset, this new edition serves as a fitting tribute to the author's lifetime of punctilious scholarship and to his profound understanding of Roman painting and of its social and intellectual context. The Boscotrecase paintings have been lucky to find such a commentator. As Erika Simon says in her review of the 1962 publication (*Gnomon* 44, 1972, 196), quoted by Joan Mertens in Note 118: "Es ist ein glückliches Zusammentreffen, daß die spezifischen Eigenschaften des frühen dritten Stils, die dem Hauptmeister von Boscotrecase verdankt werden, hier von einem Autor formuliert sind, der für diese Aufgabe prädestiniert erscheint".

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