PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher’s version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.
http://hdl.handle.net/2066/43641

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2017-09-08 and may be subject to change.
The book under discussion is a beautifully published substantial volume, with splendid (often full-page) photographs. Emphasis is on these photographs -- with comparatively little text. It is, therefore, surprising that the photographer's name, Luciano Romano, is absent from the cover. He is, luckily, mentioned on the title page.

The volume is a German translation of the Italian Domus: Pittura e architettura d'illusione nella casa romana (Venezia 2004), an English version of which was reviewed by John Clarke (BMCR 2005.08.32).

Two introductory chapters are followed by a number of short descriptions of houses and villas in Pompeii and surroundings, Herculaneum and Rome. The first introductory chapter ("Domus -- Architektur und illusionistische Malerei im römischen Haus," pp. 7-39) is written by Donatella Mazzoleni. She discusses primarily the linking of architecture and paintings, and supplies a demarcation of the material. Chronologically, the volume includes paintings from the second century BC to the first century AD. Her starting point is peculiar: (p. 11) "Indem wir einem methodologischen Modell folgen, das nicht historisch ist, sondern vom linguistischen Strukturalismus abgeleitet, werden wir unsere Aufmerksamkeit auf das Verhältnis fokussieren, das die Erzeugnisse der Architektur und der Malerei miteinander verbindet, und bewusst alles andere beiseite lassen. Von diesem Ausgangspunkt aus wird uns eine metadisziplinäre, architektonisch-malerische Analyse helfen, zum Ursprung dieses künstlerischen Erben zu finden." This is followed by short introductions of Herculaneum, Pompeii and Rome, with much attention to the cities' orientation from an astronomical perspective. The author chooses to do so because of her interest in "Gründungslandschaften". This point is further explored by differentiation between residences; there were those on different decumani, oriented southeast-northwest or vice versa, into which sunlight penetrated very differently, and those on cardines, with much more 'stable' sunlight. The author asserts that this difference in sunlight would have influenced the type of paintings, though she does not substantiate the point by supplying either solid arguments or examples. Nor does it seem possible to supply these. Light and orientation are certainly of importance, but at the level of individual rooms; not houses. The judgmental sentence (p. 33): "Die gemalten illusionistischen Gartendarstellungen sind unter den Malereien ... absolut gesehen, vielleicht die schönsten," is followed by discussion of the theatrical aspects of many paintings, after which the author waxes lyrical about the paintings of the Collegio degli Augustali in Herculaneum. These are described with the dubious statement: (p. 36) "am Höhepunkt dieser Abfolge als Hintergrund eine malerische Behandlung, die gewissermassen ein reines Zitat des Sonnenlichts ist, weiss und absolut." This makes Pompeian painted mural decorations into an elite art which it never was.
The discussion of the Domus Aurea (pp. 36-38) stands out through its extremely negative image of Nero -- which recent studies ought to have corrected somewhat. The same point applies to the next contribution, by Umberto Pappalardo (p. 47), who mentions "masslosen Persönlichkeit."

This second paper is called: "Das römische Haus -- Gemalte Dekoration und Lebensideal" (pp. 41-51). According to Pappalardo, a number of manifestations of Roman art are directly linked to Roman ideals. Thus, "verhielten (sie) sich wie hellenistischen Fürsten" (p. 42), and they wanted to live in palaces. The third ideal was the "beständig Zurschaustellen griechischer Kultur" (p. 44) and a fourth religion (pp. 48-49). Again, Roman painting is characterized as elite art. Next, Pappalardo briefly discusses technique, and describes the four Pompeian styles of painting (pp. 44-49). Three lines on the first style seem, however, unnecessarily brief. His division, furthermore, focuses much less on the systems, and more on the "paintings." Finally, there is a short discussion of the influence of Pompeian paintings on later art. The overview is organised by association and without annotation.

In this contribution, which for a volume of this size seems very short, some points need addressing. Thus, it is surprising to identify the Casa del Criptoportico in Pompeii as the Casa Omerica (p. 45). The statement that there was already an Isis temple in Pompeii in the second century AD (p. 48) is probably a typo, but a distracting one. Finally, it has long been known that the name Loreius Tiburtinus (p. 49) is a modern invention by Matteo della Corte. Luckily the house earlier mentioned under Tiburtinus' name is mentioned again on p. 300, now under the more common heading "Haus des Decimus Octavius Quartio."

The following section is the largest part of the volume (pp. 53-401) and deals with the mural decorations of 28 building blocks in Pompeii and direct surroundings and others from Herculanum and Rome. These consist of 5 villas outside the city, 19 city residences and city villas in Pompeii and Herculanum, and finally four (semi-)public buildings: the Domus Aurea in Rome, the Villa Murecine in Pompeii, and in Herculanum the Palaestra and the Collegio degli Augustali. In this section, the different styles recur more or less chronologically. The selected houses and other buildings are presented separately, though the table of contents, oddly, does not reflect this organization (e.g., pp. 53, 166, 185, 258, 297, 313, 333, 357 and 381). There is no synthesis. Apparently, the short introduction by Umberto Pappalardo is deemed to suffice.

The descriptions of the buildings are generally short and factual; at times, however, so short that one wonders whether they still serve a purpose. This is especially the case for paintings in buildings in the city of Rome. Luckily, there are often clear floor plans. The mode of presentation differs from building to building at the cost of consistency. The main system (though regularly ignored) is a short characterization of the building, followed by a more detailed discussion of the paintings. The photographs that follow each section are printed on special paper. They are often details of the walls, giving artistic rather than academic points of view. Overview photographs of walls are almost wholly absent.

The first group includes three houses with examples of First Style paintings and one of the Second Style. Discussion on the Casa del Fauno is, however, mainly on the Alexander mosaic, while the segment on the second house, the Casa Sannitica in Herculanum, deals principally with the city and gives only about one third of its pages to the residence itself. This unbalance might have been remedied by separately discussing the city in both introductions. With the Casa di Giulio Polibio the focus is mainly on the vestibule and
otherwise on the garden. The pictures illustrating the text, furthermore, clearly include paintings from other styles than the first. The section on the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor in Boscoreale lacks an overview photograph of the megalography in the oecus. It does show beautiful details. The caption at p. 105 should be "Wandmalerei im triclinium" (not shown on the plan) instead of "im tablinum (c)." There is a good overview of the room of the mysteries in the Villa dei Misteri (p. 106).

Subheadings in the description of the villa of Oplontis differentiate between architectural descriptions and the descriptions of paintings. It would have been useful to have such separations made systematically and to unify the descriptions. Pp. 136-137 show the first three-dimensional reconstruction in perspective of the mural decoration of oecus d. Several more follow further in the volume (170-171; 382 and 386).

The description of the Casa di Livia in Rome lacks an overview image of the tablinum wall, which makes the scheme used difficult to understand. It is also odd that the house of Augustus lacks an overview of the Palatine. It is unclear whether (p. 261) the Domus Domitiana is meant to be the Domus Flavia. The section on the Casa del Bracciale d'Oro should show a floor plan and from the description of the Casa di M. Lucretius Fronto (pp. 274-278) it is unclear that the paintings in the cubiculum, triclinium and viridarium are in the Fourth and not the Third Style. They are depicted on pp. 277-279. Discussion of the Casa del Frutteto deals for more than half of the text with the relations between Egypt and Pompeii (pp. 298-300). The sentence on p. 300 is obscure: "Die Entstehungszeit erscheint aufgrund des Stils augusteisch, jedenfalls vor dem grossen Erdbeben, das Pompeji im Jahr 62 n.Chr. traf...".

Description of the Domus Aurea focuses almost entirely on the history of the building; the paintings depicted are ignored, while the description of the Casa del poeta tragico discusses two paintings from the atrium which are not depicted. The same goes for the paintings from the triclinium. The Casa di M. Fabius Rufus and Casa di Ma. Castricius are again discussed without floor plans.

At the end of the volume, Ludovica Bucci De Santis explains the method used for creating the three-dimensional reconstructions of three paintings from the Second and Fourth Style (pp. 402-410). She also pays attention to the use of perspective in Roman mural decorations.


Looking at the work as a whole, it is noticeable how slight and unsatisfying the explanatory texts are, and how central the aesthetics of presenting the photographs? have been in structuring the book. It is, thus, not a work for specialists on Roman wall paintings. The question is whether it would satisfy the interested layman. From an aesthetic point of view, the illustrated details can be appreciated, but it is never made clear to the viewer that this view is not one that was intended by the ancients.