

Victoria C. Gardner Coates, Kenneth D. S. Lapatin, Jon L. Seydl, *The Last Days of Pompeii. Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012. Pp. 264. ISBN 9781606061152. \$39.95.

Contributors: Mary Beard, Adrian Stähli, William St. Clair, and Annika Bautz

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Preview

During the last decades an increasing number of studies has been devoted to the fortune Pompeii has had in western culture. The book under review – a catalogue of an exhibition held in Malibu before moving to Cleveland and Québec City between 2012 and-2013 – fits into this growing interest in this aspect of one of the oldest ongoing excavation projects and daylight museums of the world. The great strength of both the book under review and the exhibition – which I have not seen – is the generous attention paid to modern art and its response to the Pompeii motif. Although the number of exhibited works is limited to 92, their sometimes large dimensions make the exhibition appear huge. Here the visitor sees the gigantic (4.5 x 6.5 meter) painting by Briullov, which inspired Bulwer-Lytton and other authors and is now in the Historical Museum in St. Petersburg. He may admire all ten huge Rothko paintings made for the Four Seasons restaurant of the Seagram Building in New York, now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Or she may look at McKenzie's evocation of the frieze of the Villa of the Mysteries, filling a huge wall, now in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (see also below).

Since the publication of Bulwer-Lytton's novel in 1834, the title *The Last Days of Pompeii* has become a commonplace of all sorts of Pompeii exhibitions, and the reader should be aware that the show *cum* catalogue are devoted to the *Nachleben* of the city only. The three terms of the subtitle are explained by Jon Seydl in his introductory essay as the ones most frequently associated with Pompeii's life or the effect Pompeii has exerted since its discovery. Seydl argues that these emotional reactions were caused by the uniqueness of the excavated material and by the mentality of the time. In my opinion, Seydl goes too far in the interpretation of some of the art works he discusses. On the basis of biographical data about the artists, for instance their homosexuality and its explicit presence in their works (e.g. the photographers Wilhelm von Gloeden and Guglielmo Plüschow, cat. 11-13, displaying nude boys for a pederasts' audience rather than for homosexuals), he reads their paintings as sexually loaded images. The image of two young men next to a boat at the shore during an eruption of Vesuvius by Hernan Bas (cat. 18), therefore, must contain some (hidden) sexual message, for Bas apparently does not hide his sexual preferences in his work; the 'innocent' onlooker only sees the boat and the young men. Warhol's spitting Vesuvii must be phallic images (cat. 50-53). In one of them "the flesh tone of the volcano enhances its phallic nature" (p. 176). The rest of the description of the Warhols does not justify this supposition. As in some other recent studies, I observe a tendency to read texts and images in an increasingly charged way, be it from the perspective of gender studies, literary criticism, sociology, or psychology (mainly psychoanalysis). This might lead to an overestimation of what are actually simple plots of novels and novellas, of images in art and arts and crafts and in

modern media like film and game culture, now seen as high-level products aiming at a sophisticated audience.

Kenneth Lapatin gives an excellent overview of the increasing series of Pompeii exhibitions all over the world. He starts with the display of copies of Pompeian mural paintings and objects in buildings like the Pompeianum in Aschaffenburg and Crystal Palace in London. In a second section he discusses exhibitions of real archaeological objects from the National Museum in Naples and the storerooms of the excavation in- and outside Italy. The first foreign exhibitions were held in Japan, where 'Pompeii' became a popular topic (1951, 1967). While this type of classical exhibits remains a popular presentation of things Pompeian, in recent exhibitions new techniques like presentations of Pompeii's history and life by virtual inhabitants have added novelties to the shows of often the same items as in previous exhibitions. An impressive list of exhibitions is added at the end of the volume.¹

Victoria Gardner Coates discusses 'new technologies' in the discourse about Pompeii. She does not specify whether she means the use of photography and virtual reconstructions for touristic or scientific purposes (or for both, which is of course evident), but her examples mainly focus on the divulgation aspect. First she presents some notes on the medium of photography in the nineteenth century, splendidly illustrated with stills of the excavation's monuments. She focuses on the plaster casts of the victims of the eruption and their presentation in the 1860s, immediately after the technique for making these casts was developed by Giuseppe Fiorelli. These victims aroused emotional reactions from all who encountered them, both during the excavations and museums and temporary exhibitions. Her second topic is 3D-reconstructions which, as she rightly states, form the beginning of new developments in both scientific and popular reconstructions of the excavations.

Bulwer-Lytton's novel, the object of much discussion in the last years after a long period of neglect following WWI, is the topic of an essay by William St. Clair and Annika Bautz. They explore its initially slow but eventual success as one of the most popular historical novels of the nineteenth century, not only in Britain, but also throughout Europe and the United States. The authors concentrate on the social impact of the work. As has been observed by other scholars as well, the success of the work waned after the beginning of WWI, except in cinema (see below).

Mary Beard discusses the vicissitudes of the Gabinetto Pornografico in the museum of Naples, only fully opened to the public in 2000. She points to the unspoken priorities of museum directors (giving permits to all male visitors, especially those who "were particularly insistent" (p. 63)) and guides and guardians (tips!), as well as the public admitted. Clearly, the content of the room (or rooms) could vary over the decades, since the estimation of what was deemed pornographic or not, changed over the years. While in the older period objects representing phalli were seen as obscene, they moved to the 'normal' display, when they were not regarded as sex symbols any longer, but as apotropaic devices. Beard concludes that the cabinet also represents a state of mind, not only of the historical users but also of the modern visitors who make their own image of ancient porn.

Despite being very honest in the title of her essay about the emphasis placed on psychoanalysis ("Pompeii on the Couch"), Coates presents Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva* only as read by Freud in his seminal analysis of the protagonists in Jensen's book. She omits a reading of the text itself, as almost all scholars who work on this topic do. Poor Jensen was entirely overshadowed by Freud. The fictitious girl has become a cult figure in modern times

for literary authors and philosophers such as Barthes, Derrida, Robbe-Grillet, since she aroused deep-lying and hidden emotions in her friend, the archaeologist Norbert Hanold. Personally, Zoe Bertgang, which was her own name, remained a rather vague character. Most interesting are the analyses of works by surrealist artists like Dalí and Masson (cat. 15-16). Maybe inevitably, these catalogue entries repeat – sometimes in the same words – the text of this chapter. Coates makes clear that the translation of Freud's treatise into French and the publication of Maiuri's monograph on the Villa of the Mysteries, both in 1931, were important stimuli for these French artists, who were also inspired by the alleged mystical contents of the Pompeian wall decorations.² It is still unclear whether Jensen's original novella played a role in this process of adaptation by artists and authors.

Adrian Stähli addresses Pompeii as a topic of Italian and American cinema in the twentieth century and tries to explain the movies' character and (un)popularity. Most movie scripts were inspired by Bulwer-Lytton's novel and stressed specific elements like the Egyptian priest Arbaces as symbol of oriental evil, Christianity, or the disaster and its drama *per se*. Stähli argues that the earliest Italian movies followed the political agenda of the young state, stressing the Roman-ness of Romans in Pompeii, struggling against Orientals, while omitting the Christian theme. The latter aspect would be stressed after WWII in another political way, in order to evoke a new pacifist and religiously inspired Italy reigned by the Christian-Democratic Party. Hollywood met little success with the 1935 Pompeii film, despite the huge popularity of historical films in general. Apparently, the script was not convincing enough, and America would never produce other films with this topic.

The descriptions of the exhibited works (cat. 1-92) are split into the same three sections announced in the title of the catalogue. Within each section, the works on display are arranged chronologically, mostly starting in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Almost all of them are paintings, engravings and photos; sculptures and installations form an attractive minority. Fully absent are arts and crafts evocations like images on ceramic, imitations of objects, small statuettes and clocks, and cork models, which were popular collector's items in the early nineteenth century. Still more banal souvenirs like (watercolor) postcards and fans have not been taken into account, either. This selection, therefore, conveys a high-brow and in a certain way elitist view of Pompeii and reflection on this town by artists of a certain prestige. This highbrow art approach is mostly also taken into account in the essays I briefly discussed, except in the one on cinema, which was and is a phenomenon of popular culture. This is no serious flaw of the book, since other publications focus on popular culture, but elite art expressions might be a field to be explored more profoundly.

I would like to make a few remarks concerning some specific works displayed.

Cat 1-3: The famous painting of the Cupid seller from Stabiae is the only ancient object in the exhibition, but it has a place of fame, since it evoked a lot of reactions at the end of the eighteenth century, starting with Goethe's poem dedicated to the "Liebesgötter."³ The description contains quasi-psychological analyses of the emotions of the ladies involved in the transaction, which I fail to recognize on their crudely painted faces. The Vien painting is, in my opinion, a smoothed and classicized reaction, not a psychodrama, as is suggested in the commentary.

Cat. 10: Netti's gladiator scene is fascinating. The analysis of the various archaeological elements is fine. One more item can be recognized, viz. the blue wall with niches in the background does not imitate the similar bare wall in the house of Apollo in Pompeii (like

other elements), but a wall mosaic in the National Museum in Naples, displayed next to the mosaic columns, also depicted by Netti.

Cat. 19-23, 29-30: a fine set of eruption paintings around 1800, some of which were turned into historical scenes by adding small-size victims like Pliny the Elder. For a good analysis of this genre, see Joachim von der Thüsen, *Schönheit und Schrecken der Vulkane. Zur Kulturgeschichte des Vulkanismus*, chapter “Gemalte Gewalt”, Darmstadt 2008, 65-95.

Cat. 92: The old man encountered by the young people in the painting by McKenzie, mentioned above, is none other than Professor Calculus from [Hergé's Tintin](#) comics. This means that the two other people are astonished by the encounter with this illustrious scholar. Hence, the painting is more or less an actual abbreviated *Tintin* episode and not simply a ‘tintinized’ image as is suggested in the entry.

The bibliography is succinct, but gives the most important publications, mainly in English. Some works are not yet available and are apparently known to the authors in the form of proofs. There is a useful index of names.

Notes:

1. Pp. 242-250. There are small inconsistencies in the transliteration of Japanese words, where I read both Pompeii and Ponpeii.. Avatars are featured in a recent science fiction novel on Pompeii set in 2079: Frederick Pohl, *All the Lives He Led*, New York 2011.
2. The novel *Les Bacchantes* by Léon Daudet of 1931 can be added to Coates' list of surrealist adaptations of Pompeii themes, since it focuses on a peculiar reading of the frieze of the Villa of the Mysteries.
3. See Dietrich Gerhardt, *Wer kauft Liebesgötter? Metastasen eines Motivs*. Neue Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Philologisch-Historische Klasse, Neue Folge, Band 1, 2008.