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**Valentin Kockel, Sebastian Schütze (ed.), *Fausto & Felice Niccolini. Houses and Monuments of Pompeii / Häuser und Monumente von Pompeji*. Köln: Taschen, 2016. Pp. 648; 400 plates. ISBN 9783836556873. \$200.00.**

**Reviewed by Eric M. Moormann, Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen  
([e.moormann@let.ru.nl](mailto:e.moormann@let.ru.nl))**

[Preview](#)

A large quarto volume contains all plates from a serial work produced between 1854 and 1892 by members of the Neapolitan family Niccolini. Its original title, *Le case ed i monumenti di Pompei*, adorns the first page, but lacks on the frontispiece. The editors' texts are in English, German, and French; Italian translations—maybe an option for an audience in the country of provenance—have not been included. Benedikt Taschen is well known for publishing huge coffee table books, full of high-quality illustrations and interesting texts; very few of them are related to antiquity. The question is whether the Niccolini album is something more than a splendid showpiece and deserves to be reviewed for a scientific audience of scholars.

The book opens with two well-written and -researched essays by the editors. Valentin Kockel, emeritus professor of classical archaeology from Augsburg and a renowned Pompeii scholar, discusses the Niccolini album in the context of nineteenth-century excavations and documentation. He first sketches the history of the fieldwork, from 1748 until the late nineteenth century, and distinguishes three phases. The last one, during which the Niccolini brothers were most active, was that of the young Kingdom of Italy after 1860, with the extraordinary archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli as a groundbreaking excavator. The Fiorelli publication stands in a tradition of documentation with drawings, watercolours and photographs. A seminal forerunner was François Mazois' *Les ruines de Pompéi*; both his erudition and artistic skills are still admirable and have produced still important data. Other important works were William Gell's *Pompeiana* and the series of the *Real Museo Borbonico*. In these sixteen volumes both excavation reports and finds were published. The editor, Antonio, was the father of the Niccolini brothers, and an influential man in scientific and cultural circles in Naples. As to paintings, Wilhelm Zahn and Wilhelm Ternite reached a high level in publishing colored lithographs.

The attention for ornaments of murals and floor mosaics in Zahn's work aimed at the use of such motifs in modern arts and crafts. The texts in many of these works (I cannot mention all, well analysed by Kockel) often are brief and of little value, in contrast with Mazois' and Gell's illuminations.

The enterprise of the Niccolinis was a commercial success. They had worked with their father as editors of the *Real Museo Borbonico* and launched the *Case* as a project of their own. Antonio, son of Fausto, continued the project when Fausto and Felice died (both in 1886) and would be responsible for 149 plates until the project's completion in 1892. Like Zahn and Ternite, the Niccolinis edited fascicles of large folio plates to be sold by subscription. Its original size is like those of famous predecessors (Mazois 57 x 40.5 cm; Zahn 71 x 55; Ternite 70 x 55 cm; Raoul-Rochette 61 x 44 cm; D'Amelio 64 x 46 cm), that is 60 x 43.<sup>1</sup> In contrast the amount of text (548 pp.) and plates (451) surpasses that of the other series. The precise sequence of the 137 fascicles cannot be reconstructed, as we do not know either the number of copies and the way the high-priced project was financed.<sup>2</sup>

The editors have chosen not to reprint the original Italian texts (or translations thereof), so that the reader has to rely on Kockel's resumés and cannot check the Niccolinis' opinions on specific topics. Sometimes Kockel gives a glimpse of particular ideas, e.g. when he notes that they interpreted the representation of a ship on a tomb (p. 162) as symbolizing 'the voyage of life'.

In the beginning, members of the Accademia Ercolanese were responsible for these texts, among them a hotshot of the Neapolitan intelligentsia, Luigi Minervini, who praised the project in a high pitch. No systematic choices of specific monuments among temples, public buildings, houses, and tombs can be recognized, so that 'new' finds stand next to 'old' well-known complexes excavated in the 1760s. The discussions would be very thorough and include the presentation and, therefore, recontextualization of finds, making each chapter a highly relevant documentation carried out in an excellent manner. Volume II contains a 'Descrizione generale', an in-depth discussion of the whole site of Pompeii (here pp. 238-357, with 96 plates), and volume III starts with its topography (pp. 358-365, with 11 plates, providing a set of plans). Kockel recognizes Fiorelli's influence, for instance in the use of reference numbers for the buildings and their entrances. Some *vedute* are similar to the paintings sold by the hundreds to tourists, showing visitors and guides walking around between the ruins. There follow valuable sections by Antonio Niccolini on subjects like trade and industry (pp. 394-403), plaster casts of victims (pp. 404-409, but also p. 263), and arts in Pompeii (pp. 410-467). Many restored images of buildings have a too highly fantastic a character to be taken as serious reconstructions (pp. 534-577). Sometimes they combine data from the old Mazois and Gell illustrations, sometimes we see next to a reconstruction the actual situation. Kockel (p. 534) signals the gross chronological and antiquarian mistakes these plates include. A peculiar case is the plate of a

fancy atrium which is more or less that of the Crystal Palace's Pompeian Court in London (pp. 542-543). Many of these plates, therefore, correspond with the paintings by the late nineteenth-century 'néo-pompéistes' and the aforementioned Alma Tadema, and have a different charm than the more or less archaeological depictions (e.g. the bar in Mercury Street, p. 549, and the remake of the House of Marcus Lucretius, pp. 550-551, which could almost be a still from one of the early twentieth-century Pompeii movies). Three stark naked white bathers in the Stabian Baths (p. 553) are accompanied by a strikingly ugly 'primitive' black man, clearly their slave, who seems to steal a golden vessel... An impressive image is that of the town being obscured by ashes from Vesuvius (pp. 574-575).

The makers of the images often are no more than mere names, printed under the plates, but Kockel singles out some who are known as independent artists (Gigante, Duclère, Lorio) or as designers for other projects like Zahn's *Ornamente* and *Real Museo Borbonico* (Abbate, Discanno). Gradually, photography would replace the documentation in situ as well as in the museum. The Niccolinis made use of photographs (see the colored photograph of a mythological scene, fig. 52, those of the amphitheatre, p. 367, as well as the gypsum casts pp. 407-409) and 'translated' them into lithographs. Line drawings of two or more plates are sometimes combined in a smaller scale on one page (e.g. plates 2 and 5 on p. 128; 8-9 on p. 121). Other, colored ones, may occupy double pages. Hence, the formats of the originals and those printed in this book do not always match.

Kockel draws rather positive conclusions about the value of Niccolini's *Case e Monumenti* and stresses Fiorelli's influence on the choice of depicted views and objects, so that the value of the plates' archaeological information was warranted. The work is, to quote Kockel in his native German, 'ein eigenständiges Monument' (p. 44) that marks an important period of transition in the production of scientific publications on Pompeii.

Sebastian Schütze, professor of art history in the University of Vienna, sketches the visualization of Pompeii in the arts 'between appropriation and reinterpretation' (the title of his essay, p. 66).<sup>3</sup> Schütze discusses the evocations of Pompeian motifs in interior decoration of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He singles out the Pompejanum in Aschaffenburg and the Maison pompéienne in Paris, both designed by skilled artists. The discovery of large figural scenes like those in the 'Basilica' in Herculaneum led to the production of history paintings in a new, neo-classical style. Schütze observes that the ancient images met with approval thanks to their appealing esthetic features. Lost paintings, like those by Polygnotos, were 'remade' with the help of Pompeian imagery. Quasi-soft-porn images of nude women in a Pompeian interior got a certain popularity from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Schütze recalls the Victorian artist Lourens (or Lawrence) Alma Tadema and also gives some examples of Pompeian themes of the twentieth century. A genre *sui generis* is the representation of the victims, for which artists were inspired

by the gypsum casts (also represented by Niccolini, see above). A very impressive elaboration is George Segal's *Holocaust memorial* of 1984 in San Francisco (p. 91, fig. 28).

A few repetitions and contradictory remarks in the two essays are only a nuisance for a reader of the book as a whole, but will not bother those who peruse the fine essays independently.<sup>4</sup> A map designed by Kockel shows the excavation phases until 1900 and is helpful for both the essays and Niccolini's work (pp. 102-103).

The Niccolinis' plates comprise the lion's share of the volume, edited with comments by Kockel (pp. 104-619). The order is that of the original sequence. The work starts with various houses excavated in the first half of the nineteenth century, e.g. that of the Tragic Poet, which was a highlight for visitors and used as the residence of the male protagonist of Bulwer-Lytton's *The last day of Pompeii*. The House of Siricus (p. 148) was the first, in 1852, to be excavated more or less stratigraphically. In each case, Kockel introduces the reader to the complex and points to specific items of interest. The endnotes contain brief but pertinent bibliographical references to modern scholarly literature and, as to pieces brought into museums, inventory numbers of the objects and cut-out paintings.

The (unexplained) mix of building categories is confusing nowadays, but may have been made on purpose by the editors in order to create an attractive variation in the fascicles' topics. The subscribers could enjoy, as it were, every delivery as a novelty, differing from the previous ones. Sometimes the reader may feel him- or herself involved in a visit, since various plates show people strolling the ruins. A striking case is that of plate 11 of the House of the Dioscuri (p. 125), with a correspondence in attitudes of the Medea wall painting and the female visitor. Other plates show artists working, e.g. in the House of the Colored Capitals (p. 171) and in the House of Cornelius Rufus (pp. 270-271). Some fascicles mix up images from two buildings, e.g. the villas of Diomedes and Cicero (pp. 222-231). Surprisingly, objects from other sites like Cumae appear next to Pompeian pieces (p. 341). There are repetitions of images in the run of the project; Kockel gives cross-references.

Most finds can be found in the Archaeological Museum in Naples, but even large objects like two grand marble statues from the Temple of the Fortuna Augusta (p. 134-135) are sometimes lost forever. The choices made by the Niccolinis can surprise us: the Alexander mosaic from the House of the Faun is only represented in two line drawings (p. 141), while a potpourri of mobile objects fills a fancy plate as if it were a Tadema still life (pp. 144-145).

Five appendices give notes (in English only), bibliography, topographical index of Pompeii, index of objects in the Archaeological Museum in Naples, and a glossary of terms.

I put aside this beautifully edited book with mixed feelings. Kockel and

Schütze have fulfilled a great task in making available these fascinating plates and enriching this documentation with careful commentary. At the same time, the Niccolinis' texts still have to be consulted in one of the specialized libraries. The reproductions of the plates also leave mixed feelings: they are less glossy than the original ones, being printed on a sort of matte paper. The plates of entire wall systems seem to have a greater exactitude than those of the figural scenes, which show a really late-nineteenth-century gusto. Whether you like them or not is a question of taste, but I think that for a Pompeii lover they bring a lot of pleasure, as they do for the scholar, who will definitely find a lot of lost information. If this project turns out well and profitably, Taschen might do a good job in editing some other great scholarly works like Mazois' *Les ruines de Pompéi*, which would find a serious audience.

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**Notes:**

1. The sizes of copies of these works may differ due to different bindings. The series Häuser in Pompeji has similar gigantic sizes of 50 x 34 cm. The Taschen volume measures 40.5 x 29.5 cm, i.e. ca 2/3 of the original.
  2. The headers refer to the volume I, II, III, or IV, but give no fascicle numbers, which makes a precise quotation difficult. The easiest way is to refer to the page numbers of the present edition. See the reconstructed sequence at p. 640 in which, indeed, there are many lacunae.
  3. Some pertaining essays on the same topic were almost simultaneously published in M. Osanna et al. (eds), *Pompei e l'Europa. Atti del convegno*, Milan 2016.
  4. The edition of the eighteenth-century *Le antichità di Ercolano esposte* is estimated at some 1.500 copies by Kockel and as rare by Schütze (pp. 12 and 66 respectively in the English text). The history of discovery and early excavations is briefly summarized at the beginning of both essays.
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