

Fragmented histories, a case study of 'trashed' frescoes and decorative phases of Villa A ("of Poppaea") at Oplontis

Regina Gee

This paper explores ideas of value as revealed by a combination of preserved and reworked frescoes in a set of wall paintings belonging to Villa A (also called the Villa of Poppaea or Villa Oplontis), an ancient Roman maritime luxury villa on the Bay of Naples. The material draws from my six study seasons (2008-2012) as a member of the Oplontis Project (www.oplontisproject.org), which has as its goal the systematic, multidisciplinary publication of the Villa including the history of its decoration. A part of the comprehensive study of the wall paintings, this paper looks at a collection of "trashed" fresco fragments removed from the walls in antiquity and recovered in excavation by the Oplontis Project. During the 2006 study season, a trench (OP3) on the southwest corner of the swimming pool revealed a trash heap containing fresco fragments, some of which can be plausibly reintegrated into the design of wall paintings found in two rooms of the Villa, labeled 4 and 8 on the modern plan, as they existed at the time of the 79 eruption. The removal of painted plaster in rooms 4 and 8 was part of an extensive repair and restoration project by an identifiable group of Fourth Style artists, "workshop B", who painted extensively across the Villa in a single episode between 62/63 and 79. In these two examples, it is possible to reunite orphaned fragments with their rooms at the Villa because in these instances, workshop B created visual continuity between their own work and the paintings they replaced. The "trashed" fragments allow a reconstruction of a continuous style narrative for rooms 4 and 8, telling a story of new styles added and older paintings preserved along a calibrated scale from faithful imitation to stylistically sympathetic emulation. In room 8, a Third Style room with vibrant cinnabar walls and a complex design, the workshop carefully "pieced" new paintings around original passages. As part of the same work phase, they also replaced all or part of the walls belonging to room 4, a modest Fourth Style room painted in simple schematic versions of imitation marble and granite. The evidence of the fragments removed, discarded and then ultimately retrieved by the Oplontis project makes clear that ideas about value and preservation were not limited to the earlier period styles or to rooms made distinctive by expensive pigments or elaborate design. The fragments also problematize Fourth Style dating based on design syntax, and in particular any model proposing that the "fancier" designs belong to an earlier, more prosperous, phase while the simpler designs herald a decline in fortune. To return to room 4, the repainting of its imitation marble walls was for reasons of functionality; the design syntax initiates a marked movement path created by an earlier group of Fourth Style painters and then recreated in the later "refreshing" of the walls by workshop B.

(Photos by John R. Clarke and Ivo van der Graaff for the Oplontis Project, upon authorization of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment. Reproduction without permission is prohibited.)





Photos by John R. Clarke and Ivo van der Graaff for the Oplontis Project, upon authorization of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment. Reproduction without permission is prohibited.