

# INTRODUCTION

## **Cornelia LAUF**

### ART & ECOLOGY AT THE VILLA OF LIVIA, PRIMA PORTA

My sister teaches middle school Latin at Treasure Coast Classical Academy, near Jupiter, Florida. She teaches the story of Augustus and of Livia. She teaches her students about Virgil, Horace, and Ovid. While an outcry over ‘the classics’ dismantles such education in academies both large and small, seeking to relativize any idea of origins, let alone ones with a highpoint in Europe – the students near Jupiter plow ahead, delighting in the language, in tales of abduction, betrayal, love, and ruin. After all, it’s the human condition. And what was once Roman, and before it Greek, and before that, a long and unbroken sequence of doing, saying, relating, that has its origins in the Far and Near East, in Africa and India – well, that chain of history and weddedness to the past, that anchoring, is what motivates the students at Treasure Coast Classical.

The world-famous fresco cycle once belonging to the Villa of Livia, and now in the safekeeping of the Museo Nazionale Romano – this cycle belongs not to Rome, or to Europe, but to all of humanity. Because in it are not only plants from Africa, Asia Minor, and of course, Europe, but others from as far away as Siberia. Plants know no borders, as eminent botanists from Giulia Caneva to Stefano Mancuso, from David Attenborough to Eduardo Kohn, have shown us. And neither does knowledge.

So, what does the villa of Livia Drusilla, a farm and house once on the outskirts of Rome, mean? Today? The invitation by Bernard Anson Silj to create a cultural project for his charming estate in Prima Porta, once the property of Caesar Augustus, but actually the dowry of his wife, Livia Drusilla, led me to think on the ownership of land, and on the nature of a farm used as a theater, as a seat of government, as a temple, and also a home. Leaving aside the well-known stories of Livia, which are ample and abundant in many riveting studies, just a few words on the site. The family of Bernard Anson Silj once owned 15,000 hectares in property north of Rome. This was a time when stewardship of the land was carried out by landowners schooled not only in agriculture and governance, but also literature and art. Thus, without romanticizing feudalism even slightly, custodianship of the land necessarily meant a vision of the land, in its furthest, aesthetic sense. Slowly, land reforms, changing times, changing laws, whittled away at once was a mythic agricultural area north of Rome. Was the apportioning of goods fair? Hard to say, given that agriculture was once based on *mezzadria*, that half-step of sharing with the owners developed to rectify feudalism. I've spoken to many former Italian *contadini* who miss that time. Even those cheery Communists who dreamed of vacations in Havana or Moscow. At the same time, the burdens of land-owning, and 'representing' the state and ownership, can also not be undervalued. Today, the Italian State long owns part of the property once entirely in the hands of the Anson Silj family. The Etruscan-Livian estate of Bernard Anson Silj is largest in his fertile imagination, and Prima Porta, verdant front door to Rome, lies sleeping, awaiting recognition and reclamation for the important portal it once was.

In fact, a ride along the Tiberina confirms that this is Rome's neglected acropolis. Overgrown in many parts, with wilderness that engulfs even Livia's wine canteens, and speckled with seemingly unplanned real estate development, lies a spot of paradise that once was Rome's Monticello.

Rolling hills, part public park, part archaeological site, mark the area of Livia's ancient farm (an enormous property) housing the remains of the villa. A magical feeling persists as one approaches the villa. A still-paved access road between two hills leads one gradually over a hillock, to the villa itself, standing only a few feet high, its walls long ago dismantled, struck by earthquakes, looted, covered over. And yet, standing in the archaeological site, it's possible to feel that uncanny sense of proportion and equilibrium that distills the geometry of Euclid and Archimedes into the architecture of Vitruvius. Perfectly situated, with a view of Rome along the Tiber, this site is a time capsule of the harmonic and perfect balance between nature and man.

To capture the essence of the place, and stimulate its reevaluation, above all by artists, I created, for Anson, and with the additional initial support of Suzanne Deal Booth, a public project that would hover between scholarship and poetry, between public but also private, between contemporary artwork and archaeology, and function, not via mass and monument, but almost subliminally, with perception.

To this end, I began to contact a series of extraordinary people, young, old, established and not, and teased their own gardens of Livia from them, their impressions of the place, of the frescos, of the history.

This publication is a placeholder, a temporary tribute to this project to wed a vision of the past with a firm commitment to the future.

To that end, it features contributions from many types of minds, and the support of many wonderful individuals. We print our future project in full, in Gdansk, where a love of classics and practice of the avant-garde, runs undaunted. And we offer sincere gratitude to all.

What did those frescos mean? The interpretations of scholars leads us to reevaluate the relation of nature to culture, over two thousand years ago, and find it as riveting today as then.

The contributions of living artists – a Herbarium – leads us to map botanical biodiversity once more, in relation to the frescos.

To this writer, the villa demonstrates equilibrium – that manifestation of balance which became the *Pax Romana*. The famous triclinium, to this writer, is a somber hall of judgement, a tribunal, in which Livia - who loved to give the gift of freedom to those enslaved – could decide the fates of others. Far from a hall of pleasure, the stairs lead down to what could have easily been a tomb as much as a naturally air conditioned summer dining room, serving as a seat of power, much as those Medieval and Renaissance blue-skied cityscapes, dotting palaces, town halls, and churches of the Italian peninsula.

Here, in the cycle of frescos now in the Museo Nazionale, we see no human figures or architectural signs, other than a low fence and one bird cage. This unearthly earthly garden is the grandest record of natural order linking Roman culture to all prior examples of wall painting (and the estate to all prior gardens) and evocations of paradise, so beautiful it was admired in place, untouched for centuries, while the villa was still in use. It is a celestial and yet earthly paradise, in which the human actors take center stage - and rule. We see the souls of those departed, in the shapes of white doves fluttering among the burst pomegranates, themselves a symbol of impending decay, as they have not been harvested - with an open bird cage symbolizing both freedom and, perhaps, the constricted life of

its puzzling omnipotent proprietor. Twin trees on either side of the long room, brilliantly decoded in a series of essays in this volume, symbolize the sons of Livia, at least to this writer. One, Tiberius, to-be ruler of Rome, represented by the pine tree. The other, Drusus, the steadfast oak. The pine tree is stretched out in *orans* mode. Is this an image of devotion? Its young branches also uncannily resemble the shape of a crucifixion. A complex warning sign to those descending into the chamber, surely familiar with the Roman execution style, par excellence. In expressive gravity, the tree itself functions much like the *Crucifixion* of Masaccio. As if to enliven the space, and suggest performance. It's a strange and spooky conifer, despite its youth. Other hidden keys to the fresco, at least to this eye, are the beady eye of the artist, perched on a ledge near the base of the pine. Oh yes, he's a bird, and a free one, at that. And we love the plantains, the only plant depicted inside the pictorial space of the room. This weed, also used for medicinal purpose, even now infests the walkways of the actual villa in Prima Porta. Is it a foreshadowing of the dissident religion that would gut the core of pagan Rome? Or the fact that all things crumble in the face of nature? Though the pomegranates rule supreme in the fresco, perhaps the valiant tendrils shooting out of the low-standing walls are my very favorite plant.

This volume is a plant just a bit out of place, as someone once referred to weeds. Eminent voices, finest of poets, most supportive of publishers, growing together, in a logic that defies rational analysis. You will find here a tribute to thinking about history and its protagonists, as if they are still alive today. With little pomp and circumstance, a spiral-like activity has taken place, in a kind of never-ending process, that reminds one not only of the acanthus testifying to the never-ending glory of Rome on Augustus' Altar of Peace, but also a view of those same plants, still growing in Prima Porta, on erstwhile Livian lands. This spiraling motion is the obsession of contemporary artists like Emilio Prini, who studied exactly that meander, that geometry, where things stand still, and yet move, simultaneously. "Tutto è sempre pronto," the great artist once said. This publication is testimony to that thought.