

# Considerations of Roman Painting

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“The first thing discovered in the excavation begun on the Tower of the Annunciation was a painting eleven hands wide and four and a half hands high. It depicts two large festoons of fruits and flowers, a man’s head, which is very large and jovial, a ram, an owl, various birds and other things. It seemed to me to be one of the greatest paintings found to date. Having stopped in with me to see it this morning, the sculptor ordered it removed on Tuesday ...

“April 10: Detached from the wall and placed on a cart this morning, the great painting arrived at the royal palace in excellent condition.”<sup>1</sup>

What difference does it make if, just as Christopher Columbus thought to discover India while discovering America instead, the brilliant general Rocco Giocchino de Alcubierre, a Spaniard in the service of his Majesty Charles III of Bourbon, brought to light the ruins of a town he thought to be Stabies and which was in reality Pompeii! After seventeen centuries of oblivion and silence, one of the cities buried by the eruption of Vesuvius—which around 106 or 107, at the beginning of the second century A.D., less than thirty years after the catastrophe (which took place in the year 79 A.D., in the reign of Titus), was described by the Latin writer Pliny the Younger in two letters <sup>2</sup> addressed to the illustrious historian Tacitus—was suddenly reborn and came back to life. In truth, these beginnings were still very modest and uncertain. To excavate the site of Pompeii—simple deserted fields sprinkled with stones known as “the City” by the local peasants—Alcubierre had just abandoned Herculaneum, where the excavations had already been under way for ten years with interest rapidly waning. Then, in 1750, Pompeii in turn was momentarily dropped for Herculaneum, which was once again in favor, and a few more years of this criss-

crossing of hesitation passed before the excavations were taken up once more and carried out in a systematic manner.

The most important thing was that from the first cautious steps on, at Herculaneum as at Pompeii, the night and the shroud of ashes described by Pliny the Younger gave way to the brilliance of multicolored and omnipresent frescoed murals. With these discoveries, by now made richer with new findings every week, almost every hour, Antiquity took shape and life anew. The lofty, long past and glorious history of the Roman Empire was transformed into day-to-day life, and a distant past became more present each day.<sup>3</sup>

The atomic threat that hangs over our age has perhaps made us particularly sensitive to the vision of this sudden cataclysm, preserved for us in the famous description of Pliny the Younger, and to the spectacle of the ruins of the cities buried by Vesuvius. Pitiless toward the inhabitants of Pompeii, buried beneath the ashes and suffocated by toxic gases, and more merciful, it seems, toward the inhabitants of Herculaneum, who had time to flee before the torrent of mud and lava overflowed into their town, the catastrophe was lenient toward material goods: swallowed up beneath the ashes and lava, monuments and houses, of which only the upper floors were destroyed, lived on with their painted murals more or less intact, awaiting the "antiquarians" of the eighteenth century, who became the archaeologists of the nineteenth.

If the great history that Pliny the Younger believed to be immortal is often reduced for us today, two thousand years later, to a few names and major events, the eruption of Vesuvius, like a veritable neutron bomb, killing men and preserving houses, has safeguarded the traces of the hundreds of little concrete details which Pliny the Younger judged "unworthy of history," but which we consider, to the contrary, as its very life's blood. It is an irony of sorts that the passage in the *Annals* where Tacitus described the catastrophe which affected all of Campania has disappeared, carried off by time and oblivion, whereas the apparently raw materials prepared for the historian by the nephew of Pliny the Elder "benefit from the eternal glory" that Pliny the Younger believed he could promise to his friend Tacitus.

As for Pliny the Elder, before going off to die on a shore of Campania, he wrote, as we know, an encyclopedia which, in spite

of its title of *Natural History*, gives a great deal of attention to the arts and constitutes, notably, a very precious source of information on ancient paintings. Another irony of sorts is that he died precisely during the catastrophe to which we owe almost all the examples of Roman painting that have survived to this day.

To those who discovered them in the latter half of the eighteenth century, during which classical antiquity was still very much a part of education and culture, the ancient cities that emerged from their shroud of ashes and lava presented a strange and completely unexpected spectacle. As the excavation progressed it became clear that each building, each private home, regardless of its size or the part of town in which it was found, was painted with brightly colored frescoes. Furthermore, in each house, even the smallest room, the smallest wall-space was decorated in this way with sparkling and enigmatic compositions. What, then, was the effect of this revelation of ancient pictorial art on those who had until then had no more than a theoretical and thus doubly indirect approach to it, since they could know it only through the intermediaries of ancient texts which spoke, moreover, much more about the great Greek painters than of Roman efforts? Although perceptible in home decoration and furnishings, the influence of the discoveries at Herculaneum and Pompeii on artistic production per se remained, as surprising as this may seem, extremely limited. The reason for this may derive quite simply from the very difficult material conditions of exploration and visiting, which lasted for a very long time at the site of the cities buried by Vesuvius. Still at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Alexander Dumas, in *Le Corricolo. Impressions de voyage en Italie*, where a solid archaeological common sense, not without a sense of humor, vies with a real power of evocation, wrote a suggestive scene about a visit to Herculaneum, a scene that is all the more interesting since its author would find himself, twenty-five years later (in 1860), named director of the excavations at Pompeii by Garibaldi.

“Herculaneum, instead of pricking one’s curiosity, tires it out: one descends into the excavations of Herculaneum as into a mine, through a kind of shaft; next come underground corridors in which one may enter only with torches. Corridors blackened by

the smoke from time to time allow one to see, as if through a veil, the corner of a house, the peristyle of a temple, the steps of a theater; all this is incomplete, mutilated, dark, without context, without unity and consequently, without effect."<sup>4</sup> In contrast to this veritable descent into Hell, the visit to Pompeii, in which clearing was made possible by the more movable consistency of the earth that covered it, did not take long to appear incomparably more seductive and evocative in travelers' eyes: "Pompeii is priceless; a Roman town in broad daylight!"<sup>5</sup> Renan exclaimed in a letter dated 1850. Until then, indeed, the discovery of traces of Roman Antiquity was always made underground, as was the case in Rome where the exploration of the "grottoes" of the Casa d'Oro by Raphael and his rivals, eager to copy the painted stucco decorations, gave birth to a style known for this reason as "grotesque" (*grottesche*).<sup>6</sup> It is true that those who took the trouble to go as far as the Vesuvian plain at the end of the eighteenth century were able to see the most beautiful frescoes exhumed from these buried cities in the Royal Museum of Portici, which was especially arranged to receive the fruits of these excavations. The practice of cutting out and removing the paintings, which we have seen carried out by Alcubierre as early as 1748, and which found justification in ancient precedent<sup>7</sup>, was actually so systematic that it inspired Winckelmann with a marvelous term to distinguish the buildings explored by Alcubierre's miners from the frescoes which covered their walls and which were detached and carried off, they were "immobile discoveries, by which the author means that these monuments were not by nature intended to be taken away."<sup>8</sup> But cut out, transported, exhibited, viewed, but not copied (which was strictly prohibited until the end of the century), imitated (after sketches made by travelers from memory) more than reproduced (except for the case, as late as the 1760s, of the famous collection of the *Antichità d'Ercolano*, distributed one by one by the king himself, and diffused for the most part by translations or imitations), the frescoes of the Campanian cities gave to the few who saw them (not more than a hundred travelers a year until the beginning of the nineteenth century)<sup>9</sup>, and to the many more who had heard of them or discovered their uncertain reflection in the collections' engraved plates, but a partial, truncated

and finally inexact, because it was incomplete, image of Roman painting. In fact only the central panels of the painted walls, which depicted mythological or epic scenes, and the small compositions representing landscapes or still lifes, were cut out by the excavators to be taken to the Portici palace. But first they had to be deemed worthy! For if not, the king's team preferred to see them destroyed than to risk seeing them pass into rival collections! As for the other parts of the decorations painted on each wall—which, we know today, made up, along with the central motifs from which they were not inseparable, an elaborate and often complex system—they were left in a state of neglect or else reburied without further ado.

Of course, it is clear that it was not these proceedings alone that led to the misappreciation, which lasted such a long time, of the authentic aspects of Roman painting. On the contrary, these proceedings themselves were the result of an appreciation that was fundamentally erroneous. At the very least one might grant that they contributed to further accentuating prejudices and misunderstandings.

In fact, the eighteenth century retained from the discovery of the buried cities' paintings only that which corresponded to their preconceived images of Antiquity. We know that one of the major trends in art at that time was what we now call Neoclassicism. It seems logical then, at first glance, to think that if, from 1740 on, in all of Europe the unbridled fantasy of Rococco, last avatar of Baroque art, began to give way to a controlled rigor and a greater sobriety of line, embellished by sweet little Alexandrian figures of Cupid, in architecture as well as in furnishings and interior decoration, then this was due to the discovery of Herculaneum and Pompeii. On the other hand, one of the most striking results of modern research<sup>10</sup> in this area has been to attack this premise and demonstrate that it resulted from an evolution that took place *before* the resurrection of the cities of Vesuvius and their paintings. Are we thus to assume that what was long held to be an unquestionable influence of one era upon another is but an extraordinary coincidence? President de Brosses already asked himself this question in his *Lettres sur l'état actuel de la Ville d'Herculée*: "We see things so similar to our most bizarre current trends, that one is ready to suspect that they were added after the fact."<sup>11</sup>

This would mean overlooking another finding of recent research, which completes, more than it contradicts, the preceding conclusions; for we notice more and more that ancient painting was already known to the artists of the Renaissance, and even before that, to those of the Middle Ages. Like an underground river that is unseen but whose benevolent effect is apparent on the surface vegetation, it had never ceased to nurture painterly inspiration, and this more than two centuries before the great resurgence of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Giotto, and later Giovanni da Udine, Filippino Lippi, Beccafumi, Giulio Romano, and, of course, Raphael, the Raphael of the Vatican Chambers, always mentioned in this regard, as well as any other works which today's specialists agree reveal the influence of the ancient lost frescoes, illustrate, each in its own way, the role of ancient painting in the successive renewals of Western painting. Aside from the well known discoveries such as the *Aldobrandine Wedding* (found in the beginning of the eighteenth century) and the frescoes of Nero's Casa d'Oro, copied by Raphael, who was, we should not forget, in charge of the Antiquities of the eternal City, countless ancient paintings came to light, without a doubt, on the inexhaustible site of the ancient capital of the Empire, during the continual excavations which Peter's successors never ceased to undertake.<sup>12</sup> But this filiation ended up forgotten and, upon discovering the frescoes of the Campanian cities, the men of the eighteenth century were stunned with their similarity to Raphael's paintings." One would take most of (the decorations) for fantasies of Raphael," observed a certain Charles-Marguerite Dupaty in his *Lettres sur l'Italie* written in 1785 (and published in 1788). The comparison, furthermore, was not advantageous to the ancient frescoes, judged quite inferior to "modern" productions. The unanimity of the negative judgment of the Campanian frescoes by eighteenth century travelers is indeed striking. The condemnation of the abbé Richard—"only a blind respect, or an extreme passion for Antiquity ... can allow one to see in these paintings a beauty comparable to those we admire in Carracci, Domenichino, even the great Raphael"<sup>13</sup>—directly foreshadows the more famous condemnation of Stendhal who, in this regard, shows himself much more a man of the eighteenth than the nineteenth century: "One

has to be as foolish as a scholar to claim that this is superior to the fifteenth century; it is merely very curious.”<sup>14</sup> Diderot, himself so critical of the abbé Richard, whom he considered a “narrow minded head infatuated with the most ridiculous notions,” could still write in the *Salon de 1765* that the paintings of Antiquity “are known to us only through the descriptions and first-hand accounts of literary men.”<sup>15</sup> Two years earlier, for the *Salon de 1765*, he certainly did praise the painter Vien, who had been inspired by the discoveries of Herculaneum in his “Marchande d’Amours” (“Seller of Love”), but this praise itself is more a nod of approval given to one work among many of a different genre, likewise praised by Diderot, than the expression of a new taste. Again Grimm’s associate is alone in his approval; on the subject of the same painter, the *Mercur de France* expresses more of the general sentiment when it speaks of the “attachment and the application he [i.e., Vien] seems to profess for this ancient style, which many art lovers might well esteem less than others, and from which it is quite clear that most of the public would willingly excuse our artists.”<sup>16</sup> On the whole, the frescoes of Herculaneum and Pompeii exerted but a limited influence<sup>17</sup> on the art of the time when they were discovered; even those who, at first glance, seem to have been the most marked by them, such as the English architect and house decorator Robert Adams, for example, modeled their styles after already known monuments such as the ruins of Split, “the stuccos on the tombs at the Via Latina, the Loggia of the Vatican and the Villa Madama, Algondi’s ceilings in white stucco on a blue background at the Doria-Pamphili Villa” (Mario Praz), rather than after the new Campanian discoveries. What the eighteenth century retained of the paintings of the cities of Vesuvius is but the glorification of the “small taste,” the “small style,” as they called it then, which already predominated before these discoveries: centaurs, dancers, cupids, alone or in groups, and eventually still lifes—this is what was appreciated and copied. As for the rest, and notably the *trompe-l’oeils*, architectures and arabesques, ever present in these painted ancient decors, they were deemed “gothic,” or “Chinese,” which is to say barbaric and tasteless, even if the opinion on this point tended to change by the end of the century. Caylus himself, who did so much for our

knowledge of the unburied cities and their paintings, criticized in a letter “the so-called architectures which are but the worst sort of arabesques and which can be seen merely as Chinese operations.”

<sup>18</sup> It is true that according to Diderot, who did not like him, Caylus understood nothing of ancient art.

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“In its present-day devastation, this town Pompeii first covered with a rain of stones and ashes, then stripped by excavations, bears witness to the taste of a whole people for art and images, a taste of which the most ardent lover of art can only just imagine, much less experience the sentiment or need.”<sup>19</sup>

With Goethe, “the great pagan,” as Taine called him, Roman painting is regarded and appreciated with a new eye. For this reevaluation, in truth, another great German, Winckelman, is often cited before Goethe, but to do so is to overlook the fact that the author of *Reflections on the Beautiful in Works of Art and the Means to Acquire It* did not focus the main part of his attention and praise on ancient painting and that his judgment of it, although more laudatory than that of his contemporaries, was not however substantially different from theirs: the praise—quickly withdrawn compared to the much more important consideration reserved for sculpture—was for the figures of dancers and centaurs, “which can only be attributed to a great Master, for they are as light as thought, beautiful as if traced by the hand of the Graces.”<sup>20</sup> For the overall perception of the originality of these frescoes, the new look at aesthetics which they express and the message they deliver, we are indebted to Goethe and Goethe alone. Although surprised by the narrowness of the streets and houses of Pompeii, he nevertheless declares: “Yes, I understand quite well that it is possible to study one’s whole life and, in the end, still cry out ‘Today I see, today for the first time I understand.’”<sup>21</sup> Thereafter men of science would flock after the artist and poet, and the exploration of the cities buried by Vesuvius would take on a range and a rhythm previously unknown.

Brief as it was, the reign of Murat, whose wife Caroline developed a veritable passion for Pompeii, marked an ostentatious



period for the knowledge of the Campanian cities. The few dozen workers working on the site of the excavations disengaging the buried dwellings and their frescoes were increased to several hundred. On a page of his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand fleetingly evokes the infatuation of the ephemereal sovereigns of Naples for the rediscovery of these ancient cities: "During the course of the year 1814, the king and queen of Naples gave a party at Pompeii; an excavation was carried out to music: the ruins unearthed by Caroline and Joachim could teach them nothing, however, about their own ruin; on the last frontiers of prosperity, one hears only the concerts of the dream now passing." <sup>22</sup>

After the time of dream came a time of more modest exploration, but it was carried out in systematic fashion, until the great renewal marked by the entry of the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies into the young Italian state. Then modern archaeology, which during all these years had very slowly developed its parameters and methods, was finally born on the site of the two Vesuvian cities. The 1861 transformation of the *Journal of the Excavations at Pompeii* into a publication henceforth covering all the archaeological sites on the peninsula, and called *Notizie degli Scavi di Antichità*, illustrates the role of the excavation of the cities of Vesuvius in the emergence of modern archaeology, just as the late eighteenth century transfer to Naples of the frescoes housed up until that point at Portici—in other words, their passage from a private palace to a place open to all—marked a significant stage in the history of modern museology. In the 1860s, Fiorelli at Pompeii, and Ruggiero at Herculaneum, made inventories, classified, identified, named, and defined things in a twofold, complementary manner, taking stock of past research and setting a schedule for future research. Shortly thereafter, another great German, the archaeologist Mau, developed a typology identifying four successive stages in Pompeian painting, following to a system which, after more than a century, remains, in its principle thrust, still valued today.

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Thus discovered by Alcubierre's miners and the "antiquarians" of the eighteenth century, celebrated by Winckelmann and Goethe,

diffused in countless engravings which have been replaced by our photographs, tirelessly illuminated and studied, minutely, by archaeologists and modern scholars, how does Roman painting appear to us today?

The classification established by the archaeologist Mau at the end of the nineteenth century has ultimately borne up against its opponents. It distinguishes, in the frescoes of the Vesuvian cities, four styles, based on criteria that are as much formal as chronological. From the stately sobriety of the first style, one passes to the illusionistic effects of the second, then to the delicacies of the third, before arriving at the fantasies of the fourth; of course, one must avoid taking what is but an interpretative grid as a monolithic reality. One can, however, at least discern the major movements: at first monumental, the painted decoration on the walls of the Vesuvian cities later became architectural (the "second style"), then ornamental (the third), before becoming, finally, baroque. Even if discoveries made elsewhere than in the Campanian cities are rare and hard to find, they suffice to demonstrate that there was an evolution that was not limited to the painting at Pompei and Herculaneum, but runs through the entirety of Roman painting.

Not so long ago, the very term "Roman painting" would have been inconceivable. Were not the ancient writers themselves (notably Pliny the Elder) the first to proclaim that Roman painting was just a pale reflection, the copy of great Greek painting and that only the latter could be considered a distinct art, fully original and creative? Disappointed by what they discovered at the foot of Vesuvius, eighteenth century men carried their nostalgia and dreams of perfection back to the ideal of Greek art, forever lost and unsurpassable. All that was left was for the scholarship of generations to come to parrot what was basically a value judgment, nevertheless legitimized and objectified by the whole apparatus of a faultless science. It is true that after the second cycle one often finds, in the center of each wall, real "paintings," which correspond exactly enough to the literary descriptions of the great lost masterpieces of Greek painting, so much so that in the analysis of Pompeian frescoes, the concept of copy plays a leading role. What also contributed to devaluing Pompeian painting for a long time is that unlike the great Greek painters, the names of the

artists who executed the frescoes that the eruption of 79 A.D. preserved for us were unknown. Thus lacking authors (except for rare exceptions) and, apparently, originality, this painting was seen for a long time as merely the image of an image and thus as a by-product of Greek art.

It would take decades of patient on-site research, coupled with unexpected discoveries in Greece itself<sup>23</sup>—which allowed for a better comparative grasp of the specific features respective to these civilizations—to modify the assessment of a painting which today is recognized as legitimately Roman: Certainly, taken one at a time, the different elements which make up the pictorial decoration of the houses at Pompeii and Herculaneum easily allow for attributions of foreign origins, Greek most of the time, or rather Hellenistic, but also (and without contradiction) Egyptian and Alexandrian; but it was in the Italian peninsula and the territories under the Roman empire that they became integral components of coherent, structured and codified decorative systems. For this reason, instead of judging the Pompeian frescoes a priori by unsuitable criteria, we must adjust our own vision, *accommodate* our gaze. Are the compositions of mythological subjects in the central panels of the walls inspired, at times even copied exactly, from famous Greek paintings? Yes, but far from being, like their models, independent works, painted on easels, here they are part of a whole, in which each detail, each arrangement contributes to casting them in a new light and giving them a new meaning. The graceful ornaments that frame them and serve to *stage* them, have, if one considers them for a moment, a function that goes beyond the simple decorative verisimilitude to which they are often reduced; these pediments, these little columns sometimes bordered by real views, are the strict equivalent, in the pictorial order, of the “once upon a time” which, as everybody knows, begins every well made story. The Greek model is taken up again, certainly, but quoted more than copied, staged, put in perspective, which is to say, *put at a distance*. The copy itself, moreover, is often not made without tiny variations, changes, transpositions, adaptations which make it not a simple tracing, but what one could call a true creative imitation. In these conditions one understands how all the comparisons, popular in the nineteenth century, between

the Pompeian frescoes and our modern wallpapers were in reality the result of a total misconception of the real significance of this art. For the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thought that art must be above all the expression of the artist's individuality; they refused the status of art to Pompeian painting, and that of artists to their anonymous creators. Rightly so in the latter case, in fact, for they were in fact artisans organized into traveling workshops. In other words, what should be put into question in this regard is not the refusal to grant the unknown painters of Herculaneum and Pompeii the status of artists, with all that we understand by this word, but the inadequacy of this notion in the reality of ancient life. In a kind of painting where what is demanded is the expression, not of a subjectivity unlike any other, but of already known and appreciated forms, easily recreated and subtly differentiated each time, the role of artist, with all of its modern connotations of pure subjectivity, remains empty. The same misunderstanding presided for a long time—and not by chance, for here too the problematic is similar—over the appreciation of Latin literature, which was, for a long time, in Modern eyes, but the replica, crudely done, of a Greek model whose beauty, purity, and originality were all the more exalted since the works had disappeared; to speak of Terence was to involve Menander (whose work is almost entirely lost), just as in regarding the frescoes at Pompeii it was the works of Apelles and Zeuxis people wanted to see.

Today, modern philology has deciphered enough of Menander in papyruses long forgotten in Egypt, and found enough fragments of frescoes, from one end of the Hellenic world to the other (even though the originals of the great paintings have disappeared forever) to see that Terence and Plautus are hardly Menander writing in Latin, and that the painters of Herculaneum and Pompeii are not merely awkward plagiarists.

We know henceforth that we should not limit ourselves, in judging the Pompeian frescoes, to the "paintings," however accomplished they might be, which are but one part of the complex and subtle decoration they bring into play. Around the scene or landscape that might be found in the center of any given wall, the painted frame with which they are furnished, the arrangement of the ornamental motifs, even the tiniest detail, such as color, the rela-

tionship between each composition to those found painted on the same wall, on the other walls in the room, on the walls of the other rooms, the relationships one can recognize between the decoration of each part of the dwelling and the activities which took place there, the particular stamp left on occasion by the owner regarding his social status and line of work, the particular style of the workshop which carried out the commission, all of this, and many other things as well, today demand to be methodically and precisely examined, analyzed, and evaluated. To summarize what might appear as the philosophy of the new vision, I would say that it is characterized henceforth, in each of its observations, by a concern for the whole, by the sentiment of a totality rediscovered and restored.

Imitation is thus the principle characteristic of this painting, as it is in all forms of ancient art; but this word, with all that it implies in the way of rather simplistic dualism, must not allow for any illusion, which, under the circumstances, as everybody will agree, would be going to far. What indeed is this *imitation*, this *mimesis* to use Aristotle's Greek term, which perhaps would be better translated as "representation?" It would be a mistake to believe that we are dealing with what is usually meant by the term "realism," namely the minute and objective description of the real world: the visible reality in the frescoes of Pompeii and Herculaneum is a condensed, sublimated, transformed reality. In truth, it is a painting that is figurative without being realistic, as one sees in the history itself of its evolution. For if one can strictly explain the passage from the first to the second style—or from a type of decoration which mechanically reproduced palace facades on interior walls, to another genre of decoration in which imaginary architectures serve as frame and support for plays of perspective—through the search for a higher degree of reality, this interpretation does not correspond to the transformations illustrated by the third and fourth styles. There, on the contrary, one is distanced from reality, even flees from it: everything takes place as if from the second to the fourth style the ancient painters approached reality the better to transform it, always discovering more and more the bewitching and disturbing powers of illusion. It would therefore be more correct to say, from one end to the other of its evolution, that ancient painting discovers not the real

(which ultimately it had no use for), but, one might say, its own "pictoriality": hence in the compositions of the fourth style one often finds, in the background, reproductions of painted walls in the taste of the third style. In short, here painting imitates itself, taking pleasure in multiplying echoes of representation, duplicating the images it produces, as it does again when, here and there, little imitation paintings represent a "real" painted decor which in turn imitates "real" paintings. Moreover, even the second style, although most concerned with the effects of reality, does not go so far as realism per se: although it likes to open up the wall with its vistas in perspective, placed on either side of a central motif, we are forced to remark that most of the time these representations, even when placed next to one another, are not dependent on a system of central perspective. It is not, as some have maintained,<sup>24</sup> that the Roman painters and theoreticians were unaware of vanishing point perspective,<sup>25</sup> but it proves simply that their objective was not to give the viewer of the frescoes the impression of finding himself face to face with *real* buildings.

Of these powers of illusion, which give life to a form that creates space and life where there had been only flatness, the theater offered painters, with all the power of its incomparable seductions, an eloquent image. Like painting, theater is based on imitation, on "representation" (a word which in this case is doubly ambiguous), on the search for illusion. It is the profound similarity between the two arts, and not only the simple concern for ostentatious decors suggesting a princely lifestyle,<sup>26</sup> which to my mind explains the frequent representations of stage sets in the second and fourth styles of the paintings at Pompeii, as well as the abundance of accessories, such as masks, relating to the world of theater and the many manifestations of its great god and patron, Dionysus-Bacchus.

This is why this painting, which in its search for illusion, sets itself the task of persuading, pleasing and rousing the passions, maintains close ties with rhetoric and its techniques,<sup>26</sup> whose importance is well known in the ancient world—which was, above all, a world of words: words and images. The parallel can be elaborated in great detail; let us content ourselves to sketch it briefly here. First of all, rhetoric stands in the same relationship to truth as painting with regard to the real. Just as the latter does not

end up as realism, but rather as a decorative art, the former does not set its sights on truth, but rather on verisimilitude, which is quite different. More than anything else, the search, ever-present and ever-intense in ancient painting, for elaborate composition, has its exact equivalent in rhetoric, in the importance granted to the *invention* and the *disposition* of the arguments of speech; similarly, that which for the rhetorician would be *elocution*, for the painter would be the *style* of the decoration chosen, while that which the ancients called *action*, meaning the setting up of the speech itself, according to the adaptation of a gestural technique, would be translated, for the painter, into the choice of a technique of execution, a specific "manner," such as large flat tints for mythological subjects, small, quick, "impressionistic" touches for small landscapes.

"It seems to me that it is necessary to study ancient art to learn to look at nature," said Diderot in his *Salon de 1765*. Modern scholarship has, one will see, misinterpreted this beautiful and simple harmony. Let us take the example of the many landscapes and gardens in the Roman frescoes: at first sight, everything seems to indicate that these idyllic and sacred views, these images of villas with porticos overlooking the sea, reproduce the real sights offered by the plains and the shores of Campania. This is not the case; as Pierre Grimal has demonstrated, the painted gardens and landscapes seen at Pompeii and Herculaneum were drawn, not from nature, but from combinations of "essential elements and typical things," from "particularities of places" which had been established, beforehand, by painters and theoreticians, and according to which form was given to real gardens, then reproduced by painting. In other words, these frescoes do not represent natural landscapes, but gardens and landscapes themselves, in reality fashioned according to principles which came from painting. Since the art of gardens—the gardens one sees represented in the frescoes—themselves had a pictorial origin, one can thus say that painting, in representing these gardens, *reprentait son bien* ("took back its own") as P. Grimal put it.<sup>29</sup> In this way the "nature" presented on the painted walls of the dwellings at Pompeii and Herculaneum is not "natural;" it is a recomposed, represented nature transformed by deftly manipulated reflections in a double game of mirrors.

This double mediation is found again, without our realizing it, in the frescoes representing the "theater walls." What is repro-

duced are not architectural compositions that actually decorated the stages of Roman theaters, since for a long time (until 55 B.C.) building stone theaters was forbidden; they are merely reproductions of painted sets, which were permitted and set up provisionally to decorate the stage during a *representation*. The parallel with what went on in the paintings of gardens is striking: the *scaenae frontes* (theater walls) also found in the frescoes do not reproduce real structures; they are but twice removed decorations, paintings imitating paintings, the illusion of an illusion. Is life but a theater, as the emperor Augustus said,<sup>29</sup> or is it theater which is life? Is it art which reproduces nature, or rather is it nature which conforms to art? Is Reality an illusion or illusion a reality? Is not the incandescence which finally engulfed Pompeii and Herculaneum already prefigured in the mythic burning of Troy, represented in several places on the site of the two cities?

From all sides, ancient painting draws the observer into a stunning ballet in which the encounters, interferences, and correspondences abound, where the art is as *real* as the reality is artistic. It was natural, given these conditions, for the Roman to live surrounded by these images, these visions of another reality, one might be tempted to say a "surreality," in which that of day to day life is but the earthly echo. In fact, it is a world in which reality according to our definition of the word, coarse and objective reality, does not exist; reality is but a group of *signs* which it is up to the artist to interpret and make visible.

Up to the artist, that is, the painter, of course, but also the sculptor, the architect, the poet, and even the musician. For a long time people have commented on the close ties between the frescoes at Pompeii and the other arts, especially sculpture and poetry. For the men of the eighteenth century, this relationship between painting and architecture was merely an indication of the inferiority of the former with regard to the latter; but this correspondence, this interference among the arts is rather the translation, to use the language of artistic technique, of the vision of a profoundly unitarian world which we just evoked, a world in which myth tells the truth of reality, in which the real manifests the presence of myth. For this reason many figures of the gods are representations of statues of gods; and while looking at any given scene, likewise described



by tragedians and poets, one might remember the famous definition already given in the archaic age by the Greek Simonides: "Painting is silent poetry, and poetry painting that speaks."

It is thus a total art that we see, an art which abolishes limits and erases frontiers, an art that has not ceased to grow in our eyes even as modern art was discovering new experiences, an art in which Rilke would one day celebrate the "natural density" and the "unparalleled necessity." The eighteenth century appreciated its gracefulness, which characterized that same epoch; in looking at these ancient frescoes today, we can find not only the great mythological machines admired by our seventeenth century, not only the little cupids dear to the age of iron, but also the rococo curios, the large flat images without the chiaroscuro of David, Ingres and even Renoir—in 1881 Renoir was overwhelmed at the sight of the frescoes at Pompeii, "so rich with so little." Though ancient, the frescoes never cease to reveal our modernity to us; after we have seen them, Balthus' flowers and the paintings of de Chirico become more familiar to us, the same de Chirico who liked to people his paintings with masks and porticoes and who was, in Munich, a student of the painter Böcklin, who did not hesitate to say that "although they were artisans, the Pompeian painters were perhaps greater than all the later painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries." <sup>30</sup> Even Klee's little squares help us to look at the deftly arranged panels of the third style with a new eye.

Hence in contemplating these frescoes painted two thousand years ago, we see the crumbling of the barriers usually separating the present from the past, the day-to-day and the eternal, life and death, speech and silence, representation and symbol, seeming and being, the instant and the lasting, matter and illusion, chaos and order, surface and depth, movement and immobility, appearance and essence, the human and the divine, the profane and the sacred, the visible and the invisible, the daily and the mythic. Dialogue is renewed, unity reestablished in the space of a glance. For a long time art could only be modern if this dialogue was broken, this unity shattered.

Today, in the era of the disillusion of postmodern art, we discover that this tale is perhaps not over.

*Translated by Sophie Hawkes*

## Notes

1. Report of colonel Alcubierre to S.M., the king of Naples and the Two Sicilies, April 6, 1748. The original text (in Spanish): G. Fiorelli, *Pompeianarum Antiquitatum Historia* (Naples, 1860), 2.
2. Letter VI, 16 and 20; see translation into French by A.M. Guillemin, Collection des universités de France 1927, 1967, Vol. II, 113-118 and 122-126.
3. Among the many "works of art" on this subject, see P. Grimal and E. Kossakowski, *Pompéi/Demeures secrètes* (Paris, 1992).
4. Reprinted in 1978, Ed. d' *Aujourd'hui, Plan de la Tour*, Vol. I, 166.
5. Letter to Henriette Renan, Jan. 10, 1859, book IX of the Calmann-Lévy Edition, edited by H. Psichari, 1251.
6. See André Chastel, *La Grottesque* (Paris 1988).
7. See texts 2a and 2b (Vitruve II, 8, 9, and Pliny, NH 35, 49) in: *Recueil Milliet* by A. Reinach (reprinted A. Rouveret (ed.) in *Textes grecs et latins relatifs à l'histoire de la peinture ancienne* (Paris, 1985).
8. "Lettre au Comte du Bruhl" (Paris, 1764), 30.
9. According to the statistics of Ch. Grell, *Herculaneum et Pompei dans les récits des voyageurs français du VIIIème siècle*, (Naples, 1982).
10. First of all, that of Mario Praz, *Histoire de la décoration d'intérieur: la philosophie de l'ameublement* (Paris, 1990), 159 (repr.).
11. (Paris, 1750).
12. All of this is carefully documented in the contribution of M. De Vos in Vol. II (p. 353-380) of the collective work *Memoria dell'antico nell'arte italiana* (Turin, 1985).
13. *Description historique et critique de l'Italie*, 1766, in: Ch. Grell, *op. cit.*, 159.
14. *Rome, Naples et Florence en 1817* (Del Litto, 1973), 56.
15. Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. XIV (Paris, 1984), 279.
16. Judgment passed in November 1763 (p. 193), reported in Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. XIII, (Paris, 1980) 362.
17. See the chapter "Les antiquités d'Herculanum" in *Goût néoclassique de Mario Praz*, (Paris, 1989), 97-119 (repr.).
18. *Correspondance inédite du Comte de Caylus*, quoted in Ch, Grell, *op. cit.*, 163.
19. *Voyage en Italie*, quoted in Karl Schefold, *La peinture Pompéienne. Essai sur l'évolution de sa signification* (Brussels, 1972), 20.
20. "Lettre au Comte de Bruhl."
21. *Voyage en Italie, op. cit.* Baudelaire would draw quite different conclusions from this smallness, "The lodgings at Pompeii are as big as a hand; the Indian ruins which cover the coast of Malabar bear witness to the same system. These great sensuous and wise peoples well knew the situation. Intimate sentiments are gathered at ease only in very narrow spaces." "La Fanfarlo," *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1961), 508.
22. Part III, second section, book VII, 17, ed. Levaillant (Paris, 1982) 368.
23. Notably on sites at Olynthus, Delos, Lafkaia, and, recently, Vergina and the Agora in Athens; see A Rouveret, *Histoire et imaginaire de la peinture ancienne* (Paris, 1985), 166.
24. E. Panofsky, *La perspective comme forme symbolique et autres essais* (Paris, 1975).
25. See A. Rouveret, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

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26. Point of view found in A. Rouveret, *op. cit.*, 212-219 (in reference to the second style).
27. See the handsome book by Ph. Heuzé, *Pompéi ou le bonheur de peindre* (Paris, 1990), 37.
28. *Les Jardins romains* (Paris, 1984), 98.
29. "The last day of his life [...] having gathered his friends around him, he asked them 'if they thought they had played the farce of life to its limits,' and added the well known conclusion: 'If the play pleased you, give it your applause. And, all together, let us know your joy.'" Sueton, *Vie d'Auguste*, 99. Nietzsche made the following comment on this episode: "An actor's vanity! An actor's chatter! The perfect counterpoint to the dying Socrates!" in: *Le Gai savoir*, 36 (Paris, 1982), 80.
30. Quoted in K. Schefold, *op. cit.*, 20.