

## **NATIONAL ROMAN MUSEUM OF PALAZZO MASSIMO**

The National Roman Museum -organized in the four buildings of Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Terme di Diocleziano, Palazzo Altemps and Crypta Balbi- originated from a project by Adriano La Regina and was realized by means of the sources from the special law for Roman antiquities of 1981. The National Roman Museum instituted in 1889 at the Terme di Diocleziano e del Chiostro di Santa Maria degli Angeli, it must served as the main state archaeological museum, in the new political climate of the Nation and of Rome as the Capital city thereof, after September 20th 1870.

The antiquities collection in the city, i.e. the Capitoline and Vatican Museums which originated during the time from the magnificent collections of the Popes, they were not property of Italian State, belonging one to the Municipality and the other to the Vatican State. There was the need to find firstly a suitable collocation for the collections which originated near the place of their findings –as the Palatine and the Tiber Museum- for the materials of Kircherian Museum and for all those works which were rediscovered by the excavations carried out throughout Rome, in order to fit its new role of Capital city; furthermore a place must be found for the collections and the donations which should have been acquired and organized in a place devoted to archaeological culture. The important and continuos discoveries within the city and the territor were so considerable to confirm the need for creating a National Museum: among the many, te paintings and the stuccoes of the so-called Villa Farnesina came into light during the works for Tiber embankments in 1879, are worthy to be mentioned. The paintings were transferred into the museum in 1946, together with those of the Villa Livia garden at Prima Porta. In 1982 was printed the first publication thereof by Irene Bragantini and Mariette de Vos. The time passed between the excavation and the complete edition of the discovery, more than 100 years, caused the lost and/or the dispersion of many archival documents, as observd by the authors, producing an extraordinary effort to collect the documentation wrote at the time of that discovery. This was a fundamental work in order to achieve the current appearence of the museal complex.

Nothing is left from the architectonic structures, whilst some frescoes, stuccoes and some mosaics floor which today are presented in their original appearence and sequence at the second floor of the National Roman Museum of Palazzo Massimo.

The refined manufacture of frescoes and stuccoes, the themes referring to Egypt conquest and to the augustean propaganda, the stylistic affinities with the houses of

Augustus and Livia on the Palatine Hill, suggest that the same pictorial workshop did them. The house overlooking the Tiber, built on many floors in a panoramic position, must be ascribable to the familiars of the first Roman Prince. Between the hypotheses, the most validated concerns Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, the winner of Actium battle against Marcus Anthony and Cleopatra, twice closely related with Augustus. The building of the Villa may hence date back to the first marriage of Agrippa with Claudia Marcella, the daughter of Antonia Minor, in 28 b.C. or, most probably, to the second one with Julia, in 19 b.C. To give the public a complete overview of the Villa, a tridimensional model was developed, rendering every room and the whole building as well, on the basis of the recovered rich decoration. The interior was completed by light effects and furniture according to those times. The rooms settlement and their relationship with the lacking parts was faced by simplyfying the decoration elements in order to recall the splendour of a guided tour.

## **FLOOR II - Room II**

### **Frescoes of the Livia's Villa at Prima Porta**

The suburban Villa of Livia Drusilla, third wife of Augustus, is located at the intersection between via Flaminia and ia Tiberina, on the tuff knoll of Prima Porta which dominates the Tiber plain. It was the favourite place of fun and leisure for the first family of the empire and it is related to mythic tales and to its *lauretum*, the thicket where laurels for triumphs were collected. Sunked into the green, it included fruit-trees and gardens as well as, private rooms and reception halls with a thermal bad area. It is known from the sources that Livia loved this property and that she dedicated herself in cultivate new plants species and to prepare by her own hands, healthy infusions. Also the Augustus' successors liked much the splendours and comforts of this Villa. Rediscovered in 1863 during the excavation promoted by the Senni Count on a site where the suburban Villa was already supposed to be. The frescoes were first preserved in situ; later due to the problems of water infiltrations and the damages of the second world war, they were detached and stored in 1953 in the Museo delle Terme di Diocleziano and then, 1998, in Palazzo Massimo.

The paintings adorned the wall of a big octagonal room, probably devoted, as many basement spaces of Roman houses, to housing the owners on summertime. That these latters should be Livia and her husband Octavianus Augustus, it is almost certain because of many hints: the exceptional quality of the pictorial decoration, the recovery within the area of a big armoured statue of the emperor (the so-called "Augustus of Prima Porta", today at the Vatican Museums) and, finally, the notice by several ancient historians about a Villa owned by Livia within Prima Porta territory.

The Villa was called *ad gallinas albas* for a wonder which took place in proximity of the wedding of the imperial couple: an eagle let fall into the lap of Livia a white chicken, tying in its beak a laurel branch. Following the haruspices suggestion, the chicken was ranched and a laurel wood was planted, where the branches used for triumphs were collected.

This is way the laurels appear always as the background to the rich paintings decoration of the halls. In the central zone one has the immediate illusion to be *en plein air*, within a luxurious blooming garden surrounding the space without any architectural edge. A reed fence below and a marble balustrade higher, enclosed a lawn plenty of flowers where the vegetal species are extremely precise depicted (23 plant species: laurels, roses, daisies, poppies, chamomile, quinces, pomegranate, myrtles, oleanders, pines, spruces, oaks and holly oaks; 69 species of birds: blackbirds, sparrows and doves). The representation of the elements according to different scales give the sensation of a spacial profoundness, whilst the tops of trees bending to the wind, seemed to enhance the realism.

The triclinium decoration of the Livia's Villa, is the first example of a genre, perhaps of Alexandrine origin, of a huge success within the Roman painting and belongs to the late second Pompeian style. Of few years later are the garden paintings stored in the Villa Farnesina and those of the Mecenate's Auditorium on the Esquiline Hill. The most abundant documents thereof can be found in the late phase of III style, between 25 and 35 a.C. The garden paintings remained up to date until the late antiquity. They were widely diffused within funeral contexts, certainly because of their ideological meaning: the garden as *loecus amoenus* becomes symbol of life pleasures, a privileged condition which is still glorified also within the death.

The subterranean space had a bottle vault decorated with stuccoes from which few is left. The ceiling must be coffered whose lower row is still visible on the longer side of the room. In this case, the alternation between white square framed with blue and other blue ones was preferred to a monochromatic style which was more common for the stuccoes within Republican age: the polychromatic style is enhanced by the dark red frames which roll up around the little stucco squares. The subjects are alternated too, according to the colours: on the blue background squares, there are Victories standing on candelabra, the same for every blue square; on the white ones instead, there are different subjects, some no longer recognizable due to the bad conservation conditions and to the loss of their upper part, but however similar for a sacred character. On the western wall, starting from left, two women can be distinguished on the sides of an altar; then a scene difficult to recognize, again with two feminine figures and a cage of doves in between; finally another feminine figure on a stool with a cherub. On the opposite wall, the entrance one, a square depicting lying Pan between a boy and a no longer recognizable figure can be noted and a second with a lyra and a flute players.

## THE CHARACTERS

**AUGUSTUS:** 31 b.C. the Actium battle against Anthony and Cleopatra; 27 b.C. the Senate conferred him the title of *Augustus*; 23 b.C. *Tribunicia Potestas*; 12 b.C. Pontefix Maximus. After the Actium battle, even if Rome was still a Republic, began the absolute power of Octavianus. Formally Augustus seemed not to deviate from the *mores maiorum*, the old structure of Republican organization became an imperial one which centralized on one's hand, the Emperor, all the power and the life-long assignment. Shortly, Rome was identified with Augustus, the winner of Actium, the *Pater patriae* idealized and celebrated in every figurative art: he was equated to Jupiter, Mars and Apollo; still living he was divinised among the eastern population while in Italy were venerated the *Lares Augusti*, protectors of Roman population. He was depicted as an enlightened and intelligent man although reserved and mysterious; he was a model for the contemporaries also in his way of life, always worried about the difficult mission he had as the supreme commander of the wide Roman Empire. The Augustan age is indeed a new and significant stage both for the Roman history and the Roman art as well, being included, this latter, within the total change framework which occurred for political, economical and religious State organization. He and his minister Agrippa conducted a modern urban and building policy thanks to many works of public interest (fora, temples, bridges, theaters, *termae*). For what concerns the art, Augustus gave his patronage according to a precise political project which gave to art the function of enhancing the traditional values, developing trends which were already present in the last centuries of Republic. The Roman art at that time was deeply influenced by the Greek one; after the conquests made in Greece and in the East, also the first Greek texts reached Rome. From the abstract, mythological representation the art moved to the historic fact really occurred: i.e. the historical representation of emperor's life. From here, stem that Roman pictorial tradition whose precedents can be found in the eastern Hellenistic world and although known as "Pompeian" from the big amount of documents coming from the towns destroyed by the Vesuvius in 79 a.C. has in Rome its radiating centre.

II Style: the Roman painters developed and adapted previous experiences. The eye broadens over idyllic landscapes and scenes of Alexandrine origin; the wall houses figurative frames and mythological scenes of classical inspiration; according to a new Roman sense of space, where the wall is illusorily opened towards real landscapes and real architectural elements together with garden paintings. Within the Augustan decorative fashion, there is the trend to paint "monstra" of senseless and unrealistic forms –as complained by Vitruvius- thinning the columns like candelabra stems. The so-called "maniera" which characterizes the second style painting, finds its finest expression within the pictorial cycle in the Augustan "Palatina Domus". The residence which the future emperor made build on the Palatine Hill, before the Actium victory and the beginning of his uncontested dominion.

**LIVIA:** Livia Drusilla, daughter of Marcus Livius Drusus Claudianus. On 17 January 38 b.C. she became the third wife of Octavianus, not yet honoured by the Augustus title. They both were just divorced. Scribonia, his previous wife, had just gave birth to Julia and Livia was six months pregnant of her previous husband Tiberius Claudius Nero. She had lovely appearance, with big eyes and little mouth, the perfect woman for Octavianus personifying all the virtues of the Roman matron: respectable, devoted to her house, not prone to luxury. In her house on the Palatine Hill, refined for its position and its pictorial decorations, but not opulent, the two children from her previous husband grew up together with Julia who Augustus generated with Scribonia. Within the Augustean project to reorganized the Roman life under each regard, aiming at order, efficiency and virtue, Livia was the paradigm of feminine virtues so much that Octavianus gave her special honours: the title of *univira*, wife of a single man despite the previous union and the *sacrosanctitas* which posed her above every woman, even of the Vestal virgins: nobody could aggress them nor offend as it happened with the common people.

In the sculpture it is assimilated to generous and healthy goddess: Ceres, goddess of agriculture, and Ops goddess of abundance; in the temples devoted to her, outside the city, she was venerated like Cybele goddess of the earth, and like Juno, mother of the goddess. The feminine figure next the emperor, acquired an important role almost like him, as protector of the population and guarantor of their wealth.

She perceived, in agreement with her husband, the succession of her son Tiberius and to obtain it, it seemed that she used also fraudulent manners as perhaps the murder of the Julia's sons Gaius and Lucius.

Tiberius, after his election showed deference and even gratitude: he made forge coins with the image of Livia and Augustus and of Livia represented as *Pietas* and *Salus* but later suspended his relationships with her, being absent also at her funeral. Livia died 86 years old on 29 a.C.