

# Landscape paintings in the Villa of Oplontis

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In 1964 excavation began at the Villa of Oplontis, located in the town of Torre Annunziata, near Pompeii. Although the villa belonged in its last phase to a member of the *gens Poppaea*, a wealthy clan with extensive landholdings in Pompeii, the nucleus of the villa dates to about 40 B.C.<sup>1</sup> About 30 years later, around 10 B.C., the villa received substantial additions that occasioned the redecoration of many of its rooms. The third building phase, around A.D. 45, extended the villa to the east, adding, among other features, a 60-m swimming pool.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 documents the areas excavated through 1978, when investigations came to a halt. Landscapes of various sizes and shapes — all playing different rôles in their decorative ensembles — appear in each phase. In Mau's terminology, these wall decorations belong to the mature Second Style, the early Third Style, and the early Fourth Style.

Many Romanists have studied landscape painting, emphasizing various aspects of its genesis, development, and meaning.<sup>3</sup> This study does not rehearse the polemics surrounding landscape, nor does it propose new interpretations of this fascinating genre. There are, however, clear advantages to studying all the landscape paintings at Oplontis: this villa is unique both in the large number and the clear dates of its landscapes. Most importantly, all of these paintings are still *in situ*, allowing the scholar to consider the spatial and decorative contexts surrounding the landscape paintings.

The principal goals of this article are: 1) to publish fully all the landscape paintings at Oplontis, providing photographs and drawings where necessary; 2) to describe the decorative functions of these landscapes within the painted walls that surround them; 3) to examine the artists' procedures in composing the landscapes; and 4) to question the meanings these landscapes may have had for the ancient Roman viewer, and especially for the successive patrons who commissioned them as part of decorative schemes that span 85 years of the villa's life.

## Landscape paintings of the Second Style (Cat. nos. 1-14)

Oplontis is best known for its mature Second Style painting of c.40 B.C. The artists incorporated three different types of landscapes into these decorations: framed panels, imitations of marble reliefs, and vignettes simulating views 'behind' the wall. There are three framed panels. One appears above the fictive door that forms the focus of the atrium's west wall decoration, the other two are in *oecus* 15, where the painter included representations of two tiny blue monochrome seascapes that seem to rest high up on a *trompe l'oeil* ledge. There are six imitation reliefs, identified as such by the flat borders around their perimeters that represent the drafting edges in actual marble reliefs. Five of these are the yellow monochrome panels that constitute the primary decoration in the anteroom area of *triclinium* 14. The sixth, in blue, forms the central picture on the west wall of *oecus* 23. There were originally at least six views

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1 De Franciscis (1975) 9-10.

2 Clarke (1987) 267-94.

3 For a comprehensive bibliography to 1983, see Leach (1988) 470-82. Rostovtzeff posited a division between sacral-idyllic and villa landscapes based on his interpretations of their meanings; recently G. Sauron, "Discours symbolique et formes décoratives à Rome à l'époque augustéenne: problèmes de méthode," *MEFRA* 94 (1982) 699-713 attached philosophic and political meanings to landscapes, further developed in Sauron (1994); S. Silberberg-Pierce, "Politics and private imagery: the sacral-idyllic landscapes," *Art History* 3 (1980) 1-24 has cast them as propagandistic. Other scholars, including R. Ling, "Studiis and the beginnings of Roman landscape painting," *JRS* 67 (1977) 1-16; Peters (1963), Leach (1988), and Bergmann (1991), have proposed an *ad hoc* genesis for landscapes, with artists using preexisting formulae to compose them.