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Elaine K. Gazda and John R. Clarke, eds.

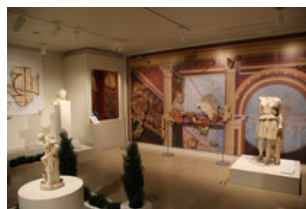
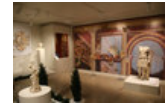
Leisure and Luxury in the Age of Nero: The Villas of Oplontis Near Pompeii

Exh. cat. Kelsey Museum Publication (Book 14). Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum Publications, 2016. 288 pp. Paperback \$25.97 (9780990662341)

Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Ann Arbor, Michigan, February 19–May 15, 2016; Museum of the Rockies at the Montana State University, June 18–December 31, 2016; Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, Massachusetts, February 3–August 13, 2017

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Installation view, *Leisure and Luxury in the Age of Nero: The Villas of Oplontis Near Pompeii*, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Ann Arbor, Michigan, February 19–May 15, 2016 (photograph © 2016; provided by Kelsey Museum)

The raison d'être for the publication of *Leisure and Luxury in the Age of Nero: The Villas of Oplontis near Pompeii* was the traveling exhibition of the same name organized by Elaine Gazda and John Clarke at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology of the University of Michigan, with additional venues at Montana State University and Smith College Museum of Art (where this reviewer saw the exhibition in February 2017). Without the exhibition, it is unlikely that a new and lavishly illustrated book on the Oplontis villas would have been published (and certainly not at such an attractive price), and so we must be grateful for the exhibition, even if the objects displayed are, on the whole, far less interesting than the villas themselves—an unfair comparison, of course, given that the villas, especially Villa A, are spectacular to visit, and portable minor finds can never compete with grandiose frescoes and colonnaded gardens seen

against the backdrop of the Bay of Naples.

For me, the most noteworthy objects in the exhibition were the trio of marble heads of Venus, a boy (possibly Nero), and a Tiberian woman from Garden 36 of Villa A (cat. nos. 34, 37, and 38) in which the juxtaposition of the boy and woman with Venus suggests that the two mortals may be Julio-Claudian descendants of the goddess); a densely decorated Hellenistic strongbox from Villa B (cat. no. 143) signed in Greek by three members of the workshop of Heraclides—clearly a highly valued heirloom in 79 CE as well as a necessity for the businessman-owner of the villa; and an expertly constructed small model of Oplontis A with the frescoes reproduced in miniature on the walls, displayed directly beneath a plan with all of the rooms numbered so that visitors to the exhibition could easily correlate the model with the numbered plan. The scores of painted stucco moldings and fresco fragments do not remotely conjure the magnificence of the Oplontis decorative mural program, but those from Oecus 15 were effectively set against a reconstruction of the full Second Style scheme, as were some Fourth Style ceiling fragments on a white ground. The miscellaneous finds of jewelry and coins in the exhibition helped to suggest the wealth of the Roman owners, but they were not especially informative on their own. Most successful to my mind was the reconstruction (at reduced size) of Cubiculum 11 of Villa A with two modern *klinai* in the two alcoves, each couch provided with a sample copy of the catalogue thoughtfully placed there for visitors to sit and read about the exhibition as if transported to Oplontis—a clever idea that also encouraged viewers of the exhibition to learn about the larger context of the finds in the introductory essays of the catalogue.

Indeed, *Leisure and Luxury in the Age of Nero* devotes far more space to the two Oplontis villas than to the miscellaneous finds assembled for the traveling exhibition. Villa A, constructed around 50 BCE during the Late Republic, was owned at the time of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE by Poppaea, second wife of Nero (r. 54–68). It is a vast structure with columnar porticos, dozens of rooms, private thermal facilities, gardens, an immense fish pool, and servants' quarters. When first excavated in the 1960s and published by Alfonso De Franciscis (*The Pompeian Wall Paintings in the Roman Villa of Oplontis* [Recklinghausen: Bongers, 1975]), the villa instantly attracted both popular and scholarly interest because of its extensive series of Second Style murals, which rival or exceed in number and quality those of Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries and Boscoreale's Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor. Subsequent excavation has revealed that many Third and Fourth Style murals were added

as the villa expanded in size. The villa epitomizes the life of cultivated leisure (*otium*) on the Bay of Naples enjoyed by the Roman elite of the Late Republic and Early Empire, a phenomenon to which John D'Arms first drew attention in his seminal book *Romans on the Bay of Naples: A Social and Cultural Study of the Villas and Their Owners from 150 BC to AD 400* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). Much less well known even today is Villa B, which was a working villa that produced income from the production of wine for its last owner, Lucius Crassius Tertius. It too had three major building phases during the last century BCE and the first century CE.

The enduring value of *Leisure and Luxury in the Age of Nero* will not be the exhibition or its catalogue but the series of essays that make up the bulk of the volume, beginning with Gazda's very useful overview of villa life on the Bay of Naples ("Villas on the Bay of Naples: The Ancient Setting of Oplontis," 30–45), which includes short sections on the Villa of the Mysteries and that of Publius Fannius Synistor as well as on the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum and two villas at Stabiae (San Marco and Arianna). There follow chapters on geology and the Vesuvian eruption by Nayla Kabazi Montasser and Giovanni di Maio ("The Geological Landscape of Oplontis and the Eruption of Mount Vesuvius," 48–56); and most welcome accounts by Clarke ("From the Archives to the Field: Revisiting Villa A and Oplontis B," 57–76) of his fieldwork at Oplontis begun in 1983 and ongoing, and by Ivo van der Graaff ("Ten Seasons of Excavation at Oplontis," 66–71) on the 2006–15 seasons. A short chapter by Clarke, Richard Beachem, Andrew Coulson, Timothy Liddell, and Marcus Abbott ("Digital Imaging at Oplontis," 72–75) describes their admirable efforts at harnessing digital imaging to bring the Oplontis villas to life in the twenty-first century.

These general chapters set the stage for many more treating individual aspects of Villas A and B: a sensitive analysis by Michael Thomas ("Framing Views in Villa A: From the Late Republic to the Age of Nero," 78–84) of the efforts by the architects of Villa A to provide its owners with "rooms with a view"; a brief overview of the frescoes of Villa A by Regina Gee ("Layered Histories: The Wall Painting Styles and Painters of Villa A," 85–95); an analysis of the gardens and garden paintings of Villa A by Bettina Bergmann ("The Gardens and Garden Paintings of Villa A," 96–110) and of Villa A's marbles (real and illusionistic) by Lynley McAlpine ("Luxury in Fantasy and Reality: Exotic Marble in Villa A," 111–18) and by Simon Barker and Clayton Fant ("Marble Floors and Paneled Walls in the East Wing of Villa A" and "The Cost of Luxury: Procurement and Labor for the Marble Décor of Villa A," 119–35). In the thirteenth chapter, Gazda discusses the sculptural finds from Villa A ("Mutable Meanings in the Sculpture from Villa A," 136–147), followed by a valuable discussion by Sandra Joshel and Lauren Petersen ("Thinking about Roman Slaves at Villa A," 148–57) of the role of slaves at that villa. (Most discussions of Roman villas pay almost exclusive attention to their wealthy owners and their art collections, jewels, and silver tableware.)

The final three essays are devoted to Villa B and wine production on the Bay of Naples (Thomas, "Oplontis B and the Wine Industry in the Vesuvian Area," 160–65), on trade and consumption (Jennifer Muslin, "Working and Living in Oplontis B"), and on the finds of skeletons and jewelry (Courtney Ward, "Luxury, Adornment, and Identity: The Skeletons and Jewelry from Oplontis B," 171–77).

The publication quality is high throughout, and the price is unbeatable for a volume packed with color photographs and plans. Gazda, Clarke, and their colleagues deserve our congratulations and gratitude.

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