

# Escapism and the Sublime: The Meanings of Illusionism in Livia's Garden Paintings

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## Abstract

*The wall paintings decorating the dining hall in the villa of Livia, Emperor Augustus' wife, depict an abundant orchard with many species of trees, flowers, and birds in a quiet and peaceful setting. Although the style is very naturalistic and mimetic, what one sees is a combination of plants and fruit trees not normally in season together, endowing this orchard with a paradisiacal nature. The picturesque naturalism of the depictions has led scholars to interpret it as a reflection of calm and peace in relation both to the atmosphere under the reign of Emperor Augustus, and to his rehabilitation of the Republic and the spirit of moral renewal he established. Thus, this paradisiacal orchard has been perceived as a reflection of the Augustan Golden Age, the peace achieved after a terrible war, and a return to the traditional values and morals. Indeed, Augustus could well be proud of his achievements. However, a question arises regarding the true nature of the peace and prosperity claimed by Augustus, since it is well attested by researchers of Roman history that hunger and war were still present in many parts of the empire. Augustus employed both economic and social manipulation in order to control the people, and his approach led to an escapist state of mind by the people, as reflected in the concept panem et circenses coined by Juvenal. Such escapism was typical to the Roman disposition and was further nurtured and intensified by the Roman emperors. The present study focuses on a prominent picturesque feature in Livia's "garden" paintings – illusionism, which is manifested in several aspects. This visual illusionism suggests a reflection of a mental illusionism: namely, the illusory and delusive atmosphere and the escapist spirit generated by Emperor Augustus.*

**Keywords:** Illusionism, Augustan regime, Panem et Circenses, Religious experience, Escapism.

## Introduction

The wall paintings that once decorated the dining hall in the villa built for Livia (58 BCE – 29 CE), the wife of Emperor Augustus (63 BCE – 19 CE), which are exhibited in the Palazzo Massimo museum (Illustrations 1-11), continue to attract both art lovers and researchers. The decorated villa was situated outside Rome in a small village called Prima Porta.<sup>1</sup>

The paintings depict an orchard abounding in trees, flowers, and birds in a quiet and peaceful atmosphere, against a background of an opaque turquoise-azure sky. The wide and dense composition generates an overall impression of vitality and prosperity. The garden is enclosed by two fences: a woven fence along the front plane, bordering a narrow green area; and another fence, of stone, as if the garden is not meant to be accessible to all. Amongst the trees can be discerned spruce, conifer, oak, pine, cypress, pomegranate, quince, oleander, laurel, myrtle, and beech; while the flowers and plants include roses, poppies, chrysanthemums, violets, ivy, irises, ferns, and acanthus. The birds perched on the bushes and ground are depicted with great precision and can be identified as pigeon, quail, blackbird, thrush, oriolus (golden bird), crow, nightingale, and sparrow. The overall portrayal offers an impossible combination of plants and fruit trees not normally in season

<sup>1</sup> The paintings are dated to ca. 20 BCE, and they probably decorated all four walls in the dining hall, which measured about 12 m long and 6 m wide. The paintings are exhibited at the Palazzo Massimo museum in Rome. See: Amadeo Maiuri, *Roman Painting*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Geneva: Skira), 1953, 126; Karl Scheffold, "Origins of Roman Landscape Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (June 1960): 87; Roger Ling, *Roman Painting* (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press), 1991, 150; Annette Lucia Giesecke, "Beyond the Garden of Epicurus: The Utopias of the Ideal Roman Villa," *Utopian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2001), 22; Giulia Caneva, "Ipotesi sul Significato Simbolico del Giardino Dipinto della Villa di Livia (Prima Porta, Roma)," *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 100 (1999), 63; Rafael Agosti Torres, "El Jardín Pintado de la Villa de Livia en Prima Porta," [https://www.academia.edu/35940445/EL\\_JARDIN%C3%8DN\\_PINTADO\\_DE\\_LA\\_VILLA\\_DE\\_LIVIA\\_EN\\_PRIMA\\_PORTA](https://www.academia.edu/35940445/EL_JARDIN%C3%8DN_PINTADO_DE_LA_VILLA_DE_LIVIA_EN_PRIMA_PORTA) (no page numbers).

together, but here blooming simultaneously, as if a botanical catalogue.<sup>2</sup> It is this very feature that seems to confer upon this orchard its dreamy and paradisiacal nature. This portrayal has led scholars to interpret it as a reflection of the rule and order under the Golden Age of Emperor Augustus' reign: the rehabilitation of the Republic; the atmosphere of moral renewal and order that Augustus established, mostly in the field of family life and marriage; the peace achieved after a terrible war; and a return to traditional values and morals.<sup>3</sup> The style of the paintings has been interpreted in relation to Ataraxia in Epicurean philosophy, and the garden as *otium* – a place of tranquillity.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Augustus could be justly proud of a series of achievements, having put an end to the civil wars and achieved control of Roman social morality by means of well-planned legislation.<sup>5</sup> The poet Horatius was invited to compose the poetry for the Roman religious celebrations - the Ludi Saeculares, through which Augustus sought to spread his message: due to the emperor and his efforts the Roman Empire had entered an era of peace. Hence the poetry was intended to glorify the peace made by Augustus with the Parthians, and proclaimed that under the leadership of Augustus the old and sacred values of Rome would return: loyalty (*fides*), peace (*pax*), honour (*honor*), and modesty (*pudor*).<sup>6</sup> As noted by Kellum, Livia's dining hall was intended for the eyes not only of the imperial family, but also for those of selected visitors. Thus, together with Augustus' triumphal statue, the paintings convey the message of his magnificent rule.<sup>7</sup> Kellum concludes her study by noting that, for the Roman viewer, the play between the real and the fictive often served as the most poignant intensifier of visual pleasure, and that these landscapes were integral to the system of meaning that constituted the mythology of Augustan Rome.<sup>8</sup>

A question arises, however, regarding the true nature of the peace and prosperity claimed by Augustus. In fact, hunger and war still reigned in many parts of the empire.<sup>9</sup> It seems that much of the purported peaceful atmosphere of the Augustan period was more a kind of illusion, detached from reality. The present study focuses on a prominent artistic feature in Livia's garden paintings – illusionism, which is manifested in several aspects. This visual illusionism would seem to be a reflection of the general illusory atmosphere generated by Emperor Augustus.

Four types of artistic illusionism can be discerned:

1. Mimesis - the visual imitation of images from nature is mimetic to the point of the merging of senses: one can almost hear the rustle of the tree branches in the breeze, and smell the blossoms. The expressive quality of the branches and leaves is very expressive. This imitation of nature offers an illusion of abundance and prosperity.<sup>10</sup>
2. Realism in the sense of the imitation of specific different, realistic, discernible species of plants, flowers, and birds. The co-existence of species normally not in season together creates the illusion of a paradisiacal place overflowing with eternal goodness.
3. An optical illusion focusing on the diffused turquoise-azure sky in the background of the orchard. This depiction does not offer a linear perspective in the Renaissance sense. However, the diffused deep colour and the large area of this background behind the dense vegetation generates an illusory effect of an endless paradise, as if nothing else exists beyond this vast tranquil expanse.
4. Symmetrical composition with a tree as a central axis on each wall. This composition generates an illusion of a world of equilibrium and harmony.<sup>11</sup>

The connection between mimesis and illusionism brings to mind the famous fable by Pliny. The fable tells of the painter Zeuxis who invited his colleague Parrhasius to a painting

<sup>2</sup> Ling, *Roman Painting*, 150; Maiuri, *Roman Painting*, 117-120; Torres, "El Jardin Pintado," (no page no.); Barbara A. Kellum, "The Construction of Landscape in Augustan Rome: the Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas," *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 2 (June 1994): 221; for a comprehensive study of the symbolism of all sorts of the plants in Livia's Garden see: Caneva, "Ipotesi sul Significato," 65-66.

<sup>3</sup> Giesecke, "Beyond the Garden of Epicurus," 20, 23, 27; Kellum, "The Construction of Landscape," 216, 223.

<sup>4</sup> Giesecke, "Beyond the Garden of Epicurus," 18.

<sup>5</sup> Zvi Yavetz, *Augustus: The Victory of Moderation* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1988), 307-312.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Kellum, "The Construction of Landscape," 224.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 224.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Gallinsky, *Augustan Culture: an Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 120.

<sup>10</sup> For the symbolism of fertility in specific species see: Caneva, "Ipotesi sul Significato," 76.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 75; Torres, "El Jardin Pintado," (no page no.).

competition. Zeuxis painted grapes so vital and vivid that he deceived the birds into perceiving the grapes as real, and they tried to peck at them. Highly satisfied, Zeuxis then invited his friend the painter Parrhasius to reveal his skills. Parrhasius remained silent, and when he was urged to remove the curtain in order to expose his work, he amazed everyone by the fact that the curtain was in effect the painting. Zeuxis then admitted his friend's victory.<sup>12</sup> The superiority of Parrhasius over Zeuxis was not due to his technical skills however, since both painters were masters. Had Zeuxis also painted a curtain, he would probably have done so no less perfectly than Parrhasius. Parrhasius' victory was due to his brilliant idea, of the sort also conceived by Marcel Duchamp. Indeed, the conceptual matter was considered to be superior to that of the technical in Antiquity, as can be deduced also from a text by Philostratus. He praises a portrayal of roses, not because of its loyalty to the imitation of nature, since, as he determines, that is not so hard to achieve; but because of its refinement and delicacy, which is the subjective interpretation of the artist.<sup>13</sup>

This fable of Zeuxis and Parrhasius supports my contention here that the mimesis and illusionism in Livia's garden paintings are actually used as a device to convey messages.

Their picturesque mimesis and illusionism seemingly reflect the atmosphere of tranquillity and prosperity that Emperor Augustus sought to convey and hence an illusion of peace and abundance. As noted above, the premise of this article is that the artistic illusionism is a reflection of a mental illusionism: namely, the Roman escapist spirit in the time of Augustus. Escapism was a typical Roman approach to life, nurtured and intensified by the emperors. Augustus, who is considered perhaps as the most moral of the Roman emperors, nonetheless employed both economic and social manipulations in order to control the people, and thus encouraged an escapist state of mind. Religious ritual involved a similar escapism, promising an illusion of merging with the divine and of everlasting happiness. The following discussion will thus be based on an analysis of two aspects: the social, regarding the policy instituted by Augustus; and the religious,

regarding the people's aspiration in Antiquity to experience the sublime.

### Social Escapism: Illusions and Augustan Policy

No doubt, according to the ancient writers, Augustus deserved the title of "Father of the land" (*Pater Patriae*): he was the Guardian of Liberty (*conservator libertatis*); he put an end to the war that had seen such terrible slaughter and anger; he was known for his "apparent" mercy (*clementia*); he made peace; and he regulated the Roman family life and marriage customs (*conservator Romani nominis*).<sup>14</sup>

Augustus was an emperor whose positions and authority exceeded those of any other emperor, with almost all of the existing powers being concentrated in his hands. For example: he was *Princeps* – "first among equals"; *Princeps Senatus* – the first senator; the sole individual responsible for the grain supply; the person responsible for the roads; *Pontifex Maximus* – "the greatest priest"; and *Pater Patriae* – "Father of the land".<sup>15</sup> The cult in honour of Augustus became the focus of most of the citizen's religious activities and developed into a state cult.<sup>16</sup> The inhabitants of the eastern provinces perceived Augustus as a god and even gave him the title *Theos*, in gratitude for his putting an end to the civil wars.<sup>17</sup>

Suetonius and Cassius Dio considered Augustus to be the founder of the Roman peace (*Pax Romana*), as explained by Yavetz, because he allegedly ended the civil wars within the borders of the empire, while resisting further conquests.<sup>18</sup> However, as noted by Yavetz, because Suetonius and Cassius Dio were not contemporaries of Augustus, they could not actually have known what secret imperial decisions were truly taken, and their approach to Augustus was one of nostalgia. Although it is common to perceive the years of Augustus' reign as peaceful and calm, this period was nonetheless witness to bloody wars in both

<sup>12</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. Harris Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938-1962), 35. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Philostratus, *Imagines*, trans. Arthur Fairbanks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931), 1. 2; Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 20.

<sup>14</sup> Yavetz, *Augustus*, 219-220; Horace, *The Odes*, trans. David R. Slavitt (Madison, Wisconsin; London, England: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 4. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Yavetz, *Augustus*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 71-72.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 72.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 192.

Eastern and Western Europe.<sup>19</sup> There were still constant struggles taking place between the Romans and the occupied regions, with occasional losses to the Roman army. Such was the fight against the Germanic tribes in the Teutoburg forest, in which the tribes brutally murdered the Roman soldiers and abused their corpses.<sup>20</sup> As discussed by Yavetz, Augustus, the pursuer of peace, actually annexed more territories to the Roman Empire than Julius Caesar, who was considered a warlord and conqueror: whereas Julius Caesar annexed only Gaul, Augustus annexed Egypt, Rhaetia, Noricum, Pannonia and Moesia. Augustus considerably expanded the empire's frontiers, and subdued the nations that opposed him. His armies drew blood on sea and land, subdued nations in the Alps, and expanded the Empire across the Rhine, the Danube, and the Prat.<sup>21</sup> Yavetz has shown the expression "*pax romana*" to have been highly subjective, since Augustus himself admitted that peace was obtained through victory on the battlefield and that he used political trickery; the word "*pax*" was simply a political slogan, and wars of occupation and annexation continued to take place throughout his reign.<sup>22</sup> As contended by Syme, '*pax*' was never detached from conquest, and it was Rome's imperial design to compel the conquered nations to live at peace, with clemency towards its own Roman subjects, and suppression of the rest.<sup>23</sup>

As a great conqueror, Augustus was titled by Ovidius – "Lord of the Universe" (*terrarium dominus*). In the year 12 or 13 BCE Augustus was considered to be the ruler of the whole universe (*rector orbis terrarium*).<sup>24</sup>

According to Tacitus, following five civil wars Augustus had gained the reputation of a cruel avenger, selfish and treacherous, and he needed to alter this impression. Cassius Dio noted that the cruelty of the young Augustus (born Octavian, heir to his adoptive father, Julius Caesar) had been well known, and, in the years that followed the battle of Actium, he took the trouble to reinvent his image to that of a merciful ruler. Later on, as an emperor, Augustus

wished to reinvent his image from that of a cruel tyrant to the Father of the Fatherland (*pater patria*), the first among the civilians (*princeps civium*), and he who "brings health and benefits" (*salubris princeps*).<sup>25</sup> This led to his new image as a great personality and a great leader as characterized in the famous statue at Prima Porta, and his image too as a priest (*pontifex maximus*).<sup>26</sup> The image of Augustus as a great leader and a peacemaker is celebrated in the monumental Ara Pacis Augustae altar. This monument was dedicated by the Roman senate in celebration of the peace achieved by Augustus following his victories in Gaul and Spain.<sup>27</sup> The images on the exterior of the altar are symbolic and can be interpreted on several levels. In general, they symbolize the cosmic dominance of Emperor Augustus and the policy of peace and prosperity (*Pax Romana*) that he sought to establish.<sup>28</sup>

Yavetz discusses at length the various positions held by Augustus and concludes that he was able to manipulate with extraordinary skill the different social strata, becoming highly popular with everyone – common people and senators alike; while also establishing the impression of being a moderate, modest, and self-controlled individual.<sup>29</sup>

Augustus' cruelty was nonetheless notorious. He was extremely brutal, cruel to his opponents, and executed people without mercy. High-ranking individuals whom he considered a threat to him were brutally punished, sometimes by Augustus himself.<sup>30</sup>

Augustus vowed to avenge the assassination of Julius Caesar, and in order to do so he violated agreements; betrayed and abandoned friends; and stuck to his goal systematically and cruelly. For example, he ordered that Brutus' head be cut off and placed at the feet of Julius Caesar's statue; and the words "*moriendum esse*" ("He must die") are

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 82; Gallinsky, *Augustan Culture*, 120. Suetonius was a contemporary of Emperor Hadrian, while Cassius Dio was a contemporary of the Severan Emperors.

<sup>20</sup> Yavetz, *Augustus*, 186.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 193, 195.

<sup>22</sup> See table of wars and battles: *Ibidem*, 193-194.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 304.

<sup>24</sup> Yavetz, *Augustus*, 191.

<sup>25</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, trans. Cynthia Damon (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 1. 10; Cassius Dio, *Dio's Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary (London: W. Heinemann, 1914-1927), 56. 44. Ivar Lissner, *The Caesars: Might and Madness* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1958), 79; Yavetz, *Augustus*, 208, 211; Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 316.

<sup>26</sup> Yavetz, *Augustus*, 211-213, Diana Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 63-65.

<sup>27</sup> The altar is monumental, over 11 m long, over 6 m high, and on exhibit today in a museum in Rome designed specifically for the monument. See: Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, figs. 79-80.

<sup>28</sup> For a description and interpretation of the Ara Pacis see: Diana Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 90-99; Stefan Weinstock, "Pax and the Ara Pacis", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960): 44-58.

<sup>29</sup> Yavetz, *Augustus*, 43-53.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, 26-27.

attributed to him when one of his rivals begged him to spare his life.<sup>31</sup>

Augustus forbade the senators to visit Egypt without his permission and, according to Tacitus, this was because he wanted to prevent others from access to the treasures of Egypt in order to preserve them for himself and to demonstrate his "generosity" to certain soldiers and senators.<sup>32</sup> Tacitus reports that Augustus "bought" the soldiers with gifts, and the people with grain and entertainments.<sup>33</sup>

Between the years 36-23 BCE, Augustus made considerable efforts to restore his image as the Roman people's "friend". Most of his favours to the Roman plebeians were by way of distribution of money derived from the spoils of war, gifts from his private property, and food and grain at either public expense (*frumentum publicum*) or at his own expense.<sup>34</sup> Suetonius remarked that the multitude and diversity of popular amusements that Augustus supplied to the masses surpassed everything his predecessors had done.<sup>35</sup> Augustus himself noted a particular gladiatorial games event he had organized, in which ten thousand gladiators fought in the circus in front of the masses, and 3,500 animals were slaughtered, to the cheers of the enthusiastic spectators. Augustus operated dozens of guard units to protect the people from burglars and thieves while the citizens were spending their time at the circus. Moreover, in order to avoid overcrowding he ordered that the games would take place simultaneously in different quarters of the city. To integrate those residents of the city who did not speak the Roman language, Augustus also made sure that actors would perform in different languages in the different boroughs of the city. Augustus himself enjoyed the spectacles, sometimes accompanied by his wife and children, and he would mingle in the crowd.<sup>36</sup> As a consequence, he became known as a kind (*clementia*) and generous (*liberalitas*) ruler, who nonetheless prevented every other individual except for himself from becoming a benefactor of the masses: for example, he got rid of Egnatius Rufus who had established a firefighting force.<sup>37</sup>

However, his donations of money and grain, the lowering of dwelling rents and interest payments, concern for water supply, construction of roads, temples, theatres and baths, were not an outcome of a social-humanist policy, which was a viewpoint alien to the ancient world. Rather, Augustus sought by this to establish his public image as a benign emperor: "*In cunctos liberalissimus, in amicos fidissimus*" ("Very generous with his friends"). Augustus indeed became greatly admired and was considered as the defender of the people (*defensor plebis*). Yavetz notes that Augustus increased the awarding of grants, benefits, and entertainment close to the events for which the *Princeps* needed the goodwill of the plebeians.<sup>38</sup> The self-indulgent and pleasure-seeking atmosphere generated by this policy was defined, as noted above, as *panem et circenses*, aimed at distracting the ordinary people from involvement in state affairs. Indeed, the Roman plebeians were described as a mob and a bunch of idlers whose only interest was the circus.<sup>39</sup>

One very important factor that contributed to establishing the escapist atmosphere, and is alien to the modern view, that is of slavery. Indeed, any society in which slavery is an integral part has always denied the existence of human suffering and loss of humanity, and hence resulted in an escapist atmosphere.

This is well attested by the laws enacted by Augustus: masters continued to control their slaves even after their release. The release of a slave involved good will on the part of the master, since he had to pay a release tax to the state treasury. Although the slave then became a free person, he was still not recognized as a citizen of the state by the authorities. The slave was not listed in the civil list and could be returned to slave status. Augustus also regulated the release of slaves through a series of laws that restricted their integration into society and prevented the "contamination" of Roman blood with foreign blood, as attributed to slaves. Augustus demanded that his heirs too would restrict the number of freed slaves in order to avoid a large presence of mobs and foreigners, and to maintain the separation between rulers and ruled, masters and servants. Yavetz concludes that Augustus became a model for the

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, 230.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, 27-28; Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.59.

<sup>33</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 1. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Yavetz, *Augustus*, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, trans. Catharine Edwards (Oxford: University Press, 2000), Augustus 43-45.

<sup>36</sup> Yavetz, *Augustus*, 141.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, 142.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, 143; Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 322-323.

<sup>39</sup> Juvenal, *The Satires of Juvenal*, trans. Hubert Creekmore (New York: Mentor, 1963), X. 72; Otto Kiefer, *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1941), 5.

proper manner of treating slaves; and that the Augustan principate was nothing but a disguised dictatorship aimed at preserving the institution of slavery.<sup>40</sup> Yavetz also noted that Roman society was prejudiced, treated slaves as "talking tools", and even the freed slaves were at a disadvantage when confronting native Roman citizens.<sup>41</sup> This reinforces the understanding of the atmosphere generated by Augustus as an illusion of an enlightened and moderate regime. Hypocrisy was a skill in which Augustus was a master. The *Princeps* never made a firm commitment, always preferring vague answers. Hypocrisy was a prominent feature of his personality, and profoundly influenced his regime. He argued that the art of speech (*eloquentia*) manifests itself in concealment rather than in its outward demonstration (*abscondere*), while pretending outwardly that he did not mean the violation of free speech. Augustus' policy was to hold onto as much power as possible, without displaying his approach as such; and he did not consider hypocrisy to be wrong.<sup>42</sup>

Hypocrisy as a way of life is consistent with the illusionistic spirit of Livia's garden paintings, which present a false picture of a life of tranquillity and joy. The escapist Roman atmosphere cultivated by Augustus would seem to be fully encapsulated in these dream-like images.

In his analysis of Roman still-life art, Norman Bryson determines that the common denominator in all Roman still-life paintings is that of the aim of creating perceptual vagueness, and an illusion of a void in materiality and vice versa; an illusion of endless space, and the diffusion of walls, floor and ceiling into each other, negating the limits of space, while the artistic image generates a fiction within a fiction.<sup>43</sup> The wall paintings from the *cubiculum* in the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale dated to ca. 50-40 BCE (Ill. 12-14) are a salient example of this illusionistic spirit: the walls overflow with a mixture of fantastic architectonic imagery from multiple points of view simultaneously. This is accentuated in the image of the *skene* from Herculaneum (Ill. 15), which is an illusory architectural structure aimed at portraying an illusionistic atmosphere. In the

black room from Boscotrecase exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Ill. 16), the illusory spirit becomes extreme: the black background supplies a fictive space relieved of gravity, in which a weightless structure is displayed. This structure is composed of delicate columns comprising alternate images of vegetal and metal stalks, bearing twisted colourful cornices in foreshortening, below a delicate gable. This fantastic structure is adorned with masks, jewellery-like images, volutes, swans, and an imaginary landscape floating against the black background. The decorated walls surround the room with theatricality, infusing reality with illusion. As Bryson notes, the aim of this decoration is to negate the physical limits of the room in order to nullify reality and make the real space infiltrated by the fictitious space.<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting that Vitruvius had criticized the artistic taste of his era, especially the tendency to create illusory and fantastic images.<sup>45</sup>

Illusion was a prominent feature too in Augustan poetry. Parallel to Livia's garden paintings, Virgil's poetry portrayed an illusion of a tranquil world of flowers and eternal spring, youth, and love; a world devoid of any suffering. In *Georgica*, Virgil poetically portrays a naturalistic image of nature, the trees in the forest and the bushes in the fields, and a peaceful rural life.<sup>46</sup>

A salient literary illusionism characterizes the Menippean 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE text *Satyricon*, by Petronius.<sup>47</sup> The most tangible illusionism is manifested in the dishes served to the guests of the freed slave Trimalchio, with the basic principle being that the original form of the foodstuff is completely obscured: quince appear as sea urchins; plums and pomegranates appear as flames; a hare appears as Pegasus; pork meat was sculpted to appear as a goose surrounded by fish and birds, meat balls as eggs, and so on.<sup>48</sup> The original is lost and has become a simulacrum, an edible sign.<sup>49</sup> These signs generate an illusion of exorbitant wealth and abundance. Trimalchio also promises his guests that his cook can create any dish they wish, even

<sup>44</sup> Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 37-46.

<sup>45</sup> Vitruvius Pollio, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. Ingrid D. Rowland (Cambridge: University Press, 1999), 7.5. 3-4.

<sup>46</sup> Virgil, *Georgics*, trans. Peter Fallon (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2. 9; 2. 510.

<sup>47</sup> Petronius, *The Satyricon*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>48</sup> Petronius, *The Satyricon*, 5. 70

<sup>49</sup> Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 48-51.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, 157-160, 168.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 170.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 233.

<sup>43</sup> Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 32-33.

chicken milk, and thus supply every possible illusion.<sup>50</sup>

The general atmosphere is that anything is possible in a world devoid of rules and boundaries.<sup>51</sup> Bryson notes the equivalence between the illusions that Trimalchio supplies to his guests and the illusions found in wall paintings: similar to the edible sign, a painted garden replaces a real one. The illusion in both cases signifies the pretension to overcome reality and its limits.<sup>52</sup> This is manifested in another surprise that Trimalchio prepares for his guests: the opening of a ceiling that showers down upon them gifts of golden crowns and alabaster boxes of perfume.<sup>53</sup> Hence, Trimalchio represents an exaggerated and grotesque reflection of an emperor who controls his subjects through supplying illusions.

### Religious Escapism: Nature and the Divine Sublime

In Antiquity, the religious was never detached from either the social or the private. In effect, nothing was entirely free of the sacred, and there was no strict separation between the sacred and the profane. Religion was completely embedded in both the social and the political life of the individual, and all aspects of life were regulated by religion.<sup>54</sup>

Religious rituals were regularly held as an integral part of life, particularly the sacred rites known as the Mysteries. The most famous of the mysteries were the Eleusinian held for Demeter, the Dionysian, the Orphic, and other mysteries influenced by syncretism in Roman times, such as those held for Isis, Mithras, and Cybele.<sup>55</sup>

Sacred rituals and the Mysteries were aimed at promising proximity to the Divine, an illusion of unifying with the sublime divine, and of eternal bliss after death.

However, as noted by Yavetz, most Romans believed that happiness was the goal of life rather than of death. Happiness meant health and well-being for the individual life, and success and prosperity in the public and state life. Religion, and mostly meticulous adherence to the rituals for the worship of the gods, promised the achievement of happiness.<sup>56</sup>

The aspiration to experience an illusion of unifying with the Divine, and hence great happiness, is rooted in platonic philosophy, mostly in the allegory of the yearning of the soul to return to its sublime origin and unite with the Divine.<sup>57</sup> This allegory inspired the Neo-Platonic thought in Roman times, which also discusses the soul's yearning for the sublime Divine.<sup>58</sup> A specific image in the paintings of mediation between the earthly and the heavenly can be found in the many species of birds, which were interpreted as messengers of the gods.<sup>59</sup>

Happiness is also associated with *hedonism*, as determined by the Greek philosopher Epikouros of Samos (241-270 BCE), and discussed in depth by the Roman poet Lucretius (99-55 BCE).<sup>60</sup> According to Epicureanism, humans believe mistakenly that they should appease the gods by means of prayer, sacrifice and offerings. However, the gods exist in eternal happiness in another sphere, entirely detached from the mundane world and indifferent to human suffering. Thus, the humans waste their lives in vain with their attempts to satisfy the will of the gods, instead of enjoying life and rejoicing.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Petronius, *The Satyricon*, 5. 38

<sup>51</sup> Shelley Hales, "Freedmen's Cribs: Domestic Vulgarly on the Bay of Naples," in *Petronius: A Handbook*, eds. Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 163.

<sup>52</sup> Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 51-52.

<sup>53</sup> Petronius, *The Satyricon*, 5. 60.

<sup>54</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), 1, 3; Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Published for the Classical Association [by] Oxford University Press, 1994), 1-3; Valerie M. Warrior, *Roman religion* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12; Jas Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality & Subjectivity in Art & Text* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 13-48.

<sup>55</sup> On Greco-Roman Mysteries see: Ugo Bianchi, *The Greek Mysteries* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976); Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries – A Sourcebook: Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987); Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987); Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Jan N. Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

<sup>56</sup> Yavetz, *Augustus*, 69.

<sup>57</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, ed. Harvey Yunis (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 250-251; Hadot, Pierre, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 47.

<sup>58</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 1.6, 8; 6.7, 22; IV, b. 4, III 5 b, c, d.

<sup>59</sup> Caneva also discerns specific sorts of trees and plants that symbolize death and resurrection. See: Caneva, "Ipotesi sul Significato," 76-77.

<sup>60</sup> Carus Titus Lucretius, *Lucretius: On the Nature of Things*, trans. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), ii 17-19; Robert Drew Hicks, *Stoic and Epicurean* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 166; Gisela Striker, "Epicurean Hedonism," in *Passions and Perceptions – Studies in Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind, Papers of the Fifth Symposium Hellenisticum*, eds. J. Brunschwig and M. Nussbaum (Cambridge: University Press, 1993): 6-11.

<sup>61</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, iii.14-24, v 156-94, v 1175-82; A. A. Long, *Hellenistic philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (London: Duckworth, 1974), 41-44; John M. Rist, *Epicurus: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 140, 156-159.

The eternal tranquillity and bliss of the gods, *ataraxia*, is spiritual, and humans aspire to achieve it.<sup>62</sup> In order to experience this sublime happiness, Epicurus recommended the practice of religious rituals that can provide a temporary illusion of happiness, great pleasure, and spiritual exultation.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Epicurus taught his philosophy in a garden that he had built. Likewise, rituals and Mystery cults were often performed in nature and occasionally in open-air sites resembling a grotto.<sup>64</sup> Trees and plants such as myrtle, palm, laurel, oak, pine, cypress, pomegranate, vine, ivy, olive and others were considered as sanctified and sacred to the gods, and they indicated a sacred location.<sup>65</sup> In relation to this, according to Longinus, mimesis leads to the sublime, and art becomes sublime when it resembles nature.<sup>66</sup> Livia's garden paintings may have alluded to these in the imagination of ancient times.

Some support for this comes from Caneva's conclusion, that this is a vision of a world in which death is not threatening, but merely a passage to a different state, and a promise of immortality, with a relation to the Mysteries. Caneva notes this specifically in relation to the cult of Cybele.<sup>67</sup>

It is important to note that explicit depictions of the Mysteries and other sacred rituals were actually rare in Greek and Roman art, since the Mysteries were considered very sacred, intended to remain secret, and were perceived as *semna* - 'awesome'.<sup>68</sup> As reflected in Livia's garden paintings and formulated by Elsner, the religious experience was omnipresent, and the ancient world was full of sacred images.<sup>69</sup> Thus, these paintings would

seem to allude to a religious experience that promises an illusion of tranquillity, of immense happiness, and of unity with the sublime Divine.

## Conclusions

This study has focused on illusionism as a dominant motif in the wall paintings that once decorated the dining hall of Livia, Emperor Augustus' wife. The paintings depict images of an abundant orchard. The four artistic features that generate an atmosphere of illusionism are: mimesis, realism, optical illusionism, and symmetrical composition.

The discussion suggests that the motif of illusionism in the paintings comports with the misleading atmosphere and the escapist spirit in the Augustan period that resulted from the policy of providing abundant free food and arena entertainment to the masses. Benefits and entertainment were even increased close to the events for which the *Principes* needed the goodwill of the plebeians. This policy, known as *panem et circenses*, stemmed from the efforts made by Augustus to reinvent his image as that of a compassionate and merciful ruler who cares for his people, and was aimed at distracting them from involvement in state affairs. In reality, Augustus was a dictator who held much power in his hands; he generated an illusion of peace, while in fact bloody wars were continuing in both Eastern and Western Europe, and he himself continued to conquer and annex territories to the Roman Empire. As concluded by Yavetz, the word "*pax*" was merely a political slogan.

The very fact that slavery was a dominant factor in this society that ignored human suffering, contributed much to the establishment of an escapist atmosphere. Pretence was another prominent feature of Augustus' personality and regime that influenced the contemporary atmosphere of illusion.

Equivalents to Livia's garden paintings that tend to reinforce this interpretation can be found in other wall paintings from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The illusionism is manifested in these in perceptual vagueness; an illusion of void in materiality and vice versa; infinite space and the diffusion of walls, floor and ceiling into one another; multiple points of view simultaneously; a fictive space relieved of gravity; and negation of the limits of space. Augustan poetry too, such as that of Virgil and of Ovid, and literature such

<sup>62</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, III. 18-24; Hicks, *Stoic and Epicurean*, 167, 187; Long, *Hellenistic philosophy*, 44-49; John Ferguson, *Morals and Values in Ancient Greece* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), 79.

<sup>63</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, v. 1198-1210; Hicks, *Stoic and Epicurean*, 167, 187; Long, *Hellenistic philosophy*, 48-49; Rist, *Epicurus*, 157-163.

<sup>64</sup> Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries*, 103; the Dionysiac ritual activity was held in the mountains, see: Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 122; Euripides, *Bacchae*, trans. Eric Robertson Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 32-8, 1051-7.

<sup>65</sup> Kellum, "The Construction of Landscape," 211-213, 218-221; Caneva, "Ipotesi sul Significato," 71-74; see also: Annamaria Ciarallo, trans. Lori-Ann Touchette, *Gardens of Pompeii* (Los Angeles, Calif.: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. Benedict Einarson (Chicago: Packard, 1945), 13, 22, 36.

<sup>67</sup> Caneva, "Ipotesi sul Significato," 78-79.

<sup>68</sup> Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries*, 18-20, 103; Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 23-24.

<sup>69</sup> Jas Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, 11-48.



as the *Satyricon* by Petronius, similarly reflects this illusionary atmosphere.

Together with the social aspect, Livia's garden paintings also convey a religious illusionism. The religious ritual in Antiquity promised proximity to the Divine, an illusion of uniting with the sublime Divine, and eternal bliss in both life and the afterlife. The aspiration to experience an illusion of uniting with the Divine, and hence great happiness, is rooted in platonic philosophy. The hedonistic doctrine of Epicurus promoted the practice of religious rituals in order to achieve an illusion of happiness and proximity to the gods. The garden paintings may perhaps allude to the garden of Epicurus himself, and thus to his concept of *hedon* and unification with the Divine sublime. Although depictions of the Mysteries and sacred rituals

were rare in Roman art, nonetheless, as contended by Longinus, because mimesis leads to the sublime and art becomes sublime when it resembles nature, Livia's gardens paintings would seem to allude to a religious experience that promises an illusion of tranquillity, happiness and unity with the sublime Divine.

In summary, the illusionistic features in Livia's garden paintings seem to portray the illusionistic-escapist spirit of Augustan times from both the social and the religious aspects, as mimesis that promises prosperity and abundance; realism that promises everlasting happiness; optical illusion that promises that nothing exists beyond this goodness; and a symmetrical composition that promises a world of equilibrium and harmony.

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1. Livia's Garden, detail from the Villa in Prima Porta, wall painting, 1st century BC , in Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome. Source: Harald Mielsch: Römische Wandmalerei, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 2001. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rom-Villa-Livia.jpg>
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