Through the Picture Plane: Encoded Narratives in the Garden Room of the Villa ad Gallinas Albas at Prima Porta

Nils Paul Niemeier, Kaja Tally-Schumacher

Following our 2016 analysis of the Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas Albas and how its design accommodates viewers and makes them an integral part of its paintings, we now turn our attention toward the content of the paintings themselves. Prompted by recent discussions of how material objects and landscapes can encode meaning textually, we argue that such an approach can be applied to garden spaces, both physical and painted. Furthermore, we argue that aspects of garden design can be used to encode and present meanings to visitors and viewers. In applying the theory of “garden-as-text” to the Garden Room and building upon visual themes previously explored by Barbara Kellum, we find a deep narrative taking place in the garden. Through floral imagery, the Garden Room presents to its viewers a visual narrative not only depicting Augustus as an all-present entity in Rome, but also as a protecting force, bringing new life, safety, and prosperity to a Roman Empire still haunted by the specter of Actium.
Introduction

The Villa Ad Gallinas in Prima Porta, sits above the banks of the Tiber, 15 kilometers north of Rome. The recent garden excavations at Prima Porta as well as significant new work on Roman gardens has led to a renewed interest in this otherwise relatively ignored villa. In addition to the physical gardens, the villa also boasts one of the most famous garden frescoes, which is the focus of this analysis. The garden painting originally adorned an underground chamber, commonly called the Garden Room. The highly naturalistic painting spans continuously across the four walls of the room, creating the effect of one long view that has been stretched onto four interior walls.

The questions posed by the authors here build on an earlier publication and companion to this work, “Through the Picture Plane: Movement and Transformation in the Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas at Prima Porta.” While the previous publication addressed the permeability of the picture plane within the Garden Painting at Prima Porta, as well as the application of green-screen technology, in this companion piece we identify the painted garden as a physical garden, rather than a mere painting, and suggest that real gardens maybe be interpreted in a similar manner to texts.

While multiple scholars have used iconography as an interpretive lens for the Prima Porta garden painting and other garden paintings more generally (indeed, it might even be the most commonly applied method), this approach prioritizes the work as a painting and undermines the artists’ illusionistic intent in painting a real garden space. As we argued in our companion piece, the design of this garden is not the whimsical fantasy of an artist, as the locations of plantings and design patterns match planting patterns found in actual contemporary Roman gardens. As a result, if these walls are more than paintings, it is useful to ask how we might move past the iconography of a painting to the reading of real, physical gardens. Approaching gardens as texts may provide us with a new method of understanding the people who made them and how information is encoded within them. Using such an approach, we argue that we may further be able to discern an Augustan political narrative within the design of the Garden Room.

Defining “Texts”

As it is most often used, the term “text” evokes an idea of written information, but this understanding of the term does not fully encompass all that “text” means. The word “text” is derived from the Latin texere, meaning “to weave,” (hence, “textile”). This suggests a “weaving together” of different components—in the case of a textile, different threads of possibly diverse colors and materials are brought together to create a unified whole. There is a similar pattern in “texts,” wherein various kinds of information are “woven” together to make a coherent whole. Thus, in written texts, the words, ideas, and the physical components of the text (ink, paper, glue, binding thread, etc.), as well as the work of its creation are all brought together to make the final product. An unwritten “text,” like the aforementioned textile, contains within itself its physical components, the ideas behind its design, the intentions of its maker, information about who made it, and information about the act of its creation. In this view, anything written, or non-written, can be a text.

Moreland helpfully expands the meaning of “texts” by describing them as “technologies of power” that exert influence upon those who “read” them. This means that the text
has a kind of agency that can exert power over a group or individual or, alternatively, can subvert the exertion of power. They either encode and reinforce concepts and behaviors, thus giving them legitimacy, or they can encode opposition to behaviors and ideas by subverting their legitimacy and status. Texts have the power to convey information and influence those to whom that information is communicated. A text, therefore, is not necessarily “literary”—it may be material, and it carries information and narratives about itself, its development, and maker, as well as any messages or other information its creator wishes to convey, including those that exert or subvert control over readers.

A text likewise serves to encode memory through allusions. Alcock’s argument that landscape, as a product of both physical and metaphysical human intervention and manipulation, is able to transmit memory within its physical form, Landscape can also be extended to texts, as can Ingold’s definition of the landscape as a “taskscape,” in which it encompasses space, movement, and action (of both human and non-human actors). Furthermore, we can apply Bergmann’s discussion of “memory theater,” wherein certain features or motifs present in an object can serve as loci for memory and experience. A text, in either written or material form, can function similarly to encode memory, experience, and action. Aspects of the “text” are imbued with meaning and become “physical setting[s] of remembrance,” bringing to mind memories or allusions when read. They can furthermore be manipulated by their creators to evoke specific allusions, which may thus evoke further allusions; these in turn become present within the text’s fabric, though they are not immediately apparent. A text may therefore evoke countless allusions that augment the narrative created by its author. With this discourse in mind, an exciting opportunity presents itself to researchers working with material culture, as we can expand beyond our bibliocentric understanding of what a text is in order to incorporate many other physical formats in which data from the past are encoded. Texts are no longer only books and scrolls—they instead range from small finds to highly figured artworks to the shape of the land itself. If texts can be anything that act as technologies of power or subversion, that encode meaning and memory, and provide information about themselves and the people or processes that made them, then it is possible to use an understanding of gardens as texts to undertake more nuanced interpretations and understandings of gardens’ creation and functions.

The Garden as Text

Gardens are the results of an intentional “unfolding of sequences,” derived from the work of designers, laborers, and horticulturists to form them by grading subsoils, engineering drainage systems and planting pits, arranging plantings, bringing in topsoil, and choosing trees, shrubs, flowers, and other plants for their inclusion. In the case of a painted garden, like that at the Villa of Livia, the artist, and perhaps his patron, adopt these roles and hint at the actions involved in garden design through the painted image, while the painting itself includes the information of its creation as well as information about its creators. Like Moreland’s “technologies of power,” a garden can be designed to exert power or influence on a viewer by dictating their movement or ability to view it by using paths and hedges. These place the “reader” or viewer in positions desired by the garden’s designers. Furthermore, the inclusion of statuary, water features, or certain planting choices can create visual
narratives and allusions to further narratives within the garden’s physical design. These narratives can be socioeconomic, displaying the garden owner’s wealth and botanical knowledge through his ability to afford exotic species. They might also be political, communicating a narrative about the owner and/or designer using a variety of botanical, artistic, and architectural features embedded with their own symbolism and allusions. Alternatively, the real or simulated garden may be designed for the purpose of displaying multiple types of narrative, stressing power and wealth while also indicating the owner’s appreciation of different narrative streams and stories (for example, the interpretation of the Garden Room previously argued by the authors as a “garden of transformations”).

Meaning is imbued into these features, and the garden, either the real or simulated, becomes a “landscape of allusions.”

Augustan Narrative in the Text of the Garden Room

The world of Augustan Rome (ca. 27 B.C.E. - 14 C.E.) was suffused with imagery and symbols with political connotations, seen clearly in coinage, statuary, and monumental building structures from the period. It is therefore not surprising that we are not the first to note the presence of such political allusions embedded in the botanical motifs in the paintings of the Garden Room. Kellum treats the possibility of an Augustan program in the Garden Room by focusing on political associations between the laurels present in the painting and Augustan political symbolism. There are other Augustan narratives present in the work that become apparent if we treat the garden as a text. These point toward an intent within the design of the garden to display a grander narrative of Augustus as a bringer of peace and unifier of empire in the Roman world during the period following his victory at Actium (31 B.C.E.).

A garden-as-text treatment allows for the identification and reading of narratives that are also applicable to physical garden spaces. In this approach, the joint use of painted and real garden evidence is necessary. The archaeological record preserves the arrangement of plantings and thus the garden’s design (in the form of planting pots, root cavities, or pockets of introduced soil from root bulbs from nurseries), and new analyses of pollen captured in fresco plaster allow us to identify the genera of pollen-producing plants that existed in a garden. In spite of this, we are not yet able to identify the species of specific plantings. We may state that a particular variety of rose was present in a garden, but we are unable to say where the rose was planted in relation to other plantings. As the garden paintings depict plants that are also present in pollen analysis, painted gardens, like that at the Prima Porta or at the House of the Golden Bracelet in Pompeii, make it possible to identify the kinds of narratives Roman garden designers might have attempted to portray in actual garden spaces. The exploration of these painted themes, then, allows us to transfer this language of narrative to real spaces.

The naturalistic representation of 24 individual plant species in the Garden Room allows for the identification of species that have various symbolic and economic associations in the setting of the Greco-Roman world. These include plants endemic to Italy and the Roman Empire at large, as well as exotic species from beyond the empire’s boundaries. Flowers and ground cover (violets, ivy, ferns, and irises) bound the marble fence in the painting’s foreground, and individual trees (Norway spruce, stone pine, and English oak) are set into niches along the wall located centrally on each panel. Behind the marble fence, the garden paintings are populated with a mixture of smaller woody trees and
shrubs (including laurel, arbutus, oleander, myrtle, dogwood, box, and roses), fruiting trees (quince, pomegranate), and other larger trees including palms, oaks, and cypresses. If the painting was reconstructed as a three-dimensional space, the plants depicted are arranged so that small flowers and shrubs appear in the foreground, medium-sized trees and shrubs in the mid-ground, and larger trees in the background. This seems to mirror actual planting arrangements in real Roman gardens from the Bay of Naples (based on root cavity arrangements), and the apparent “pruning” of depicted plants to create a layering effect highlights the Roman desire to create a simulated “wildness.” The mid-ground of the painting is where plants with Augustan associations are most prevalent.

Roman gardens are able to speak to the circumstances of their creation and indicate the “seat and direction of power,” commenting on or displaying the power of those who owned or used them. The emperor Caligula (12-41 C.E.) employed the gardens of the Horti Lamiani (Gardens of Lamia) in this way when he broke protocol and used them as a meeting place for his audience with Greek and Jewish delegates from Alexandria. Caligula even made sure that the gardens were renovated to suit his tastes actively during the meetings, letting the delegation know that he was able to reshape his surroundings on a whim. The depictions of trees and flowers on Augustus’ monument to peace, the Ara Pacis, likewise indicate a floristic narrative pointing to Augustus’ political power over the direction of the Roman state. The Garden Room paintings work in a similar way, encompassing a variety of themes and narratives within the depicted flora.

The most prominent political theme in the paintings of the Garden Room is that of Augustus as a surrogate and devotee of Apollo, found in the extensive presence of laurel (Laurus nobilis) in the mid-ground of the painting. Reeder, Kellum, Klynne, and von Stackelberg have previously commented on this association between Augustus, Apollo, and the laurel within the context of
the Garden Room, but we propose that the association is not just one of symbolism. The laurel does not simply signal an Augustan presence through the laurels’ allusion to the emperor, but the ubiquity of laurels may also be read as Augustus himself being present in the room. If so, he is everywhere, suffused in the space while also surrounding it, as the band of laurels in the paintings continues on all four walls. By the time of the Garden Room’s completion (30–20 B.C.E.), Augustus would have solidified his control over the Roman state as princeps, and so his presence in the empire would have been likewise ubiquitous, on coinage, through decrees, and in images. The Garden Room may therefore be read as the empire in microcosm, with Augustus functioning as the sole power throughout it. Given that the fasces (the axes bound in rods that symbolized Roman political authority) were traditionally made from laurel, the trees in the garden allude to state power and may also indicate the boundary of Roman hegemony (and thus Augustus’s influence), stretching into the distant background of the paintings. The laurels also incorporate allusions to the god Apollo into the work, who was said to have sired Augustus and whom Augustus had chosen as his patron deity, as well as allusions to the life and career of his deified uncle and adoptive father, Julius Caesar. This renders Augustus a demigod, protecting the realm of empire with the aid of his divine forebears.

A theme of botanical imperialism or colonialism is also present in the Garden Room, with its inclusion of exotic species within the laurel boundary [Figure 2] [Figure 3]. The vast majority of these come from the east, either from Rome’s eastern provinces and protectorates, or from further beyond. The quinces and pomegranates especially evoke Persia (to which they are originally native), and the date palms Egypt. After the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, Egypt became a full Roman province. The inclusion of Egyptian flora in paintings at the Villa of Livia would indicate that this region was now fully under the control of Augustus, and that he was responsible for their protection and perhaps their cultivation (that is, growth within the empire). The inclusion of flora from further afield indicates that Augustus brought those regions under his influence as well, symbolically including them within his empire. These fruit-bearing trees from the east therefore indicate a new inclusion and premise in Augustus’ garden of empire, perhaps facilitated by his newly instituted pax Romana (“Roman peace”). Furthermore, a number of these species were considered to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species Name</th>
<th>Common Name</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cydonia oblonga</td>
<td>Quince</td>
<td>Persia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nerium oleander</td>
<td>Oleander</td>
<td>Greece (Plin., NH 16.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix dactylifera</td>
<td>Date palm</td>
<td>Egypt, North Africa, Levant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picea excelsa</td>
<td>Norway spruce</td>
<td>Northern Europe, northeastern Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punica granatum</td>
<td>Pomegranate</td>
<td>Eastern Mediterranean, Persia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Plant species exotic to Italy in the Garden Room paintings (after Caneva and Bohuny 2003).
have medicinal properties against snakes and other venomous animals in antiquity. The medical benefits of certain flora and fauna gain added relevance when one considers that the cobra was a symbol of Egypt. That such plants guarded against venomous serpents may indicate that Augustus intended to prevent Egypt from coming to power a second time to threaten the empire.

Treating the paintings as a real garden further allows us to reconsider the relationship between the four walls and the illusionistic space. While the interpretations of the Garden Room paintings vary greatly, many of them tend to focus on the two short walls and particularly on the fecundity of Augustan Rome, as expressed by heavy, ripe fruit and a bounty of blooming flowers (hinting at future fruit at a later stage). No doubt, this is due in part to preservation, as the two short walls are better preserved than the two long walls. Yet the prioritization of the shorter and better preserved walls denies and even reverses the intended order in which the garden was meant to be viewed.

Visitors descended stairs and entered the vaulted chamber through the northeast wall. From the stairs, the landing, and the entrance the viewer first saw the long southwest wall [Figure 4]. This wall features a dark blue band in the foreground, followed by a crosshatched wicker fence, then a green path, and then by a low marble fence behind which we find a deep garden. The low marble fence features two wide deep niches, each accommodating young evergreens. These two evergreens dominate the composition, in part due to their size, but also because they are framed and separated from the rest of the garden by the white marble fence. The motifs on the southwest wall are mirrored on the entrance northeast wall.

The separation of the evergreens from the
rest of the garden by means of the marble fence and their framing by the niche walls creates a sense of emphasis and suggests that these plantings deserve further investigation. While Penso identifies the four trees on the long walls as *Albies alba*, or European silver fir, Möller, Gabriel, and Caneva’s most recent horticultural examinations all agree that the trees are in fact *Picea excelsa*, the Norway spruce. The correct identification of the species and its phytogeography, i.e. the distribution, are significant in reading the garden. While the European silver fir is common in south-central and southeastern Europe (indeed it grows in Italy itself), the Norway spruce is more northern, and is common in northern, central and eastern Europe, often at higher elevations. The two opposing identifications create distinctly different narratives: where European silver firs were native in Augustan Rome, Norway spruces were decidedly exotic. Consequently, the first significant planting the visitor reads upon entering the space is not one that reinforces native Roman fecundity; instead, foreignness and the exotic take precedence. Further, as the opposite northeastern wall is a near mirror image, with two prominent Norway spruce trees, the viewer’s last impression of the garden is again one of a foreign and exotic nature. If we read the paintings as a real garden, then we need to unfold the four walls into one long continuous walk. And, indeed, long alleys have been discovered in a number of Roman gardens, including at the first century C.E. Large Peristylo of the Villa Arianna in Stabiae. When we unfold the image, the garden takes on an alternating pattern of foreign (Norway spruces), followed by local trees in niches (English oaks), Norway spruces, and again local trees (stone pines). Even more interesting, Caneva and Bohuny argue that based on the lack of cones these specimens are young, i.e. newly acquired specimens. As the painting has been dated to about 30-20 B.C.E., it is clear that these young, exotic northern specimens cannot greatly predate that era.

The regions to which Norway spruces are native, Germania Superior, Raetia, Noricum, parts of Gaul, and even Germania Magna, were relatively new areas of Roman expansion in the first century B.C.E. Most significant to the Prima Porta painting and the Norway spruces is Agrippa’s appointment as governor of Transalpine Gaul (one of the phytogeographical regions of Norway spruces) in 38 or 37 B.C.E. According to Dio, during his governorship Agrippa led Roman troops against the Germanic tribes, including the feared Suebi, becoming the second general in Roman history to cross the Rhine in war (another phytogeographical region of Norway spruces). The suppression of the Suebi was a significant enough event that it earned Agrippa a triumph from Octavian (though it was never celebrated). The presence of four non-native Norway spruces in the most visually prominent location is not merely an expression of exoticism. The youthful state of the Norway spruces (at the time of their painting in the 30s-20s B.C.E.) recalls events that only occurred in the recent past. But this analysis raises several questions: did the artists have the botanical knowledge to depict a Norway spruce and how many visitors would be able to recognize this variety?

To answer the first question, Gabriel’s close analysis of the hands of the craftsmen who worked on these paintings, shows that the process involved highly specialized painters. The birds, for example, bear a remarkable level of anatomical accuracy and were completed by a specialist who does not appear to have painted other elements. As Caneva and Bohuny illustrate by examining
the morphology of the plants, including their shape, color, leaf layout, fruits and flowers, the treatment of the plants is likewise highly sensitive to botanical accuracy: the painters clearly intended to paint Norway spruces, not generic evergreens. The second question is more difficult to answer, but does not necessarily require a definitive answer. The highly-specialized depiction of the birds serves as a parallel example. We cannot expect that every Roman who may have had reason to view the paintings was an expert ornithologist, yet great care was taken to represent specific species. Moreover, the gardening and farming treatises of Varro and Cato aimed at elite readers illustrates that Roman elites were deeply invested in horticultural knowledge—certainly more so than in ornithology. But even more importantly, Horace, Pliny, and Martial criticize new first century C.E. gardens on the wastefulness of introducing purely aesthetic, “unreproductive” plants, i.e. plants that do not produce fruit. Even if the visitor did not possess horticultural knowledge about specific plant species and was unable to appreciate the connection of the spruces to the expansion in the north, the very presence and prominence of non-fruit bearing trees is significant.

Conclusions

Approaching the program of the Garden Room as a text allows us to view a multi-layered narrative within the painted space, specifically one in which multiple allusions to Augustan policies and actions may be read, as well as allusions to deities, areas outside the empire, and foreign powers. All these data are incorporated into the botanical elements of the work, allowing for multivalent readings of the plants in their context. By understanding the Garden Room as a text that can be interpreted as a “technology of power,” we can see how Augustus may have intended to use it to support political narratives he wished to make known about himself: that he was a protector of Rome and its environs, that he had vanquished threats to imperial stability, that he had brought the world into the bounds of his hegemony and that he was its protector as well. Treating the Garden Room in this manner informs us about the ideas behind its creation: that the designer understood plants and chose to include specific species, and that such readings allow the room to be understood simultaneously as both a garden and a commentary on Augustan political identity. Since the painted garden of the Garden Room may very likely represent a garden similar to physical gardens of the period, we can attempt to extrapolate this kind of reading from painted gardens to real garden spaces. Reading the Garden Room in this way thus opens up a new world of meaning and narrative in gardens throughout the Roman world.

Endnotes:

1. The authors wish to thank Dr. Kathryn Gleason and the Roman Gardens and Fora seminar participants who helped shape this companion essay.
6. A more complete treatment of this may be found in Niemeier, N. 2015.
10. Moreland 2001, 87-94. Reading here is used broadly to refer to the reception of information contained in “texts.”
15. Bergmann 1994. The “memory theater” is
tied closely to the memory house described by Quintilian in his Institutio Oratoria.


17. Wills 1998, 279, notes that it is difficult to close an allusion—once opened, an allusion may continue to expand. A helpful way of thinking about allusions in a work, either written or material, is as like footnotes in an article. Each note refers to an entire work, which in turn refers to other works, which refer to other works, etc. The scope of these allusions may be ever expanding, but may also be determined by the individual making them.


20. Tally-Schumacher and Niemeier 2015, 64, 67.


22. See Zanker 1988 for a lengthy treatment of the use of images in Augustan Rome for political purposes and exertion of power.


34. Niemeier 2015, 50-51.

35. See Totelin 2012 discussion of 1st century CE botanical imperialism in reality and literature; Zarmakoupi 2014, 114-115. Images from Gabriel are used here in accordance with fair use, as Gabriel is now in the public domain.


38. Niemeier 2015, 52-53. This would be reminiscent of his alleged conquering of Ethiopia in the Res Gestae; he did not actually bring the region into the empire, but he did exert his influence with a military expedition.


41. For a review of some of the most significant interpretations of the Garden Room and its paintings see the discussion in the companion work, “Through the Picture Plane: Movement and Transformation in the Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas at Prima Porta” (Tally-Schumacher and Niemeier 2016).


43. Caneva and Bohuny 2003, 151; Möller, 1890, 78-80; Penso, 1986; Gabriel, 1955, 32-42.

44. Caneva and Bohuny 2003, 151.

45. Tally-Schumacher and Niemeier 2016, 65; Gleason, et al., 2008; Gleason 2010.

46. Caneva and Bohuny 2003, 151.


49. Dio 48.49.


52. Caneva and Bohuny 2003, 150.

53. Mart., Epigr., 3.58.1-7; Hor., Carm., 2.15.5-12; Plin., HN, 12.6.

Works Cited:


Kellum, B., 1994b. “What we see and what we don’t see: Narrative structure and the Ara Pacis Augustae.” *Art History* 17.1: 26–45.


giardino.” *Fondamenti* II, 3-39.


