

# Emulation is the Leitmotif. Conspicuous Consumption in the Casa della Fontana Piccola

Wolfgang Filser

The “Theory of the Leisure Class” has at its core a socioeconomic model stemming from Veblen’s more scientific writings.<sup>1</sup> He understood that the propensity for emulation has a central role in an economically developed society; more than his famous concept of conspicuous consumption, *emulation* of the habits of the rich is keeping the wheel of wasting of resources spinning and stabilizes social inequality. Emulation, however, does not require the wasting of great material values. The only thing that counts is that usually those who emulate – by wasting time and money – threaten their social position and enhance the status of those emulated. In fact, emulation of the richer ones is not a choice in certain societies, it is rather a general condition.

In my contribution I tried to apply Veblen’s system to the Casa della Fontana Piccola.<sup>2</sup> After 62 AD its pseudo-peristyle garden was embellished with paintings and a tiny fountain along the model of porticoed gardens in bigger Pompeian houses and suburban villas.<sup>3</sup> The walls of the southern and western side were painted with landscape sceneries between Doric columns, which parallel the colonnade that frames the garden to the east. Centrally placed was the fountain (fig. 1), adorned with mosaics and statuettes dating from different epochs.<sup>4</sup> On the left side of the basin a sitting bronze fisherman was placed, on the right one an archaistic marble kore; in the centre of the basin stood an eros serving as waterspout; a second fisherman, a sleeping boy in marble, was lying in front of the first one. The emblemata of the fountain are surrounded by rows of different seashells and the curved back wall of the basin is covered with pumice. These materials were used to imitate grottos and caves.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the visitor of the house was reminded of sculptural installations in artificial grottos as they were common in aristocratic villas.<sup>6</sup>

However, this is not the only level of referentiality of the fountain. Its grotto-icography is closely linked to the frescoes adorning the walls of the garden. Notably the panorama on the southern wall has been treated by many scholars as the depiction of a villa maritima.<sup>7</sup> To the left appears a stretch of land with several buildings, some colonnaded, some multistoried. Those in the foreground are lifted up on rectangular substructures (the basis villae) with stairways leading to the rocky shore. To the right a spacious harbour is depicted separated from the open sea by a long mole supporting a curved portico and a series of islets with towers and another portico. On these structures and in front of the villae several figures are shown standing and moving around, one is sitting on the rocky shore with a fishing rod. It is this last figure, which tightly connects the painting and the sculptural fountain. The fisherman sitting on the rim of the fountain belongs to the same range of motifs. His rocky base in turn is of the kind



Fig. 1: Pompeii, Casa della Fontana Piccola, garden.

as those (reconstructed ones) of the life-size bronzes<sup>8</sup> from the garden of the Villa dei Papiri and of some high-quality bronzetti<sup>9</sup> from its atrium.

With the aid of different visual tactics the houses and gardens of the super-rich are emulated. This becomes still clearer when one observes the entire wall surrounding the garden with the large panels between the painted columns. Obviously these scenes should be understood as pieces of landscape appearing in panorama windows as described by Pliny.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the modest peristyle with its decoration is an emulative prospectus on what actually existed behind its western wall: the villae maritimae on the shoreline of the Gulf.<sup>11</sup> Of course the material level, on which such villas were emulated in town houses, was a low one. However, this was done with attention to detail in the garden of the Casa della Fontana Piccola. It is not a thoughtless layout, as has been suggested,<sup>12</sup> presupposing a breakup of aesthetic value and content: as the small garden only imitates the grandiose art and architecture of villas the small scale sculptures are not works of art in their own right, they do not fit together artistically and there is no aesthetic concept underlying the whole. Such assessments tend towards a general verdict of Hellenistic-Roman near-to-life illusionism as a kind of naive puppet theatre. Indeed, certain gardens like the one of the relatively wealthy Casa di Octavius Quartio with its tiny euripus and small scale sculptures or still more the petty hortus

of the Casa di Lucretius Fronto with its miniaturist figurines may remind the modern viewer of bourgeois garden gnomes.<sup>13</sup> But as one should be cautious when judging content without paying attention to style or vice versa, we should refrain from a humoristic interpretation; what is staged here by modest but efficient means is always the grandeur of the superrich. Indeed, there seems to be a certain inescapability of emulating the rich: If you wanted a garden within your small domus it was at the price of being constantly reminded of how a real garden in a real house – a house on the sea – looked like. It would be very interesting to know how the owners of such houses in Pompeii thought about this: if at all they thought about it, if there were different ways of thinking about the subordinate relation of their homes to those of the wealthy, if they sensed a certain subjugation because they could not help but parrot the ideals of the elite. The inventories of houses and villas may be very similar<sup>14</sup> but there is one important difference: of course, with size also action is reduced.<sup>15</sup> This applies not only to the sculpture but to the whole garden of the Casa della Fontana Piccola, which had not been calculated for being entered but for being seen from the surrounding triclinia and the atrium. Such horti are themselves designed in the first place as images hinting at much more spacious gardens with porticos on all sides.<sup>16</sup>

At this point one might combine Veblen's and Böhme's theories. What style and content have to achieve is what Gernot Böhme calls the "Inszenierungswert" of a certain commodity.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the quality of the garden's furnishings is not measured by expense or superficial refinements but by the persuasiveness of its image system as a whole. This image system stands for a certain lifestyle, which the owner of the Casa della Fontana Piccola had to adopt in order to succeed. It dominated his existence – whether he wished so or not.<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> On Veblen see Filser 2017, 33–54 with further reading.

<sup>2</sup> On the Casa della Fontana Piccola see Fröhlich 1996. On decorations of Roman houses and gardens see Jashemski 1979; Jashemski 1993; Wallace-Hadrill 1994; Zanker 1979; Zanker 1995; Bergmann 2008; Haug 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Fröhlich 1996, 82–97.

<sup>4</sup> Fröhlich 1969, 82f. 98–102; Mattusch 2008, 86. 194; Bergmann 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Sear 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Sear 1977, 27–30; Rakob 1964; Zanker 1979, 502f. instead highlights the connection with monumental fountains in public parks.

<sup>7</sup> For example Lafon 2001, 5 pl. III; Hinterhöller-Klein 2015, 408f. 413, pls. 69. 70; Cf. Zanker 1979, 506–508.

<sup>8</sup> Guidobaldi 2008, 23 fig. 108; 205 fig. 80.

<sup>9</sup> Guidobaldi 2008, 210 fig. 90.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Fröhlich 1996, 95 f.; Förtsch 1993, 24 f.; Hinterhöller-Klein 408 f.; for some remarks on the concept of panoramatic seeing habit in antiquity see Filser 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Fröhlich 1996, 95 f. 116. Such a villa maritima par excellence is being investigated by the Winckelmann-Institut at the Cape of Sorrento since 2014. It extends on the whole tip of the cape. On three artificial terraces, built upon enormous vaulted cisterns, is to be located the main part of the villa with the fundus and large buildings overlooking the cape. On an island in front of the cape is preserved the pars maritima, which is surrounded by an elaborate private harbor. See Filser et al. 2017; Filser et al. 2021. For regularly updated research results visit: [www.fastionline.org/excavation/micro\\_view.php?item\\_key=fst\\_cd&fst\\_cd=AIAC\\_3796](http://www.fastionline.org/excavation/micro_view.php?item_key=fst_cd&fst_cd=AIAC_3796).

<sup>12</sup> Fröhlich 1996, 102; Cf. Zanker 1979, 466. 494–496. 512.

<sup>13</sup> Zanker 1979, 470–481. 496–498; Zanker 1995, 150–162.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Rakob 1964, 182; Zanker 1979, 466.

<sup>15</sup> Since September 2021 investigations of the so-called Villa della Rampa near Sperlonga have commenced under direction of Christoph Klose, Paolo Vitti and myself. Through the villa-space lead a public road (today's Via Flacca, in Roman times a branch of the Via Appia). This implies that “normal people” crossed the core of the huge estate (probably the main residential part of the so-called Villa di Tiberius with its famous grotto on the other side of the cape), but probably could not enter its terraces. In other words, “living genre figures” such as those that appear on the villa paintings were actually present in the villa of Sperlonga.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Zanker 1979, 492; Bergmann 2002, 96–120.

<sup>17</sup> Böhme 2016, 71–74.

<sup>18</sup> Zanker 1979, 520. asserted that the imitation of the wealthy made the late Pompeians feel “happier” while he nonetheless acknowledged a general “Imitationszwang” since the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (p. 466). Consequently he concluded (pp. 521–523) that this illusionary happiness resulted from the base background of the libertini as opposed to the refined old aristocracy.

## Image Credits

Fig. 1: photo by Anna Bechtle.

## References

### Bergmann 2002

B. Bergmann, Art and Nature in the Villa at Oplontis, in: T. McGinn – P. Carafa – N. de Grummond – B. Bergmann – T. Najbjerg (eds.), *Pompeian Brothels, Pompeii's Ancient History, Mirrors and Mysteries, Art and Nature at Oplontis & The Herculaneum 'Basilica'* (Portsmouth 2002).

**Bergmann 2008**

B. Bergmann, Staging the Supernatural. Interior Gardens of Pompeian Houses, in: C. C. Mattusch (ed.), Pompeii and the Roman Villa. Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples. Exhibition catalogue Los Angeles (New York 2008) 53–69.

**Böhme 2016**

G. Böhme, Ästhetischer Kapitalismus (Berlin 2016).

**Guidobaldi 2008**

M. P. Guidobaldi (ed.), Ercolano. Tre secoli di scoperte. Exhibition catalogue Naples (Naples 2008).

**Filser 2017**

W. Filser, Die Elite Athens auf der attischen Luxuskeramik (Berlin 2017).

**Filser et al. 2017**

W. Filser – B. Fritsch – W. Kennedy – C. Klose – R. Perrella, Surrounded by the sea: Re-investigating the villa maritima del Capo di Sorrento. Interim Report, JRA 30, 2017, 64–95.

**Filser 2020**

W. Filser, Towards an archaeology of the panoramic view, in: R. Reisen (ed.), H. G. Esch. Advancing Horizons (Kempen 2020), 223–236.

**Filser et al. 2021**

W. Filser – B. Fritsch – W. Kennedy – C. Klose – R. Perrella – M. Reinfeld, La Villa Maritima del Capo di Sorrento. Ricerche dell'Istituto Winckelmann, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, in: A. Coralini (ed.), Extra Moenia. Abitare il territorio della regione vesuviana, Conference Pompei 22–23. 6. 2017 (2021), 131–144.

**Förtsch 1993**

R. Förtsch, Archäologischer Kommentar zu den Villenbriefen des jüngeren Plinius (Mainz 1993).

**Fröhlich 1996**

T. Fröhlich, Casa della Fontana piccola, Häuser in Pompeji 8 (Munich 1996).

**Haug 2020**

A. Haug, Decor-Räume in pompejanischen Stadthäusern (Berlin 2020).

**Hinterhöller-Klein 2015**

M. Hinterhöller-Klein, Varietates topiorum. Perspektive und Raumerfassung in Landschafts- und Panoramabildern der römischen Wandmalerei vom 1. Jh. v. Chr. bis zum Ende der pompejanischen Stile (Vienna 2015).

**Jashemski 1979**

W. F. Jashemski, The Gardens of Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Vesuvius (New York 1979).

**Jashemski 1993**

W. F. Jashemski, The Gardens of Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Vesuvius II: Appendices (New York 1993).

**Lafon 2001**

X. Lafon, Villa Maritima. Recherches sur les villas littorales de l'Italie romaine (Rome 2001).

**Mattusch 2008**

C. C. Mattusch (ed.), Pompeii and the Roman Villa. Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples. Exhibition Catalogue Los Angeles (New York 2008).

**Rakob 1964**

F. Rakob, Ein Grottentriklinium in Pompeji, RM 71, 1964, 182–194.

**Sear 1977**

F. Sear, Roman Wall and Vaulted Mosaics, RM Suppl. 23 (Heidelberg 1977).

**Wallace-Hadrill 1994**

A. Wallace-Hadrill, Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum (Princeton 1994).

**Zanker 1979**

P. Zanker, Die Villa als Vorbild des späten pompejanischen Wohngeschmacks, JdI 94, 1979, 460–523.

**Zanker 1995**

P. Zanker, Pompeji. Stadtbild und Wohngeschmack (Mainz 1995).