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"The Villa of the Mysteries by Maria Barosso: Archaeology, Art and Politics in Italy in the 1920s"

This paper concerns itself with two questions – the status of archaeology in the early 20th century and the reception of works discovered in that period. It focuses on a set of large-scale watercolor reproductions of the famous Bacchic frieze in the Villa of the Mysteries, which had been discovered just outside Pompeii in 1909. The watercolors were painted between 1924 and 1927 by an Italian artist, Maria Barosso, at the behest of Francis Kelsey of the University of Michigan, who wanted a replica of the entire room, including its floor, for the archaeological museum that he hoped to establish at the University of Michigan. There the replica would serve scholars for their research and would be available for viewing by students and the general public. It would also ensure that this “masterpiece” of ancient painting would not suffer the fate of so many Pompeian wall paintings, which had faded or completely vanished even by Kelsey’s day.

Barosso was eager to undertake the Herculean assignment for a number of reasons, at once scientific, personal, and political. As an artist she had worked with archaeologists in the Roman Forum and on the Palatine, illustrating finds and eventually undertaking her own excavation in the Forum. She understood the scholar’s need for faithful renderings of archaeological discoveries, and she applied herself to the challenge of making as precise a copy of the Bacchic murals as she could. At the same time she was moved aesthetically by the monumental frieze and was excited by the fact that her work would help to disseminate knowledge of the magnificent paintings on both sides of the Atlantic. Barosso’s enthusiasm extended to the political realm. She supported the emerging regime led by Mussolini, whose interest in exploiting the monuments and images of the Roman past as symbols of greatness of the Italian people and of himself as its leader also manifested itself in his support for archaeological work. It is no accident that the majority of Barosso’s watercolors of the Villa of the Mysteries murals formed the centerpiece of an exhibition of her work at the Galleria Borghese in Rome in 1926, sponsored by the Italian government.

Taking off from Barosso’s reproductions, this paper explores a number of questions of reception – scholarly, artistic, and political – from the 1920s to the present. What kinds of questions were scholars, artists, and the public in the 20th century asking about Pompeian paintings? What sort of status was accorded such a replica of a famous work in the 1920s versus today? How “scientifically” reliable are Barosso’s watercolors? Do they preserve details of the paintings that have since been lost? How much do they reveal of her personal style and aesthetic judgment? Should her watercolors of the Villa of the Mysteries be judged as artworks in their own right, within their own historical context? These and other questions lead me to reconsider issues of copying, appropriation and authenticity in the light of the theme of this conference.