

A Greek teacher of the mid-second century A.D. named Aelius Aristides has this comment to make on the mighty city of Rome, in an impressively flattering panegyric, the Roman Oration:

For who could survey in precise detail so many hilltops covered with buildings, so much parkland in the valleys turned to city uses, so much land brought together under the name of one city alone? . . . This city covers mountain crests, covers the ground in between, even stretches down to the sea . . . wherever you may be in Rome, nothing prevents you from being at the same time at the city's very centre.

(Aelius Aristides Rom. Or. 6,7)

Both from Roman writers and from Roman paintings and mosaics we gain a vivid impression of a peculiarly Roman enthusiasm for taming nature and reducing natural landscape to elaborately built-up 'city-scape'. Both Horace and Juvenal, writing more than a hundred years apart, comment on the effects of this enthusiasm. Horace, for example, in a letter in verse to his friend Fuscus whom he describes as a 'lover of Rome', writes

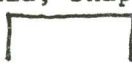
If we ought to live the natural life, and if we first must choose a site for building our house, do you know of any place that would be preferable to the rich countryside? . . . Does the grass gleam less, smell worse than Libyan marble floors? Is the water clearer, straining to burst the leaden pipes along the streets, than the brook that hesitates, murmurs, tumbles down its falling bed? How carefully, of course, we tend the shrubs among our coloured colonnades! The house that overlooks the spreading fields most wins our praise. Drive Nature out with a fork, and back she'll come again, forcing through our warped sophistication, sly and irresistible.

(Horace. Epistles. I.10.12-14, 19-25)

Juvenal more briefly but perhaps more bitterly than Horace comments on the carefully citified appearance of a local beauty spot, the Valley of Egeria, which lay just at the southern edge of the city on the Appian Way close to the Porta Capena:

We walked down to the Valley of Egeria, and towards the caves, so unlike the real thing. How much better could one sense the presence of the water-spirit there, if there were grass to enclose the pool with a green bank and no marble monuments to desecrate the local volcanic stone!

(Juvenal. 3, 16-20)

Most of the remaining paintings, however, show us just what Romans could do to the original landscape in an effort to reduce it to the organised and manmade appearance they evidently preferred. I cannot - unfortunately - reproduce any of these here, but I will describe several in detail, hoping to show you what I mean. First, a painting of a villa, found in the House of Lucretius Fronto in Pompeii. It is an elaborately built villa, shaped like an E without the middle leg. We are looking at it this way , from the formal garden in front of it. There are green stretches of lawn surrounded by stone walls both plain and with patterned openings pierced through, and gravel walks

between. Behind the house is a view out to sea, over the tops of the carefully planted and spaced trees at the back of the buildings. There are porticoes which seem to run along the distant shoreline.

Another fresco from Pompeii shows a very similar shoreline, but from the water. Two pleasure boats are gliding on the dark green bay, while along the beach are strolling several groups of elegant people, here **four**, there a couple; behind them runs a wall made of pierced stonework, and further back from the water, of more widely spaced pilasters, with a central shrine or small round temple. The walls are built up on a stepped marble bench or walkway, on which someone is sitting watching a dog playing on the beach. Behind the wall are again the symmetrically spaced trees, this time mostly cypresses.

But perhaps these scenes and many similar ones are not really country landscape, we may say. These all show villas or porticoes or pleasure-parks. Yet in two paintings which both show what is obviously meant to be the countryside, or at least fairly unrestrained growth of trees and shrubs, we still find the indications of Roman love for subduing and moulding the landscape. Look for a moment at the famous fresco known as the Garden of Livia from Prima Porta.

Behind not one, but two fences (or rather first a fence of what look like woven wooden slats, and then a stone wall, not pierced this time, but with the same type of pattern carved into the stone as we see elsewhere made by actual openings through the wall) is a growth of shrubbery and trees which blocks out all but a view at the very top of the painting of the blue sky. There are birds and fruit and branches, even individual leaves and twigs are visible, but the effect is of a thicket of flourishing green growth. No wonder that the artist has painted in a solid stone wall to keep out all that unrestrained natural growth from the more subdued parkland inside the wall! Since the wooden fence is at the very edge of the painting, perhaps we may guess that the viewer is standing on a neat gravel pathway only too thankful that Nature is so well fenced and walled out.

A fresco from the villa of Agrippa Postumus near Pompeii shows a somewhat wilder piece of ground. In the centre of some rocky and uneven land stands a tall old tree with a large column standing immediately in front of it, hung with religious or commemorative offerings. Close by are a small round temple and two or three stone shrines, against one of which leans a goatherd watching a group of three or four goats grazing. In the background, but not far away, are more buildings, including a garden wall with openings and a temple or shrine. In spite of the rocks and the farm animals, the whole impression again is of a built up area or a park overloaded with architectural attractions to be seen by tourists.

Pliny the Younger writes several letters in which he describes in considerable detail one of his villas, or some well-known beauty spot. He frequently makes a comment which reveals the same sort of attitudes to landscape that we have seen in the paintings I've just described. Pliny mentions a spring which rises in a mountainside and then runs down through rocks to a small man-made grotto or cave where one can sit and picnic while enjoying the scenery (Book 4, 30). At his seaside villa (Book 2, 17) the shoreline is much improved by the pleasingly varied houses built here and there along it, which look like a number of cities, he says, from the sea or the shore itself (where he walks when the sand is hard enough to make comfortable walking). His villa at the foot of

the Apennines in Tuscany (Book 5, 6) is delightful, containing gardens elaborately laid out and decoratively planted, even enclosing what looks like a piece of rural land planted in the centre, or buildings which contribute quite as much attractiveness to the setting as they gain from it, or which are so thickly overgrown with (no doubt carefully pruned and trained) vines that you can lie on a couch and imagine you are lying in a wood - but without worrying about the rain.

Pliny's description of the source of the River Clitumnus (Book 8, 8) sounds wild enough to start with, but very soon come the references which make it obviously a much-visited tourist attraction: coins thrown in the spring, boating on the river for amusement, a temple and a number of small shrines, some containing springs, a bridge, a bathing place, an inn, a number of villas picturesquely situated on the bank, and finally the countless scribbles on every wall and pillar written by the visitors - "Most you can admire", says Pliny "but some you'll laugh at!"

No doubt there were Romans who genuinely enjoyed unspoilt scenes of natural beauty. Far too many, it seems, for our taste preferred Nature well controlled and organised, built-up and confined behind elegant park or garden walls.

Horace to Bullatius on being a tourist

What was the Aegean trip like, Bullatius? The islands are famous, of course, but what did you think of them? Tell me about Chios, and beautiful Samos, Lesbos, King Croesus' Sardis, Smyrna and Colophon. Are all of them, no matter what their reputation, disappointing after the sights of Rome? Have you given your heart to one of the great Eastern cultural centres? Maybe you are charmed by some quiet coastal town and have lost the urge to travel? "Remember Lebedus? It's even lonelier than those isolated Italian villages, but that's where I'd like to live, forgetting all about my friends, forgotten by them too, watching the great god Neptune raging far out at sea, from a comfortable spot on the shore." Fine - but remember, a rain-soaked, mud-splattered traveller when he breaks his journey at an inn won't want to stay there forever; a man who is thawing his chilled bones out in a restaurant or a steam bath, doesn't claim that here is all anyone needs to live happily ever after. If you've had a rough crossing, with southerly gales you certainly won't step straight off the boat and sell it, I hope! If you're fit, health resorts and spas do no more for you than an overcoat at midsummer, boxer shorts when the snow flies, a swim in the river in wintertime, or a stoked-up stove in August.

As long as you can, as long as Fortune keeps on smiling, stay at home and sing the praises of the islands from a distance. Take with real gratitude each hour that it has pleased God to bless you with; don't wait till next year to enjoy life. Then, wherever you end up, you'll still be able to say "I've had a good life!" Believe me, if reason and good sense rather than a fine sea view from the bluffs make a man carefree, people who look for a better life overseas only find a new climate, not a new personality. We are all so energetically going nowhere! We travel all over the place, looking for the good life; but it's here, or there - or anywhere, as long as you keep your peace of mind.

(Epistle I.11)