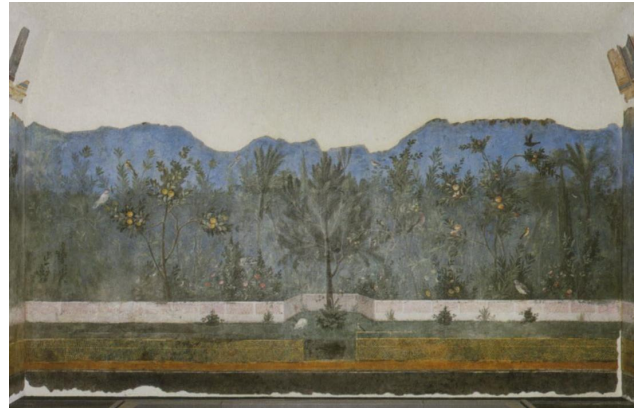


“Order in the Garden”



Detail of the Ara Pacis Augustae



Detail of the Villa of Livia Fresco

At first glance, the Ara Pacis and the garden scenes from Augustus's wife Livia's house at Prima Porta seem to be chaotic depictions of wildly flourishing vines and skittering animals; when one steps back however, patterns emerge, and one can see that both are highly symmetrical, ordered, symbolic depictions of something much more than plants and birds. In both works, the flowing, organic lines of nature are contrasted against the geometric lines of civilization that border the art, inserting a sense of order into what seems to be a chaotic vision. My intention is to show that the man-made constructions, plants, and animals are organized to convey a specific hierarchy of power. The scene depicted in each work of art is one of nature dominated by man and repurposed for his benefit, paralleling the Roman concept of imperialism, the right of the powerful to control the weak. The vegetation from both the Ara Pacis and the Prima Porta show nature bounded by human intervention, representing the Roman Empire conformed to a set of Augustan ideals of imperialism, order, and hierarchy. The Prima Porta shows a private depiction of this concept, as it was painting within Livia's home designed for personal enjoyment, and would have only been seen by family and guests. This private depiction of man's constraints on nature implies Augustus's struggle in forcing Rome into the constraints

of his fundamental ideals. The Ara Pacis presented a public representation of Augustan ideals, which was designed to be seen by the Roman public and to give an impression of Augustus's power and influence on his public image. As a public image it represented an ideal Rome, in which all things supported Augustus's values.

I will begin my analysis by seeking out the similarities between the Ara Pacis and the Prima Porta and showing that these similarities contribute to imagery of order, hierarchy, and imperialism, depicting nature bounded by human constructions, such as borders and fences. Once I have established the presence of these Augustan values in the art, I will analyze the differences between the two works of art. I will show that the Prima Porta shows the struggle involved in binding nature with civilization, representing the struggle Augustus experienced in trying to impose his values on the Roman Empire, while the Ara Pacis shows the ideal way in which nature should conform to civilization, representing Rome ideally conformed to Augustan ideals.

Both the Ara Pacis and the Prima Porta are arranged symmetrically. In the Ara Pacis, the South Wall frieze contains panels on which a central plant with spiraling leaves that spread symmetrically from both sides. On either side of the central plant are matching mirror image plants, dotted with identical birds that look outward or inward in pairs. Similarly the garden scene in the Prima Porta starts a robust evergreen in the center of its main wall, flanked on either side by fruit-bearing trees. In both works of art, linear borders line the symmetrical images. The Ara Pacis has geometrical borders on all sides that serve to contain the organic shapes of the vegetal imagery, while the Prima Porta constructs a more three-dimensional border around its garden, painting a layer of folding fences and walls binding off the garden in the image. In addition to the lines that border the images, both pieces create geometrical shapes within the

vegetation itself. The Prima Porta illustrates the ripe fruits of its trees as perfect circles, and draws geometrical patterns into the panels of its fences, and the Ara Pacis twists the lines of its plants into circles and arcs. By taking things that are inherently organic and wild and imposing straight lines and mathematically defined shapes on them, these images construct a sense of order. Everything seems to be placed specifically where it belongs into a symmetrical schema and the borders serve to give definite boundaries to the images. This order appears to reflect the order Augustus felt he needed to impose on the Roman Empire in order to maintain his power.

Within this order, there is a sense of organizational hierarchy that resembles the hierarchy that Augustus imposed on his empire. Just as Augustus saw his government, headed by himself, as dominating the people of Rome, civilization is represented as dominating nature in these works of art. In the Ara Pacis, humans are figured highest on the building, separated by a geometric border into their own frieze. Below them are elegant birds, followed by the plants they perch on, and below their fronds are the lizards and bugs. The Prima Porta arranges its hierarchy spatially within the implied depth of the fresco. The human-constructed walls and fences are foremost in the painting, backed by birds that seem to pop out of the fresco. The birds sit on the fruit-bearing trees and flowering plants, while the less aesthetically pleasing vegetation fades into the background. These hierarchies represent the larger hierarchy Augustus constructs in his political life, including his complete power over the Roman government, the government's power over the people, and a telescoping sense of the power of each stronger thing over the weak. This hierarchy of the stronger over the weak supports the imperialistic ideology Augustus used to justify many of his political actions.

Both the Ara Pacis and the Prima Porta depict the most basic act of imperialism, which is the domination of man over nature. In each, the elements of nature are taken and repurposed to

man's benefit. This is seen in the Ara Pacis in the way individual lines and shapes from nature are broken down and reassembled to create geometric, highly patterned, symbolic imagery. The Prima Porta illustrates a garden, in which elements of nature are selected and repurposed for man's benefit. In its more finite detail, the Ara Pacis represents imperialism in a scene of a snake eating baby birds: the more powerful predator dominating the weaker, inferior species. This represents political imperialism, and implies that it is natural for the powerful to govern the weak. Similarly, the Prima Porta uses illustrations of birds dominating plant life by reaping the fruits of the trees, and man dominating animals by containing birds in cages.

While the Prima Porta shows a more realistic image of nature, the vegetation of the Ara Pacis is highly stylized and symbolic. The Ara Pacis does not show nature as it really is, but as it ideally would be if it perfectly adhered to Augustan values. Each value is shown in its ideal form, without variance or flaw. In the far plane of the frieze, the sense of order in the Ara Pacis is manifested in clear and definite molded lines, perfect symmetry in every detail, and the separate space allotted to each element of nature. The sense of hierarchy in the Ara Pacis is a distinct, delineated diagram, showing the world of people clearly above that of the plants and animals, and divided by borders. These elements of order and hierarchy in the Ara Pacis sum to a perfectly formed ideal of nature in which all elements are consistent with Augustus's ideal values. By conforming nature perfectly to these values in the Ara Pacis, Augustus intended to illustrate a world in which his values were upheld, representing an ideal Roman Empire.

While the Ara Pacis shows an ideal reflection of Augustan values in nature, the Prima Porta paints a more realistic picture of the struggle between the wild tendencies of nature and man's attempt to organize and dominate it. Although there is a wall that binds the vegetation into a garden, small shrubs and weeds can be seen creeping out from underneath the wall. The birds

in the scene are not constricted at all by the low wall, and can be seen on either side of it. Though the nature in the Ara Pacis is condensed into two dimensions and seems decidedly containable, the plants in the Prima Porta grow endlessly into the distance, revealing the magnitude of nature in comparison to the paltry walls and fences that attempt to contain it. The sense of order is imposed on the plants with geometric shapes and lines, but the plants themselves cannot be bound by geometric rules, but rather grow wildly and intermingle with one another. The hierarchy in the Prima Porta is present, but the boundaries between various strata are fuzzy, allowing the levels blend into one another, and form a gradient of power rather than a clear order. The imperialistic nature of powerful civilization dominating nature is represented, but the difficulty inherent to trying to tame something wild is also expressed, through the tangled vegetation and the unruly plants that grow out from under the wall. The emergent effect is a sense of struggle between the greater power, man, trying to tame the weaker power, nature, and conform it to human ideals. This represents the struggle Augustus experienced in trying to impose his values on the Roman Empire.

Both the garden scenes from Livia's House at Prima Porta and the Ara Pacis incorporate straight lines, geometric shapes, and implications of imperialism into images of nature dominated by man, in order to convey Augustan values of order, hierarchy, and imperialism. These artistic works are not identical however, as the Prima Porta was a private fresco in Livia's house, while the Ara Pacis was a public monument meant to be seen by all and contribute to Augustus's public image. For his public statement, Augustus had an image created that would show an ideal nature in which it was perfectly subordinate to man and reflected Augustan values in every element, just as an ideal empire would be subordinate to Augustus's wishes and would reflect his values. In the Prima Porta, a more realistic struggle between man and nature can be seen which

may represent the struggle between the Roman Empire and the ideology Augustus tried to impose on it.