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The Landscape Architect Ruth Brandberg in Pompeii

In a manuscript for an obituary of the landscape architect Ruth Brandberg (1878–1944), her younger colleague Helfrid Löfquist wrote that Brandberg had been to Pompeii in Italy several times, investigating the gardens, making drawings of them and also giving talks about them. For several years I tried to find out more about these visits. Only some of Brandberg's correspondence and drawings are preserved, as she ordered that they should be destroyed. This situation is not unique to Brandberg. Indeed, letters, drawings, photographs, and other material remnants of women landscape architects are rarely preserved as whole collections in public archives. Instead, one has to pull together bits and pieces of information scattered across many different collections. To be able to unfold their design practices, journeys, commissions, and inspirations, I have used the method of following these women – including Brandberg – through letters and documents held in the archives of other persons in their private and professional circles. Although time-consuming, this has been rewarding, and a fruitful way of getting to know these professional women.

When I recently asked the director of the Swedish Institute in Rome if he could advise me on how to find out more about Brandberg's visits to Pompeii, he suggested she might have been able to go to there with the help of Axel Boëthius, the institute's first director. It was not long before I found several letters from Brandberg to Boëthius in Gothenburg University Library. Written in a beautiful hand, the letters confirmed that Brandberg went to Pompeii at least twice during the late 1920s, and that Boëthius helped her obtain permission to visit the archaeological site, as well as gardens inside and outside Rome. During her visits she investigated the gardens, made drawings of some of them, and probably also documented them with her camera, as she had been taking photographs since childhood.¹ According to the letters, she spent several months in Pompeii, mainly during wintertime, and was sometimes the only non-Italian exploring the area.

Back in Stockholm, she gave talks to small audiences about Pompeii and the gardens. To be able to better explain the sites, she needed visual representations, and she therefore instructed Boëthius about the angles from which new photographs should be taken. The gardens of Pompeii are well known today thanks to

¹ The Brandberg family had a darkroom for developing photographs see Amelie Posse, *I begynnelsen var ljuset* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1946), 220–221.

the work and writings of Wilhelmina Jashemski during the 1960s and 1970s.² When Brandberg came to Pompeii, Amedeo Maiuri had recently been installed as the chief archaeologist in 1924, and with him started the first systematic scientific excavations. It is intriguing to know that during this dynamic period – several decades before Jashemski – Brandberg reflected on and sought to contribute to knowledge about the gardens she visited. Were they reconstructions of the original ones, based upon motifs found in preserved wall paintings, or even pure fantasy?

During the last decades, international organisations and individuals have shown concern about and even openly critiqued the state of the archaeological site. Several causes of destruction and decay have been observed; houses and walls have collapsed; thefts and vandalism have occurred. However, recent excavations have revealed new knowledge about Pompeii, and the heritage site seems to be better cared for.

1 Relationships

Brandberg's letters to Boëthius highlight several relationships, first and foremost that between the writer and the recipient. In the letters, Brandberg expresses herself in a self-confident way in relation to her work. This was a relationship between two professionals: on one hand, a landscape architect; on the other, a professor of archaeology who was the first director of the Swedish Institute in Rome. The letters also describe a relationship between now and then, between history and presence, as I read them and turn their contents into research. By this I mean that I try to follow Brandberg's paths, her way to Pompeii and back to Stockholm, and her connections in Sweden and Italy. She wished to know more about the gardens of Pompeii specifically, but she also promised Boëthius that she would make drawings of the gardens – a way of communicating, a form of give and take. He helped her with the permission to visit the site, and in return she made drawings of the gardens, documenting them not only for herself but also for him. But I only have Brandberg's six letters to Boëthius, so I do not know what his letters were like, or how he addressed her.

Through the letters, I follow her into her work as a landscape architect. I do not know if any of her drawings still exist, and if so in what archive they might be kept, as she has no dedicated archive of her own. The letters also say something about travelling, then and now: in the 1920s, a trip abroad was not something one did for just a few days. She stayed in Pompeii for long periods, which gave her opportuni-

² Wilhelmina Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii* (New Rochelle: Caratzas, 1979).

ties to get to know the place. There is also something about sending letters across Europe – the most important method of communication in the 1920s – and how those letters now make it possible for me to carry out my research. The letters even give me indications about relationships with other persons, both personal and professional, or perhaps professional relationships that became personal. By using my contacts, I have been able to follow Brandberg, and by following Brandberg through her letters, I have also come to know new sides of her and her work, which opens up other ways of understanding her projects, seeing them in relation to history, and glimpsing how historical gardens were understood at the beginning of the twentieth century.

References

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