Marco Brunetti

NERO'S DOMUS AUREA
RECONSTRUCTION AND RECEPTION OF THE VOLTA DORATA

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Table of Contents

7 **Abstract**

11 **Acknowledgements**

15 **Introduction**

25 **Chapter 1. The Oppian Building and its History: From Antiquity to the 21st Century**

26 1. The Current Remains of the Domus Aurea. The Oppian Building: Chronological Phases and Possible Function
35 2. After Nero and Before the 15th Century Rediscovery
41 3. From the Rediscovery of the Domus Aurea to the End of the 16th Century
58 4. The 17th Century
63 5. The 18th Century
69 6. The 19th Century: From Titus' Baths to the Domus Aurea
71 7. The 20th and 21st Centuries: Recent Studies and New Excavations
75 8. Literary Sources

85 **Chapter 2. The Paintings of the Volta Dorata through Archaeological Evidence and Graphic Documentation**

86 1. Room 80: The Location within the Oppian Building, Decorations, and the State of Conservation
86 1.1 Room 80 as Part of the Oppian Building
89 1.2 Room 80: Architecture, Marble, and Painting Decoration
91 1.3 Room 80 and Famulus, the *Gravis* and *Severus* Painter

96 2. The Volta Dorata
96 2.1 Dimensions and the Geometrical System
100 2.2 The Decorative System of the Volta Dorata: Colours and Types of Decorations
106 2.3 The Figural Programme of the Volta Dorata: The 'Central Medallion'
110 2.4 The Figural Programme of the Volta Dorata: The 'Internal Area'
122 2.5 The Figural Programme of the Volta Dorata: The 'External Frieze'
131 2.6 A New Possible Interpretation for Scene 2: An Unparalleled Iconography of the Myth of Aeneas and Dido?
142 2.7 Some Final Observations: The Figurative System and Literary Themes

148 3. Hypothetical Reconstructions of the Volta Dorata and Room 80
148 3.1 The Volta Dorata: A Hypothetical Reconstruction
154 3.2 Room 80: A Hypothetical Reconstruction

159 **Chapter 3. The Reception of the Volta Dorata in the Renaissance and the History of its Graphic Documentation**

160 1. The 'Copying Process' in the Renaissance Drawings of the Volta Dorata
166 2. The Drawings of the Volta Dorata: The Draftsmen, their Interests, and the 'Copying Methodologies'
175 3. From Model to Re-Elaboration
197 4. The History of Graphic Documentation after the 16th Century: Some Issues about the Drawing from the Antique
198 5. The 17th Century: Pietro Santi Bartoli
203 6. The 18th Century: Ludovico Mirri's Artists
211 7. A Brief Overview of Drawings of the 19th and 20th Centuries
214 8. Conclusions and Final Considerations
217 9. Appendix I – Subjects Depicted in Francisco de Hollanda's Album of Drawings (*Os Desenhos das Antigualhas*)
219 10. Appendix II – Annotations on the Drawings of the Hertziana Album (inv. Dv 570–340 gr raro)
221 11. Appendix III – Ludovico Mirri's Engravings Album (Mirri/Carletti 1776), Louvre *Album des Bains de Titus* (Coloured Engravings), Giuseppe Carletti's Descriptions (Carletti 2014)

225 **Conclusions**

235 **Catalogue of Graphic Documents**

235 1. Introduction to the Catalogue
236 2. List of Graphic Documents
238 Cat. 1
244 Cat. 2
251 Cat. 3
256 Cat. 4
259 Cat. 5
264 Cat. 6
268 Cat. 7
273 Cat. 8
279 Cat. 9
283 Cat. 10
286 Cat. 11
289 Cat. 12
292 Cat. 13
297 Cat. 14
300 Cat. 15
304 Cat. 16
307 Cat. 17
311 Cat. 18
316 Cat. 19
323 Cat. 20
329 Cat. 21
334 Cat. 22
337 Cat. 23
341 Cat. 24
344 Cat. 25
351 Cat. 26

371 **Works Cited**
393 **Index of Most Relevant Names**
395 **Index of Places and Works Mentioned**
397 **Photo Credits**

Abstract

This research aims to provide a critical analysis and comparison of the graphic works (prints, watercolours, coloured engravings, drawings) that depict the Volta Dorata, namely, the vault of Room 80 in Nero's Domus Aurea Complex. Therefore, it mainly addresses two strictly related issues: the first concerns the original appearance of the Volta Dorata and how graphic documentation can be an important source to establish it; the second is to assess how and why artists have copied the Volta Dorata since the Renaissance. The work includes a catalogue of the graphic and documentary evidence, analysed based on the artefacts' archaeological and artistic features (i.e., style, material, techniques, and attribution).

The first chapter introduces the Neronian Building on Oppian Hill and focuses on one specific problem, i.e., how, since the discovery of the underground grottoes in the 1470s, a few antiquarians and artists were able to posit that those wall paintings belonged to Nero's Domus Aurea and not to other ancient Roman buildings, as most of their colleagues believed. We will see how, surprisingly, in the 17th century, this insight was replaced by other identifications, e.g., the Baths of Titus and Trajan. The studies of De Romanis in 1822 allowed Piale in the 19th century, and later Lanciani, to recover and confirm the identification first provided during the Renaissance.

In the second chapter, after a preliminary discussion of Domus Aurea Room 80, we use the data provided by the catalogue to focus on the original colours and types of decoration of the Volta Dorata (stucco, wall painting, appliqués in precious stones) and chiefly concentrate on comparing different figural scenes. A possible iconological message of the decorative system is offered at this point. We relate this message to the literary themes present in other figural scenes of the Domus Aurea vaults and the myths that literary sources indicate as Nero's favourites.

The third chapter discusses catalogue data to assess artists' working methodology between the 16th and 19th centuries. In particular, we focus on how their interest and their practice of copying caused a modification of the original scenes depicted in the wall paintings. We then address the reception of the Volta Dorata during the 16th century. Through study cases of early modern ceilings (such as specific works by Peruzzi, Pinturicchio, and Raphael's workshop), it has been possible to detect how the Volta Dorata inspired Renaissance artists and how they studied, re-elaborated, and renewed their artistic language. A similar analysis has been devoted to the 17th- and 18th-century graphic documentation. In particular, we address how this changed the function of drawings of the Domus Aurea wall paintings and the practice of copying the Antique.

"I had developed a downright disgust with aestheticising art history. The formal contemplation of images — not conceived as a biologically necessary product situated between the practices of religion and art (which I understood only later) — seemed to me to give rise to such sterile trafficking in words that after my trip to Berlin in the summer of 1896 I tried to switch over to medicine."[1]

Aby Warburg (1866–1929)

A Gianni e Renata,
al loro amore, alla loro curiosità

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1 Text transcribed by Philippe-Alain Michaud, in Michaud 2004, pp. 177–178 (for the Italian translation by Maurizio Ghelardi: Warburg 2006, p. 16). Aby Warburg wrote this passage on 14th March 1923 during the preparation of his "Kreuzlingen Lecture" on the Serpent Ritual. This document (with 114 typewritten pages) is now preserved in the Warburg Institute Archive in London under catalogue number 93.4. For the transcription of all typewritten pages: Michaud 2004, pp. 293–330.

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At the beginning of each research project, one imagines the moment of writing the acknowledgments as the easiest. However, the passing of time, the many encounters, experiences in Italy and abroad, and finally, the sheer exhaustion make it less simple to take stock of these years and thank all those scholars, institutions, and dear friends and family members who supported the research effort.

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Introduction

> "La conoscenza storica non è mai una costruzione personale, ma richiede la collaborazione di molti e ogni nuova scoperta ha sempre le sue fondamenta più solide nel lavoro già compiuto da numerosi altri studiosi che ci hanno preceduto."[1]
> Eugenio La Rocca, in memory of Luigi Beschi

Since the last decades of the 19th century, many scholars, such as Rodolfo Lanciani, Paul Gustav Hübner, Christian Hülsen, and Hermann Egger, have increasingly clarified the importance of Renaissance drawings that depict antiquities.[2] These drawings can now be considered not mere documents of the draftsman's style and artistic production but rather as sources from an archaeological perspective. Of course, since that time, many further studies have been published on Renaissance drawings of antiquities.[3] Therefore, this is not the first book on this topic and, of course, it will not be the last. Nevertheless, by selecting a specific case study and analysing the documentation collected, this book aims to go beyond the traditional purposes of visual document analysis. Indeed, working on Renaissance drawings of ancient monuments or artefacts means entering into the research field of archaeologists and historians of early modern art, who usually analyse the same documents from different points of view. In this book, both approaches have been taken into account while also attempting to further expand on such methods to open new research paths.

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1 "Historical knowledge is never a personal construction, but requires the collaboration of many people; each discovery is always firmly based upon the work already completed by the many other scholars who came before us": a passage from Eugenio La Rocca's speech at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in memory of Luigi Beschi (15th January 2016).

2 E.g., Lanciani 1891b; Lanciani 1895b; Egger 1906; Hübner 1911b; Hülsen 1907; Hülsen 1912; Robert 1919.

3 For the use of Renaissance graphic documentation in archaeological studies, e.g.: Robert 1919 (Roman sarcophagi); Mitchell 1974, and Beschi 1998 (Parthenon); Cavallaro 1983 and Settis 1988 (Trajan's Column); De Maria 1988a (Roman arches); Viscogliosi 2000 (Roman Forums); Waddell 2008, pp. 27–32 (Pantheon); Ortolani 2009 (Roman Baths); Zampa 2019 (Basilica Emilia). For the drawings of antiquities collected and studied, ordered by author, e.g.: Bober 1957 (Amico Aspertini); Zorzi 1959 (Andrea Palladio); Dacos 1962b (Ghirlandaio); Canedy 1976 (Girolamo da Carpi); Shoemaker 1978 (Filippino Lippi); Borsi 1985 (Giuliano da Sangallo); Günther 1988 and Nesselrath 2014 (for architectural drawings of antiquities); Vinti 1995 (Giulio Romano); Frommel 2005 (Baldassarre Peruzzi); Bartsch 2019 (Maarten van Heemskerck).

While archaeologists often study Renaissance graphical works to gather more information on ancient monuments or artefacts, now destroyed or severely damaged, art historians use the drawings of or inspired by antiquities to examine the influence of the Antique on early modern artists. While Renaissance drawings of antiquities are generally collected and analysed by archaeologists according to the monument, art historians focus their attention on the artist/workshop that produced the graphic documentation. However, such a separate vision of the same medium inevitably produces limits and barriers, thus reducing the potential insights that these documents can provide. When a Renaissance artist copied an ancient model *in situ* (or from another drawing), he frequently added or altered some details, usually because of his interpretation of the subject or when trying to imagine its original and undamaged appearance. For this reason, archaeologists sometimes consider the drawings biased by artistic license and, hence, do not regard them as fully trustworthy visual sources of scientific value. Nevertheless, precise research conditions may clarify the limits between reliability and artistic fantasy within the graphic documentation available. The conditions that make such an investigation possible are essentially the following: a substantial number of graphic documents available for the same antique subject; familiarity with the methodologies of the artists in copying the Antique; detailed knowledge of the archaeological evidence that has survived to the present day (in addition to other sources such as the written and numismatic ones). Under these conditions, it is possible to understand the correspondences and differences between drawings and the ancient model. We can gain an insight into the circumstances that brought artists to copy what they saw, leaving missing parts and empty spaces. Instead, in other cases, we notice that they employed additions and interpolations to alter their model. In our analysis, mistakes and omissions have an essential value. As in philological studies, the absence of details constitutes a clue, shedding light on particular issues. It can help assess the extent to which the archaeological evidence was visible at the time or reveal how the individual drawing fits into the copying process, which ranges from *in situ* sketching to the session at the studio drawing board.

If Renaissance drawings provide clues that are often neglected by archaeologists, a similar situation can also happen in the case of art historians. A subject depicted in a Renaissance artwork or a drawing may recall the features of an ancient model (e.g., a form, gesture, architecture or geometrical scheme). Art historians often use this correspondence as evidence that the artist drew inspiration from the Antique and evaluate how such knowledge comes from a detailed study of the ancient subject. Scholars sometimes dismiss the possibility that such models entered into the artistic repertoire without artists recognising its antique provenance. The case of the grotesque is a clear example in this sense. As Nicole Dacos' study has shown, particularly in the second half of the 16th century, the circulation of drawings of grotesques was so widespread that many artists ignored the origin of specific decorative motifs.[4] Raphael's Logge were often considered the source for their genesis and diffusion. There is a vast bibliography regarding the Renaissance phenomenon of the discovery of antiquities and their impact on early modern artwork. However, less attention has been devoted to the phenomenon that increasingly considered such antique models on the same level as modern ones and not merely evidence of a past distant or 'superior' artistic culture. In this sense, the analysis of graphic Renaissance documentation is critical as it helps establish whether the artist was effectively conscious of the antique provenance of his model or whether his knowledge was merely based on a tradition that had progressively lost archaeological awareness. One of our aims is to point out the markers that indicate when the antique model was a direct source of inspiration for certain Renaissance artworks, or if the artwork shows some aspects that derive from

4 Dacos 1969. For the bibliography on the grotesques, a few recent references are: Scholl 2004; Zamperini 2008; Squire 2013; Hansen 2018; Farinella 2020. For the grotesques before the Domus Transitoria and Domus Aurea: Walter-Karyde 1990.

an ancient model in a broader sense but lacking any specific, direct knowledge. In other words, the artist was not always an expert connoisseur of the original ancient work. Still, the artistic tradition ensured some features of the ancient model that became part of an artist's visual grammar. Some aspects of the graphic documents show us how the assimilation of the *all'antica* style occurred and the reasons why direct contact with the antique model was lost. Moreover, through the analysis of margin notes and details depicted in the drawings, we can identify which aspects of the ancient model attracted the attention of artists and how such interests developed and faded over time.

As mentioned above, a rich corpus of drawings on the antique is an essential condition to pursue these aims since it allows us to observe aspects often neglected in scholarship, namely the working methods of Renaissance draftsmen in copying the antiquities. We examine how these drawings were produced and used. A sketch was produced *in situ*, could be re-copied in the studio, and then circulated among artists and workshops.[5] Studying artists' working methods also clarifies the cases in which the draftsmen tended to (re-)invent or interpolate the subject. Consequently, such an analysis has an impact not only on studies of Renaissance artistic culture but also impinges upon our archaeological knowledge of the ancient model. Indeed, we can consider the material conditions that affected the monument/artefact and how these inspired artistic inventions.

Within this context, the study of the graphic documentation of the Domus Aurea's wall paintings (prints, drawings, and watercolours) is particularly emblematic. Since their discovery in the 1470s, thanks to the visual impact on visitors, the frescoes became one of the most studied subjects of antiquities. Their knowledge was particularly significant for artistic apprenticeships, and past research by Nicole Dacos also provides substantial evidence of the influence of the Domus Aurea's wall paintings on Renaissance art. Dacos' work mainly investigates the reception of one ancient decorative motif in the Renaissance Age, i.e., the grotesque.[6] She has explored this motif by analysing some 15th and 16th-century drawings and specific Renaissance artworks. As such, Dacos' study has precise purposes that lie outside the examination of graphic documentation as a source for investigating the copying and studying process of these ancient frescoes in Renaissance. In fact, she does not provide many insights into these artists' working methods and why they decided to copy specific details from these paintings. However, Renaissance drawings of the Domus Aurea also provide helpful documentation to analyse the influence of the vault geometries and figural panels in the 15th and 16th centuries, not limited to the reception of the grotesques. These Renaissance graphic documents depict specific parts of Roman wall paintings because their draftsmen had particular interests in them. For this reason, they copied only certain details of these wall paintings. The draftsmen's cultural background made a difference in the way they copied the antique model. While some draftsmen were more fascinated by figurative scenes or decorative motifs, others were more interested in the structural and architectural aspects. Nevertheless, an antique model such as the Domus Aurea's wall paintings provided both and may allow us to understand how practically the execution of copies varied from one draftsman to another.[7]

The recurrent presence of the Domus Aurea's frescoes in Renaissance drawings (especially in the drawing books) shows us how this antique subject was considered an essential model during the 15th and 16th centuries. Knowledge of this ancient monument and other antiquities implied that a Renaissance artist was part of the Italian artistic tradition and antiquarian culture. Ever since the Middle Ages, its many emerging

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5 Ames-Lewis 2000a, pp. 63–90; Ames-Lewis 2000b, pp. 109–140; Huppert 2001; Modonutti 2016; Yerkes 2017, pp. 83–104. See also Chapter 3, pp. 160–166.

6 Regarding the theories of 'Reception studies' in Roman art: Squire 2015 and Trimble 2015.

7 Regarding the architectural drawings representing, or inspired by antiquities: Günther 1988 and Nesselrath 2014.

ancient artefacts and ruins have constituted Rome's main attraction.[8] Nevertheless, although Renaissance's rich graphic documentation depicts many different objects (coins, statues, reliefs, monuments, inscriptions), it is remarkable how specific ancient models were repeatedly chosen. Although some drawings are copies of other drawings, in most cases, these models played a decisive role in developing an antiquarian background for artists. At the turn of the 16th century, the crucial decades for the early modern artistic sensibility, studying any random antique model did not automatically mean that an artist would be part of the 'antiquarian Renaissance culture'. An artist would be accepted as part of an artistic *milieu* only if he could demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of an essential repertoire of antiquities, a sort of basic 'Vocabulary of the Antique'.[9] This essential antiquarian repertoire resulted from different models chosen because of the artistic stimuli or solutions they provided.

This artistic repertoire and the selection of ancient models resulted from a continuous dialogue between antiquarians, erudite intellectuals, and artists. Within these discourses on Antiquity, the Oppian grottoes played a prominent role. They fascinated artists, antiquarians, and explorers and brought them fame while also inspiring their artworks. Regarding these unique underground paintings, several hypotheses emerged regarding their archaeological identification. Latin literary sources available at the time were compared to their artistic and material evidence. We must view Renaissance drawings of the Domus Aurea within the broader antiquarian context that so favoured those artistic studies of antiquities. A significant amount of topographical and antiquarian hypotheses and knowledge appear in the graphic documentation. This evidence is not easy to understand if we view the authors as mere copyists. The documents reveal that the fascination for these underground wall paintings impacted a far broader cultural context, comprising an intricate network of artists, antiquarians, and literary figures.

In addition to the artistic and cultural insights provided by Renaissance drawings, we have also studied this documentation from an archaeological point of view. Fritz Weege's studies of the Domus Aurea's graphic documentation suggested reconstructing the paintings' original appearance.[10] However, our aim transcends mere reconstruction.

For archaeologists, the frescoes of the Domus Aurea are one of the most attractive research topics. They are among the few surviving antique wall paintings in Rome and belonged to a private space enjoyed by an emperor that lacked any purely public function.[11] Due to its majestic scale and proximity to other public spaces (e.g., the Temple of *Fortuna Virgo/Minerva Medica*), scholars disagree on the precise function of the Oppian Building, namely, the remaining part of the original Domus Aurea. Its sheer size means it is still unclear if the complex – also called a 'pavilion' or 'wing' – was a space of complete privacy for Nero and his inner circle or if it had a semi-private function. It might have perhaps been open to the court and a selected audience, such as members of the Senate and a few aristocratic families. In any case, as we will see in Chapter 1, scholars tend to exclude a purely public function, as was the case for baths, forums, and ludic spaces, for instance. This aspect has a significant relevance from our point of view, and, thus far, it has not been sufficiently explored by scholarship. Any scholar dealing with the paintings of the Domus Aurea has to consider that these were spaces reserved for an emperor who was not insensitive to art,

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8 Regarding the discovery and study of the Antique during the Renaissance (in addition to the bibliography mentioned in Chapter 3), here are a few further references: Weiss 1969; Haskell/Penny 1981; Agosti/Farinella 1984; Nesselrath 1986; Agosti/Farinella/Settis 1987; *Da Pisanello alla nascita dei Musei capitolini* 1988; De Maria 1988b; Settis 1989; Rowland 1998; Barkan 1999; Faedo 2015; Furlotti 2019.

9 Agosti/Farinella 1984; Nesselrath 1986; Ames-Lewis 2000b, pp. 109–140; *La Roma di Leon Battista Alberti* 2005; Bober/Rubinstein 2010; Adriano Aymonino, in *Drawn from the Antique* 2015, pp. 18–40.

10 Weege 1913a.

11 Cf. Chapter 1, pp. 28–34.

literature, or paintings. Literary sources indicate that Nero was an active proponent of the liberal arts that he personally practiced including poetry, theatrical performances, and painting.[12] Fortunately, Latin sources also specify his mythical and literary tastes. Considering these circumstances, it seems unlikely that Nero did not pay attention or expressed preferences for decorating his monumental and sumptuous palace.

Renaissance drawings of the Domus Aurea's figural scenes can also help establish their iconological meaning and their message.[13] In fact, the large number of surviving drawings and their detailed execution help us understand some of the vaults' figurative scenes and assess their material and artistic features, i.e., colours, stucco decoration, and the geometrical system of the vault. As also occurs in other Roman contexts such as sarcophagi and Pompeian wall paintings, the myths depicted in the figural scenes frequently referred to the patron's cultural profile, or, failing that, to contemporary literary taste.[14] In recent decades, the relationship between literary texts and the figurative arts has been frequently explored by archaeologists but has so far proved elusive.[15] For instance, there is insufficient evidence to assess how patrons commissioned works: whether artists provided a precise figurative project or suggested several solutions based on their figurative models.[16] Of course, the dynamics depended on the patron's socio-cultural level and the workshop/artist's expertise. Monumental Imperial public projects (e.g., the Ara Pacis, the Trajan's Column, and the forums) constituted special cases where figurative systems were directed by Imperial ideology and, specifically, by the sort of image the emperor wanted to convey to the public.[17]

In the case of Domus Aurea's wall paintings, we are in an intermediate situation. The project was commissioned by a highly cultured Emperor, who demanded sophisticated figurative solutions, possibly linked to his artistic preferences. Nevertheless, the spaces' private function would not necessarily require the kind of Imperial figurative ideology considered mandatory in public spaces (e.g., forums, baths, arches, etc.). In some rooms of the Domus Aurea, figural scenes were essentially absent because of the secondary function of such spaces. However, in other cases, the rooms' size and positions inside the complex indicate that some spaces probably included figurative elements meant to convey an iconological message. Sadly, due to the frescoes' conservation conditions today, only a few vaults preserve figural scenes. The recovery of the lost figural scenes might clarify which myths were being depicted in the decoration of the Domus Aurea and how they fitted into the cultural and literary context of the Neronian Age.

Of course, we cannot assume that Nero coordinated every room's decoration or decided all myths depicted in the figural scenes. Nevertheless, in a certain way, the wall painting decoration must be related to his artistic and literary taste and, primarily, to his times. We have used Renaissance graphic documentation of the Domus Aurea to cast fresh light on the relationship between literary traditions and figurative solutions in Roman Art, especially between the cultural profile of the recipient and the literary/artistic taste of his age.

Many of the almost one hundred-and-fifty rooms of the Oppian Building have lost their original decorations and lack sufficient graphic documentation as to their original appearance. Some rooms only bore non-figural decoration. We could thus only

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12 Tac., *Ann.* 13, 3, 3. Regarding the education and artistic profile of Nero: Chapter 2, pp. 145–148.

13 For iconological studies on Roman art: Isler-Kerényi 2015, Hölscher 2015, Lorenz 2016.

14 Regarding self-representation in Roman art of the patron (commissioning the work) and of the recipient, i.e., the person to whom the work is addressed: Zanker 2002 and Zanker 2015. Regarding such a phenomenon in Roman sarcophagi: Zanker/Ewald 2012. For the case of Roman wall paintings: Scagliarini Corlaita 1974–1976; Ghedini 1997; Wyler 2004; Wyler 2006; Coralini 2006; Romizzi 2006; Lorenz 2008; Moormann 2016; Esposito 2021.

15 Regarding the relationship between image and text in Roman studies: Elsner 2007; Squire 2009; Steiner 2015; Newby 2016; Pandey 2018.

16 De Maria 1993; Vollkommer 2015; Varner 2015; Esposito 2021.

17 Settis 1989; Hölscher 1994; Kellum 2015; Russell/Hellström 2020.

apply our methods of research and pursue our aims in approximately seven spaces.[18] Out of these, we chose one specific vault of the Domus Aurea, and this may represent a clear and concrete example for further future studies of this kind.

Dacos collected all Renaissance graphic documentation known at the time. Since then, the digitisation of collections of prints and drawings (e.g., at the Uffizi, the Windsor Royal Collection, the Louvre and the British Museum) has made new documents available regarding the Domus Aurea paintings and their reception. Online databases[19] offer large repertoires of Renaissance drawings of antiquities, naturally including the Domus Aurea so favoured by Renaissance artists.[20] Due to these online databases and the increased accessibility of the material in the main museum collections of Europe (e.g., the British Museum in London, the Uffizi Galleries in Florence, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, and the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome), the number of documents collected is greater than expected.[21] A preliminary study of other graphic collections and personal site inspections established the absence of any drawing of the Domus Aurea within specific museum collections (such as the Albertina in Vienna, the Istituto Centrale per la Grafica in Rome, and the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid). Several 17th and 18th-century engravings and watercolours were analysed to determine which parts of the paintings are no longer visible.[22]

Moreover, thanks to the recent work of Paul G.P. Meyboom and Eric M. Moormann,[23] scholars finally have a detailed corpus of the original murals, as well as an archaeological analysis of the wall paintings and marble decorations in all the Domus Aurea's rooms. Due to this comprehensive study, it is now possible to identify the subjects of some Renaissance drawings of the Domus Aurea that were often mentioned or inventoried rather vaguely by museum curators.[24]

All considered, it has become clear that the Volta Dorata is particularly relevant in the study of both fields of research discussed above. The twenty-five figural scenes constitute a rich programme. We can contextualise the myths depicted within Neronian literary culture and determine the overall iconological programme. A refined and elaborate figural programme was planned for the Volta Dorata. We need only consider the relevance of Room 80 within the Oppian Building: its central location overlooking the 'pentagonal court', and ample size (approximately 10 x 10 m). At the same time, more drawings are available for the Volta Dorata than for any other vault of the Domus Aurea – and for a good reason. While other vaults provided artists with many different kinds of grotesque motifs, in the Volta Dorata, grotesques were almost absent. The Volta Dorata fascinated artists for its geometrical scheme, elegant figural scenes, the mix of stucco and painted decoration, various mouldings, and use of a rich palette including bright colours and, of course, the celebrated gold decorations. The vault was continuously copied from the end of the 15th century until the late 16th

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18 Rooms 29, 31, 33, 50, 55, 119, 129.

19 Digital portals such as Census, Graphikportal, Euploos, the Hertziana database, etc.

20 Many Renaissance artists copied Domus Aurea's wall paintings, as testified by their signatures on the walls and vaults (Weege 1913a, Dacos 1969). Concerning surviving Domus Aurea drawings, excluding those made by unknown artists and followers of prominent artists (such as Giuliano da Sangallo, Raphael, Giorgio Vasari), the draftsmen identified so far are Ghirlandaio, Amico Aspertini, Filippino Lippi, Antonio da Sangallo il Giovane, Orazio Porta, Francisco de Hollanda, Giovanni Antonio Dosio, Fra' Giocondo, Girolamo da Carpi, Giovanni Colonna da Tivoli, Pietro Cataneo, and Annibale Carracci (Chapter 3, pp. 166–175).

21 Following are few examples: drawings of the 'Volta Gialla' (Room 31): Uffizi 1683 O *recto*, Uffizi 130 O, Berlin KdZ 25034, Louvre 3337 DR *verso*, Windsor RCIN 909567, Kupferstichkabinett Berlin 16942 *recto*; 'Criptoportico' (Room 92): Wien 187, Uffizi 1683 O *recto*, Uffizi 1683 O *recto*, Louvre 3334 DR, Kupferstichkabinett Berlin 16942 *verso*, Uffizi 129 O, 1637 E *verso*; 'Volta delle Civette' (Room 29): Parma Ms. 1535, c. 59; Codex Escurialensis, fols. 34 *verso* and 12 *verso*; 'Volta Nera' (Room 32): Uffizi 989 O, Codex Escurialensis, fol. 14 *verso*; 'Volta degli Stucchi' (Room 129): Windsor RCIN 909573, Uffizi 54 O, Codex Escurialensis, fols. 32 *recto* and 60 *recto*.

22 E.g., Bartoli/Bellori 1680, Bartoli/Bellori 1706, Mirri/Carletti 1776.

23 Meyboom/Moormann 2013.

24 See definitions such as "ancient paintings", "all'antica vault corner" and "ornato".

century. We might say that, within the 'vocabulary' of the antiquities studied by artists, the Volta Dorata's special features provided in turn a 'vocabulary' of artistic, architectural, and stylistic solutions.

As a result, this book collects and explores twenty-four Renaissance drawings of the Volta Dorata, including some of those already known in scholarship.[25] The issue is approached in a new way. While the Renaissance drawings are often considered a tool for archaeological purposes, here they are seen as a valuable asset in examining the paintings they depict. The documentation collected here will not merely serve for archaeological reconstructions or investigation of the antique artistic/cultural context. It will also allow us to study why the Volta Dorata was copied during the Renaissance and how the practice of copying the same ancient model developed over time. Although the influence of the Volta Dorata is easily traceable in the history of Renaissance ceilings, as discussed in Chapter 3, understanding how this practice developed is no easy matter. Renaissance drawings allow us to identify which of the vault's features proved most attractive to Renaissance artists. In fact, the Volta Dorata was one of the most copied subjects in Renaissance drawing books – more than any other Roman vault or ceiling known in the 16th century (e.g., the stucco arches of the Colosseum or Villa Adriana's ceilings at Tivoli). Its presence in Renaissance drawing books is more recurrent than other key monuments of Rome.

By focusing our attention on the Volta Dorata, we can also investigate another unexplored topic, namely the topographical identifications concerning the Oppian grottoes during the Renaissance. Indeed, the study of the ancient topography of the underground paintings is testified by some documents, such as a watercolour by Francisco de Hollanda (Pl. 1). This document shows that Francisco knew that these paintings were the remains of the Domus Aurea and not those of Titus' Baths, as most antiquarians believed at that time (1538–1540). To investigate such an issue, this study has analysed many sources that, so far, have not been taken into account: i.e., the late-Medieval and Renaissance maps of Rome,[26] the late-Medieval and Renaissance guides of Rome,[27] and notes from 15th and 16th-century excavations in Rome collected by Lanciani.[28]

The present study is based on a catalogue of drawings. The twenty-four Renaissance drawings of the Volta Dorata include the two drawings of the so-called 'Grande Fregio', a painted frieze that ran under the vault. The drawings are presented with their essential data, i.e., material features, chronologies, and attributions. Besides, two later watercolour sheets dating to the 17th and 18th centuries are included because they help establish the original appearance of the vault and illustrate how the practice of copying the Antique changed over time. The analysis of the graphic documents covers three main aspects: what the artists copied, whether the subject depicted provides some clues from an archaeological point of view, and how the technique, style, and selection of the subject may allow us to understand the potential interests of the artist. Since many catalogue drawings are not single sheets and belong to Renaissance drawing books, one section of the catalogue entry is entitled "Drawing in Context". This section will assess whether and how drawings representing the Volta Dorata in Renaissance drawing books are related and connected with other subjects.

The book is set out in the following order. Chapter 1 introduces the Oppian Building and the history of the identifications provided for its paintings. In virtue of their beauty and rich decorative features, the mural paintings were seen and studied by many artists, antiquarians, and visitors. Thanks to geographical maps, guides of Rome, and documents of excavations, it is possible to assess which archaeological

25 In Weege and Dacos' studies, the following drawings are not mentioned or taken into account in relation to the Volta Dorata: Cats. 4, 5, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21.
26 Frutaz 1962.
27 Valentini/Zucchetti 1940–1953.
28 Lanciani 1989–2002.

identifications were provided for this underground building. Apart from a few interpretations suggested during the Renaissance, it was only in the 19th century that it was possible to confirm Emperor Nero's ownership of the Oppian Building. Nevertheless, literary sources and oral traditions ensured that the memory of the Domus Aurea always lingered upon Esquiline Hill and around Colosseum Valley. Imaginative descriptions and graphic reproductions prove that since the Middle Ages, descriptions of the beauty and wealth of the 'Golden House' had fascinated generations of antiquarians and artists. The first chapter presents a repertoire of ideas, beliefs, and images surrounding the Domus Aurea and how these grew considerably, particularly after discovering the underground paintings.

In Chapter 2, the archaeological evidence and clues that emerge from the catalogue are collected and compared to what is visible of the Volta Dorata today. The aim is to provide a potential reconstruction of the vault's original appearance and to contextualise its decorations (i.e., materials such as stucco, paintings, and figural motifs) within the art of Nero's time. The type of decorations and geometrical system of the vault make it possible to assess whether it is related to other specific coeval Roman ceilings.[29] The figural scenes are then analysed to advance a possible iconological meaning for the entire vault decoration. Thus, based on the work of Jean-Michel Croisille[30] and the more recent bibliography on Neronian and Flavian art and literature, the myths depicted in the Volta Dorata are compared with the coeval mythical repertoire attested in literary and artistic sources.[31]

Aspects related to the Volta Dorata's reception are at the core of Chapter 3. The aim is to determine how Renaissance drawings of the Volta Dorata can be used as tools to understand the methods of the artists who copied them (i.e., from copying the antique models *in situ* to their study in workshops). We try to understand why drawings concentrate on a specific part of the vault and how it was copied. In this way, it will be possible to find clues to understand which details were relevant for Renaissance artists and how their interests developed during the 16th century. Finally, the research will show how the inspiration of the Volta Dorata might have been assimilated in particular Renaissance drawings and how this inspiration appears concretely in some 16th-century ceilings. Moreover, as a few artists of the 17th and 18th centuries provided watercolours of the Volta Dorata,[32] we focus on how artistic interests in the Volta Dorata changed during these centuries and, consequently, how the practice of copying developed.

As previously mentioned, the interest of this research is focused on the main room of the Domus Aurea. Many more Renaissance drawings are available to those wishing to study other rooms of the Neronian Building. We hope that other studies will follow in the same direction as this research by applying similar methods. For example, future research could investigate how the geometries of Neronian ceilings could be reconstructed based on Renaissance and post-Renaissance graphic documentation and how early modern artists re-used such geometrical systems. As stated in the introduction's opening quote, this research has been possible thanks to the efforts of many other scholars who opened up new paths. Hopefully, this book will constitute a contribution, however small, to help reach an insight into this fascinating field of study.

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29 Regarding figural scenes of the Domus Aurea discovered after the Renaissance: Meyboom/Moormann 2012; Meyboom/Moomann 2013, 1, pp. 95–97. For the figurative programmes in Pompeian wall paintings of the Fourth Pompeian Style: Beyen 1960, 2; Croisille 1982; Peters 1982; Romizzi 2006; Lorenz 2008; Esposito 2009a; Esposito 2014; Moormann 2016; Tabacchini 2018. Regarding the "visuelle Organisation des Raums" (mostly, on the Third Pompeian Style): Haug 2020, pp. 398–519.

30 Croisille 1982.

31 For the literature of the Neronian Age: Berti 2011; Hanse 2013; Littlewood 2017, Drinkwater 2019, pp. 101–130. Regarding Neronian painting and art: Bragantini 2011; Rea 2011; Lorenz 2013; Croisille 1982. For literary themes in the Fourth Pompeian Style: Romizzi 2006, pp. 71–166.

32 Artists such as Pietro Santi Bartoli, Francesco Smuglewicz, and Vincenzo Brenna.