Iconographies of Greek
and Roman wall painting
Some reflections on the meaning
of figural representations and decorative systems
in mural decorations

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Abstract
Iconography of wall painting in the ancient world (ca 300 BC – AD 100) concerns both
decorative systems used to decorate the walls of houses and other buildings and the figural
elements within these systems. The first section discusses matters of contexts of wall sys-
tems, especially from the so-called first and second styles, and addresses the possible mean-
ing of colours. The second part is on figural motifs which here are not seen as expressions
of political or personal ideas of the patrons who ordered the decorations, but rather as
expressions of *mentalité* corresponding with the societal developments of the discussed
period.

Keywords
Greco-Roman Wall painting – iconography – Vitruvius – Macedonia – Pompeii – Rome

Introduction
When we study iconography in ancient mural painting, we find a world full of
images, especially in Roman houses in the cities buried by Vesuvius in AD 79, but
also beyond, both in place and time. From the mid-1st century the number of
framed figural scenes as parts of the mural compositions increased, and there were
various ways of inserting images. Central images are the most common of them,
varying from vistas through imaginary open niches (*aediculae*) or windows as parts
of architectural façades, via depictions of wooden panels exposed within the archi-
tectural compositions, to square, rectangular or round figural scenes applied on
panels in panel decorations. Topics include mythical images, still lifes, landscapes,
portraits and, very rarely, scenes from real life or history. The accent of study laid
on Pompeii, where many examples have been preserved or are known from old
documentation, implies that material from other geographical contexts and differ-
ent periods has generally received less scholarly and popular attention. Sometimes
these non-Pompeian cases are overvalued for their (presumed?) rarity. Apart from
images in houses we have those in (relatively few known) public and sacral build-
ings, while tombs are another, variegated category adorned with mural decorations
which we find in many areas of the ancient world, from Minoan and Mycenaean
instances up to late antique times. While figural scenes form the subject of icono-
graphical and iconological studies, the figural elements within mural decorative
systems often are only seen as parts of those compositions. From architectural
particles to entire compositions, these mural systems deserve attention in the field
of imagery as well. Therefore, I take the notion ‘iconology’ consisting of various
‘iconographies’, supported by Erwin Panofsky’s perspective,’ rather wide as a set
of messages expressed by both strict figural scenes and compositorial elements
belonging to wall decoration systems. As a consequence, such an analysis includes
implications about the presence, display, prestige of Roman wall paintings, and
the like, since we are dealing with fixed decorations which form part of an archi-
tectural structure, and cannot be studied outside of their contexts. The same
would be true for mosaics, vault and ceiling decorations, as well as ornamental
sculpture within the architectural structures, which, for the sake of space and
focus, cannot be addressed in this paper.

One of the questions to be addressed concerning the decorative repertoire is the
real or assumed connection of painting with contemporary society and attitudes.
I want to address this theme from two points of view, which are not per se ‘figural’
and which, as far as I can see, have not been taken into account from this point
of view:

1) Iconography of wall decoration structure and colour;
2) Iconography of images.

The material taken into account dates between the late 4th century BC and the
Flavian era. I confess to rely mostly on the biased Pompeian abundancia just
observed rather than exploring later and less known material.

Iconography of wall structure and colour. Or: Eloquence of form and tonality

The mural decoration from one of the palace-like houses in Pella (fig. 1) shows a
suggestion of marble veneer covering the wall up to five meters. The upper half
of the wall is vertically subdivided into intercolumniations by means of pilasters

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1 Panofsky 2006, which relies on earlier editions of his iconographical studies.
2 Lilimpaki-Akamati 2004, 17, 27, fig. 18: 135; Miller 2014, 210, pl. 5.19.
with Doric capitals. Above a parapet made of red marble blocks there are windows with blue openings that suggest a direct access to an adjacent open space or rather to the sky. Consequently, the visitor gets the idea that the room is part of a cosmos and that he or she experiences both realms inside the room. Unfortunately the architectural remains visible in situ do not help us much to visualize the original situation, since the walls have entirely vanished apart from the stone dadoes.3 The same system can be found in the 2nd century ‘Bau Z’ in Pergamon – probably the prytaneion – where, however, the window section has been restored as closed dark-painted panels,4 and occurs in the Roman world: recall the atrium of the so-called Samnite House in Herculaneum where a late 2nd century decoration – in the upper zone – was combined with a restoration in the third quarter of the 1st century AD in the lower section.5 These three examples make clear that a fundamental point is the imitation of precious building materials and the insertion of architectural elements like mock marble blocks, columns and capitals. Together, they create a larger and grander atmosphere, often with the suggestion of space beyond the walls of the room, than really exists.6

3 Cf. Lilimpaki-Akamati 2004, 13-17, fig. 4 (reconstruction of the House of Dionysos); 133-135.
4 Radt 1999, 104, 109, fig. 57.
5 Esposito 2014, 67, pl. 37. Here Esposito also gives other examples of this system in Pompeii. On the fourth-style paintings of the house, see his p. 187.
6 McKenzie (2007, 80-118) describes the correspondences between built and painted elements in Alexandrian architecture and painting and late Hellenistic painting in Italy.
The presence of figural elements in these austere murals is not abundant. An exception is the House of the Comedians at Delos, with the same series of mock marble blocks, but now enriched by a tiny frieze with comedy players. Another fragment shows running horses, between cornices of ovoli and guilloches which means that it is applied on a fancy marble block, which, in itself, constitutes the frieze zone of a building wall.7

These structural systems were described by the Roman nobleman Vitruvius in his *De Architectura* (7.5.1-2) dating to the early reign of Augustus, around 20 BC, when they were already more or less out of fashion. If we follow his description, the use of veneer imitations along with the suggestion of architectural elements enhanced the atmosphere of the houses as official dwellings. He does not refer to a direct relationship with real marble and real columns, but we know that the latter were used in the lavish *oeus corinthius* or *tetrastylus*, yet in the form of concrete or brick columns clad by stucco (fig. 2). In Roman eyes of the late Republic and early Empire the application of real marble would be a sign of *luxuria*.8 Pliny (*NH* 36.109-110) sees the introduction of marble columns and other elements into the architecture of the Roman house as an expression of debauchery. When he wrote in the 60s and 70s of the 1st century AD, this had been a practice for decades, so that he can be seen – like Vitruvius – as a *laudator temporis acti*, a role other noblemen of the same time, like the wealthy philosopher Seneca, played with verve.9 In Pliny’s case, he might – silently – allude to the public-friendly politics of Vespasian, who rejected the luxurious palace practices of Nero. In his days, Vitruvius could not afford to be too critical in his assessment of the contemporary fashion of painting, considering his dedication of his book to Augustus.

The so-called first and second styles in Roman painting in Italy, including Sicily and southern Italy, covering mainly the third through first centuries BC, present decorations like those in Macedonia.10 Here we may recall Vitruvius’s observation (*De Arch.* 7.5.1-2) that the ancients (he does not define them) started with the imitation of marble veneer, followed by the insertion of columns and cornices.

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7 On painting in domestic context in Delos, see Trümper 1998, 23 (prestige), 163-164. On figural friezes, see Bezerra de Meneses 1984 (criticized as to the prestige by Trümper); Rouveret 2014, 210-214, figs 5.27-30.
8 See Isager 1993 on *tryphe* and *luxuria* in Roman sources. See also Isager 1998, 183-186, focusing on Pliny. On marble and marbling in the late Republican era, see Mulliez 2014. On the *oeus tetrastylus*, see Tomei 2014, 154-161.
9 Isager (1993, 272) gives an interesting reason for this criticism, that is a sort of ecocriticism, since Pliny observes the misuse of natural sources in nature. On the application of marble in interior decorations in the imperial era, see Meyboom & Moormann 2013, 74-76; van de Liefvoort 2016, 47-85.
10 See Bilde 1993 on the various forms of ‘structural’, ‘masonry’ and ‘First Style’ decorations. For a Sicilian example, see the finds in ‘Peristylhaus I’ in Monte Iato (Brehm 2000, esp. 116-121).
As far as we know, these things were done more or less simultaneously, as we have seen already in Pella, Pergamon and Herculaneum. Unfortunately we do not have ancient texts that convey ideas about the use of marble in the Greek or Hellenistic world, but we may assume that palaces in Pergamon, Antioch and Alexandria possessed these commodities at a greater scale. Kallixeinos’ description of the festive ship or *thalamegos* of Ptolemy II Philadelphos offers a glimpse into that rich men’s world nowadays unreachable.\(^\text{11}\)

The same use of fake architectural elements is true for rich late 2nd century houses in Pompeii like the House of the Faun.\(^\text{12}\) Its entrance, discovered in 1830 (and witnessed by Goethe’s son August), has small temple-like façades in the upper part of the wall, entirely inaccessible, but more or less realistically rendered. The owner of the house will have shown a religious feeling or wanted to design his house as a modest royal palace. Looking into the atrium and tablinum, with relief-painted stucco on the walls and opus sectile floors, indeed a palatial atmosphere was made clear.\(^\text{13}\) In the public realm the picture is similar, as we see in the Basilica next to the Forum, dated to the late 2nd century.\(^\text{14}\) Clearly, these cases from Pompeii demonstrate that there was a *koine* in this respect.

Less known are temple decorations with the same structural style dating to the early 1st century BC. They are executed in two dimensions on a flat surface, as in the Temple of Populonia and the Temple of Brescia.\(^\text{15}\) The mural decoration systems we possess from religious buildings do not imply specific forms and elements which make the interior a specific religious space. It is the iconography of images – either only known from description or preserved in the archaeological record – that give temple decorations some touch of specificity. The architectural schemes apparently render these temples to luxurious and conspicuous houses of the gods; their interiors, consequently, were like those of houses.\(^\text{16}\)

We may say that the Hellenistic masonry style was a clear statement of virtuality used to enhance the physical environment by the suggestion of precious materials and – tentatively – the expansion of space, without falling into the trap of a too high degree of *tryphe* or *luxuria* (cf. note 8). There may have existed combinations of various materials, such as real and fake marble veneer, as we know from imperial ensembles. Such imitations were not simply cheaper or less esteemed.\(^\text{17}\)

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\(^{11}\) Inserted into Ath. 5.204d-206c. McKenzie 2007, 49.

\(^{12}\) See Zevi 1998. For the adaptation of ‘international’ motifs, see already Clarke 1993, 1-29, 78-123.

\(^{13}\) PPM V (1994) 80-141; Guidobaldi, Pesando & Varone in Coarelli 2002, 220-2339.

\(^{14}\) PPM VIII (1998) 1-23.

\(^{15}\) Moormann 2011, 51, 59-60, fig. 13; 239, fig. 15; Rossi 2014.

\(^{16}\) Moormann 2011, 203-206.

\(^{17}\) See on this challenging paradox the Nijmegen PhD thesis by S. van de Liefvoort (2016) and her paper on marble (van de Liefvoort 2012). Cf. Mulliez 2014.
Some Hellenistic tombs in Macedonia do have precious materials like the marble doors and couches as well as sculptural elements in the same space where there are mural paintings. Here, in fact, the royal atmosphere was more easily suggested or imitated, but this does not necessarily imply that these tombs were royal indeed.\(^{18}\)

Again turning our attention to Rome, we see that these architectural schemes remained in vogue until the late 1st century BC. The House of Augustus, constructed and used between 42 and 36 BC, conveys the distinction between the Vitruvian traditional forms of an elite urban house (*De Arch.* 6.3), which were apparently showing the realm in which a late-republican *dominus* received his relatives and clients (fig. 2), and the more intimate private space where he could be together with intimate family members and friends. A room on the first floor, called the ‘Studiolo’ in the Italian publications and sometimes connected with a private room mentioned by Suetonius, shows a fantastic, ‘progressive’ decoration formally ahead of its time, looking like a Fourth Style ensemble in many ways.\(^{19}\) Later on, around 10 BC, a more sober atmosphere was created, with small vignette-like embellishments, but also with openings towards mythical landscapes. For this fashion, however, Rome offers almost no examples, and we have to move to Boscotrecase for a possibly almost imperial example, i.e. the villa attributed to Agrippa’s son Agrippa Postumus (fig. 3).\(^{20}\)

In his monograph on the formal language of the early Second Style, Rolf A. Tybout sees this ‘style’ as a formal, decorative set of forms that reflect contemporary fashions in other decorative arts, especially architecture; yet not copying specific categories of monuments.\(^{21}\) The intellectual play is that of illusion, not of a mirror-like recreation of existing buildings or interior decorations like those of theatre stage buildings (*scaenarum frontes*), as is often suggested. The decorations are, according to him, devoid of deep meaning and reflect intellectual playfulness rather than political, religious or philosophical ideas. Later ‘styles’ do not dictate similar thoughts and enjoy the mix of various decorative elements, among which architecture is less dominating.\(^{22}\)

A peculiar case is that of the suggestion of space behind the room in which we are now indicated by the presence of fake doors and windows as well as painted walls ‘behind’ which one sees another space, either in- or outdoor. Adolf Borbein

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\(^{18}\) Brecoulaki 2006 presents the corpus of some fifty tombs and discusses technical matters of the paintings. For a recent assessment, see Miller 2014, 171-202.

\(^{19}\) Iacopi 2007, 29-55; Tomei 2014.


\(^{21}\) Tybout 1989. See now also Bragantini 2014, 307-318, with further references.

\(^{22}\) Bragantini 2014 and Ling 2014 bring together the most important notions about the formal developments of painting in the Roman world.
Figure 2: Rome, oecus corinthius in the House of Augustus (from Tomei 2014, pl. XXX).

Figure 3: Naples, Museo Nazionale, inv. 147501, wall decoration from Boscotrecase, Villa of Agrippa Postumus, room 16, north wall (photo courtesy museum).
suggested in the early seventies that the half-open walls painted in the mid-1st century BC might allude to ideas of the netherworld or that of death and he referred to Lucretius’ *De natura deorum*.\(^{23}\) Despite the attractiveness of this idea, the problem, in my view, is that the poet does not distinctly speak about mural decorations in his own time. That is a general problem we have to cope with regarding the connection between texts and wall decorations. Andreas Grüner advocated a different approach by looking at tendencies in poetry and art in the sense of the style, motifs and atmosphere. In that respect, we may say that the murals in the House of Augustus correspond with the playfulness of the poetry of the fifties and forties, e.g. Catullus and the early Virgil.\(^{24}\)

A few words should be added on the topic of colour and tonality as a means of expressing messages. As far as we know, the ancient painters did not use colours\(^{25}\) to carry iconographical meanings, in the sense that a specific colour could possess a specific function or meaning, although lost treatises might have said the opposite.\(^{26}\) Recall the golden background of medieval altar pieces and icons, where gold represents heaven or the blue that is used to colour the mantle of the Virgin Mary. In contrast, according to Pliny, as we may glean from various anecdotes told in book 35 of his *Naturalis Historia*, the use of specific colours was seen as a means to increase the quality of the work and, conversely, to stress the talents of the artist.\(^{27}\)

Single colours could be cheap but necessary constituents, even in an opulent house like that of Augustus. In the Room of the Pine Garlands, for instance, the light was scarce and white was a logical choice.\(^{28}\) In other rooms like the *oecus tetrastylus* (fig. 2), the colours used indeed were expensive, ideology and prestige were displayed by them as well as by the painted motifs. Vitruvius (*De Arch. 7.4.4-5*) tells us that, sensibly, dark rooms are originally those lit by fires with smoke or discoloured by the long use. We may think of a black atrium or tablinum. *Atramentum* was an expensive pigment, made of a mix of burnt bones and wood and connected with egg as a binding, so that an open room, looking onto a garden at the east side in the Villa della Farnesina (dating to the late 40 or 30s BC like the House of Augustus) can be seen as a rich variation.\(^{29}\) Vermilion or

\(^{23}\) Borbein 1975. See the good assessment of Grüner 2004, 75-76. Grüner analyses other passages of Lucretius on invisible architecture on p. 105-110.


\(^{25}\) On colours and their value, see Brecoolaki 2006, 451-462, with bibliography.

\(^{26}\) See Brecoolaki 2006, 452 n. 1. We only have precious observations in Vitruvius, *De Arch. 7.6-14* and Pliny, *NH* 35 (passim). On colours, see also Guineau 2002.

\(^{27}\) See Isager 1998, 123-135.

\(^{28}\) Iacopi 2007, 16-19; Tomei 2014, 73-91.

\(^{29}\) Vitruvius, *De Arch. 7.10.3*; Pliny, *NH* 35,41. Farnesina: Mols & Moormann 2008, 37-44.
cinnabar red was a very expensive colour\textsuperscript{30} as was Egyptian blue.\textsuperscript{31} Vitruvius (\textit{De Arch.} 7.5.7-8) criticizes the use of these ingredients, since they were as precious as rare medicaments. Apparently, the emperor himself did not bother about this form of \textit{luxuria} and had this colour lavishly applied in various rooms, as did the owner of the Villa della Farnesina. Or we may presume that after the abandonment of these complexes, his new houses got less expensive decorations.

Gold must have been used as well.\textsuperscript{32} Nero’s Golden House bears its name with justified pride although we do no longer observe gold with the naked eye. The so-called Volta Dorata indeed contained pieces of gold leaf, and recently two scholars in the British Museum have made clear that workshop A in the pavilion on the Oppian used gold dust in some rooms of the same building in combination with Egyptian blue.\textsuperscript{33} But by no means can we attribute political or ideological messages to these rooms, since they all served the purpose of Dionysian relaxation.

2. Iconography of images

Most readers would have expected that section 2, on images, would be the core of this paper, but I hope to have demonstrated that their setting is as important as the figural scenes themselves. However, we must admit that ancient sources almost uniquely concentrate on figural paintings, to begin with wooden panels or \textit{pinakes}, all lost since having been described, and only in rare cases recognizable in Roman evocations.\textsuperscript{34} Otherwise, the Stoa Poikile in Athens or the Lesche of the Cnidians in Delphi would have formed good starting points for reflections on iconography, but as said, in general, we have little certainty about reconstructions of these ensembles of which nothing has survived.\textsuperscript{35} Remarkably, the Stoa Poikile contained historical scenes, viz. the battle of Marathon, rather than mythological representations, as is usually the case. As a matter of fact, historical or commemorative scenes are rare in both Greek temple sculpture and painting. A few tombs might have figural scenes alluding at real occasions, e.g. the hotly debated hunting frieze in the ‘Tomb of Philippos’ in Vergina (see below). Regarding houses, we have no material at all, apart from the Delos friezes mentioned previously, which

\textsuperscript{30} Vitruvius, \textit{De Arch.} 7.9.2-3; Pliny, \textit{NH} 9.134-135; Brecoulaki 2006, 418-419; Mols & Moormann 2008, 64.

\textsuperscript{31} Vitruvius, \textit{De Arch.} 7.11.1; Pliny, \textit{NH} 33.161-162; Brecoulaki 2006, 423-425.

\textsuperscript{32} E.g. in Macedonian tombs: Brecoulaki 2006, 430-431.

\textsuperscript{33} Payne & Booms 2014. On Workshop A (and other decorations in the pavilion), see Meyboom & Moormann 2013, I, 56-58.

\textsuperscript{34} All sources are splendidly collected in \textit{Der neue Overbeck}, which replaces the old \textit{Recueil Milliet}. On copies of mosaics and paintings, see Mielsch 2008.

\textsuperscript{35} Ultimately Stansbury-O’Donnell 2014, 146-151, figs 4.3-4.4.
have no commemorative character. Even in Roman culture such scenes are rare in painting and, we may add, in mosaic, where we have the famous case of the Alexander mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii made around 100 BC. In Republican Rome, we have a painted fragmentonce decorating the interior of the “Tomb of Fabius’ on the Esquiline, dating to the first half of the 3rd century. The preserved fragment shows various registers with warriors, one of them called Fabius or Fannius, in a moment of possible peace negotiations (fig. 4). It is not clear whether these images were visible for family members only, who honoured the deceased during memorial ceremonies or when they brought a new body to the tomb chamber, or that others had access as well.

In the case of various Macedonian tombs there are indications that the façades were visible for ages. In the case of the alleged royal tombs in Vergina, a wall blocked the entrance dromos from the mid-2nd century onwards, due to the invasion of Gauls. These decorations, therefore, could have inspired both patrons and painters of later generations. This possibility is not so clear in Italian cases like Etruscan tombs in Tarquinia and Vulci. Regarding the decorative program of the 4th century Tomba François in Vulci, it is striking that these images were perfectly understandable thanks to added painted ‘name tags’ and remained at least visible for the family members as long as the tomb was in use, that is up to the 2nd century. Here the extreme violence strikes the onlooker and seems to bring us back to the violent scenes in early Archaic art (e.g. relief pithoi and Archaic vase painting), while they also predate those in Roman tombs, like the above-mentioned Tomb of Fabius. In all these cases of funerary decorations we may ask whether the depictions are meant to remind the visitor of the great deeds of the deceased (or one specific deceased person), while we may also think of the display of virtues as generally acclaimed goods. The latter are important as well and are recorded in the shape of banquets, battle scenes and the like. The hunt returns in a similar form on a wall of the Villa of Boscoreale, above the central door; the painting may reflect a showy façade, entirely in the fashion Vitruvius advocated some decades after its application (fig. 5).

Clearly recognizable historical figures are rare as well, and the reason they were once chosen to embellish a private room remains hidden for us. A good example

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36 See on friezes, as a means of orientation, the still excellent collection of cases in Knell 1990.
37 The fragment is now in the Centrale Monte Martini in Rome. See Bragantini 2014, 303-304, pl. 8.1.
39 Andreae 2004; Rouveret 2014, 250-252, figs 6.8-10, pl. 6.5-6.6.
40 See the fine overview of possible themes by Miller 2014, 174-202.
41 See Bragantini 2013. This wall section is now in Naples, Museo Nazionale, inv. S.n. [senza numero; without number], Barbet & Verbanck-Piérard 2013, I, 43-45, pl. 4; II, pl. VI.
Figure 4: Rome, Centrale Montemartini, painting from the ‘Tomb of Fabius’ on the Esquiline (Wikimedia public domain).

Figure 5: Naples, Museo Nazionale, inv. S.n. 1, wall decoration from Boscoreale, triclinium Q, west wall (photo courtesy museum).
is the portrait of Alexander and Roxane from the House of the Golden Bracelet in Pompeii from around AD 60; they are rendered in the mythic guise of Ares and Aphrodite. The most famous case is the depiction of the riot between the inhabitants of Nuceria (modern Nocera) and Pompeii in and around the amphitheatre of Pompeii from AD 59, found in house I 3, 23. Despite the clumsy use of bird’s eye perspective, the scene gives an effective record of the bloody fights in and around the arena, as well as a documentation of the buildings next to it and the velai sheltering the spectators from the sun. Not knowing the exact original context and/or the patron who commissioned the image, it is difficult to establish the possible relationship of the house’s owner with the historical event.

One of the questions we may ask is whether the images convey political or personal messages. Do the figures on the façades or those in the tomb chambers reflect ideas about the dead in general and/or the deceased persons buried, or do they try to instruct the onlooker? Bernard Andreae (see note 39) hesitates about that in his discussion of the historical scenes in the Tomba François; others are less prudent in that respect. Another widely discussed example is the hunt frieze on the façade of one of the tomb chambers in the Great Tumulus in Vergina, sometimes seen as a royal sepulchre. Since hunting was considered a pastime of the elite, of royals and their kind, many scholars have tried to read the frieze as an allusion to some dynasty in Macedonia of the age of Philip II, Alexander the Great or his half-brother Philipp III. Due to chronology, Philip II seems to fall out, a date of making in the time of Cassander being more plausible. One of the questions is whether the represented hunters show portrait features, which in my view is rather difficult because of the small sizes of the faces. We may, returning to Pella, compare the scene with a pebble mosaic showing a lion hunt, sometimes seen as an image of Alexander and his general Krateros, but more likely it is an emblem of private arete. This sort of genre image is also known from tombs in the Italic world, where various areas have their own variations of style and figural design. Think of Lucanian tombs (chest tombs and small tomb chambers of Paestum) and those in Etruria.

When we now turn to the private realm of houses and villas, none of the cases predates the late Hellenistic era. From the late 1st century BC onwards, the Roman house contains large collections of images, encompassing various genres, as parts of the previously discussed decorative schemes. Images inserted into the wall

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42 PPM VI (1996) 92-93.
43 PPM I (1990) 80-81.
44 Borza & Palagia 2007; Palagia 2014, 210-211; Miller 2014, 174; Faust 2015.
45 Salzmann 1982, 54 gives the main arguments of the discussion. Cf. Miller 2014, 192-197 on hunting scenes in this and other Hellenistic tombs.
46 See Steingräber 2014; Rouveret 2014.
systems start in the late second style, for instance in the House of Augustus and the House of Livia in Rome (see above). In the first decades of the 1st century AD there are conspicuous examples of narratio continua depictions in the House of the Orchard and elsewhere in Pompeii.

Mythical scenes in frames as central panels in wall systems (second half 1st century BC, beginning 1st century AD) or in wall panels (from the beginning of the 1st century AD onwards) are ubiquitous. In the House of Augustus figural scenes adorned the centre of the ‘Studiolo’, whereas groups of figures feature in lateral sections of other decorations; their meaning cannot be interpreted clearly. In the adjacent contemporaneous house of Livia we see clear references to myth in two scenes: a depiction of Io guarded by Argos, while Hermes is arriving from the left, and Polyphemos and Galateia. Some have seen a reference to the defeat of Egypt in 31 BC in the Io scene, but if the painting is earlier, for which there seems to grow consensus among scholars, this house of cards collapses. In the narrow room with heavy columns, adjacent to that with the Io myth, there are garlands and a yellow frieze with the abundance of the Nile. One may infer that here the Augustan connection with Egypt was made as well, but we know that the motif of the Nile already existed in Pompeii as early as 70-60 BC.

Most of the scenes appearing later, which are innumerable, stem from the mythical atmosphere and occur in many combinations. Sometimes they are organized according to themes; other instances show topography as a leading principle (sea, wood, town), while the pose and gender of principal figures can also have determined the choices of combinations. A few cases also combine themes from one and the same mythical cycle. After a blooming of mythical scenes in the 1st century AD, they become less prominent in the later centuries, not only in Italy, but also outside, although they never vanish. The gradual disappearance may have been caused by new conceptions of mural paintings, i.e. less favourable for new developments, or the accent laid on aspects other than figural representations, such as the increasing use of marble veneer (real and fake) as well as the interest in figural mosaics.

It has been a good thing that Jürgen Hodske and Katharina Lorenz in their almost simultaneously published studies have paid attention to these often neglected mythical scenes, which, to begin with, respond to various formal rules. On the basis of their studies (and others as well) we can leave complicated readings of these scenes as moral exempla (e.g. Karl Schefold) and as high-brow

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47 Sauron 2016 follows the early dating and interprets the scenes as expressions of Livia’s personal experiences in the late 40s.
48 See on these scenes in Pompeii, Hodske 2007 and Lorenz 2008.
49 See on the ‘decline’ of painting during the Empire, Ling 2014, 370-373.
literary references. Sometimes formal criteria like the setting of a scene in or next to the sea, a palace as a backdrop, or the exposure of the nude body, were the main reasons to combine scenes. The frequency of these images depended more or less from the size of the house and, hence, from the prestige of the owner, but the quality and content of the images did not differ much. ‘Pompeii ist voller Liebe,’ says Katharina Lorenz. Indeed, eroticism (or what might be seen as such) played an increasing role in depicting young men and women in attractive poses. According to Emanuel Mayer, the mythical and other scenes form ‘an atmospheric backdrop for domestic lifeworlds’, but Lorenz and Hodske make clear that the world represented had little to do with reality, so that this remark should get a question mark: the scenes refer to ‘Lebensgenuss’ and otium as symbolised by unattainable scenes and persons. Lorenz also points at the normative quality regarding gender roles as expressed in these scenes. Women and men have their own proper functions, often expressed by their activities and posture. The myths, in that way, can be seen as metaphors of the daily life these people had to pursue.

It has become clear that it is unfortunately very difficult to grasp the meaning of images beyond their direct interpretation in the private atmosphere: was the dominus involved, or even some other member of the family? Except for very few cases – like the House of Augustus on the Palatine in Rome – we lack information concerning the owners and/or inhabitants of houses and villas, so that a connection between patron and the interior design, including images, cannot be established. What is more, even if we do have information on the owner’s identity, we should take into account that a house could be transformed over generations and, therefore, get new patrons with their own private wishes. Take, in contrast, the forum frieze in the atrium of the Praedia of Julia Felix which apparently does not say anything about the rich proprietor Julia, but something about some of her

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52 Hodske 2007, 60-62, 67. His work has a strong statistical character, giving many numbers and percentages. And see Lorenz 2008, 329-340. Her study is more conceptual and theory-based than Hodske’s. The books come to similar conclusions, of course with differences, and form ideal starting points for further examinations.

53 Lorenz 2008, 32. In what follows, she discusses eroticism more amply. I ask whether Lorenz’ explanation of the frequent presence of Mars and Venus as expressions of the connection with Venus Pompeiana, the city’s patroness, is likely: the scenes do not hint in any form at the creation of the Roman Empire.


55 Lorenz 2008, 246-257.

56 See i.a. De Angelis 2011, 72-73.
renters.\textsuperscript{57} They might have been ordered by this lady or by people who rented her property.\textsuperscript{58} Since they belong to the rare group of everyday depictions like paintings of professions and street façades,\textsuperscript{19} they could have had a specific meaning for the people who ordered them in the last years of Pompeii’s existence. Another striking case is that of the Vettii, two brothers and freedmen, commercial traders who apparently wanted to show off their wealth in their well-known Pompeian residence.\textsuperscript{60} In contrast with what has been argued previously, Francesco De Angelis demonstrates that the famous friezes with a group of winged Erotes and Psychai at work (fig. 6) do not hint at the brothers’ commerce, but are ‘the object of detached contemplation’.\textsuperscript{61} Nicolas Monteix makes a further step, proposing that they belong to the Dionysian atmosphere of the room and represent a ‘reinterpretation of the Greek banquet, strongly marked by Dionysian ideals’. The Erotes and Psychai of the friezes produce or test objects used in the framework of a banquet and do not necessarily have a connection with the owners’ activities.\textsuperscript{62}

But even when we have the combination of names and personalities – as in the case of the House of Augustus – it is a matter of debate whether wall decorations tell much about the inhabitant of the house. Its decorations do not betray in any way his personal background, his connection with his adoptive father Caesar, his victories, or his personal taste: as we have seen, the rooms have conventional decorations (fig. 2) for which one easily finds parallels elsewhere in late Republican Italy.\textsuperscript{63} Regarding religious buildings we may assume that the god venerated received specific attention in the images applied on the walls, floors and doors of temples, but the scanty evidence at hand does not give clues to answer this question in a positive way except for shrines of specific cults like that of Mithras.\textsuperscript{64}

Turning to genre representations, these images can say something about mentality, illustrating literacy, knowledge of myth and history, taste for luxury, and so on, without giving ‘personal’ information about the owner of the house. Yet, studies of isolated motifs, logical and attractive as they might be, can arrive at distorted conclusions, just because of their focus on the subject only and the loss of context. Jean-Michel Croisille, for instance, connects the painted still lifes in

\textsuperscript{57} PPM III (1991) 248-257; Oliveto 2013, 239-245. On this genre more in general Torelli 2012.

\textsuperscript{58} Despite his thorough research, Oliveto (2013) could not solve this problem.

\textsuperscript{59} See Torelli 2012; Oliveto 2013, 231-221.

\textsuperscript{60} PPM V (1994) 541-565. On the Vettii and the various assessments of their status, see De Angelis 2011, 62-64.

\textsuperscript{61} De Angelis 2011, 66.

\textsuperscript{62} Monteix 2016. I owe this reference to Domenico Esposito. Nicolas Monteix had the courtesy to send me the image of the amorini frieze, and sent me a draft of this article before publication.

\textsuperscript{63} This seems also to be the outcome of a study by Emanuel Mayer (2012) on Roman ‘middle class’ people.

\textsuperscript{64} Moormann 2011, 163-183.
Figure 6: Pompeii, House of the Vettii, Room q, north wall, frieze showing amorini tasting wine (photo Nicolas Monteix).
Pompeian houses with the wish to show the owner’s interest in an ‘aimable épiciurisme, entendu au sens horatien du terme’. In the House of the Vettii he observes the same penchant for food, ‘ce qui semble correspondre à un art de vivre sachant prendre en compte les plaisirs de la table’. The banquet was, indeed, an important feature in rich households in antiquity and food will have played an important role, but we may ask whether these xenia – foodstuffs presented to guests to take away in order to be prepared at home – indeed correspond with the many references to food in contemporary literature, or if the images simply belong to the stock figures. Would the patron really have been an epicurean or lucullian gourmand? And what to say of the Temple of Isis where food still lifes abound in the portico around the main temple area, unless, as Croisille does, we see them as offerings of gratitude towards the goddess venerated. Some scenes of money bags and writing utensils are seen as expressions of commerce rather than literacy. Interestingly, the fictitious description of a collection of paintings in Naples, the Imagines of Philostratus, contains detailed references to still lifes which, according to Croisille, occupy secondary positions only, as do the most of them in mural paintings, but have a much greater importance according to Michael Squire, who points at the suggestive appetizing qualities and their position within the paintings’ order. If we follow Croisille on his interpretation, it would imply that the significance given to the paintings in the previous discussion in his book is overcharged. Squire’s intellectual approach to still lifes leads to a very sophisticated interpretation of these images as ‘deconstructing the visual boundaries between the real and the artificial within different frameworks’ and as illusions of deceptive realism. But we may ask whether such intellectual play (like that advocated by both Croisille and Squire) really worked so well. Squire rightly brings together the notion of luxuria expressed by the painting of (precious) images of food and

65 Croisille 2015, 66, in respect to the House of the Deers in Herculaneum. See also Croisille 2015, 82-87, figs 77-84 on other still lifes, out of context, from this house. All of them belong to the fourth style. On the simplified epicurism, see also Croisille 2015, 149.
66 Croisille 2015, 70. However, the still lifes in cubiculum d are combined with a sex scene and representations of the love couples Ariadne and Theseus and Hero and Leander (see Mayer 2012, 195 on this room).
67 As to the xenia, word known from Vitruvius, De Arch. 6.7.4, see the discussion in Croisille 2015, 111-121. The motif is used by Martial in his book 13 of the Epigrams (list in Croisille 2015, 112 n. 425). On the luxury of the table, i.a. Dubois-Pelerin 2008, 61-115.
68 Croisille 2015, 73-76, esp. 76.
69 Croisille 2015, 100-102, esp. 102, figs 97-100 (all out of context; fourth style).
70 Croisille 2015, 105.
72 Squire 2009, 383 (quotation), 384-389.
that of the fresh foodstuff itself, which tallies well with the double significance of
the Roman villa as a centre of food production and *otium*.

*Megalographiae*, as described briefly by Vitruvius (*De Arch. 7.5.2*), without
clearly explaining the terminology, were produced in the second and beginning of
the third quarter of the first century BC. They have vexed scholars over decades,
so that the French researcher Gilles Sauron once suggestively spoke of ‘une fresque
malade de ses interpretations’ in a paper on the megalography in oecus H in
Boscoreale (fig. 7). The most famous example is the megalography in the Villa
of the Mysteries, while the short list also includes examples from a villa in Ter-
zigno and in the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum. The problem is that none
of these compositions of large figures has clear parallels in iconography, at least in
the combinations in which they occur in these settings; they leave us with many
questions. Even if we can explain a great number of the single figures on these
murals, interpretation of the scenes as a whole remains difficult. One interpreta-
tive tool that could be useful (and never explored in full as far as we know) is the
fact that these megalographies adorn large rooms with the function of banqueting
or symposium rooms. In my view, their function as conversation pieces should
cause us to avoid religious interpretations like those proposed for the Villa of the
Mysteries. History and allegory, as suggested for Boscoreale, could be problematic
as well, although such topics could appear on the ‘discussion agendas’ of the sym-
oposists. The latter method is applied by Sauron in many of his publications.
This French scholar believes that these and other late Republican paintings convey
allegorical messages, mostly hidden from the modern onlooker, inserted by the
painters on behalf of the patron or patrons. He argues that the highly complicated
structures of these murals are too rich in detail and too particular to consider them
only as a sort of wallpaper. For him, allegory permeates these walls in a strong and
persuasive way, albeit with concealed messages, and it is our task to find the keys
to a good understanding by analysing contemporary philosophical and literary
sources like Varro, Lucretius, and Cicero. As a welcome contrast to war and poli-
tics, it was philosophy, astrology, and other sciences that stimulated the rich
Roman villa owners to hide messages in these murals. Sauron argues that these
cryptic images were understandable to their peers, and that they expressed ideas

74 Squire 2009, 408-415. Squire indiscriminately uses heterogeneous sources covering a long time
span, from Varro to Macrobius, what might be a weakness in regard to the paintings he discusses
which date from ca 50 BC to AD 79. He points at the distance of time in the discussion of Philo-
stratus and refers to mosaics of later date in other contexts (Squire 2009, 416 n. 141).
75 Title of Sauron 1996. The title of Sauron’s paper (2013, 119-129) suggests that the painting’s healing
process is going well: *Une fresque en voie de guérison: la mégalographie de Boscoreale*. See on this room
Palagia 2014 (with previous bibliography).
76 See on the Villa of the Mysteries ultimately Esposito 2007.
77 See Moormann 2013.
about personal fortune and life, combined with prestigious signs referring to military or political achievements. Sauron interprets some recurring motifs as tokens of the allegorical language of these ‘images de mémoire’ adopted by the painters who must have been instructed thoroughly by the patron. Although I admire his highly intellectual readings which have the highest degree of associative thinking and reasoning possible, I fear that he relies on speculation, since direct sources do not tell us that allegory was a preferred play in interior decoration and other arts. Therefore, I cannot discover other messages than mundane ones of enhancing the solemn atmosphere and the prestige of the rooms and, consequently, the owners of these rooms (*pars pro toto* for houses/villas). 78 One of Sauron’s spokesmen, Cicero, for example, wrote a lot about the furnishing of houses and villas with statuary, while he did not pay any attention to the decorations of floors, walls, and ceilings, as do very few other authors, for instance Petronius in the *Cena Trimalchionis* section of his *Satyricon*. When Pliny summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of Roman painting (*NH* 35.2–3), he applauds veracity of images (e.g. in the stories about real painters like Apelles and Zeuxis, but not about *toichographoi* or *pictores parietarii*), but says nothing about the intrinsic value of these decorations.

Of course, we must be prudent as to relying on these few sources only. Neverthe-
less, the *mentalité* of the Roman house, villa and palace, or public buildings and
temples, seems to be perceived only through their silent remains; certainly not
from vague associations made nowadays on the basis of texts (sometimes even very
remote from the canon) making no reference at all to the ancient form of wall
paper that is painting.

**Conclusion**

Iconography of ancient wall painting includes both the usual suspects, that is
images, and decorative systems. The latter convey messages by representing sump-
tuous architecture (Republican period), an austere background stressing a sort of
soberness (late Augustan and Tiberian period), or a revocation of all sorts of lux-
ury and free fantastic forms (from Claudius onwards). The structure-like ‘images’
are as important as the figural elements included in these murals. The colour
schemes stress the various sorts of messages, but also respond to practical demands
like fitting into dark or light rooms, large or small spaces, and dynamic or static
places. In sum, all elements of a decoration contribute to the creation of an atmos-
phere as wanted by the patron. The relation between the room and its decoration
can be important to make definitive decisions.

The debate regarding images focuses on the interpretation of their content and
their composition, but should also take into account their position within the
decorations. The example of the still lifes shows that too much significance can be
ascribed to them when one takes them as if they were real paintings and not parts
of a total decorative ensemble. A vexed question is the meaning of images in the
sense of societal, political, and/or personal involvement. The analyses of imperial
complexes like the Houses of Augustus and Livia on the Palatine and the Golden
House of Nero on the Esquiline Hill do not support the interpretation of images
and decorative schemes as immediate political or allegorical messages pertaining
the patron of these residences. What is more, both wall schemes and images do
not differ from those in other private buildings, unless in quality and use of
expensive pigments. As for the ancient temples, textual testimonies describe images
hung in the interiors and some examples of figural decorations, and here we see
attention paid to the deity worshipped. The hard reality of the archaeological
record leaves us with hundreds of cases of interior decorations consisting of wall
systems similar to those in houses, which reinforces the impression that temples
indeed were the houses of the gods. Tombs, finally, are more polyvalent. We have
seen how the Macedonian tombs eternalize the virtues of the deceased, symbolised
in fighting, hunting, and dining, sometimes enriched by other motifs; the Roman
tombs convey the same idea: there, we also encounter house-like interiors.
Although I have not dealt with many other aspects of imagery and iconography of ancient mural painting in this contribution, I hope to have shown that the sometimes complicated images should be looked at with great care, fantasy, and maybe some northern dryness of thinking. They were adornments, not political or spiritual pamphlets.

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