

Painted Temples: Intersignification between Roman Sanctuary and Home

Roman wall painting is perhaps best known from the frescoes in the houses of Pompeii. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius has preserved the decorative designs of these walls and has led to much study of August Mau's "Four Styles." Mau (1882) classified the frescoes of Pompeii into a linear progression of styles that evolved in their complexity and aesthetic qualities. This evolutionary perspective has been challenged, but an equally fundamental problem with Mau's classification is that it is primarily drawn from this one partial evidentiary source and doesn't take into account paintings outside of the houses of Campania.

The temple of Isis at Pompeii has several preserved frescoes, and Italian temples outside of Pompeii often also show evidence of painting. Moreover, the literary sources are quite clear that painted interiors of temples were commonplace, even if we don't have as numerous examples as for houses. Fabius Pictor supposedly got his name from his painting in the Temple of Salus in 304 BC. Given this fact, how would a viewer have read these temple paintings in light of those they had seen in houses (perhaps even their own)?

Likewise, the first two of Mau's styles made direct reference to the stone architecture seen outside of the home. The so-called First Style or Masonry Style consisted of walls painted in various colors to mimic expensive marble blocks, often including stucco molding of orthostates, large blocks which were prominently used in civic architecture. The Second or Architectural Style takes this allusion a step further by using perspective to dissolve the walls of the room and filling this receded space with architectural motifs and buildings, as if looking out a window. Second Style wall painting makes use of many building types, but frequently, these paintings revolve around a central round aedicular building. The references to public, and

particularly religious, architecture in domestic painting creates an intersignification, where both religious and domestic painting enter into a dialogue that enhances the meaning of each.

This paper explores the complicated interplay of meaning for paintings in/of temples. Domestic wall painting is often seen as the province of the elite, who are the same individuals who have regular visual access to the interiors of temples. This is true of the literary references in Pliny and Livy of paintings in the temples of Rome as well as the art historical contexts of the richest homes from the Bay of Naples (Pompeii, Boscoreale, etc.). However, some of the earliest examples of painted temples include the cellae of the Capitolium at Brescia in Northern Italy, which shows evidence of being dedicated to non-Roman local deities. In this example, and others at Nemi and Sulmona, the language of elite domesticity becomes subversive, capturing local alterity and contesting the top-down assimilation model proposed by Moorman (2011), who saw the spread of temple painting as an index for “Romanization”. Paintings in temples then do more than dress them as houses for the gods, but play on the expectations of viewers to challenge and complicate the boundaries between public and private, between religious and secular, between elite and non-elite, between Roman and local.

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