Wall Decoration in Roman Commercial Space

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Over the course of the last 30 or 40 years, studies examining the Roman economy have shifted from a reliance primarily on textual sources towards a more materially-integrative approach, with the result that quantitative archaeological data now play a central role in analyses focusing on various aspects of the economic system. This paper applies some similarly quantitative techniques to a related (if slightly tangential) topic: painted wall decoration in Roman commercial space.

Roman cities were awash with commercial activity. Hawkers and peddlers wandered the streets selling their wares, merchants set up temporary stalls along sidewalks and in the porticos of public buildings, and goods were sold from central markets, as well as shops and workshops lining urban thoroughfares. Pompeii, the focus of this study, provides material evidence for these activities, most notably in the form of over 600 purpose-built *tabernae* that have been preserved throughout the city. An analysis of the painted decoration in and around shops containing bar counters reveals that the owners of properties used exclusively for retail activities employed various forms of painted decoration in an effort to encourage patronage and, presumably, to enhance the status of their establishments (fig. 1).[1]

Fig. 1: Distribution of bar counters in Pompeii (n = 153).

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In general, the façades of bars in Pompeii were painted utilising a regular decorative scheme, in which large, monochrome blocks of colour were positioned in horizontal bands. Various colours were employed, but the most common arrangement consisted of a high, red dado topped with a white upper zone. An examination of interior decorative programmes reveals that a similar design was often present. Of the 113 bars in which painted wall plaster was recorded, 65 utilised the white-over-red pattern in the bar-room, while in an additional 26 remains only of the red dado were preserved.[2] The continuity between façade and interior decoration worked in conjunction with the wide "*taberna*" doorway to establish a formal link between the bar's internal space and the street, a set up that was, no doubt, quite useful when trying to encourage pedestrians to stop for a bite to eat or a drink.

But a standardised colour scheme was not the only decorative technique used by the operators of retail properties to encourage trade. Figural images also appeared on the façades of Pompeian bars and shops, typically on the lighter, upper section of the wall. In terms of content, these images can be broken down into three thematic categories: merchandise, animals and deities.[3] It has been argued that images included in the first category served as rudimentary forms of advertisement,[4] but the depictions of animals and deities likely functioned in a similar way. Paintings of animals – such as the elephant applied to the exterior of the Hospitium di Sittius (VI.1.44) – provided the property with a definitive identity, which might also serve as a useful shorthand for word-of-mouth advertising (e.g. "let's meet at The Elephant for a cup of wine").[5] Images of gods or goddesses perhaps worked in a similar fashion, while also indicating that the establishment and its patrons were under the protection of a divine benefactor.[6] Not surprisingly, deities associated with commerce and good fortune dominate this category of images. Mercury was by far the most popular figure, representing more than one-quarter of all façade deities (n = 127), followed by Minerva (8%), Venus Pompeiana (7%), and Fortuna (6%).

The prevalence of these divinities in commercial settings serves to emphasise the close relationship between artistic content and spatial context in Pompeii. If wall paintings inside the *domus* are best known for depictions of complicated mythological scenes, commercial decoration adopts the opposite approach. Employing a set of comparatively simplistic images with a limited cast of characters, the meanings of façade paintings were quickly and easily understood by their viewership.[7] This distinction is reflected in the results of J. Hodske's 2007 survey of mythological imagery in Pompeian houses. He identified 101 individual figures in 2nd, 3rd and 4th style painting programmes; in total, these deities, demigods and humans made 983 appearances on house walls.[8] What is striking about Hodske's data, however, is the virtual absence of the deities most popular in façade painting. While Hodske's top five figures make more than 40 appearances each, Mercury is depicted only four times and Minerva only twice; Venus Pompeiana is nowhere to be found.[9]

These are admittedly preliminary results, and the complicated and incomplete nature of the datasets employed necessitates further analysis of the available evidence. Examinations of other forms of media utilised inside bars, such as paintings found on bar counters and around lararia, are necessary before conclusive distinctions between Pompeian "commercial" and "non-commercial" art can be drawn. But, with those caveats clearly stated, the results presented here suggest that a quantitative approach to the study of *taberna* decoration does offer some promise.

Notes

[1] The use of bar counters as a proxy for retail activity is an approach first developed by S. Ellis (2004, 373) in the mid-2000s.

[2] Data from Kieberg 2014, Tabelle IV 6 d.

[3] For the purposes of this paper, I exclude a fourth group, *lararium* paintings, because they have a specific religious function.

[4] Fröhlich 1991, 64.

[5] The elephant decorating the façade of the Hospitium di Sittius was accompanied by two dipinti: one indicating the property was for let (CIL IV 807), the other noting that it was called "The Elephant," and had been restored by its owner, Sittius (CIL IV 806).

[6] J. Clarke (2003, 457) has suggested that paintings of deities linked to commerce and good fortune were appropriate for the decoration of shops and workshops because they delivered a message that prospective patrons were expecting: that the "proper" gods were being celebrated and propitiated.

[7] More than three-quarters of figural images applied to Pompeian façades hail from bars, shops or workshops.

[8] Hodske 2007, Tabelle 3: Verteilung der Bildthemen nach Mythen und Stilen.

[9] It is worth pointing out that these deities do sometimes appear in domestic *lararium* paintings (e.g. V.4.3; VII.4.20), however, which emphasises further their "functional" character.

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Fig. 1: Basemap courtesy Pompeii Bibliography and Mapping Project.

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