

Roman Wall Painting under the Flavians: Continuation or New Developments?

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Introduction

In the study of the Fourth Style, the distinction of determinate phases within the sixty years of its existence has been a much-discussed question.¹ The Fourth Style as such is a rather unpractical indication of an era with bricolage of elements from the preceding, better defined Second and Third Styles. It is a combination of architectural schemes and their derivatives, panel decorations, fine and gross decorative motifs like broderies, and the application of mock marble veneer, mainly in the lower zone. The origin of this mixture seems to be found in the late Third Style, so indicated, since it comprises more heavily adorned decorative systems like that of the House of M. Lucretius Fronto. Some scholars have tried to connect the invention of the Fourth Style – and phases within it – with the person of a determinate emperor, but these attempts have failed, as is clear from the chronological problems involved. Thus, Nero has been advocated by Karl Schefold, but we can find examples from an earlier stage. What is more, the Golden House of Nero, the only complex of decorations surely connected with this emperor and dated between AD 64 and 68, shows a broad array of possibilities that have predecessors in decorative complexes in the Campanian cities.² The same is true for the Flavians: no specific historical occasion can be connected with a complex of firmly dated murals. The poor remains of murals in the Domus Flavia and the Domus Augustana do not give us any clue as to the development of the Fourth Style.

Therefore, we want to take a closer look at the more or less firmly dated decorations in Rome, Ostia, and the area buried by Vesuvius. This has been done in some instances, but not in a systematic way. Although the format of this contribution is limited, we hope to give a new outlook upon this matter.

Flavian Paintings in Rome and its Environment

Nero's Golden House in the post-Neronian Period

The Golden House was not immediately abandoned after Nero's suicide in the summer of 68. We do not know who were the new inhabitants (or at least users), but these people completed a couple of rooms in which real marble veneer should have been installed under Nero (e.g. room 71), and decorated other rooms.³ The *terminus ante quem* is the construction of Trajan's Baths which started in AD 104. The crucially situated room 116 got a complete painted decoration as well as a tessellated mosaic



Fig. 1: Rome, Golden House, room 42, vault of secondary decoration.

floor: they differ from the other decorations in this area of the building, lacking marble veneer and *opus sectile* flooring. The murals contain an elaborate Third-Style like articulation into panels separated by *aediculae* on black on top of a red dado.⁴ Probably because of these miniature adornments, the decoration was dated earlier in the past. They look like the fine paintings of Workshop C in the western wing of the edifice. Two rooms, 42 and 48, were partly redecorated due to the insertion of a mezzanine. Room 42 shows a fine decoration in red on a yellow ground, but here there is no possible doubt that it is late, since it cuts the old monumental façade of workshop A.⁵ As in 116, there are *aediculae* separating panels, but the ornaments look thicker and more roughly executed than those in 116. The vault has a central



Fig. 2: Rome, Domus Flavia, room 334, vault.

composition familiar from other Neronian rooms; it looks more refined than the walls and might have been made by a more skillful painter than the wall decorator. In room 48 we observe the same difference: simple *aediculae* between almost empty panels on a white ground and delicately executed vaults.⁶ Finally, there is room 71, where a white panel decoration fills the lacuna of the not-yet-applied marble dado, which is situated below a stucco façade of workshop A.⁷ The presence of small birds as decorative motifs has given this room the common name of Sala degli uccelli, and these ornaments have brought up the suggestion that the room was painted by no less than Famulus himself. Yet, we recognize the miniature architectures and broidery-like garlands encountered in the other rooms as well. In sum, despite the simplicity of the decorative patterns in rooms 42, 48, 71, and 116, the ornaments applied were rather refined and would later give the idea that they belonged to

Nero's murals. Probably those in the dado of room 24 (yellow on white)⁸ were also subtle. The fact that in rooms 42 and 48 two painters or small groups of painters have subdivided their work demonstrates that the post-Neronian patrons had a certain ambition as well as the need for speed to complete the requested decorations.

An exception to these observations seems to be constituted by a partially preserved decoration in the staircase 38.⁹ The few remains show, at least, elements like candelabra, columns, and a round shield, which are more heavily rendered than the other Flavian murals within the pavilion.

Domus Flavia-Augustana

The few remains of murals and ceiling decorations show extremely simple, but not badly made decorations adorning the vaults in yellow and red on white ground in rooms 334 and 340. Since these are rather secondary rooms, such as latrine 340, they received little light and should not be heavily adorned.¹⁰ Real marble must have clad the walls, after the example of Nero's Golden House.¹¹ The vault of room 334 has a central composition of a tondo occupied by a floating woman with quarter circles marking the corners, all in red thin garlands painted on a plain white ground. This composition, indeed, closely resembles the decoration of room 42 in the Golden House, where a similar scheme with central tondo and quarts of circles adorn a yellow ground. The little known of the ceiling in room 340 shows rectangular spaces surrounded by thin red lines, sometimes enlivened by yellow fantastical forms and yellow-red *cornucopiae*. Thin garlands hang from the framework. These line plays recall the decoration in the lower part of room 71.

The Cityscape Painting on the Oppius

The cityscape found on the Oppius has raised a severe debate regarding its context, function, chronology, and iconography.¹² Since at the beginning the location was not yet clearly established, the chronology oscillated between Neronian and Flavian. As in the Golden House, the construction of the Baths of Trajan constitutes a *terminus ante quem*. While L. Bouke van der Meer recognized an image of the ideal Rome projected as Neropolis by Nero and, consequently, dated it to the age of Nero and attributed it to his Golden House,¹³ Eugenio La Rocca has seen it as an adornment of the *praefectura Urbis* erected under Vespasian. Its 'tecnica pittorica [...] compendaria'¹⁴ and topic are unique and there cannot be found a real parallel from, say, the second half of the first century AD. La Rocca's connection with ancient chorography is plausible.¹⁵ Finally, in an essay on ideal towns and their micro-imitations in villas like the Golden House, Hadrian's villa in Tivoli, and Piazza Armerina, Mario Torelli interpreted the image as a depiction of all the elements necessary to accommodate the inhabitants of a town.¹⁶ Since we are not discussing the iconography, but are trying to articulate some ideas concerning the Flavian way of decorating, we can only conclude that the cityscape has no real parallels as of yet and stylistically cannot be compared to other late first-century decorations.



Fig. 3: Pompeii, House of Pinarius Cerialis, room a, Wall 'stile a facciate'.

The House of Via Genova

In 1933, during construction work for a public fire department, some rooms of a *domus* were found, one of them having white-ground paintings with fine ornaments and thin architectures. Water colors were made and some parts were stripped and brought to the Antiquarium Comunale on the Celio.¹⁷ Only a few colors (red, reddish brown, black, and green) are used to compose the aediculae which separate the fields on top of a tripartite dado. The ornamental borders within the fields show a



Fig. 4: Pompeii, House of Vettii, Peristyle I, Decoration with Panel system.

mix of vegetal and fantastical elements. The center of the panels has vignettes with landscapes. Although the decoration is modest, it displays a certain pictorial quality and elegance that look like the white-ground murals in Nero's Golden House. If we look more closely, they correspond to those applied after Nero's death in room 71. The connection with the decoration in the Golden House was made in previous studies, without giving exact parallels. If the lead water fistula found here really belongs to this house, it can be ascribed to a man connected with the Flavians: Titus Flavius Salinator.¹⁸ If this relationship is likely and substantiates the area's topography, the paintings have a secure date and as a result are valuable for the study of Flavian painting in Rome.¹⁹

Flavian Decorations in Ostia

Ostia has yielded significant material prior to that known from its second-century boom as a harbor town. Fourth-Style fragments stem from recent excavations and investigations, as well as from earlier found materials kept in depot.²⁰ A rather heavily colored scheme is that from a house under the 'Taberne Finestrate' with a sort of *Prunkfassade* similar to those in the ala of the House of the Great Hunt in Pompeii. Its dating is not secure.²¹ Other fragments come from the 1975 excavation within the Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Here, we see a flattish, Third Style-like mural system, with



Fig. 5: Herculaneum, House of 'Gran Portale', room 6, monochrome wall.

red panels separated by black spaces occupied by simple aediculae. The dado presents some yellow plants on a black ground. They are similar to the red decoration in the Temple of Bona Dea, partly applied in the first half of the first century AD.²² We would like to suggest a comparison with the simple and closed systems in the Golden House discussed before.

All in all, Rome and its neighborhood offer little material, and the murals we encounter are of a simple nature, characterized by panels enlivened by sections of architectural systems (used previously as well) and tiny adornments. This would imply that one would consider the Fourth Style under the Flavians in Rome as a return to Third-Style systems, with a strong stress laid on ornamentation on top of monochrome facings.

Flavian Paintings in Pompeii and Herculaneum

As said above, it has been argued that the Fourth Style was an invention made at Nero's court in Rome. Given the fact that wall decorations made according to this fashion are known from earlier monuments, especially in Pompeii, this assumption is unrealistic.²³ Some scholars have tried to distinguish between Neronian and Flavian painting.²⁴ The Flavian decoration would be more 'baroque' and rich with lavish elements. However,



Fig. 6: Pompeii, House of Dioscuri, room 46, example of a preparatory layer for a (stripped) marble veneer.

the mature Fourth Style, which is the late Neronian phase, as we can see in the first instance in Nero's Golden House, also displays a wide array of possibilities. Many shapes encountered in this palace – ornamental façades, panel decorations, *aediculae* and parts of them subdividing panel systems, repetitive patterns, embroideries – are found in buildings elsewhere in more or less the same time.²⁵ Yet, the lack of firm chronological criteria for the latter group of monuments makes such an assumption rather shaky.

To better understand the nature of the Fourth Style we have to read it as a double process of continuity with and redevelopment of the previous decorative fashions (so-called Second and Third Styles). As stated by Mariette de Vos, the Fourth Style is eclectic: that means that the new decorative fashion combines and renews at the same time all the formal and decorative solutions proposed in the past Second and Third Styles.²⁶ As a consequence of this process it is very difficult to define chronological distinctions between the fine decorated panel-systems and the heavy architectural systems imitating complex façades and megalographies.

In the Vesuvian area, the few dated complexes comprise the uncompleted decorations in various houses, such as the House of the Painters at Work in Pompeii. An extraordinary case is that of stamps of datable coins in the wet plaster of the atrium in the House of the Old Hunt in Pompeii.²⁷

A group of heavily adorned decorations in Herculaneum, like the public buildings of the *Augusteum* and the unfinished *Aedes Augustalium*, form a Flavian set.²⁸ Here, architectural elements are plastically rendered, there are vistas through open windows, and the color scheme is abundant. Nevertheless, even firmly dated walls do not yet help us to define different style phases very well within the Fourth Style.

Experts have to rely on stylistic and formal associations, which often are rather arbitrary and subject to connoisseur-like estimations. Yet, the paintings attributed to this latter phase are similar to the preceding decorations, albeit richer and, especially in respect to the architectural elements, more complicated. Wallpaper patterns and marbling are present to a larger extent than before.

In Pompeii, between late fifties and AD 79, we can recognize two painters' workshops that decorated the major public buildings and private houses within the town: the Vettii Workshop and the Via di Castricio Workshop.²⁹ The distribution map of the activity of each painters' workshop in Pompeii shows an interesting pattern. The Vettii workshop seems to be favored by the members of the local élite and owners of the richest houses of the town, as well as the patrons who commissioned decorations in all the most important public buildings. The simpler workshop of Via di Castricio was favored by more modest patrons or used for the secondary rooms of rich houses.

Looking at the production of wall painting in this period, however, we have to keep in mind the socio-political status and economic possibilities of the patrons on the one hand and the commitment and technical capacities of the painters on the other. In Pompeii, the socio-economic interaction between patrons and painters influenced the originality of wall painting, but also stimulated processes of emulation or banal imitation between different decorative systems. At the same time, we can recognize cross-sections between public and private contexts or low and high quality of paintings, reflecting the needs and economic possibilities of the patrons and technical capacities of the painters.³⁰

Furthermore, the examples of Pompeii and Herculaneum demonstrate that painters' workshops were organized as big businesses, run by *redemptores*, perhaps employed by socially and politically influential *patroni*.³¹ Since they were large affairs, these workshops used teams of numerous decorators capable either of working together on the site of a large public building or separately at multiple sites. At a local level, these workshops were able to control large parts of the market, and to continually secure new commissions. More rarely they were able to function on a regional or inter-regional basis.

Another point brought forward is that the Fourth Style would show a certain degree of neglecting pictorial qualities and is artistically less convincing than its predecessor; this opinion started with Mau.³² A strong impetus to find this fashion below good taste comes from Paul Zanker's 1979 influential article on the imitation of villa culture of the late Republican period in the Vespasian era in Pompeii. He

argued that the predecessors had good taste, whereas the followers were nothing but tasteless *nouveaux riches*.³³ Apart from the fact that, in a technical sense, Fourth-Style paintings are not worse (or better) than the preceding ones, this negative estimation reflects a scarcely enlightening assessment of the Neronian and Flavian period as a whole. These intimations seem strongly influenced by the negative image of the notoriously badly esteemed emperors Nero and Domitian rather than based on a meticulous analysis of their era's culture.

However, the archaeological evidence from the Vesuvian towns, particularly from the villa-like *domus* at Herculaneum, helps us to better define the spread of luxury and the choices made by the patrons to increase the expenditure of luxury in their houses and villas. Many scholars stated that the quality of panel paintings in Herculaneum is largely rough. They explain this circumstance as the result of the minor interest of the patrons for panel paintings. Although some evidence seems to corroborate this hypothesis, at the same time we observe the remarkably high quality and innovative character of the big panel pictures of the aforementioned *Augusteum* of Herculaneum. In that sense, the Fourth Style is not neglecting pictorial qualities at all.

In the large houses of Herculaneum, it is possible to recognize other forms of luxury expenditure than is expressed through the wall paintings as well as through other media. The decorative systems show very fine and complex architectural frames, with vanishing pavilions and different levels of perspective.

Monochrome walls (in blue, green, red and black) and mock marble veneer are more in fashion than elsewhere. In contrast with the strong monochromatic surfaces of the walls, the large use of colored marbles for floors is attested; in the richest houses, such as the House of the Stags, entire rooms were lavishly decorated with marbles. At the same time, marble *monochromata* or Attic reliefs were used as mythological wall decorations to replace the normal panel paintings. This trend seems to be confirmed by the large diffusion of marble imitation in the 'traditional' wall paintings and by the increasing use of marble veneer on the walls as well. The two appearances of marble and marbling show a similar development of taste, that is the wish to have the motif of marble as a conspicuous part of house decoration.³⁴

Conclusions

The material presented here demonstrates both a quantitative and qualitative distortion between Rome and Campania. In Rome, the few instances known stem from complexes connected with the Flavian dynasty, but are surely not representative of the most important rooms within imperial residences. The murals are simple and not expensive if we look at the use of pigments and complicated pictorial schemes, but the ornamental parts do not lack a certain degree of pictorial quality. If we look

at nearby Ostia, the problem is that we have almost nothing but fragments from debris layers, which are partly reconstructed and show more heavily colored wall systems that are not much different from those in Campania. There might even be a bias of the abundant Campanian material, which has made the reconstructions as they are.

As to Campania, there are much more data, although the distinction within the material from after the 62/63 earthquake cannot precisely be subdivided into Neronian and Flavian groups or categories. Yet, the cases presented show the wide array of possibilities at hand among the painters' studios in the Campanian towns of the time.

Therefore, it seems justified to conclude that the Flavian decorations differed rather in subtle details than in composition schemes from previous Fourth-Style decorations. The decorative systems are variegated and venture plays with architectural and ornamental devices in a fantastic realm of possibilities. There must have been enough skill and inspiration among the painters to vary the schemes and ornamental elements they disposed of.

If we look at the economic demand, it is not yet the moment to ban paintings from important places within public, sacral, and private buildings. However, the use of marble, begun under Nero at a great scale, gradually takes over the domain of decorating principal rooms. Therefore, as said, paintings remain the dominating feature to decorate interiors of all classes of buildings. Pompeii and Herculaneum prove the existence of different – but also similar – levels within temples, public buildings, and residences, the latter varying from small to big complexes.

Notes

¹ See Thomas 1995; Strocka 1996; Esposito 2009; Bragantini 2014; Ling 2014.

² See for an overview of this discussion, the authors quoted in note 1. See also Meyboom – Moormann 2013 on Nero and the Fourth Style.

³ Meyboom – Moormann 2013, I, 96: rooms 7–16 (almost nothing preserved), 19 (lararium painting), 24, 26, 38, 42, 48, 49, 50, 62, 71, and 116. On what follows, see the remarks in this work.

⁴ Meyboom – Moormann 2013, I, 96, 225–226; II, 150–153.

⁵ Meyboom – Moormann 2013, I, 96, 170–172; II, 53–59.

⁶ Meyboom – Moormann 2013, I, 96, 175–176; II, 66–69. As to the vaults we must keep in mind that we only possess 18th-century documents which may be embellished versions rather than entirely trustworthy copies. Yet the detailed articulation does not differ much from the now-lost original situation.

⁷ Meyboom – Moormann 2013, I, 96, 189–190; II, 92–95.

⁸ Meyboom – Moormann 2013, I, 96, 152–153; II, 24.

⁹ Meyboom – Moormann 2013, I, 96, 167–168; II, 50.

¹⁰ Cf. the plan in Sojc 2012, fig. 7. On the paintings: Sojc 2012, 23, figs. 10 (room 334) and 11 (room 340). For 340 as a latrine: Sojc 2012, 23; J. Pflug in: Sojc 2012, 57; A. Schmölder-Veit, *ibidem* 206–208 (Hadrianic intervention).

¹¹ Here we take up Sojc's (2012, 23, note 68) suggestion that a comparative study should be made of the murals in this building and those of the post-Neronian phase in the Golden House.

¹² For the *editio princeps* of this painting found in 1998, see Caruso – Volpe 1998. See Van der Meer 1998 for a summa of the first reactions in press and oral communications. Caruso and Volpe consider the wall and its decorations as part of a public building from the Flavian era.

¹³ Van Der Meer 1998.

¹⁴ La Rocca 2000, 59. La Rocca 2008. See also Marchi – Rotondi 2010.

¹⁵ La Rocca 2000, 63 and La Rocca 2008.

¹⁶ Torelli 2006.

¹⁷ Cima di Puolo 1993. On the excavations, see De Caprariis 1988, 20–29.

¹⁸ CIL XV 7452. See De Caprariis 1988, 27; W. Eck, *LTUR* 2 (1995) 103. On the topography of the Flavians in this area, see most recently Moormann 2018.

¹⁹ The wall structures in *opus reticulatum* lined by *opus latericium* sections in fine brick work are visible on the water colors and substantiate a Flavian dating (Cima di Puolo 1993, 264–265, figs 94–95).

²⁰ Falzone 2017, 338–339, fig. 4: material from the Insula of the viridarium. The depicted fragments, however, seem to us rather typical for the Second Style and are comparable to the inferior cubiculum and oecus 13 of the House of Augustus (Tomei 2014, plate after p. 164, pls. XXX–XXXVIII).

²¹ Conte et al. 2017, 345–346, fig. 2; Falzone 2018, 95–96, fig. 8.

²² Marano 2017, fig. 2 (reconstruction); Falzone 2018, 95 (same reconstruction).

²³ Thomas 1995, 79; Meyboom – Moormann 2013, 23–24; Bragantini 2011.

²⁴ E.g. Thomas 1995, 136–166; Stročka 2010; cf. Esposito 2014, 151–152.

²⁵ See the analysis of Pompeian decorations in Thomas 1995, 134–136; Bragantini 2014 and 2019.

²⁶ De Vos 1981.

²⁷ Allison – Sear 2002, 83, figs 263–271; cf. Thomas 1995, 151–152.

²⁸ Moormann 2011, 119–137; Esposito 2014, 45; for houses *ibidem*, 158–163.

²⁹ De Vos (1981) 'discovered' the Via di Casticio workshop. See now Esposito 2009, 49–132, esp. 57; cf. Moormann 2011, 149–162, on this workshop's paintings in the Temple of Isis.

³⁰ Bragantini 2004, 2010, 2014 and 2019.

³¹ Esposito 2017.

³² Mau 1882. Also Ling 2014 speaks about a decline of quality.

³³ Zanker 1979; also in later publications.

³⁴ See also Van de Liefvoort 2016 on this juxtaposition.

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Fig. 1: after Meyboom – Moormann 2013, II, fig. 42.12. – Fig. 2: courtesy of Natasja Sojc. – Fig. 3–6: courtesy of Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali.

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