

Room Decoration as an International Code for Living with Images during the Roman Imperial Period

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Eclectic features of post-Pompeian wall painting systems make classification and dating without stratigraphic and architectural-historical results difficult. The wide range of painting systems common in the 2nd and 3rd century AD present only a few general, stylistic characteristics. An analysis of the use of painting systems in the terrace houses of Ephesus and of the distribution of stucco and wall painting friezes in a building in Palmyra has revealed specific parameters that serve to impart the status of a room and its hierarchy within a house. Decorations are highly diversified, and yet one common code for living with images, which seems to be international during the middle of the Roman imperial period, exists at all the widespread sites, even in the northwestern provinces like Noricum.¹

An analysis of the use of wall paintings in Ephesus and Ostia resulted in the definition of several parameters for this code.² The distribution of painting systems in terrace house 2 of Ephesus in the phases 2–3 illustrates this theory (Fig. 1).³ The apartments have large rooms for representation north of the peristyle. Apartments 1, 3, and 5 each have an exedra south of the peristyle. Often two closed, small rooms are situated east of the peristyle.⁴ In spite of these broadly common features, each apartment features an individual plan, which was adapted as per needs and the personal preference of the owner. The distribution and value of the wall painting shows that architecture was completed by room decoration. The use of marble revetment as the highest category was limited to the best and most important rooms.⁵ Two neighboring rooms of apartment 4, opening towards the peristyle and very close to the representation rooms on the first floor, are decorated with stucco masonry.⁶ In residential unit 4, a garden painting opens the closed courtyard in an illusionistic manner.⁷

The most common and typical system of the Ephesian workshop in terrace house 2 is the open fields and lesene system (Felder-Lisenensystem).⁸ A more complex layout on red background was exclusively adopted in the peristyle.⁹ The white background open fields and lesene system is more flexible and appears in the peristyle or in representation rooms that open toward the peristyle.¹⁰ The lesenes are decorated with leaves and candelabra, which vary in polychromy and sophistication depending on the rank of the room.¹¹ Rare elements enhance the paintings. The quality is defined by elaborate frames and the choice of emblems in the fields. Emblems with philosophers and muses on red fields exist only in the peristyles.¹² Birds and other emblems are used on red and white fields.¹³ Emblems vary on white background open fields and lesenes. There are medallions with philosophers in the peristyle of apartment 5.¹⁴ Emblems with artists, servants and banqueters emphasize its use as a dining room.¹⁵ The use of identical painting systems with

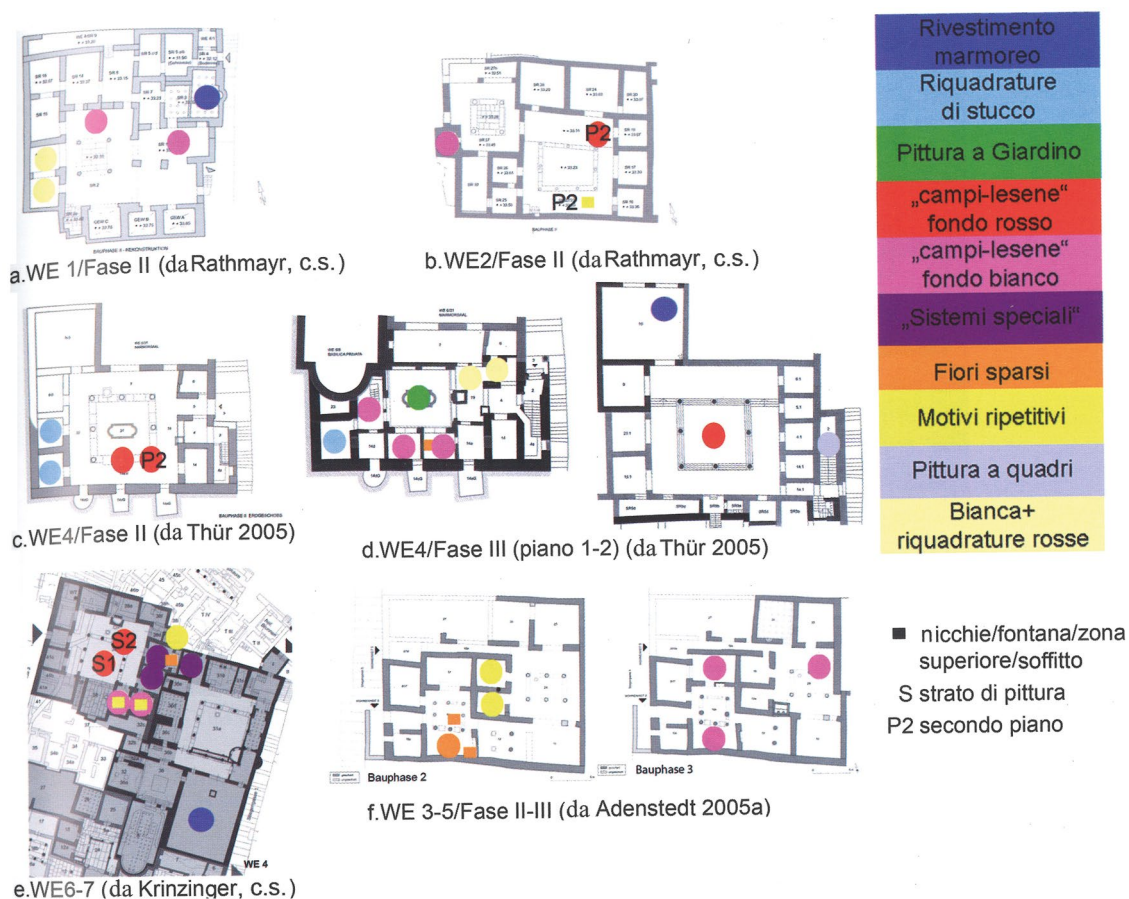


Fig. 1: Ephesus: Distribution of wall painting systems in terrace house 2.

birds and fish establishes a visual axis between the northern and southern rooms along the peristyle of apartment 3.¹⁶ Concerning the upper zone of the wall, the status is determined by the use of architectural painting on a yellow¹⁷ or white¹⁸ background. A mythological scene enhances the upper zone in only one single case in the peristyle of apartment 4.¹⁹

The only exceptions to these decorations on white backgrounds are to be found in apartments 6 and 7. Small landscapes, ornaments unique to Ephesus, and a painting system with aediculae in the middle zone follow western painting systems.²⁰ The use of repeated patterns in two small, secondary rooms, connote a functional connection between the rooms.²¹ Scattered flowers are found only in rooms which open towards a courtyard.²² Painted masonry is exclusively used in staircases.²³ A very simple system consisting of red frames in the corners on white background is used in two small, secondary rooms and again connotes their equal rank.²⁴

In phases 2 and 3 of the 2nd century, the Ephesian workshop made use of ten painting systems in terrace house 2 (fig. 1). The variation of the base color, painting systems,

motifs and figures connote the function of rooms. Specific systems and motifs are reserved for particular rooms. Identical decorations in neighboring or opposite rooms create a connection or visual axis.

The comparison of the Ephesian results with Stella Falzone's analysis of the wall painting of the 2nd century houses in Ostia has revealed that local painting systems define main and secondary rooms.²⁵ In Ephesus the workshop preferred open fields and lesenes. In Ostia, aedicular decorations are the preferred painting system. Main rooms use complex systems with rare elements and special ornaments. Polychromy is another factor used to emphasize the meaning of the room. Secondary rooms have simple painting systems and reduced polychromy and ornaments. Mythological scenes are rare and reserved for main rooms. Rare and special systems express the wishes of the sponsor. Identical painting systems stress axial and functional connections. Mosaic and marble decoration completes the expression of room hierarchy.

Are these Parameters also Valid in Palmyra? What about their Applicability?

In the ancient city of Palmyra, a building with a large courtyard provides a unique context for interior wall painting and stucco decoration.²⁶ The decoration originated in approximately the mid-2nd century and was in use until the building was abandoned.²⁷ In Palmyra the room hierarchy is defined by molded stucco and painted friezes.

The stucco decoration comprises nine different friezes, which can be classified in three categories:²⁸

- A. Very simple moldings without further three-dimensional decoration. They come from string courses, monumental door cases, and from the frames of niches.
- B. Stucco friezes with flat relief that combines different stamped ornamented bands.
- C. Very elaborate friezes with moldings in high relief including vegetal and figural decoration.

Within these main categories some features contribute to a more refined expression²⁹: the technical complexity required in order to produce the frieze; moldings made by templates, stamped ornaments and ornaments that are formed by hand; the height of the stucco-relief and plasticity of the frieze; the number of ornament bands; and the quality, richness of details and variation of free-formed parts like consoles and appliques.

The painted friezes complement these results and can also be classified in three categories.³⁰ System B comprises four similar ornamental friezes with elements of architectural decoration. Six to seven zones combine anthemion with egg-and-dart, tendrils, dentils and polychrome stripes.³¹ System C has a reduced amount of polychromy and the number of zones. Only three zones on white background show an anthemion, egg-and-dart, and dentils.³² System A is a highly elaborate decoration. The design of the frieze is combined with adjacent figural medallions and cassettes.³³

Decoration of room G:



Fig. 2: Palmyra: Decoration of the most important room G.

Like the stucco-friezes, the wall paintings form their own, very clear hierarchy of three categories. They show a clear intended ranking of the interior decoration. The wall paintings lack the possibility of variation in the third dimension and the complexity of plasticity, but through motif, size, and color, the painted decoration provides a differentiation of individual rooms³⁴.

The distribution and combination of stucco and painting in this building illustrates the practical use of the categories for emphasizing the meaning of the room.

In room G we can find (fig. 2):³⁵

1. The most elaborate paintings with figural designs (system A)
2. Friezes with free-formed stucco, garlands, and masks of the best category C
3. Gilded sea creatures
4. Some parts of a shell-shaped conch

The concentration of these elements and the exclusive use of paintings and stucco of the best category C, identify room G as the most representative room, at the top of the hierarchy of the building.³⁶

But aside from this outstanding and opulent room, they created a sensitive design inside the building (fig. 3). If there are stucco and painted friezes in one room, they refer

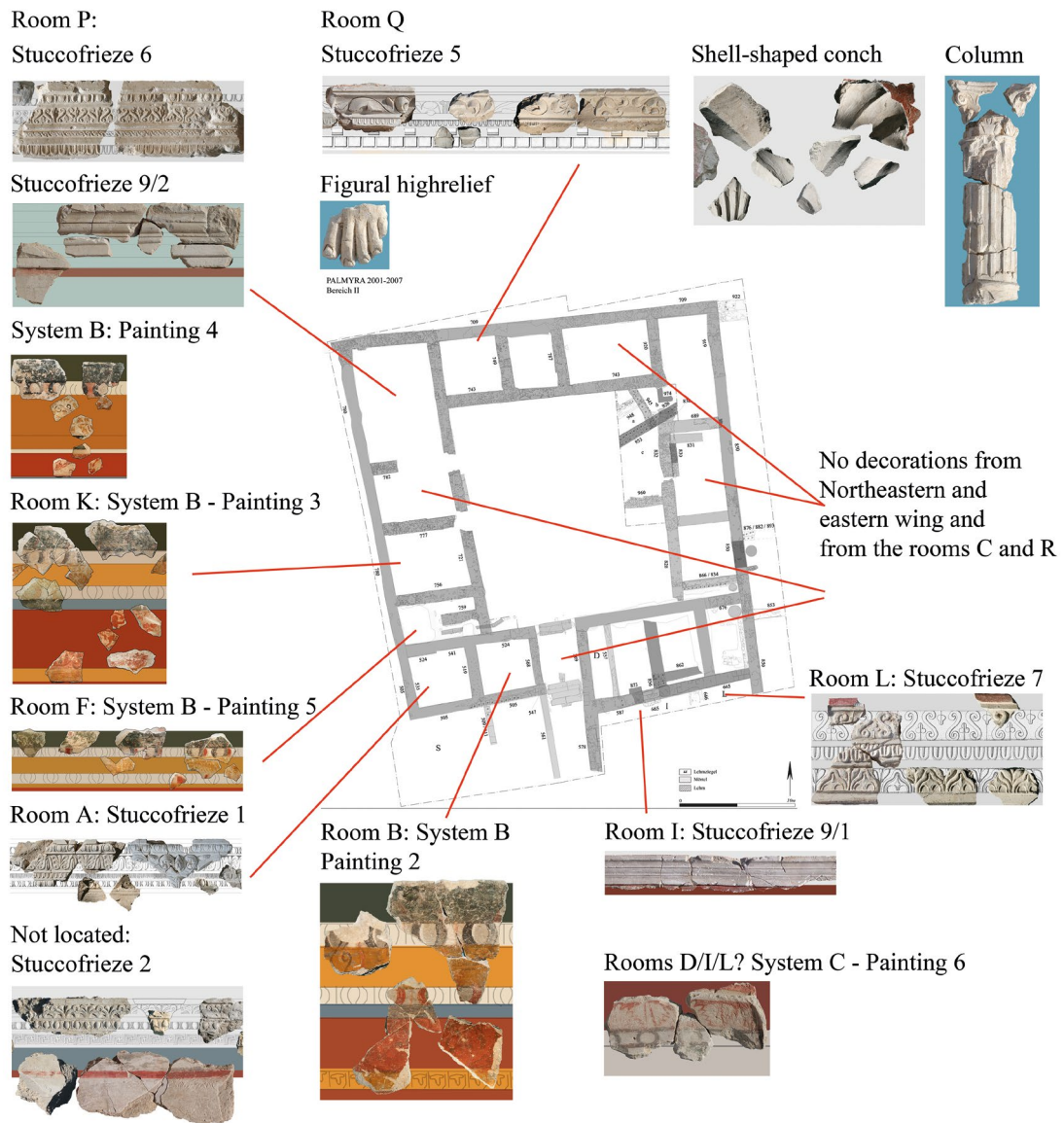


Fig. 3: Palmyra: Decoration of the other rooms.

to each other and the workshop that used the same categories. Room P contains only friezes of average category B in stucco and painting and a door case.³⁷ The adjoining rooms of room G show examples of the categories A and B, and represent secondary rooms.³⁸ Beside the room decorations with a combination of stucco and painting, there are two rooms with only one medium. Room Q has a stucco-frieze of the best category.³⁹ Room A has a stucco-frieze of average category but with elaborate capitals.⁴⁰ Both rooms seem to be important and of similar rank.

The use of wall painting system B connects the rooms K, F, and B by the sense of meaning, and emphasizes this sequence of rooms in the south-western part of the building.⁴¹

The analysis shows a very clear example for the use of friezes for defining main and secondary rooms. Room G is outstanding and opulent, followed by rooms Q and A with their stucco decoration. Room P is next with a combination of stucco and painting. The rooms B, F, and K form an equivalent group of secondary rooms without stucco.⁴²

In contrast to Ephesus and Ostia, where marble revetment and different painting systems define the hierarchy, Palmyra prefers to use stucco and painted friezes for the expression of the meaning of the rooms.

In spite of the different medium, the parameters in Ephesus and Palmyra are the same: polychromy, figures, number, quality and singularity of ornaments are complemented by plasticity and the technical complexity of the production of the stucco friezes.

**To Go more International, These Parameters Will Be Proved in the
Northwestern Province of Noricum. What about the Expression of the
Meaning of the Rooms there?**

The paintings in Noricum are often in poor condition, but together with the mosaic-floors they create an idea of the immovable environment of the buildings.⁴³

The early Tiberian example of the Principia on the Magdalensberg shows the adoption of the repertoire to the use of space.⁴⁴ Hall A has paratactic fields without a center, which can be repeated endlessly.⁴⁵ Decorative figures without special meaning enrich the painting system. Room E features higher polychromy and a central image, probably with a specific subject.⁴⁶

In Salzburg/Iuvavum, several sites have mural painting complexes combined with mosaic floors. In the ancient domus beneath the square named after the famous composer (Mozartplatz), some rooms have mosaics and two rooms display painted dados.⁴⁷ The mosaics and paintings seem to be part of period II, which dates from the mid-2nd century until the beginning of the 3rd century. Room C shows a centrosymmetric dado.⁴⁸ The painting is polychrome, has a figural part, and an unusual motif with a vegetal foot for a medallion. The mosaic floor has a central field.⁴⁹ The room is being interpreted as a dining room.⁵⁰

Ambulatory B belongs to a courtyard with columns and is decorated with a crenellated meander (Zinnenmäander) with birds and tendrils in the intervals. Higher up it is followed by a black-grounded main zone. The endless pattern of the mosaic and the consecutive crenellated meander optically support the sense of movement in the room and serve the room's purpose.⁵¹ Room A, containing the famous mosaic with Achelous and Amazons, is called the tablinum and was the most representative room of the building.⁵² The rooms seem to follow a staging that is aligned towards the main room with its figural mosaics.⁵³

In Saalfelden the architectural design with an apse indicates a main room.⁵⁴ The ill-preserved wall decoration has marble and opus sectile imitation on the dado, followed by a polychrome field and lesenes decoration in the main zone together with

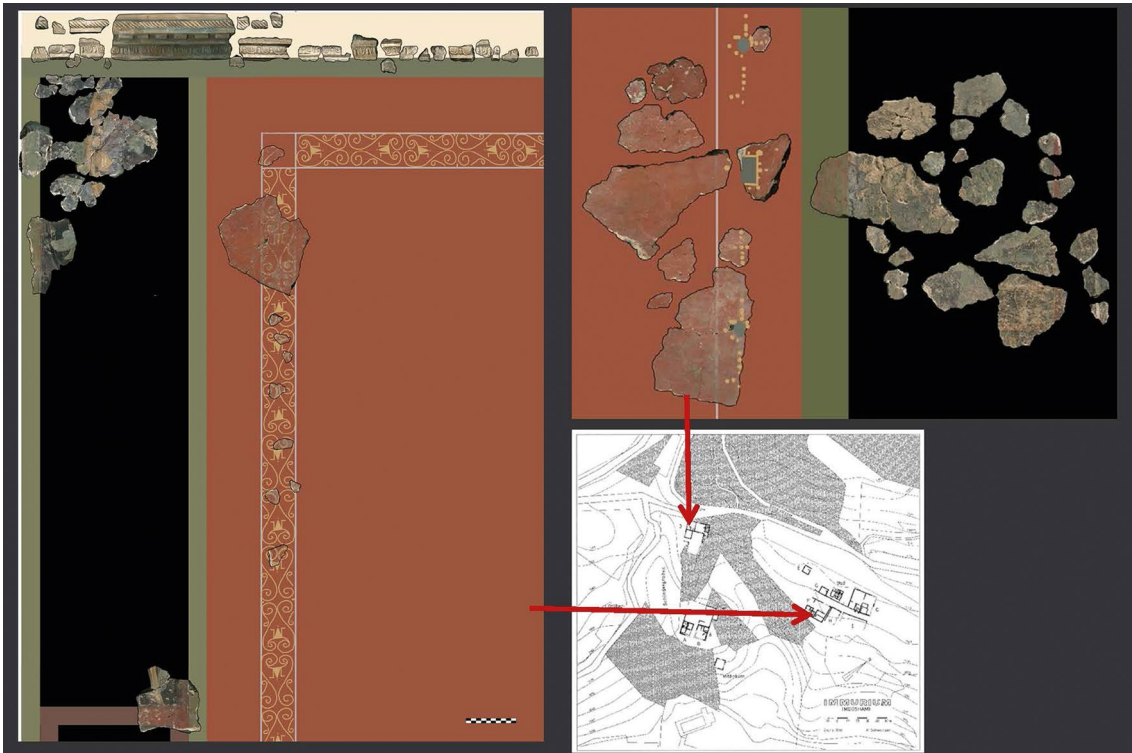


Fig. 4: Immurium/Moosham: Two wall painting systems from house F and house J.

a polychrome architectural decoration. The iconographic program of the ceiling uses Pompeian wall painting image types, like the myth of Actaeon, as well as rare motifs like the gigantomachy. The choice of the personification of the wind gods over the more common four seasons is rather uncommon on painted ceilings. The architectural system, the rare and special motifs of the wind gods and the gigantomachy, as well as the polychromy define the high ambition of this decoration. New finds from another room in the same villa show fragments of a rather simple yellow-black decoration with sprinkled dots on the dado.⁵⁵ A gradation towards the main room can also be noticed in a Roman villa in the Alps.

In the Roman villa of Marzoll, the room decoration of the second half of the 2nd century is coordinated with the architecture and the mosaic floors.⁵⁶ The main rooms had polychrome paintings, two rooms were heated and all had mosaics. The corridors had white-grounded wallpaper patterns on walls and ceilings, a simple plastered floor or a simple mosaic, but no heating. Secondary rooms had no mosaics and no paintings. Polychromy seems to determine main rooms. Corridors were decorated efficiently with all-over wallpaper patterns.

In the Roman vicus at *Immurium* in the Alps, houses with wall-decoration were excavated (fig. 4). Room F4 in house F at *Immurium* had a heating system and a red dado, and the secondary rooms of the house F5 with an oven and the small room F6 had

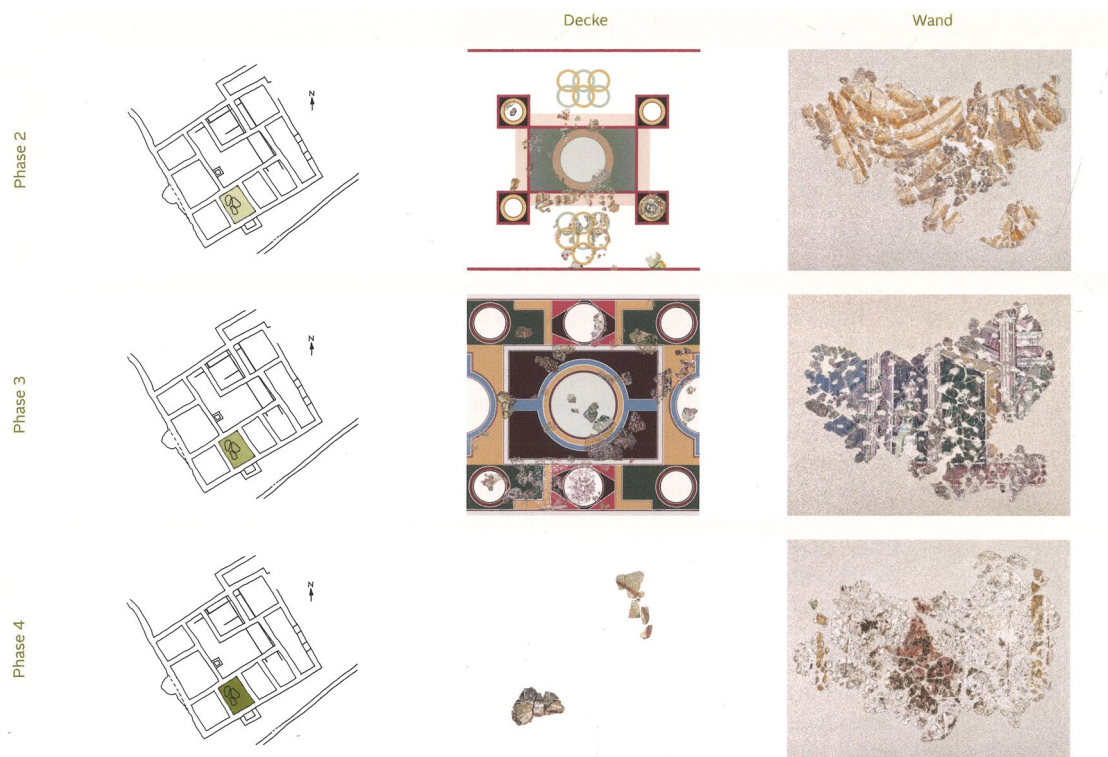


Fig. 5: Lauriacum/Enns/ "House of Medusa": Wall- and ceiling decoration in room 1.

only undecorated plaster.⁵⁷ The valuable painting system 1 shows a field and lesenes system with an elaborate scroll and a volute border and a rather high stucco frieze.⁵⁸ A yellow ceiling with birds, stripes, and scrolls completes the decoration of the prestigious room F4. House J also had a heated room and a similar, but simpler wall decoration that was made probably by the same workshop.⁵⁹ It is also red grounded, but the border and the leaves are simpler. At *Immurium*, the houses had heated main rooms with red wall decoration, which was enhanced by the use of different ornaments.⁶⁰

A new find complex from the canabae of *Lauriacum/Enns* comes from a large house with a courtyard.⁶¹ Room 1 has three painted layers and shows a harmonization between walls and ceilings, and a change of the hierarchy of the room during the third century (Fig. 5).⁶² The first phase had a monumental drapery on the main zone of the wall, which is an uncommon motif in third century wall painting.⁶³ The ceiling decoration combined a wallpaper pattern with a polychrome center surrounded by a small scaled *velum*.⁶⁴ The Medusas in the medallions are apotropaic and a common motif.

In the second phase the meaning of the room changed, and the wall and ceiling were decorated with a sophisticated polychrome decoration with a mythological program and figures. The ceiling has fake sculptural leaf-and-dart molding as frames and high-quality scrolls and other ornaments.⁶⁵ The architectural wall painting system is the best one in Noricum from this period.⁶⁶ In the third phase the meaning of the room was

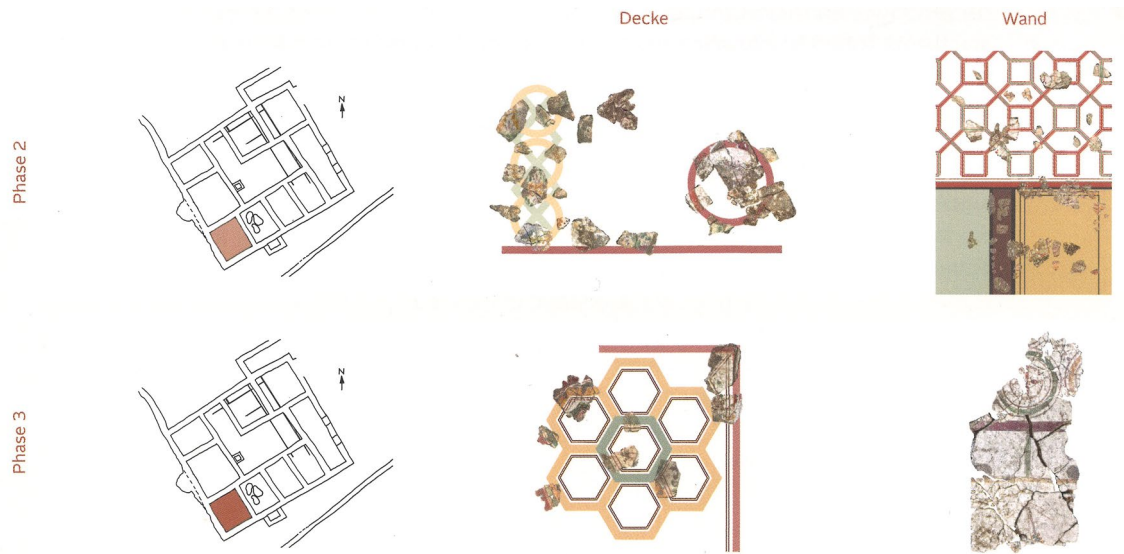


Fig. 6: Lauriacum/Enns/ “House of Medusa”: Wall- and ceiling decoration in room 6.

reduced by the use of a white field and lesenes system with simple frames and a deer emblem in the field’s center and a white decoration with frames on the ceiling.⁶⁷

Neighboring room 6 shows a similar attitude (Fig. 6). The painted marble imitation on the wall is witness to a high aspiration.⁶⁸ The effective wallpaper pattern on wall and ceiling together with the four seasons as the common motif in the medallions⁶⁹ seem to form an equivalent rank to the first phase of room 1. In the second phase, the devaluation is articulated by the use of masks as common motifs in the cassettes of the wallpaper pattern on the ceiling,⁷⁰ and the white background painting system with frames instead of marble imitation on the wall.⁷¹

Summary

Also in the northern province of Noricum we can infer the use of the same parameters for the articulation of room meanings as is found in Ephesus and Palmyra. The corridors use repetitive, paratactic painting systems and mosaics. Main rooms have painting systems and/or mosaics with a central motif. They possess the highest amount of polychromy, rich ornaments, and architectural painting systems. We find figural motifs and mythological programs on ceilings, mosaics, and stucco friezes. The architecture of main rooms underlines the meaning by their large size, great height, apse, heating, and vaulted ceilings. Secondary rooms have a reduced color range of mosaics and wall paintings, as well as simplified painting systems and ornaments.

The articulation of room hierarchy in a building depends on the use of the latest painting systems, meaning and rank of the building within the settlement, the quality

of the painters, the preferences of the workshop, the financial resources of the sponsor, and his taste and need for representation.⁷²

Despite the diversity of houses and local styles, and the different media preferences for stucco, mosaic, and wall painting in the high imperial period, an international code with consistent parameters for the articulation of the hierarchy of rooms is used. This international code adapts the preferred medium and resources of the available workshop and its repertoire, making living with images an essential expression of Roman representation in the home.

Notes

¹ This article unites results from different projects and is an English version of Tober 2017.

² Falzone – Tober 2010, 641–642.

³ Krinzing 2002; Zimmermann 2002; Zimmermann 2004; Zimmermann 2014; Zimmermann 2016.

⁴ Ladstätter – Zimmermann 2010, 49–75; Falzone – Tober 2010, 635; Apartments 1–2: Rathmayr 2010a; Rathmayr 2010b; Rathmayr 2010c; Rathmayr 2010d; Apartment 4: Thür 2005, 32–100; Apartments 3/5: Adenstedt 2005, 39–74, 91–111, 178–195.

⁵ Falzone – Tober 2010, 636 with note 7.

⁶ Falzone – Tober 2010, 635 with note 7.

⁷ Zimmermann 2005, 112. 116. 212 Pl. 85, 1–5; Zimmermann 2007a, 269.

⁸ Zimmermann 2007b, 145; Falzone – Tober 2010, 635–636.

⁹ Falzone – Tober 2010, 363 with note 9.

¹⁰ Falzone – Tober 2010, 636 with note 10–11.

¹¹ Falzone – Tober 2010, 636 with note 13.

¹² Falzone – Tober 2010, 635 with note 14.

¹³ Falzone – Tober 2010, 636 with note 15–16.

¹⁴ Strocka 1977, 115–117 fig. 263–265.

¹⁵ Strocka 1977, 109–111 fig. 224–235; Zimmermann 2005, 112–113 Pl. 85, 8–12; Zimmermann 2007a, 269.

¹⁶ Strocka 1977, 124. 126 fig. 297–302. 308–311; Adenstedt 2005, 131.

¹⁷ Zimmermann 2005, 106–109 Pl. 83–84.

¹⁸ Strocka 1977, 124 fig. 297–302; Adenstedt 2005, 131.

¹⁹ Strocka 1977, fig. 221–223; Zimmermann 2005, 107–108 Pl. 83, 7; 84, 3; 87, 1–4; Zimmermann 2007a, 268.

²⁰ Zimmermann 2007b; Zimmermann 2016, 197–199 Pl. 436 fig. 25; 194–196 Pl. 435 fig. 22.

²¹ Falzone – Tober 2010, 636–637 with note 26–29.

²² Falzone – Tober 2010, 637 with note 31–32.

²³ Falzone – Tober 2010, 637 with note 33.

²⁴ Falzone – Tober 2010, 637 with note 34.

²⁵ Falzone – Tober 2010, 641.

²⁶ Tober 2013; Tober 2014a; Tober in print.

²⁷ Tober 2013, 239–240; Tober 2014a, 705–706.

- ²⁸ Tober 2013, 221; Tober 2014a, 703–704; Tober 2019, 256–257.
- ²⁹ Tober 2013, 221; Tober 2014a, 704.
- ³⁰ Tober 2013, 238.
- ³¹ Tober 2013, 229–234.
- ³² Tober 2013, 234.
- ³³ Tober 2013, 224–229.
- ³⁴ Tober 2013, 238; Tober 2019, 259–260.
- ³⁵ Tober 2013, 241–244 fig. 226.
- ³⁶ Tober 2013, 247; Tober 2014a, 705.
- ³⁷ Tober 2013, 244.
- ³⁸ Tober 2013, 245–246.
- ³⁹ Tober 2013, 244.
- ⁴⁰ Tober 2013, 245.
- ⁴¹ Tober 2013, 238.
- ⁴² Tober 2013, 243. 247 fig. 227.
- ⁴³ This is a summary of results discussed in Noricum and Raetia. More examples: Tober 2018.
- ⁴⁴ Tober 2018, 473–474.
- ⁴⁵ Gostenčnik 2012, 271–272, 434, fig. 2, 2–3.
- ⁴⁶ Gostenčnik 2012, 272–273. 436 fig. 4, 1–2.
- ⁴⁷ Tober 2018, 474; Tober 2014b.
- ⁴⁸ Tober 2014b, 297 fig. 8.
- ⁴⁹ Jobst 1982, 65 Pl. 16, 3; Pl. 32, 3.
- ⁵⁰ Thüry 2014, 190 with note 820.
- ⁵¹ Jobst 1982, Taf. 30; Tober 2014b, 298–299.
- ⁵² Jobst 1982, 47–56; Kovacsovics 1989; Thüry 2014, 183–184.
- ⁵³ Tober 2014b, 300–301.
- ⁵⁴ Tober 2010; Tober 2015; Tober 2018, 475.
- ⁵⁵ Höglinger 2017, 121–122 fig. 7.
- ⁵⁶ Christlein 1963; Tober 2018, 475.
- ⁵⁷ Fleischer 1968/1971, 186. 188; Fleischer 1998, 36–37; Tober 2018, 475–476.
- ⁵⁸ Tober 2017, 506 with fig. 3; Tober 2018, 479 Abb. 6.
- ⁵⁹ Tober 2014c, 435.
- ⁶⁰ Tober 2018, 476.
- ⁶¹ Santner 2017.
- ⁶² Tober 2017a, 147–149. 164.
- ⁶³ Tober 2017a, 147; Santner 2017, fig. 20; Tober 2017b, 22–23.
- ⁶⁴ Tober 2017a, 148; Santner 2017, fig. 1–5; Tober 2017b, 3–10.
- ⁶⁵ Tober 2017a, 148. 154 fig. 4; Santner 2017, fig. 8–19; Tober 2017b, 13–18.
- ⁶⁶ Tober 2017a, 148; Santner 2017, fig. 21. 23; Tober 2017b, 23–25.
- ⁶⁷ Tober 2017a, 149. 160 fig. 5–6; Santner 2017, fig. 22; Tober 2017b, 19. 25–26.
- ⁶⁸ Tober 2017a, 149. 163 fig. 8; Tober 2017b, 26–30.

⁶⁹ Tober 2017a, 150. 161 fig. 7; Tober 2017b, 20–21.

⁷⁰ Tober 2017a, 152. 170 fig. 9; Tober 2017b, 21–22.

⁷¹ Tober 2017a, 152–153; Santner 2017, fig. 27; Tober 2017b, 30.

⁷² See Tober 2018, 483.

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Fig. 1: after Falzone – Tober 2010, Pl. LXI,1. – Fig. 2: after Tober 2019, 261 fig. 2. – Fig. 3: after Tober 2019, 260 fig. 1. – Fig. 4: B. Tober. – Fig. 5–6: after Santner 2017, 16 fig.

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