

The World of Pictures in Late Antiquity: Changes and Mutations

The changes and mutations I shall discuss in this paper have various aspects and belong to various chronological periods. The focus will be on the time between the 3rd and the 6th century, with some insights about earlier and later periods.

One of the most obvious mutations in the urban landscape is the slow disappearance of statuary in the streets. I shall refer here only briefly to this topic, which I have discussed in a recently published paper¹. The decrease in production of new statues, as well as the decrease in inscriptions, began already in the 3rd century, and had nothing to do with the Christianisation of the Roman world, but with changes in the provincial administration where, increasingly, imperial officers became more important than local notables. Displaying themselves in public, which was a sort of challenge to these notables, became less important². At the same time, the emperors gained more and more control over the erection of statues and decreed restrictions on the dedication of statues to magistrates and officers. Of course, this evolution was fostered by Christianity's opposition to the statues, with all its contradictions. It was a contradiction to say that mythological statues represented nothing but imaginary divine beings, figures with no reality, and nevertheless to think that these statues could be dangerous and give shelter to demons and evil spirits. The rejection of nudity was also a reason for opposition to statues.

The decrease was slow, tempered by admiration for artistic skills both in private dwellings, as demonstrated by some collections of statues, and in urban public spaces, such as *thermae*, streets and squares. In these public contexts, the weight of tradition in the urban landscape, where statues had an important place, was also a factor of continuity³.

Christianity was only one of the causes which tacitly prepared the way for pictures in two dimensions, in painting and mosaics, but it is possible to say that this stress on the incompatibility of sculpture and Christianity became more and more important. It is important to remark that the expansion of this kind of decoration did not start with Christianity, but has its roots in Hellenistic times, when floor mosaics and wall paintings became fashionable in the houses of the social elite.

More precisely, the development of tessellated floor mosaics started in the capitals of the Hellenistic kingdoms⁴.

The chronology of the development of the polychrome mosaic in imperial Rome is not precisely established and only its main lines are well known. Eventually, the technique of floor mosaics also came to be used in churches. We have no precise evidence of how or why mosaic floors made their way into churches and synagogues. As far I know, we have no so-called »pagan« traditional cultic monuments with floor mosaics. In any case, it seems that floor mosaics were used only in private houses (in various rooms, in porticoes) and, of course, in palaces⁵. We can, however, follow the evolution in size and in pictorial composition of these mosaics, which made possible their use on very large surfaces.

In the first period of tessellated mosaics their usual size and structure were not adapted to large spaces in public buildings. In the Delian houses, even if the *opus tessellatum*, usually in the form of white *tessellae*, extended over the entire surface, geometrical motives framed a much smaller area with pictures, and these pictures did not themselves cover the entire framed area. To give only one example: in the Centaur room of the so-called House of the Masks, the dimensions of the room are 7.2 m × 5.1 m; a frame marks a rectangle of 4.62 m × 2.6 m containing three figured panels. The central panel with the famous scene of Dionysus riding a panther measures 1.6 m × 1.5 m⁶. We do find some larger mosaics in the 1st century BC such as in Pompeii in the House of the Faun with the Alexander mosaic measuring 5.82 m × 3.13 m, but this is very rare⁷.

However, from the beginning of the 1st century AD, mosaics with geometric patterns covered the complete surface of rooms in Roman houses, as in the Villa of the Volusii near Rome⁸. Principally in the 2nd century, black-and-white mosaics, known foremost by pavements from Ostia, were adorned with geometric or figurative motives. Particularly, huge areas of the rooms of *thermae* received this kind of decoration⁹.

Starting approximately in the same period, but developing a little bit later, the evolution of polychrome mosaics permit-

1 For more details, see Spieser, *Réflexions*.

2 See also the consequence of another way of display in a more private surrounding: mosaics in villas, as shown by Muth, *Kultur* 114.

3 For the collections, see, for instance, Balmelle, *Demeures aristocratiques* – Bergmann, Chiragan. For the exceptional Lausus collection Mango/Vickers/Francis, *Palace of Lausus*. – Bassett, *Urban Image* 98-120.

4 Blanc-Bijon/Spieser, *Mosaik* 13 f. – For the public spaces Jacobs, *Maintenance*.

5 For an overview see Blanc-Bijon/Spieser *Mosaik* 17-26.

6 Bruneau, *Mosaïques* 240-242. – For the dimensions see also Chamonard, *Mosaïques* 11.

7 For a general presentation of the House of the Faun see Guidobaldi/Pesandro/Varone, *Maison du Faune* 220-239 (and 399 f. for earlier references).

8 Moretti/Sgubini Moretti, *Villa*.

9 See still Becatti, *Mosaici*.

ted the use of figurative motives for the entire pavement. Antioch is one of the few places where many mosaics dating from the 3rd to the 6th century have been found *in situ*¹⁰. We do not see any fundamental changes in techniques or use of mosaic pavements from the 3rd century to the 6th century, even if style and repertoire changed.

For instance, the comparison of the mosaics in the dining room of the Atrium House and a hunting mosaic such as that of the so-called Worcester hunt speaks for itself¹¹. The evolution of the repertoire is not easy to assess, principally because only a small fraction of the mosaics in Antiochene houses have come to light. Secular themes such as hunting scenes and daily life were already present in the 3rd century in some areas. It is also possible to say that mythological scenes became less frequent and slowly disappeared, though later than usually accepted, certainly not at the turn of the 3rd to 4th century¹². Even the Christianised elite remained attached to the display of traditional culture. Such an affirmation must of course be nuanced. It has been shown how new images based on traditional myths but with new meaning related to social change were used in late Antique houses and how these new meanings were at odds with the original myths¹³. I would suggest that the distance eventually became too great to be bridged and caused the disappearance of these pictures as Christian influence gradually increased in the 6th century. The later decline and disappearance of mosaic pavements in houses cannot be explained by the change of repertoire and has more to do with the evolution of housing in elite society than with Christianisation¹⁴.

This evolution in structure from Hellenistic mosaics to those extending over larger rooms could have led to the use of mosaics as floor pavements in churches, which is already attested in the 4th century¹⁵. These mosaics are mostly known from basilicas in Greece and Jordan, but this is the result of the exploration strategy in the various countries around the Mediterranean Sea and does not reflect the situation in the period under consideration¹⁶.

We must also keep in mind that in churches mosaics were not the most expensive sort of pavement. This is again in continuity with the Roman imperial period. To give only one example: the main room of the well known villa in Piazza Armerina had an *opus sectile* pavement, whereas all other rooms had mosaic decoration¹⁷. The construction of many

basilicas from the 4th to the 6th century ends approximately with the reign of Justinian, in the difficult years of the empire.

Mosaic pavements in the Roman and late Antique tradition disappeared at the same time, but we must not confound the causes which differed in each case. Certainly, the economic and political situation, as well as the decrease of population caused by plagues in the middle of the 6th century, explains why the proliferation of basilicas came to an end. But the end of the traditional mosaic pavement in churches cannot be explained in this way alone. Even in the difficult times, traditionally called the »Dark Ages«, a few new churches were built, most of them domed basilicas, but without mosaic pavements. It cannot be said that the know-how had been lost, for wall and vault mosaics were used in these new churches. The material is of course not the same: mostly glass, not stone or ceramic tessellae. But the technique of setting the tessellae and of composing the pictures is not fundamentally different. It is not, therefore, the scarcity of new churches which explains why mosaic pavements were no longer in fashion.

To address this question, we must re-examine the evolution of the use of wall mosaics. It is well known that this kind of mosaic developed much later than pavement mosaics and, initially, only on a reduced scale. They were first used in the context of water, as decoration in artificial caves. The oldest mosaics on vertical surfaces have been found on fountains in Pompeii¹⁸. This technique does not appear to have spread widely in the first centuries AD, but this could be due to the lack of preserved monuments. The oldest known vault mosaic and most famous of the imperial period was found in the Domus Aurea of Nero, representing Ulysses and Polyphemus¹⁹. Some fragments were discovered in various *thermae*, for example, at Ostia in the *thermae* of the Seven Wise Men (ca. 130 AD) and at Salamis on Cyprus²⁰. They were also used in imperial dwellings, as in the palace of Domitian and in the Villa Hadriana²¹.

It is likely that wall mosaics were used during late Antiquity in secular buildings, in palaces and rich dwellings²². We have an example in one of the so-called Hanghäuser in Ephesus, a very important residential area (fig. 1). The decoration of this ensemble is now to be dated in the second quarter of the 3rd century²³. It allows us to suppose that such mosaics were found in rich Roman houses, though perhaps not very

10 For the Antioch mosaics the most extensive publication remains Levi, Antioch. – See also Kondoleon, Antioch. – Becker/Kondoleon, Arts. – Balty, Mosaïques.

11 For the Atrium House Triclinium Becker/Kondoleon/Newman/Wypiski, Atrium House. – For a photographic reconstitution of the floor of the dining room of the Atrium House Kondoleon, Antioch 62. – See also Levi, Antioch 15-25 pl. I-IIa. – For the Worcester Hunt, Levi, Antioch 364f. pl. 90; for a good reproduction Kondoleon, Antioch 66.

12 See for instance this topic in Muth, Kultur.

13 See Muth, Kultur 114-116.

14 For the evolution of the housing of the elites in the 6th century see Niewöhner, Palatial Architecture.

15 See for instance Dresken-Weiland, Zeugnis 74f.

16 The most important ensembles of pavement mosaics in Greece, for instance, Amphipolis, the basilica C in Nea Anchialos are not yet thoroughly published. – For an overall view of the Jordan mosaics, see Piccirillo, Mosaics.

17 For an overview on the main room of Piazza Armerina Villa and its pavement Carandini/Ricci/de Vos, Filosofiana 231-234.

18 For the beginning of vault mosaics Lavagne, Operosa Antra 369-380. – Sear, Vault mosaics. – Joly, Mosaïque pariétale.

19 Lavagne, Nymphée 695-699 for some trace of even earlier vault mosaics and for contemporary texts.

20 For the *thermae* of the Seven Wise Men, Sear, Vault mosaics 112f. no. 106 pl. 46, 3; 47, 1-2 colour pl. B; for Salamis, Sear, Vault mosaics 141f. no. 164 pl. 60,3 and 61,1.

21 Sear, Vault mosaics 97f. no. 77 pl. 43, 1 and 3; 109-112 no. 96-104 pl. 45-46, 1-2.

22 Guidobaldi, Originalità 438.

23 For the ensemble to which this mosaic belongs, see Krinzing, Hanghaus 2. – For the reinterpreted dating Zimmermann, Ausstattung. – For reproductions of this mosaic Jobst, Römische Mosaiken pl. 110-124.



Fig. 1 Ephesus, Mosaic in a niche of Hanghaus 2, WE 2 SR 2223. – (Photo ÖAW-ÖAI, A-W-OAI-DIA-082826).

frequently, even before the changes at the beginning of the 4th century²⁴. We have no indication concerning wall mosaics in later Byzantine houses, with the exception of course of the Great Palace, which is a sacred building.

Again, we should not forget that *opus sectile* was the favourite wall decoration in the richest houses²⁵. Suffice it to mention the splendid *opus sectile* panels from the house of Junius Bassus and those in the famous house in Ostia called the Aula presso Porta Marina²⁶. For vaults and ceilings fine stucco decoration was the norm even in Late Antiquity, for instance, the remains of stucco from a vault in the villa of the Gordians in the suburbs of Rome²⁷. We still find *opus sectile* and stucco decoration in the 6th century, as in Saint Demetrius in Thessalonica or in San Vitale in Ravenna, but both seem to disappear after the 6th century (fig. 2)²⁸.

It is not easy to determine with precision the process which led to the use of wall mosaics in churches. Perhaps the mosaics in Santa Costanza (mid-4th century) in Rome could be seen as a point of transition from mosaics in funerary

monuments to those in churches (fig. 3)²⁹. Some funerary mosaics have been discovered in the catacombs of Rome and of Naples³⁰; Santa Constanza is also a funerary monument, but its size brings it closer to churches. However, this apparent transition may be due simply to the evidence of preserved monuments. The oldest preserved church mosaic is that of the apse of Santa Pudenziana³¹. The date of the decoration of Saint Peter's in Rome is still disputed. Even if some scholars disagree, it can be said that at the time of its construction – if Saint Peter's was in fact built under Constantine³² – the church had no figural decoration. Only after the middle of the 4th century was the apse decorated with a mosaic, the subject of which is still disputed, and the nave received two painted cycles³³. We find this same alternation of mosaic in the apse and triumphal arch with painting in the nave in Saint Paul's³⁴. It would appear that mosaics were originally preferred for the decoration of vaults. This may be a mark of continuity with the use of wall mosaics in imperial Rome. But again, this affirmation could be due to the preservation of the

24 For these changes see Guidobaldi, Domus.

25 For a corpus of the *opus sectile* decoration, Asèmakopoulou-Atzaka, *Opus sectile*.

26 For the house of Junius Bassus Sapelli, Basilica 137-139 with the earlier references. – Guidobaldi, Lussuosa aula, also with earlier references.

27 See for instance Volpe, Ville 165 fig. 7.

28 For the *opus sectile* in Saint-Demetrios Spieser, Thessalonique 174-179. – For another dating proposition Bauer, Eine Stadt 122-127. – For stuccos in San Vitale Deichmann, Ravenna II 2, 135-139 and fig. 73-74; Ill pl. 308-309.

29 For the mosaics of S. Constanza see now Piazza, Santa Constanza.

30 For references see Blanc-Bijon/Spieser, Mosaik 41. – See also Sear, Vault mosaics no. 135. 140. 152-161.

31 See now Braconi, S. Pudenziana.

32 For another interpretation see Bowersock, Peter (a) and (b).

33 For the pictorial decoration of Saint Peter in general Liverani, Mosaici perduti. – For a different analysis of the apse mosaic Spieser, Images du Christ 244-257.

34 For the chronological issue about the dating of the decoration of Saint Paul, see Viscontini/Bordi, Mosaici e dipinti. – For the mosaic in the apse Camerlenghi, Sankt Paul 125. – Painting on walls are also attested by an inscription dated around 340 in Asia Minor, see Dresken-Weiland, Zeugnis 68f. 75. – See also Downing, Wall Paintings.



Fig. 2 Ravenna, Saint-Vitale, Stucco decoration. – (Photo J.-M. Spieser).



Fig. 3 Rome, Santa Costanza, Vault mosaic. – (Photo Séminaire d'archéologie paléochrétienne, Université de Fribourg, Suisse).

monuments. In any case, as early as the 430s, mosaic was used in the nave of Santa Maria Maggiore. The extensive use of figural decoration in Christian churches is one of the most obvious changes – and one of the most lasting – introduced by Christianity. It demonstrates the importance of the inner space of cult buildings, in strong opposition to traditional pagan temples.

The question as to whether Christianisation had an impact on the evolution of style has a long history and it is not possible here to review the extensive bibliography. But we must discuss the stylistic change which began slowly in the

3rd century. Some decades ago, it was seen as the emergence of popular art³⁵, whereby Christian ideas were perceived as the motors of the detachment from the classical canon. But the first changes in portraiture in the 3rd century went not at all in the direction of more spirituality, but in that of expressivity or, more precisely, toward the expression of power and strength, as exemplified by some well known portraits of the tetrarchs (fig. 4). Even with regard to later times, I would not say that spirituality was the dominant feature on the face of the Barletta colossus³⁶. But the stylistic evolution did not go only in one direction; the imperial portraits of the 4th century

35 Bianchi-Bandinelli, Fin.

36 Recently for this statue Purpura Colosso with the former references and with a new proposal for identification.

were as different from those of the 3rd century as from the Barletta statue. However, the most important question for the evolution of style is why at a certain point sculpture in the round could no longer be seen from every side; or, more generally, why stylisation was preferred to naturalistic rendering, questions which concern the evolution of painting as well.

In an interesting recent paper, Jás Elsner has given evidence for two modes of visibility³⁷, one which by simplification we might call profane, including a large range of approaches to works of art, from eroticisation to fine connoisseurship and distinguished art criticism; the other mode of visibility must be called sacred. Elsner rightly points out that, in general, the profane mode is correlated with classicism and naturalistic rendering, and is therefore associated with Antiquity and Renaissance Art, whereas sacred visibility is associated with the Middle Ages. The purpose of Elsner's paper is to show that Antiquity knew both modes. He justifies his point of view with the Aphrodite of Cnidos which was a cult statue, but whose naturalistic rendering cannot be questioned³⁸.

I would like to add nuance to this conclusion by remarking that, at least, from the 2nd century, a non-naturalistic style was considered as fitting much better with sacred visibility. It is not by chance that Dio Chrysostom and, about a century later, Pausanias made remarks which support this idea. Dio complained that even the Phidian Zeus looked too human; and Pausanias said that older statues, attributed to Daedalus, imparted a deeper sense of the sacred³⁹. But then, what of the Aphrodite of Cnidos? We do not know what Praxiteles had in mind when he was working on this statue; nor do we know of any contemporary reaction. The story, reported by Pliny, whether true or invented, that Pausanias sculpted two Aphrodites, one dressed and one undressed, the second having been bought by Kos, may be an indication that there was concern over the naked statue, at least in a subsequent period. A text of Lucian and later epigrams, too, give the impression that at least some viewers did not look at it with the awe due to a cult statue⁴⁰.

Can we argue that, whatever Praxiteles wanted to do, whatever the reaction of those who saw the statue when she found her place in the temple, this Aphrodite opened the way for a new perception, allowing the consideration of cult statues as works of art? But we may also say, that it was a time, when the style associated with classicism was the only one compatible with religious awe. The story by Pliny and the later epigrams could signify that something had changed or was about to change in the perception of the sacred, not only visually, but also mentally. A cult statue could also be seen as a profane object. The nakedness of the Cnidian Aphrodite seems so unexpected that we could think that it



Fig. 4 Venice, San Marco, The Tetrachs. – (Photo Séminaire d'archéologie paléochrétienne, Université de Fribourg, Suisse).

may be considered as a sign of an evolution in progress or, at least, to come. This is not the place to discuss such a vast topic, but it can help us to understand that, in Late Antiquity, a »new« – though, actually, a very old – expression of the sacred was coming back⁴¹.

What is the implication for our topic? This evolution was achieved through a deliberate withdrawal from naturalistic features. This supposes, for the painter or the sculptor, other skills, other methods of working. He no longer needs the training which enables the artist to produce naturalistic pictures or statues; and it follows that, sooner or later, these skills will no longer be exercised. This may help us to bridge the gap between those who – today less than several decades ago – speak of decline and others who deny it. In the naturalistic aesthetic failure or lack of skills is easy to detect. In the new aesthetic this becomes more difficult: some methods of imparting a sense of the sacred or attempts at new ways of

37 Elsner, *Mimesis*.

38 For the Cnidian Aphrodite see Pasquier, *Aphrodite* 139-149. – See also the note by Ridgway, *Personal Thoughts*. – Seaman, *Original Aphrodite* tries to come to more precise conclusions, but they do not seem solidly established.

39 Pausanias 4,5,268. – Dio Chrysostom, *Olympic* (12th) *Discourse* 48-79. – See Spieser, *Images du Christ* 416-418.

40 Pasquier, *Aphrodite* 139-142.

41 Of course J. Elsner is right insofar as this alternation between two modes of visibility does not mean that, in times when classical forms were used for sacred visibility, nobody looked at them with a profane eye, nor that, in other times, the sacredness of naturalistic cult statues was completely forgotten.



Fig. 5 Madaba, Hippolytus Hall. – (After Piccirillo, Mosaics 51).

expression may appear to lack skill, indeed, sometimes – why not say it? – they do lack skill. The distinction is not always easy. What is one to say about a mosaic like that from the »Hippolytus Hall« in Madaba (fig. 5)⁴²? Is it an awkward depiction of mythological scenes, or a successful attempt to display legendary tales in a fresh and humorous way, as in our comic strips?

We may say that the desire of the artist to create new forms and of the public to see new pictures converged in a new trend of representation of the sacred. This situation pro-

duced the change in the art of late Antiquity. The notion of decline or not poses the wrong question. In this paper I have attempted to demonstrate that the changes under discussion operated on various levels, in various temporalities, making it impossible to fix any precise date for the break⁴³. These changes were slow and had complex and diverse causes. Christianity was only one of them. I would even dare to say that Christianity was not only a cause of the change, but was itself fostered by deep changes in various aspects of the imperial Roman society.

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⁴² Piccirillo, Mosaics 51.

⁴³ For this topic see again Muth, Kultur 116.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

Die Bilderwelt der Spätantike: Veränderungen und Wandel

Dieser Artikel versucht zu klären, wie sich die Bilder in der Spätantike verändern. Die Bildhauerkunst verliert sich langsam und stufenweise; die Wiedergabe der dritten Dimension verschwindet. In den Privathäusern ersetzt Malerei allmählich die Statuen. Die Verwendung von Bodenmosaiken entwickelt sich, was eine Form der Kontinuität darstellt, und verbreitet sich in den Kirchen, aber mit tiefgreifenden stilistischen Änderungen. Auch die Wandmosaiken verbreiten sich in den Kirchen und haben eine lange Zukunft, während ihr Gebrauch in Privathäusern zurückgeht. Es wird gezeigt, dass dieser Wandel vor der Entwicklung des Christentums beginnt und schon im 3. Jahrhundert spürbar ist. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit wird den heiligen und göttlichen Figuren gewidmet. Der Gedanke taucht auf, dass Realismus und Mimesis im Widerspruch mit der Empfindung der Gegenwart der göttlichen Präsenz stehen, was Fragen über den Status der Aphrodite von Knidos als Kultbild aufwirft. Diese Fragestellung auch geht dem Triumph des Christentums voran; schon Dion Chrysostomos und Pausanias haben dazu Stellung genommen.

Le monde visuel dans l'Antiquité tardive: changements et mutations

L'article essaie de mettre en évidence les transformations qui affectent les images dans l'Antiquité tardive. On constate la disparition lente et progressive de la statuaire et de la perte de la troisième dimension. Dans les demeures privées, la peinture tend à remplacer le décor de statues; l'emploi des mosaïques de sol se développe, ce qui est une forme de continuité, et se répand dans les églises, mais avec de profonds changements stylistiques. Les mosaïques pariétales se répandent dans les églises et sont promises à un long

The World of Pictures in Late Antiquity: Changes and Mutations

This paper tries to highlight the changes in images during Late Antiquity. The slow and gradual disappearance of the statuary and the loss of the representation of the third dimension are obvious. In the private dwellings, statues are replaced by painting; the use of floor mosaics is expanding – what is actually continuity – and became important in churches, but with deep stylistic changes. The use of wall mosaics is also expanding in the churches, the onset of a long history, while their private use seems to be diminishing. These changes pre-date the expansion of Christianity and became apparent since the 3rd century. The issue of the representation of sacred figures is stressed. The idea that realism, mimesis conflicts with the feeling of divine presence is arising. It addresses the issue of the status of the Aphrodite of Knidos as a cult image. This issue also developed before the triumph of Christianity; already Dion Chrysostomus and Pausanias pointed to this question.

avenir alors que leur usage privé régresse. Il est montré que ces mutations s'amorcent déjà avant l'essor du christianisme et se font déjà sentir à partir du 3^e siècle. Une attention particulière est vouée à la représentation des personnages sacrés. On voit émerger l'idée que le réalisme et la mimésis paraissent incompatibles avec la sensation de la présence du divin, ce qui pose des questions sur le statut de l'Aphrodite de Cnide comme image de culte. Cette problématique précède le triomphe du christianisme et, déjà, Dion Chrysostome et Pausanias faisaient des remarques en ce sens.