Fashioning the Walls of a Villa: An Analysis of Three Wall Paintings from the Main Reception Hall of the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor in Boscoreale

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Being judged by the time and fortune they spent on decorating their houses, as well as on caring for their own appearances, the Romans have often been described as a culture of “conspicuous consumption.” The magnitude of such extravagance in luxury consumption had its roots mostly in the great zeal towards the Greek culture, although, sometimes it was related to the issues of self-promotion, propaganda, or, social mobility in a society where its members were defined by what they were wearing and what kind of houses they lived in.

This paper is an analysis on the possible motifs that might have been effective in the commissioning of the three wall paintings from the Main Reception Hall of the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor, which have been in display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, NY, since 1903. Paintings from other parts of the villa are exhibited at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples, the Louvre in France, the Musée Royal et Domaine de Mariemont in Belgium, and the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam. In my discussion, I will omit an analysis of the relationship between these three paintings with other paintings in the villa, for I have not closely inspected those panels, and for a paper of this length would fail to provide a sound and comprehensive discussion of the entire villa.

The Villa

The Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor is located on the southern slopes of Mount Vesuvius near Boscoreale, about a mile away from the town of Pompeii (Fig. 1). The only source of information on the original state of the remains of the villa at the time when it was discovered in 1900 is Felice Barnabei’s report on the excavations. Managed by an overseer and owned by a wealthy master, the villa of Publius Fannius Synistor was a villa rustica, which would, as opposed to a permanent dwelling, provide its owner a comfortable temporary residence when he chose to visit it. Built around 50-40 B.C., the villa changed hands multiple times and had at least two
owners only in first century A.D., although it is now commonly referred to as the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor to avoid confusion.\(^9\)

![Map of Herculaneum and Boscoreale](image)

Figure 1. The towns of Boscoreale and Boscotrease, both buried in A.D. 79. by the Vesuvian eruption. From Anderson (1988).

The three large panels exhibited at the Roman Art Galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art belong to the right wall of the main reception hall of the villa (shown as \(H\) in Fig. 2). Situated on the northern side of the villa, directly across the courtyard from the main entrance, room \(H\) is the largest room in the property. The hall was decorated with eight wall paintings in Second Style\(^10\), each depicting a figure or a small group of figures that strike the viewer with their grandeur upon entrance to the room. Dividing each wall into three areas on which the eight separate scenes were painted, was a painted Corinthian colonnade having the same height and size of that of the real columns that surrounded the *peristyle*.\(^11\)
21. The villa at Boscoreale is shown here in a roofless isometric plan that includes features known only from the excavation report published by F. Barnabei in 1901. Retaining Barnabei's unorthodox system of identification, we can proceed around the villa clockwise:

B. Interior entrance
C. Passage way
D. Room of the Musical Instruments
24. Oecusarium, for the production of wine and oil
E. Peristyle. The six-column arrangement was imitated on the painted walls below the cantilevered roof of the courtyard. A large bronze vase (fig. 39) was painted on the wall across the entrances of Rooms N and O, and the Corinthian column (fig. 38) was at the southeast corner of the peristyle
N. Winter triclinium (dining room)
O. Sitting room
M. Cubiculum with a north window, which may have been original or added after the earthquake of A.D. 62 (see fig. 23)
L. An open exedra with three walls painted with garlands. The wall visible in the drawing is in the Musée Royal et Domaine de Mariemont, Moorland, Belgium; the Metropolitan's panel (fig. 43) was on the facing wall
I. This room was decorated with paintings of rusticated masonry, now in the Louvre and in the Mariemont museum
H. Probably a dining room. On the wall facing the south entrance were three paintings (left to right): Dionysos and Ariadne, Aphrodite and Eros, and the Three Graces. Only the center panel is preserved; it is in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. Above each painting were smaller triptychs; two of these, in very poor condition, are in the Metropolitan Museum. On the right (east) wall were the Metropolitan's paintings (figs. 34–36). A winged Genius was at each side of the southern entrance from the peristyle; one is in the Louvre, and the other is in the Mariemont museum. On the left (west wall), not visible, were three paintings now in Naples
G. Summer dining room(?). Paintings in the Mariemont and Naples museums
23. Passage way
F. Three paintings of this room are in the Metropolitan (see figs. 40, 42)
22. Uncertain function
20. Dressing room
21. Frigidarium (cold bath)
17. Tepidarium (warm bath)
18–19. Calidarium (hot bath)
15. Colonnaded courtyard
1–12. Servants' quarters

22. Opposite: Detail of a mask of Pan from the Metropolitan's section of Room L

Figure 2. The plan of the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor. From Anderson (1988).
The Three Wall Paintings on Display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Along with the painted walls of the Room of Mysteries, in the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii, the painted scenes in room $H$ provide the most famous examples of *megalographia*, a sub-genre of Roman wall painting that is characterized by the depiction of large-scale monumental figures within the framework of clearly defined architectural spaces.\(^{12}\) The figures painted on the walls of room $H$ appear to be arrayed on a podium to the rear of the painted colonnade, against a red background.

The panel to the left of the wall depicts a seated woman and a younger female figure standing behind her seat, who are both gazing attentively towards the center of the room (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. The seated woman playing a kithara from the villa of Publius Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (Room $H$, right wall), 50-40 BC. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. From the museum’s online collection database.
Seated on an exquisitely decorated, and perhaps gilded chair, the elder figure is holding, or playing, a golden *kithara*. Both figures are dressed in elegant and long purple robes, while the elderly seated figure is also wearing a white *palla* and *stola*, that are apt to her age. Again, both figures are very richly adorned with different types of jewelry, such as tiaras, bracelets, earrings, and rings, all of which are clearly depicted.

Likewise, the female figure on the panel to the right of the wall is also depicted wearing elaborate jewelry, with earrings, an elegant snake-shaped bracelet on her right arm, as well as an ornament on her upper right arm, and a necklace (Fig. 4). Dressed in a white chiton and a purple tunic, the young woman is holding a shield, on which a nude male figure is seen. Her head slightly turned to her upper right in a calm poise, the figure seems to be looking towards the source of light reflected on the polished surface of the shield.

The central scene depicts a heavily draped woman and an athletic male nude, whose head is badly damaged (Fig. 5). The heavy and voluminous garments of the pensive female figure emphasize her chastity and uprightness. In contrast to her bulky *stola* and *palla*, the body of the male figure is depicted in a state of heroic nudity, although his *pallum* covers his right thigh and genitals. Seated on a gilt throne, more luxurious than the one on the left panel, the couple appears almost divine.

**Literature and Interpretations on the Decorative Scheme**

Puzzled by the decorative scheme of this room for over a century, scholars have suggested numerous interpretations and are in no consensus regarding the iconography featured in this room. Lehmann argued that the room was used in religious celebration of a cult of Aphrodite and Adonis. Identifying the nude in the middle panel as Alexander the Great seated with the Persian princess Statira, or his mother, Ling suggested that the scenes are “close copying of Greek
Fig. 4. Woman holding a shield, from the villa of Publius Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (Room H, right wall), 50–40 BC. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. From the museum’s online collection database.

Fig. 5. Enthroned couple, from the villa of Publius Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (Room H, right wall), 50–40 BC. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. From the museum’s online collection database.
prototypes.”18 According to Smith, dynastic marriage and eastern conquest seem to be twin subjects to the painting cycle, which is “Macedonian and royal.” Iconography of Achilles and portraits of the household, along with family representations from several generations, are among the suggested arguments, although Torelli summarized all the above literature as “a complicated explanation of the figured friezes, which is remote from the mentality and taste of Roman commissioning.”21 Despite this dispute, however, there seems to be an agreement that the three scenes on the left wall of the room depict personifications of Macedonia and Asia.

According to Beard and Henderson, there is not always necessarily a connection between paintings in a specific room, or a narrative being depicted; paintings with different and unrelated subjects can be found in the same room.22 Ling pointed out that the eight scenes in the room H were probably drawn from different sources into this composition, as the entire scheme in the room lacks a unity like that we find in the Room of Mysteries with the interrelated gazes and interactions of the figures depicted on the walls of the room; the wall paintings in the great hall of the Boscoreale Villa are “‘fragmented and episodic.”23 So as Torelli argues, the paintings might not comprise a whole program with a “complicated explanation,” but rather might be separate scenes, which would explain why there are so many different interpretations.

Social Context

Judging by the modest size and general look of the villa, which is not as luxurious as the villas of the Roman elite, the original owner who commissioned the paintings is thought to be a member of the local elite of Pompeii, who would take the lifestyles of the Roman aristocracy as models and imitate their behavior.24

In the room L of the villa of P. Fannius Synistor, we see an extremely comprehensive and rich illusionary vista in Second Style, which would, in Ling’s words, “[transport] the householder
to a world of almost magical luxury.” A patron who was not as wealthy as a Roman elite would still strive to elevate his status and to enhance the living environment in his house by having painted architectural vistas and landscape scenes, featuring sumptuous architectural motifs and lavish materials, rather than actual construction which he could not afford. So, aspiring to be a member of the Roman elite class, such a late Republican villa owner would ambitiously pursue to impress his guests with “the sight of vistas of regal splendor, of villas, temples, palaces, dominions of which he could dream, but which he could not afford to build.”
Just as the villa was a sign of the master’s political position and prominence in the society, rank and status of any citizen was immediately crystal-clear from his/her dress as well. In a society, where excellence of appearance was valued extremely highly, Romans would use three quarters of their income on food, and spend almost all of the remaining on clothing and housing in roughly equal parts. In fact, the wealthy Romans would spend a smaller portion of their budget on food, and spend more on clothing. As Romans came into contact with new lands due to the military expansions of the Republic, the use of different colors and new luxurious fabrics in garments evolved more and more into clothing for display purposes in 1st century B.C.28

This evolution of clothing also brought up a complex discourse around public dress and social control in the Republican and early Imperial Rome; there was a strict Roman public dress code, which was strictly controlled through legislation and intervention of the magistrates.29 One such code implemented by the legislations was Caesar’s restriction on purple clothing items, which strongly signified a high social rank and thus were in great demand. Due to the restrictions, however, only certain members of Roman elite were allowed to be dressed in purple.30

The figures in the main reception are described to have “a statue-like character.”31 Even though genre of portraiture is a rarity in Roman painting,32 the figures depicted on the right wall of the room might be portrait paintings of the owners, as previously suggested by some scholars. Since the owner of the Boscoreale villa wanted to imitate the wealthier elite by decorating the walls of his house with paintings of grandiose architectural settings like those found in the richest villas, he as well might have wanted to depict himself and his family clad in purple clothes and lavishly expensive jewelry, which he could not afford. In fact, self-aggrandizing representations were very common in such villas, as Romans identified and individuated themselves when they adopted a distinctive of a social role.33
The nudity of the male figure poses as a problem, if we assume that the panels are portraits of the owners of the villa, as Romans, unlike the Greeks, were modest about the display of bodies. It is possible that the figures belong to the mythological portrait genre in statue, in which an individualized portrait head was placed on an ideal body borrowed from the respected Greek culture.\(^3\)\(^4\) We can, for example, compare the nude male figure in Boscoreale to Veristic portrait statues of prominent Roman Republicans, which featured nude, muscular, and heroic bodies similar to that of the Boscoreale figure, along with boldly contrasting signs of age carved on the faces. Since we can’t see the face of the figure in Boscoreale, we can’t say if he was depicted with such a Veristic style face, or not. Such portraits did not allude to an apotheosis (neither did they capture a true likeness), but instead elevated the personality, skills, and morality of the commissioner by identifying him/her with a divinity, hero, or important historical figure. Besides, such a Hellenistic iconography would also present an image of the owner of the villa as a tasteful and cultured patron who was sophisticated about the Greek culture.

The male figure might also be depicted in nude because he was imitating the Roman elite, who retreated into a fantasy world of Greek culture, with which they had leisure in an elevated cultivated way in towns outside Rome.\(^3\)\(^5\) Living the *otium* life in their villa, Roman men laid aside their toga and wore Greek clothes, to manifest a close affinity with Greek culture.\(^3\)\(^6\)

The elites would also host highly theatrical parties in the dining rooms of their villas, where entertainment would be provided by recitation of Greek literature, reenactments of scenes from Greek tragedy, pantomimes, and dances. In an attempt to appear as tasteful and intellectual as the Roman elite, the owner of the villa may have wanted to have paintings of himself and his relatives at such a banquet. Since the room at Boscoreale has been described to be a multi-purpose room, which would be used for reception or entertainment purposes, holding banquets or symposiums,\(^3\)\(^7\) such banquet paintings would fit aptly to the purpose and use of the room.
Whether the panels depict mythological portraits of the owner of the Boscoreale villa, or depict them enjoying a Hellas-inspired banquet, the elegantly dressed and lavishly ornate women in the scenes would complement the patron of the villa perfectly, as “the feminine arts regime of carefully constructed appearances that signaled social position and worth.” While criticizing the women’s extravagance, Livy indicated wearing purple clothes and gold jewelry was the ultimate mark of status and wealth for women, by quoting a woman as “‘That we may sparkle in fold and purple,’ says one, ‘that we may ride in carriages on holidays and ordinary days, that we may be borne through the city as if in triumph over the conquered and abrogated law and over the votes which we have captures and seized from you; that there may be no limits to our spending nor our luxury.’” On these three paintings, not only the figures are depicted as wearing noble purple dresses, they also seem to wear incredibly rich jewelry that could be afforded by only the very rich in the Roman society, pointing that their husband/son/father is a wealthy man and they are of a high status in society. (Figures 7-8).

Although I have articulated my arguments based on Ling’s thesis that the scenes depicted on the three walls of the great hall of the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor were not tied together in a...
specific and coherent iconographic program, an examination of the iconography and imagery in the entire villa could be key to the understanding of how these three wall paintings functioned in the villa, for the owners, as well as their guests. If the paintings are not part of a complicated scheme, however, it is probable that they were commissioned by the owner of the villa in an attempt to imitate wealthier patrons.

3 See Anderson (1988) Lehmann (1953), and Richter (1906).
4 Torelli (2003), p. 218. Torelli also pointed out that there are parts of frescoes left in the villa after its excavation.
6 Ibid., 1-2. The villa was found and excavated by Vincenzo De Prisco in 1900, on the property of Francesco Vona in Grotta Franchini. Written by Felice Barnabei in 1901 as a report on the excavation for the Minister of Public Instruction, La villa Pompeiana di P. Fannio Sinistore Scoperta Presso Boscoreale (1901) is the first published account on the villa. According to Lehmann, the report fails to provide a precise and detailed account due to some omissions and a significant number of inconsistencies. Lehmann also added that the villa was “incompletely and unofficially excavated,” as the excavator did not keep any scientific records.
8 Ibid., 2.
9 Ibid., 3-5. There are written and archaeological evidences that suggest the villa was sold in auctions. Ownership of freedman Publius Fannius Synistor was deduced from an inscription on a fragmentary bronze vessel found in the villa, while a bronze stamp indicated another owner to be Lucius Herennius Florus, a member of a well-known local family. There is no evidence as to who commissioned the wall paintings in the house.
10 All resources in the bibliography conforms that the wall paintings in the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor are among the best examples of Second Style paintings, along with those in the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii. In fact, Lehmann alleged that the villa can “serve as a textbook of the earlier phases of the Second Style.” (1953), p. 6.
12 For more information on megalographia, see Mazzoleni (2004) and Ling (1991).
13 An improved and larger version of the lyre, the cithara was a concert instrument played exclusively by professional musicians. Smith described the cithara as the grand piano of Hellenistic music. (1994), p. 113.
14 See Olson (2008), and Sebesta and Bonfante (1994).
15 For a woman, being “muffled in certain kinds of all-enveloping clothing” was the most significant sign of being chaste and upright. Olson (2008), p. 11.
16 According to Smith, the pallum functioned to mollify any inappropriateness that might have been felt in the house, due to the nudity of the male figure. (1994), p. 113.
18 Ling (1991), p. 105. Smith affirmed that the scenes were copies from earlier paintings, due to their “large scale, high quality, monumental effect, and level of detail, combined with the unfamiliar Macedonian subject matter.” (1994), p. 107.
20 M. Bieber (1953) argued that the figures in the central panel on the right wall were the owners of the Boscoreale villa. F.G.J.M. Müller 1994 suggested a mythological iconography based on the myth of Achilles. Torelli (2003).
26 George M.A. Hanfmann is quoted in McKay (1975), p. 149.
30 Sebesta and Bonfante (1994), p. 47. According to Sebesta, “the purple color was associated with blood; the Romans and Greeks spoke of purple blood as we do blue blood.”
33 Koortbojian (2008), p. 73.
36 Koortbojian (2008), p. 82.
37 Torelli (2003), p. 225. Torelli based his argument on the oecus corinthius in the hall, which is usually seen in villas and large urban establishments as a decoration in salons, used “for reception, for entertainment, and occasionally for a banquet/symposium.”
39 “ut auro et purpura fulgamus,” inquit, “ut carpentis festis profestisque diebus, velut triumphantes de lege victa et abrogata et captis et equebris suffragiis vestries per urbem vectemur; ne ullus modus sumptibus, ne luxuriae sit.”
40 Olson (2008), p. 102. Olson quotes the passage in her discussion of the sumptuary legislations.
41 Olson (2008) and Sebesta and Bonfante (1994).
Bibliography


