Water and stone: the economics of wall-painting in Pompeii (A.D. 62-79)

Francesca Bologna

This article investigates production times, workforce, and materials involved in the creation of wall-paintings, applying figures obtained from pre-industrial building manuals and through experimental archaeology. This is a crucial yet — at least with regard to Roman wall-painting — unexploited avenue for research, one that has already been successfully applied to the study of ancient construction, stone-working, and mosaic production.1 The implications of this type of study are twofold: estimating labour figures allows us to assess painters’ working practices and workforce organization, yet it can also help uncover the burden sustained by patrons in both economic and personal terms, thereby providing a more realistic notion of what it meant to have one’s house decorated. Ultimately, this can lead to a better understanding of local markets and of the socio-economic implications of the wall-painting industry.

Many studies have examined the relationship between wall-paintings and the people linked with them, focusing particularly on ancient viewers and patrons to appreciate how they experienced this art form and the logic behind the choice of specific painted subjects.2 That is not to say that painters have not been investigated, for the study of wall-painting has been characterized by different attempts at identifying individual workshops or makers based on stylistic analysis.3 Still, previous scholarship has not really engaged with the

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3 H. G. Beyen, “The workshops of the Fourth Style at Pompeii and its neighbourhood,” in E. J. Brill (ed.), Studia archaeologica Gerardo van Hoorn obiata (Leiden 1951) 43-65; L. Richardson, jr,