

Towards a cultural biography of Roman painting

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Using a term drawn from economic anthropology¹ and pushing the boundaries of this type of analysis, I would like to describe an attempt to trace in time and space the roots of the technical, stylistic and iconographic know-how that gave form to Roman painting. Considering the fragmentary nature of the evidence at our disposal, the argumentation set forth here cannot follow a linear path containing various steps that can all be neatly demonstrated. I believe that the time is right, however, to tackle Roman painting — and particularly painting in the domestic setting — with more conviction. Although understanding the rôle and nature of the patrons and painters remains an objective that is still far off, it is probably worth investigating the traditions that enjoyed some level of continuity in Roman painting and the concrete ways and contexts in which the process unfolded. The aim is to achieve a deeper understanding of the rôle that this artistic technique played in a society that made ample use of it during a fundamental phase of its history. In the 1st c. B.C. and 1st c. A.D., in the brief period that saw the transition from Republic to Empire, the domestic ideology of Roman society found expression in a decorative system marked by a continuous stream of innovations with respect to themes, schemes and ornament that were adopted consistently by a broad spectrum of patrons. Indeed, beyond simply protecting and covering the walls of dwellings, figurative painting — especially of such a complex nature as we are dealing with here — added a wide range of elements which I believe it is useful to investigate.

A reflection on the cultural roots of Roman painting also seems necessary in view of the state of the art. Studies have long suffered (and to a certain extent continue to suffer) from a rather narrow focus, perhaps partly due to the view according to which the figurative pictures (the most striking aspect of these decorations) depended totally on Late Classical and Hellenistic painting.² For these reasons, in a framework characterised by the scientific interests of the 20th c., the study of Roman painting *per se* was considered to be of no great interest. In this way an important tool for understanding the meaning of a broad artistic process was lost. Indeed, despite the gaps in the historical record, a thorough analysis of Roman painting suggests that it continued to sustain — to a far greater degree than we are accustomed to considering — an artistic and craft tradition of the highest sophistication.

1 S. Langdon, "Beyond the grave: biographies from early Greece," *AJA* 105 (2001) 579-606, and M. J. Versluys, "Roman visual material culture as globalising koine," in M. Pitts and M. J. Versluys (edd.), *Globalisation and the Roman world: world history, connectivity and material culture* (Cambridge 2014) 141-74, have already felicitously applied to archaeology the approach of I. Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process," in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspectives* (Cambridge 1986) 64-95. See also the observations of R. R. R. Smith and C. H. Hallett, "Troilos and Achilles: a monumental statue group from Aphrodisias," *JRS* 105 (2015) 154 and n.87; S. D. Bundrick, "Athens, Etruria, Rome, Baltimore: reconstructing the biography of an ancient Greek vase," *MAAR* 61 (2016) 2 n.5 (with further bibliography) and 15-17.

2 Outside a narrow circle of specialists, this view, which is based on a series of studies (e.g., G. Lippold, *Antike Gemäldekopien* [AbhMünch 33, 1951]) that had great influence, above all in the first half of the 20th c., continues to inform handbooks on these themes.