

Vitruvius' *monstra*

Sara R. Yerkes

H. G. Beyen's theory of the evolution of Roman wall-painting, based on the concept of "open" or "closed" systems of wall-decoration, has dominated the scholarship for the last half century. In setting out to prove that the Third Pompeian Style "is both opposed to the Second and independent of the Fourth,"¹ Beyen encouraged subsequent scholarship to perceive a polarity between the four styles of Roman painting, and scholars have made Herculean efforts to explain these seemingly dramatic shifts in Roman taste. However, the theories which attempt closely to correlate these changes in style with larger cultural changes are mutually inconsistent. For example, the Third Style, although undeniably whimsical and fantastic in its creations, has been termed "classicizing" and associated with the contemporary "classicizing" age of Augustus and an emerging new morality.² Yet the Second or "architectural" Style, which preceded it, is also described as "classicistic" and "conservative",³ while at the same time epitomizing the "extravagant excess" of the Republic.⁴ To complicate matters further, between the Second and the Third Styles lies the late Second Style, characteristic of houses linked with Augustus and his family members, which is variously described by scholars as "baroque" or "anti-classicistic", in contrast to both the Second and Third Styles.⁵ And here a famous passage of Vitruvius (7.5.3.) comes into play:⁶

* Frequently cited abbreviations:

- Beyen 1 and 2 H. G. Beyen, *Die pompejanische Wanddekoration vom zweiten bis zum viertem Stil* vols. 1-2 (The Hague 1938)
- Blanckenhagen P. von Blanckenhagen and C. Alexander, *The Augustan villa at Boscotrecase* (Mainz 1990)
- Cain H.-U. Cain, *Römische Marmorkandelaber* (Mainz am Rhein 1985)
- Cain and Dräger H.-U. Cain and O. Dräger, "Die Marmorkandelaber," in G. Hellenkemper Salies et al. (edd.), *Das Wrack: Der antike Schiffsfund von Mahdia* (Bonn 1994)
- Carettoni G. Carettoni, *Das Haus des Augustus auf dem Palatin* (Mainz 1983)
- Guillaud J. Guillaud, *Frescoes in the time of Pompeii* (New York 1990)
- Möbius H. Möbius, *Die Ornamente der griechischen Grabstelen klassischer und nachklassischer Zeit* (Munich 1968)
- Sauron 1979 G. Sauron, "Les modèles funéraires classiques de l'art décoratif néo-attique au 1er siècle av. J.-C.," *MEFRA* 91 (1979) 183-236.
- Spinazzola V. Spinazzola, *Le arti decorative in Pompei e nel Museo Nazionale di Napoli* (Naples 1928)
- Walter-Karydi E. Walter-Karydi, "Die Entstehung der Grotteskenornamentik in der Antike," *RömMitt* 97 (1990)

- 1 "Für den dritten Stil beabsichtige ich nachzuweisen, dass er sowohl gegenüber dem zweiten wie dem vierten Stil selbständig ist" (Beyen vol. 1, 2).
- 2 Blanckenhagen 64: the Third Style paintings from Boscotrecase are a "paradigm of Roman classicism"; R. Ling, *Roman painting* (Cambridge 1991) 57: "The paintings of the Third Style ... are the pictorial equivalent of the Augustan classicism embodied in sculpture and the other arts ...".
- 3 E.g., J. J. Pollitt, *The art of Rome, c.753 B.C.-337 A.D.: sources and documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1983) 127: In championing the Second Style and condemning the Third, "Vitruvius presents what seems to be a conservative classicist's theory of painting," and G.-Ch. Picard, *Roman painting* (Greenwich, CT 1970) 50: The grotesque motifs of the late Second style "opposed themselves radically to classicism and to naturalism ..."
- 4 Cf., e.g., E. Leach, "Patrons, painters and patterns: the anonymity of Romano-Campanian painting and the transition from the second to the third style," in B. Gold (ed.), *Literary and artistic patronage in ancient Rome* (Austin, TX 1982) 166; P. Zanker, *The power of images in the age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor 1990) 279.
- 5 E.g., Picard (supra n.3) 50: "Both the 'surrealism' here condemned and the escapism evidently stemmed from the same state of mind, one which turned away from a concept of nature that is intelligible and that is disciplined by the reason in which classicism found its inspiration"; and id., "Les grotesques: un système décoratif typique de l'art césarien et néronien," in *L'art décoratif à Rome* (ColLEFR 55, 1981) 144: "Enfin et surtout, il prouve que le décor grotesque est l'expression d'une esthétique dont ses