

2008

# Paintings in Roman Pompeii: Differences in Public and Private Areas of the Home

Ashley Barnes  
*Western Oregon University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Barnes, Ashley, "Paintings in Roman Pompeii: Differences in Public and Private Areas of the Home" (2008). *Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History)*. 180.

<https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his/180>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Digital Commons@WOU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History) by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@WOU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@wou.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@wou.edu).

Paintings in Roman Pompeii:  
Differences in Public and Private Areas of the Home

By

Ashley Barnes

Senior Seminar  
(HST 499W)

June 6, 2008

Primary Reader: Dr. Benedict Lowe  
Secondary Reader: Dr. Bau Hwa Hsieh  
Course Instructor: Dr. David Doellinger

History Department  
Western Oregon University

In 79 CE Mt. Vesuvius erupted destroying the area around the Bay of Naples, and all the Roman towns that were in the region. More than seven hundred years later, while a Frenchman, Domenico Fontana, digging for a new aqueduct, the city of Pompeii was found again. Before the eruption the city of Pompeii was a prominent province, where Roman citizens and elite were said to have had houses. When the city was rediscovered in the 1700's it was a gold mine of new information on the Roman people and their society. This city, along with others that were later discovered in the region, was nearly completely intact, which made Roman historians rethink everything they thought they knew about Roman culture.

Because of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, not only was the town preserved, but the paintings and decorations that would have been found in a typical Roman town were also preserved. Historians gained a new understanding of not only what a Roman town would have looked like, but also how the houses would have been decorated. Though we see decoration in some other Roman locations, that which remains is very scarce, and typically is that of imperial villas, or houses, and not of every day people. In the city of Pompeii alone there are four distinct styles of painting found.

Knowing the base of the four artistic styles found in Pompeii is essential to being able to study the paintings that have been found there. Because of the unique conditions of the site, it is the best chance at getting to study the domestic paintings found in Roman houses. Knowing the styles is only one part of the equation though. Was there a reason for placing a certain painting in one room or another? Were some, more expensive, colors of pigment found in areas of a house that others weren't? Essentially, does a correlation

exist between the colors and motifs of paintings and whether the rooms they were found in were for public or private use? Though research has been done on the four styles, not many people have focused on connections between room use and decoration. By looking at the paintings and where they are located in houses a correlation can be made between public and private spaces and the decorations found there.

The construction of houses in this area, at the time, was pretty standard, being built on a piece of earth that was pounded and then covered in cement. The walls were built of stone and cement, and were then covered in plaster. This meant that the walls of houses had no windows, and the walls themselves looked like one single slab of plaster with no breaks, which led to the idea of decorating interior spaces of living.

First style was used in the late second and early first centuries BCE, shortly before and just after Rome's conquest of the region of Campania, where Pompeii is located. The construction of houses caused a need for decoration, and in first style painting, people took the idea of marble, a symbol of wealth, and recreated it by painting the plaster walls. The different colors used try to imitate different types of precious marbles that were used in important buildings such as palaces and temples. To the Roman's appearance was everything, and by a person creating a faux marble look in their house, it gave the idea that they were wealthier and more important than they might have been.

The influence on first style came from the Greeks. The area of Campania was under Greek control long before it was taken by the Roman's in early first century BCE. The Greek people had a very developed and sophisticated style that is referred to as Hellenistic. The first style paintings imitate a style that was used for centuries all around

the Mediterranean that is called Masonry Style, and is based on the monumental structures that were built by the Greeks. The three sections are divided into large panels at the bottom that are also known as orthostates<sup>1</sup>, one or more narrow friezes or string courses<sup>2</sup>, and a series of isodomic course block work sections. To top all this off, another frieze would be added or, in more ornate buildings, an imitation of a Doric or Ionic order that is miniaturized to look better in the home. Although the style stayed very close to what was used by the Greeks, in Pompeii more was added to the equation. Instead of starting at the bottom with the orthostates, they started with a socle followed by a string course. The sections containing the orthostates, frieze or string courses, and isodomic courses were put above the two new sections. An additional frieze was painted above this, and a dentil cornice was added to top everything off. The idea of first style was not just achieved purely by painting, but included stucco work as well in order to give the walls a real architectural feel. Each of the sections seems to have depth, and the stucco work in the string courses, friezes, and dentil cornice definitely give the walls their intended architectural effect. The whole idea of first style was to imitate fine architecture and high end marble, and by the end of the use of first style, they had achieved their goal flawlessly.

First style is a very plain and purely architectural based style, but once second style comes into play, there are a few more elements added that make the paintings a little more complex. Second style painting started right about the time that first style was dying out, around 80 BCE, and lasted until about 20 BCE. Though the period of second style is

---

<sup>1</sup> Orthostate- A vertical panel or block in a real or imitation masonry wall. (definition from Clarke, page 376)

<sup>2</sup> Frieze, string course- Narrow area between the orthostates and isodomic block work. In some cases this area has imagery in it, but in first style it does not.

about sixty years, the style itself is divided into two phases. The first part of second style took place from about 80-40 BCE, and second part lasted the next twenty years from about 40-20 BCE.

The first phase of second style wall painting takes the idea of first style to a different level. Instead of using stucco work to create architectural effects, they created them from the paint itself. Artists created an illusion of a three dimensional decoration, but painted on a flat two dimensional surface. Second style also adds painted columns and moldings to the walls, taking the idea of grand architecture to another level. Because the details were painted instead of made of stucco, the illusion is left with the position of the viewer. By looking at the same painting at two different angles the view of it would be different. In a strategic place in a room, an area called an emblema was put on the floor. The emblema usually shared the motif of socle, and marked the best place in the room to view the paintings and their perspective.

Second style, as well as adding more architectural elements, took illusion of space to a completely different level than first style did. Between the painted columns there were more than just faux painted marble but now the illusion of space beyond the walls was added. Paintings between the columns would give the illusion that another room lay behind the room you were in, giving the room behind the room another set of columns.

There are three different theories about where second style got its inspiration. The first is that the paintings were based mainly on monumental Hellenistic Greek architecture, the second was based on the paintings of theatrical sets, and the third was based on the contemporary architecture being built at the time in Italy<sup>3</sup>. Looking at these

---

<sup>3</sup> Ling, Roger. Roman Painting.

theories, one can conclude that all three have some good ideas, and all could be true. All three are used in different capacities in different areas. The idea of using monumental Greek architecture for inspiration was used in first style, but now the second style paintings were not just to imitate Greek architecture, but also to show images of monumental architecture. Using both contemporary architecture and using theatrical sets were new ideas though, that ended up making for some beautiful paintings. Contemporary architecture at the time had a very distinct look and feel, and second style painting tried to imitate it.

In the second phase of second style painting, which lasted from about 40-20 BCE, a new motif comes up, one that is monumental unto itself. Instead of just giving the illusion of space beyond the wall, in the second phase of this style, the painter created a framework with the columns to house a single large painting. The paintings were of many different things, but many focused on garden and figural scenes. Private homes and palaces tried to imitate the ideal of farmland, and therefore had gardens in them.

Second style painting draws on this idea by painting garden scenes on walls to make it feel like they are actually in a garden, or one lingers just beyond the space they're in. They also used this technique if there was not enough space for a good sized garden, so they would paint garden scenes, with statues and fountains, around the garden walls to give it the feel of being larger than it really was. Image 1, from the House of the Marine Venus, is found in the garden. Though this particular house has a fair sized garden, the idea of a larger garden is always good in Roman houses. The image shows plant and animal life along with a fountain or bird bath. This is a very typical scene to find in houses, and shows how gardens could feel bigger by just adding paintings.



Image 1. Garden scene from the House of the Marine Venus, Pompeii. Taken by Ashley Barnes, June 2007.

The focus on figures instead of on dimension also meant that the perspective illusion of a separate space was not as important anymore. Perhaps the most well known example of second style paintings are found in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. The images seen in the house are not all famous, but in one room the paintings are quite “mysterious,” giving the house its name. The figural paintings found in the Villa of the Mysteries depict a strange ceremony that women in the cult of Dionysus went through. There is a series of ten images that show different steps of the procedure as an individual would experience them. This example shows how Greek myths and Gods transferred into Roman life and society, and how they were also portrayed in Roman homes and buildings.

As with the first two styles, third style paintings also have influences from monumental architecture, however the third style architectural elements get put on the backburner to the images that are placed amongst them. Third style, unlike second, flattens surfaces and makes the paintings of images the most important part of the wall



paintings. Like second style, third is separated into phases that mark differences in the styles development.

The third style is dated to about 20 BCE and lasted until about 45 CE, with the first phase lasting from approximately 20 BCE- 25 CE, and the second lasting from 25-45 CE. The first part of third style took the architectural idea of columns and made them more “spindly,” making the architecture not as credible as in second style. The thin columns could never actually be used in a practical way, and therefore are purely decorative and kill the illusion of reality that went along with second style painting. During the first part of third style, the scale of images didn’t completely change though. The painted columns still served as a border for the paintings contained inside them, but now the borders were flatter and not as realistic. The images held within the borders were also not as numerous as those in second style. Third style wall paintings had areas of beautifully painted scenes in one bordered off area, while the area next to the scene could have nothing but a flat single colored surface. The paintings that are in the columned borders consist of the usual themes of mythology and landscapes.

In the second part of third style, changes take form in the use of the bordered areas. Instead of using all of the space within a border, the images become smaller and are surrounded by flat single color, not just in neighboring bordered areas, but within the pictured section itself. The borders also have slight changes in the second phase. The spindle like columns stay the same, but leaf motifs accompany the columns. The use of the color yellow becomes even more prominent with the progression of the second phase, and the color will stay very popular through to the next style of painting. The idea of having a smaller painting inside a flat surfaced bordered area looks as if the painting is

mounted on the wall like a picture could be today, again showing that the style is much more ornamental than the last two.

In the second phase of the third style the friezes on top of the main paintings played a large role in decoration. The scenes in the upper sections contain motifs that are largely based again on mythology and mythological landscapes. The upper zones typically had much more decoration to them and, though they were not central to the wall, carried more definition and detail.

Third style leads nicely into the fourth and final style found in Pompeii. The time period for fourth style lasts from about 45 CE until the destruction of Pompeii with the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. Fourth style painting takes the ornamentation idea of third style and makes it more complex. Not only did fourth style take ideas from third style, but borrowed from first and second as well, and combines all three previous styles in a somewhat unpredictable way. The final style, like those that came before it, is also separated into sections, but instead of just phases, fourth style sections are given names that correspond with motifs being employed during that section. The three divisions of fourth style are tapestry, plain, and theatrical.

Tapestry style is the first, and imitates the look of hanging rugs or tapestries. The style consisted of painted panels on walls that would be in colors like red and gold, or light blue and black.<sup>4</sup> Like in third style, tapestry style used small images of mythological scenes in the center of the paintings. Unlike third style though, the use of tapestry images started the trend back to the more illusionary paintings seen before. The idea of using a tapestry theme is one that may or may not be traced back to Ptolemaic Egypt, but either

---

<sup>4</sup> John R. Clarke. *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100B.C. - A.D. 250, Ritual, Space, and Decoration.*

way the idea of using plush textiles on walls creates a grandeur that can not usually be afforded. As in first style paintings, tapestry style takes the idea of expense and creates the illusion of being able to afford something you typically might not be able to.

Image 2 is an example of the tapestry style from the House of the Vettii. The large yellow segments are supposed to create the look of hanging rugs, which implies luxury. Again by looking at the painting from the House of the Vettii the continued use of third style small central paintings that was retained can be seen. The second part of fourth style is plain. Plain style consists of a series of randomly aligned vertical and horizontal rectangles. Each rectangle can be a different size and color, and usually is done in white, black, bright red, and porphyry red.<sup>5</sup> The style is typically associated with houses with poorer owners, who couldn't afford a more intricate style in their house. The trick to making plain style look good is the positioning of the different colored and different

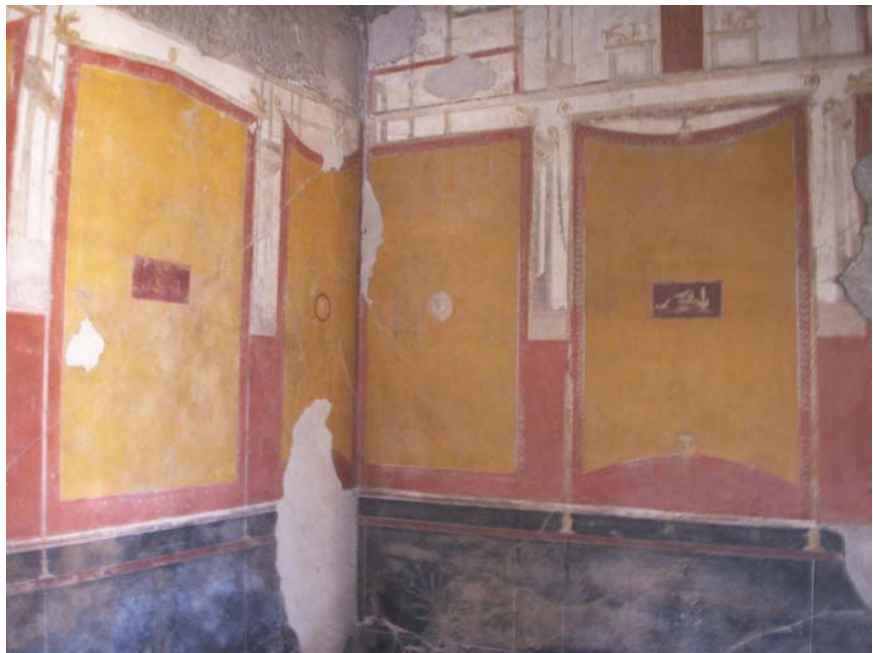


Image 2. Tapestry style painting in the House of the Vettii. Taken by Ashley Barnes, June 2007.

---

<sup>5</sup> Clark, John R. *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100B.C. - A.D. 250, Ritual, Space, and Decoration.*

shaped rectangles. Though plain style is considered a lower class style, when done well can be just as beautiful as other forms of fourth style.

By far the most eccentric part of fourth style belongs to that of the theatrical phase. This phase is characterized by a return to the second style illusion of other spaces beyond the wall, but retains third styles unrealistic approach to the idea. The columns separating areas are still too spindly to be accurate representations, but illusion is back, and this time it is in the form of a theater style appearance. In most of the separated spaces human figures appear, and one theory is that they could either be a type of actor or a spectator in the play being represented. Though the style is called theatrical, it is not a fact that the people in the scenes are actually supposed to represent people in a performance, but the fact that there are people appearing in the paintings makes this part of the style unique to others. Again, the scenes being played out are mostly of Greek mythology, which is drawn from all styles preceding it.

Fourth style is a chaotic combination of the previous three styles; the idea of using stucco to create an architectural feel is back from first style; from second style we gain back the illusions that were so popular at that time; and from third style the use of spindly columns and of small pictures inside certain areas is retained. The fourth and final of Pompeian wall paintings brings together the best of all the styles that came before it.

Though a lot is known about the four styles of paintings found in Pompeii, there are no known primary sources that specifically talk about them. The only written primary source that discusses houses is Vitruvius. Writing in the first century BCE his works included *De Architectura*, which, among other things, gives the layout and use of a typical Roman house. In order to compare public and private paintings it is first necessary

to have an understanding of the Roman house, which can be achieved by looking at Vitruvius. The problem with this however is that only one style of house is given in *De Architectura*, and as seen in Pompeii not all Roman houses follow that style. Due to the fact that it is all that exists on the topic though, it must be looked at and taken into account.

The “Vitruvian” style of house included the *fauces*,<sup>6</sup> *atrium*,<sup>7</sup> *tablinum*,<sup>8</sup> *peristyle*,<sup>9</sup> dining rooms, baths, and bedrooms. The *fauces* is the entrance to the house and leads to the atrium, which in turn leads to the *tablinum*. These three areas are the extent of the true public areas of the house, which as Clarke says are, “open to the uninvited public.”<sup>10</sup> Beyond the *tablinum* a *peristyle* would lay, which would be the center of the rest of the house. Around the *peristyle* would be dining rooms, baths, and bedrooms, with the dining rooms being the most important.

The Roman people had very separate spaces in their houses, those seen by other people, public spaces, and those that were only seen by the owners and slaves of the home, private spaces, this distinction is hard to classify though. Wealthy Romans were patrons to lower class citizens, and the area in which business would be done is technically the only true public space in the home. However, the area around the garden which included dining and other rooms could also arguably be public. Though not all

---

<sup>6</sup> *Fauces*- (plural), literally, “jaws”; the entryway passage of a house. (from Clarke, page 375)

<sup>7</sup> *Atrium*- central hall of the domus, usually having a single central opening in the roof to capture rain water (*compluvium*) with a corresponding catch basin in the floor beneath (*impluvium*). (from Clarke, page 373-374)

<sup>8</sup> *Tablinum*- main reception room of the domus, focal point of the axis running from the *fauces* through the atrium. (from Clarke, page 378)

<sup>9</sup> *Peristyle*- garden or courtyard surrounded by a colonnade. (from Clarke, page 377)

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, page 12.

people would be allowed to enter these areas, if the owner of the house had friends over or a dinner party, those guests would see the areas. The dining rooms and gardens of houses are usually very well decorated, and therefore would be public spaces.

The decoration of the public and private spaces would have been done in very different ways. The fact that most people would never enter private spaces put them on the back burner of value. The most lavishly decorated areas of a house would be public ones, so that the owner could show off their wealth and importance. Therefore, if an owner didn't have the money to pay for their entire house to be decorated, at least the places people would see might give the illusion that they were wealthier.

“The relationship between wall-decoration and room type in Pompeian houses; a case study of the Casa della Caccia Antica,” by Penelope Allison,<sup>11</sup> gives new light on the correlations between room use and paintings.

It seems that light decoration with small panels, scant architecture, and no opening of the wall, was considered appropriate for small, closed, presumably private rooms off the atrium, such as room 14. Elaborate architectural decoration was appropriate for more open, accessible, public rooms such as rooms 13 and 18 (conventionally referred to as an oecus or exedra). Dark (usually black), flat fields were preferred in the ambulatories of peristyles, and large landscape scenes for garden walls. Corridors and entranceways had simple, fairly flat decoration. In long, narrow rooms (so-called triclinia) in one corner of the atrium, like room 12, or off the garden, abundant use was made of reds and yellows, usually in alternating flat fields with limited architectural reality.<sup>12</sup>

By taking Allison's research and applying it to other houses in Pompeii and the Bay of Naples area a new perspective on public and private spaces, and the connections between room use and decorations.

---

<sup>11</sup> Penelope Allison, “The relationship between wall-decoration and room type in Pompeian houses; a case study of the Casa della Caccia Antica” in *Journal of Roman Archaeology* Vol. 5 (1992): 235-249.

<sup>12</sup> Allison, page 247

## The House of the Vettii

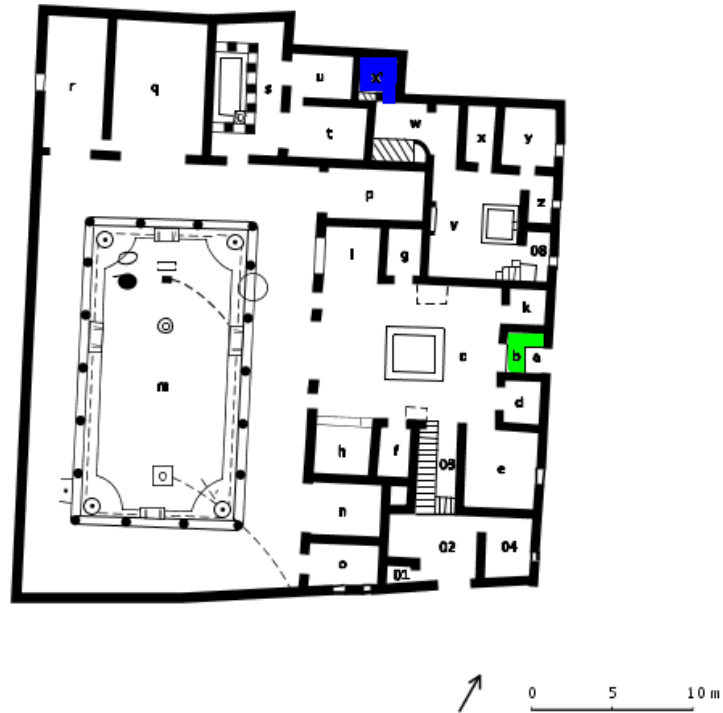


Image 3. Map of the House of the Vettii from <http://www.stoa.org/projects/ph/house?id=18>, edited by Ashley Barnes.

The idea of showing wealth with decoration was taken to an extreme in the House of the Vettii, a map of which is shown to the left. The owners of this house were two ex-slaves who had gained their independence and made a good amount of money. Trying to show off their new wealth and status, they decorated every bit of their house in an early form of fourth style paintings. Upon entering the house from the street a visitor would see scenes from Greek mythology, showing their knowledge (or opportunity for knowledge) and worldliness. John R. Clarke discusses the House of the Vettii in his book *The Houses*

of Roman Italy<sup>13</sup>, explaining the paintings that are found in the house and their importance in the development of the four styles in Pompeii. Clarke references another historian that has done work focusing on the House of the Vettii, William C. Archer. Archer has published many books and articles that deal solely on this particular house, including his article “The Paintings of the Alae of the Casa dei Vettii and a Definition of the Pompeian Fourth Style”<sup>14</sup>. Both authors discuss the significance of the elaborate decoration, and the use of fourth style paintings in the House of the Vettii. Archer explains that some of the paintings in this house, that are in fourth style, date to before the earthquake in 62 CE,<sup>15</sup> and therefore are arguably some of the earliest mature fourth style paintings.

Image 4 is an example of one of the paintings from the entrance of the House of the Vettii. It depicts the Greek god Priapus, god of fertility and male genitalia, weighing his giant phallus. This image shows that the owners were not only wealthy, but also powerful. The entire house is decorated in this fashion, with over the top paintings, mosaics, and statuary, but the image of Priapus is a prime example of how wealth can be shown through paintings. The use of blues and greens in this painting also shows that no expense was spared when it came to decorating this house. The reasons for the higher

---

<sup>13</sup> John R. Clarke. *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100B.C. - A.D. 250, Ritual, Space, and Decoration*.

<sup>14</sup> William C. Archer, “The Paintings of the Alae of the Casa dei Vettii and a Definition of the Pompeian Fourth Style” in *American Journal of Archaeology* 94 (1991): 95-123. “Casa dei Vettii” is the Italian name for the House of the Vettii, which is what it will be referred to in this paper.

<sup>15</sup> In 62 CE an earthquake hit Pompeii causing much devastation and need for rebuilding and redecorating. Many historians and art historians use this date as the beginning of mature fourth style painting, and those that came before as transitional or early fourth style paintings. The significance in the House of the Vettii is that the pre-earthquake paintings still exist, while most others do not because of the destruction in 62 CE.





Image 4. Picture from the entrance (room b) of the House of the Vettii taken by Ashley Barnes, June 2007



Image 5. Picture from the cook's quarters (room x<sup>1</sup>) in the House of the Vettii taken by Dr. Benedict Lowe, June 2007.

cost of some colors is easily seen in the explanation of different pigments as described by Vitruvius.<sup>16</sup> The paintings in the public spaces of the House of the Vettii are all done in this elaborate and expensive manner, though not all had such explicit subject matter.

Though the paintings in the public spaces of the House of the Vettii are done in an expensive and elaborate manner, the paintings in the private areas were not given as much attention. Image 5 is a painting of a sexual scene from a small room in the back of the house, which Clarke attributes as the cook's quarters.<sup>17</sup> This area clearly would not be seen by anyone but those who lived or worked in the house, and therefore does not have as much detail as the public paintings. The fact that the cook's quarters was painted at all is a big deal because most servant areas didn't have paintings, or if they did wouldn't be

---

<sup>16</sup> Vitruvius, de Architectura, Book VII, chapters 7-14. translation found at <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Vitruvius/home.html>, June 2, 2008

<sup>17</sup> Clarke, page 220

as detailed as this one (which compared to the public spaces is not very detailed at all). “The Vettii... seem to have held the cook in particularly high esteem, since his room received a special kind of decoration.”<sup>18</sup> The reason for this special attention to the cook may have been because the Vettii were former slaves, and appreciated and wanted to recognize the good work of one of their workers.

The color use in this space is much less extravagant than the public areas, using reds and browns and not expensive colors like blues or greens. The details in the paintings are also a point of interest. The public areas in this house have a very high degree of detail, while those found in private areas have less attention paid to the detail. In the painting from the cook’s quarters (image 5) it is clear that the detailing is not as great as in the painting of Priapus (image 4).



Image 6. One of the rooms off the peristyle in the House of the Vettii taken by Dr. Benedict Lowe, June 2007.

---

<sup>18</sup> Clarke, page 220

Image 6 is from one of the triclinia around the peristyle. The elaborate architectural elements in this room, and the colors and details found in the room point to the fact that, though this room was not in the main public area of the house, it would still have been accessible to guests of the house.

The men who owned the House of the Vettii, A. Vettius Restitutus and A. Vettius Conviva, had a lot to prove. Their rise from slaves to home owners was a big deal, but they didn't want the public to view them as just former slaves. The paintings they had done for their public areas shows that they weren't just freedmen, but they could make it on their own, and could now afford to decorate their house in an extreme manner. Whatever the reasoning for doing so, the House of the Vettii is a good example of how public and private spaces were dealt with in different ways in the Roman house.

### The House of the Menander

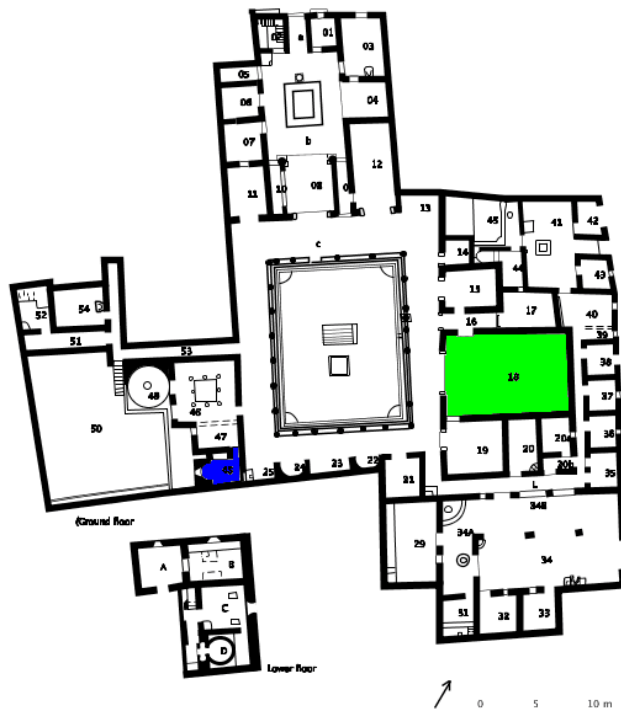


Image 7. Map of the House of the Menander from <http://www.stoa.org/projects/p/h/house?id=9>, edited by Ashley Barnes

The House of the Menander is another house from Pompeii that gives good examples of the use of paintings in both public and private spaces. This house is also discussed in detail by Clarke, but Rodger Ling has by far done the most research and writing on not only the house, but the entire *insula*<sup>19</sup> that it is located in. Ling's series of books, The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii, include his Volume II: The Decorations,<sup>20</sup> giving descriptions and information on all the houses located in this particular insula. Both these authors describe the use of the mature fourth style, tapestry style, in the rooms around the peristyle.<sup>21</sup>

Image 8 is a picture of a large dining or banquet room, which is located just off to the side of the peristyle garden area. Having a dining or banquet room directly off the garden was a common feature in Roman houses, but being able to decorate it as ornately as is done in the House of the Menander is not. The paintings in this room are done in intense detail, and the colors used are expensive ones. Though the paintings in this room are quite exquisite it is not the only part of the room that is impressive. The size of the room is extremely large, adding to not only the importance of the room itself, but the owners as well because they could both afford to have a room of this size and also have need for it. Like the House of the Vettii this is a way to show off status, though it is being done in a more tasteful manner.

---

<sup>19</sup> Insula- a city block in a Roman town.

<sup>20</sup> Rodger Ling, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii, Volume 2: The Decorations*. (Clarendon Press. Oxford 1997)

<sup>21</sup> Peristyle- a garden located in the rear of a Roman house. Most houses have their important dining or gathering rooms around the garden as Romans thought of themselves as gardeners as explained earlier.



Image 8. Picture from a dining area in the House of the Menander taken by Ashley Barnes, June 2007.

Room 18 in the House of the Menander is similar to room 18 in the House of the Ancient Hunt that Penelope Allison discusses<sup>22</sup>. Both rooms open to the peristyle and were used as dining or banquet rooms. In Allison's section on this room she talks about the use of "strong colours, predominantly yellow, with black and red."<sup>23</sup> These rooms, the one in the House of the Menander in particular, show how effective decoration can be in a large dining area.

This particular house includes a private bath complex, a painting from which is shown in image 9. Though most of the private areas in the House of the Menander do not contain paintings, the bath complex found here has detailed paintings that still exist. The paintings that are found here are not as complex or in depth as the ones that are found in the public areas, but are still good quality for a private space. Because the owners of this

---

<sup>22</sup> Penelope Allison, "The relationship between wall-decoration and room type in Pompeian houses; a case study of the Casa della Caccia Antica" in *Journal of Roman Archaeology* Vol. 5 (1992): 235-249.

<sup>23</sup> Allison, page 245.

house were extremely wealthy they could afford to not only have a private bath complex but were able to decorate it in an ornate style.

The owners of the House of the Menander decorated their house paying extreme attention to the details. The size of the house, and the need for large rooms like some found in the house, indicate wealth, but if these rooms were not decorated in the ornate fashion that they were, the rooms would not be as meaningful. Though the paintings in the House of the Menander don't show the differences in public and private spaces as clearly as what was seen in the House of the Vettii, it is still clear that differences are there.



Image 9. Picture from the private bath suite in the House of the Menander taken by Dr. Benedict Lowe, June 2007.

## The Villa of Poppaea at Oplontis

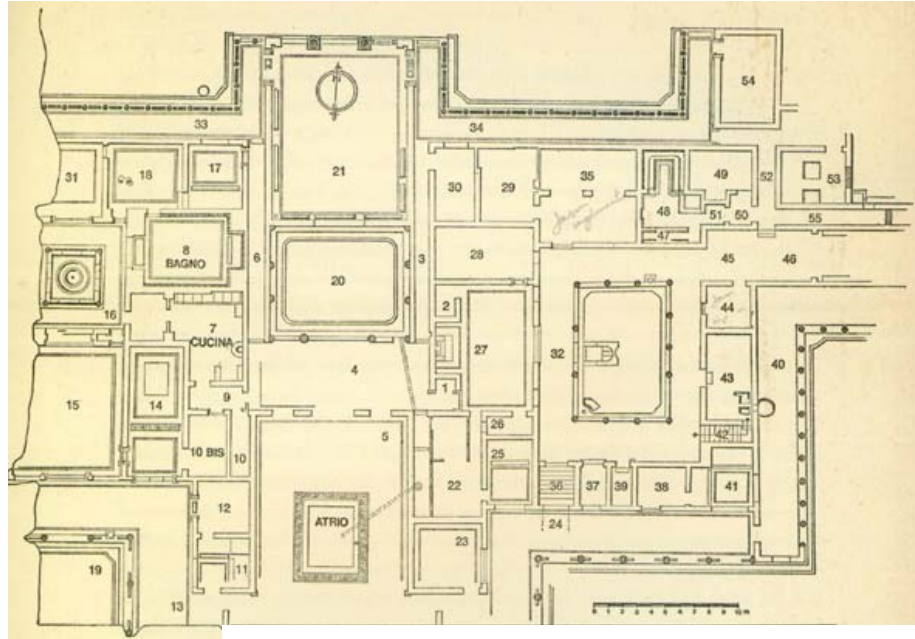


Image 10. Map of the Villa of Poppaea at Oplontis from [www.indiana.edu/~leach/c409/opolan.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~leach/c409/opolan.html)

Though the villa at Oplontis is not technically in the city of Pompeii, it is very close to the ancient city and was also destroyed in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. The villa is thought to have been the property of the second wife of the emperor Nero, and is one of the best preserved houses in the entire Bay of Naples area. As expected in an imperial villa, the paintings are exquisite. The colors and details of the paintings show that no expense was spared when it came to the decoration of the house. Clarke discusses the Villa of Poppaea in his sections on second, third and fourth style paintings in his book, including a map of the villa that shows which areas of the house are done in the different styles. Regardless of the style, the quality of the paintings remains extremely high. To the right is an image from one of the public areas of the house. As in the Villa of the Mysteries, every color imaginable can be seen throughout the house.

---

Image 11. Picture from the Villa of Poppaea at Oplontis taken by Ashley Barnes, June 2007.



This particular painting shows architectural elements with effects that try to imitate a third dimension that would exist behind the columns if they were really there. The architectural details in this area fit into Allison's argument as to why this space would be a public one.

The difference between the public spaces shown above and private ones is drastic. Because people put most of their money into decorating the places in a house that guests would see, less time and attention was made in the private living and serving spaces of a house. The villa at Oplontis is a good example of how this was done. Though the public areas of the house were done with a high degree of skill and beauty, the private areas look as though they aren't even the same house. The painting on the left is also from the villa at Oplontis. The differences between this one and the one mentioned above are startling. Where in the public space there is extreme attention to detail, and bright expensive colors, in the private areas the paintings have a geometric pattern and are limited in color. This happens to be a hallway leading from one part of the house to another, and would most likely be used by the slaves of the home. Because this house belonged to a very





Image 12. Picture from a private hallway in the Villa of Poppaea at Oplontis, taken by Ashley Barnes, June 2007.

wealthy family, the private spaces are still well decorated, just not to the same degree that the rest of the house is.

This house above all others discussed shows the differences between public and private spaces. While the family of Poppaea was extremely wealthy, so were the owners of the other houses discussed. The separations between the public and private spaces in this particular house are much more pronounced than the other houses though. Subject matter, details of the paintings, and the use of color are all large factors in what the differences in these spaces can entail.

## The Villa of the Mysteries



Image 13. Map of the Villa of the Mysteries from [www.emich.edu/abroad/staff/benita/pompeii.html](http://www.emich.edu/abroad/staff/benita/pompeii.html)

The Villa of the Mysteries is located just outside the city limits of Pompeii, and is depicted in the map to the left. This house is the location for possibly the most famous paintings in all of Pompeii. Because of the fame of the “Room of the Mysteries”, it has been the focus of many books and articles, but the other paintings in the house have kind of been neglected. Clarke also devotes a section of his book to the Villa of the Mysteries, and specifically focuses on the Room of the Mysteries. A detailed account of the paintings and their meaning (or what is thought to be the meaning of the paintings) is given, as well as an explanation of the use of second style paintings in the house.



Image 14. Picture from the Room of the Mysteries taken by Ashley Barnes, June 2007.

A detail from the Room of the Mysteries is shown in image 14. This image shows the beginning of the scene that encompasses the entire room. Clark and others explain that the scene could be the initiation rights into the cult of Dionysus. The cult of Dionysus is one that little is known about, and even in antiquity was very secretive. The paintings in this room depict nearly life size figures that are painted in such high detail that even their facial features look like they are real. The colors that are found in the paintings come from every color of the rainbow, and all the colors in between, showing how much money was dedicated to this space alone.

Though the rest of the rooms in the house have clear public or private functions, this room is different to classify. Most visitors to the Villa of the Mysteries would never have seen this room, which could make it private, but due to the lavishly decorated walls and the subject matter of the paintings it could be public. The room would have been used in initiations into the cult, and therefore would technically be public because people, though not everybody, would enter it and see the wealth and power of the owner.

This room is one that pokes holes in Penelope Allison's discussion on room functionality and decorations. By all of her standards, this room should be a public area, most likely a dining room, especially because it is located looking out on the Bay of Naples. The problem with this argument is that the subject matter of the paintings, and the size of the figures, would not be found in a dining room. The uncertainty of the function or cause of this room is what lead this house to be called the "Villa of the Mysteries."

The other public areas of the house are also painted in mature second style. They are painted with the same ornate details of the Room of the Mysteries, and also contain expensive colors, though not as many colors as are seen in the Room of the Mysteries. The paintings in one of the rooms, "provides one of the finest of architectural decoration in the 2<sup>nd</sup> style."<sup>25</sup> The room that Maiuri is discussing depicts columns and arches that look close to reality, which was the entire point of second style.

The Villa of the Mysteries has some of the best examples of paintings found in Pompeii. It shows the difficulties in determining public and private spaces in houses with the Room of the Mysteries. The colors used in the public spaces of this house are exquisite, to say the least, and the attention to detail is of a quality rarely seen. Though the room of the mysteries poses a problem in Allison's arguments, the rest of the house fits into her arguments

Looking at the site of Pompeii is a unique experience when studying ancient artwork. The four styles named from the site are studied all around the world, and

---

<sup>25</sup> Amedeo Maiuri. *Pompeii Herculaneum and Stabiae*. Istituto Geografico de Agostini. Novara. 1963.

because of the preservation of Pompeii people have been able to gain a better understanding of ancient Roman life and society. Houses found in Pompeii range from small and shabby to extremely large and beautifully decorated. No matter how wealthy or poor an owner was though, the idea to decorate public spaces in a house more extensively than private areas is one used in every building. The Romans were a society that was all about appearances, and by showing guests how well a house was painted made a person seem more wealthy and important.

## Bibliography

- Allison, Penelope. "The relationship between wall-decoration and room type in Pompeian houses; a case study of the Casa della Caccia Antica" in Journal of Roman Archaeology Vol. 5, 235-249 (1992).
- Archer, William C. "The Maturing of the Fourth Style: The Casa delle Nozze d'Argento at Pompeii" in Journal of Roman Archaeology 7, 95-123 (1994).
- Archer, William C. "The Paintings of the Alae of the Casa dei Vettii and a Definition of the Pompeian Fourth Style" in American Journal of Archaeology 94, 95-123 (1991)
- Clarke, John R. *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100B.C. - A.D. 250, Ritual, Space, and Decoration*. University of California Press. (1991)
- Laidlaw, Anne. *The First Style in Pompeii: Painting and Architecture*. Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider. (1985)
- Ling, Rodger. *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii, Volume 1: The Structures*. Clarendon Press. Oxford (1997)
- Ling, Roger. *Roman Painting*. Cambridge University Press. (1991)
- L. Richardson, Jr., *Pompeii, the Casa dei Dioscuri and its Painters*. Rome: American Academy in Rome, Memoires of the American Academy in Rome 23. (1955)
- Maiuri, Amedeo. *Pompeii Herculaneum and Stabiae*. Istituto Geografico de Agostini. Novara. (1963)
- Painting in Rome and Pompeii. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, new series, Vol. 45, No. 3 (winter 1987-1988), pp. 3-16
- Vitruvius, *de Architectura*. Translation from:  
<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Vitruvius/home.html>, June 2, 2008
- Zanker, Paul. *Pompeii Public and Private Life*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1998
- Maps** (in order they appear, and all websites visited on May 19, 2008)
- <http://www.stoa.org/projects/ph/house?id=18>
- <http://www.stoa.org/projects/ph/house?id=9>

[www.indiana.edu/~leach/c409/opolan.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~leach/c409/opolan.html)

[www.emich.edu/abroad/staff/benita/pompeii.html](http://www.emich.edu/abroad/staff/benita/pompeii.html)

### **Images**

All images in this paper were provided by Dr. Benedict Lowe and Ashley Barnes from June 2007.