

ROMAN PAINTING

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview Great in architecture and sculpture, the Romans (like the Greeks) were far less deeply invested in painting, though over the course of their long ancient achievement, they produced incidental paintings of great beauty. While our minds turn first to the wall paintings preserved by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, we can greatly enlarge that example. From the catacombs, from Nero's palace, from painted mummies in the Egyptian Fayuum, we have evidence of high painterly skill, while from Pompeii and Herculaneum we have more than that, moves toward perspective, in landscape work, which herald the future of western painting. We may be left, nonetheless, with the larger question--Why did painting remain a minor art in classical antiquity? Why did the Romans, for example, abstain even from that art of vase painting, at which their models, in fifth century Greece, excelled?

The domus aurea Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, recounts his observations of the construction of Nero's Palace after the destructions of 64 C.E. He is particularly fascinated by the painter Amulius. *More recently, lived Amulius, a grave and serious personage, but a painter in the florid style. By this artist there was a Minerva, which had the appearance of always looking at the spectators, from whatever point it was viewed. He only painted a few hours each day, and then with the greatest gravity, for he always kept the toga on, even when in the midst of his implements. The Golden Palace of Nero was the prison-house of this artist's productions, and hence it is that there are so few of them to be seen elsewhere.*"^[15]

Pompeii and Herculaneum. By a disastrous accident of fate, we know a lot about a certain group of houses, which were smothered in ash and pumice by a devastating volcanic eruption from Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. (The result of that smothering was this: for fifteen hundred years, while they were still undiscovered, the people and house objects of many sites in both Pompeii and Herculaneum were preserved in exactly the same stance, position, activity as they had been when the eruption occurred.) From the preserved rubble of some of those houses we have been able to see, and judiciously reconstruct, the wall decorations with which these (upper middle, at least) citizens surrounded themselves.

House murals. The wall murals which provided the milieu were of high artistic quality, colorful and artful. Over the two hundred years during which these paintings had been created there was a growth in technical sophistication which showed to what a level of lifestyle the well to do rose in the Rome of the first centuries before and after Christ. Art historians have analyzed the periods of development in question: from plaster-over-concrete walls on which were depicted simulated layers of marble and terracotta decorations—already a step into *trompe l'oeil*—to the most subtle illusionary paintings, in which the observer's eye enters a simulated portico and loses itself either in a fantastic lush landscape or in a maze of depicted columns and towers which enchants the eye. It is not until the nineteenth century, our art historians assure us, that such *trompe l'oeil* artifice was created in the West. Access to Janson's *History of Art* would be a convenient way to note a kind of genre detail, from one of those wall paintings at Herculaneum, that shows in fine detail what kind of illusionary skill the Roman painters of the time were capable of.

A still life painting. The tiny piece in question dates from around 50 A.D., and depicts a still life of a few peaches and a jar of water. The collocation of peaches with an intertwining vine establishes, on one side of the composition, a kind of natural—almost temple- ornamental—ionic column relief. Juxtaposing this floral motif, to its right, are a split open peach with visible seed, a small half peach (or is it some other fruit?) and a transparent pitcher of water. Off of the water, which half fills the pitcher, glint echoes of light, transparencies, which no evident source produces, but which seem to break forth from within the water itself, and to echo the zones of brightness in the fruit. This description falls short, by a mile. If you can access Janson go to 7.58, on page 218. If not, you will find illustrations of this piece in any art historical book which covers antiquity. This is a matter of detail. I chose it for simplicity and availability. But what you need to see is the degree of subtle intensity to which the Roman artist was able to go, in transforming domestic life for his clients.

The Catacombs as Art Gallery Between the third century C.E. and around 400 C.E., the catacombs of ancient Rome, where the fugitive Christians buried their dead, became a workshop for frescoes with Christian motifs. Much of this thematic painting--Adam and Eve, St. Paul as philosopher, Jonah thrown into the Sea, the Good Shepherd, an Agape Feast--is rough as would have to be expected, of work applied to damp walls in poor light. (Must one not think of the cave paintings at Lascaux, which were also created in dim light against damp walls?)

Readings:

Boardman, John, *The Oxford History of Classical Art*, Oxford, 1993.

Schoenbauer, Norbert, *6000 Years of Housing*, (New York, 1981). Read widely on the ancient classical world, and let your attention wander over other period of history.

Discussion:

How does the well to do Roman private house fit its environment?

What have we learned from Pompeii and Herculaneum, about the lifestyle of prosperous Romans of the first century A.D.?

What kind of artistic sensibility do you see reflected in the murals found