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Ornamental Painting on Campanian House Façades

Abstract: Since the late 1980s, studies of decoration in Campanian houses have emphasised the importance of painting schemes for the organisation of social activities and movement, examining the *domus* and its *decor* primarily from the perspective of the non-resident. At the same time, painted decoration on façades – particularly the non-figurative variety – has been ignored almost entirely in scholarly literature, despite its obvious communicative disposition. After an historical introduction, this paper considers a selection of common schemes employed in ornamental façade painting, exploring their relationship with similar designs found inside the house. The discussion concludes with some preliminary thoughts on the relationship between interior and exterior decoration, access and privacy in the dwellings of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

In the modern world, the exterior decoration of urban buildings plays a central role in the visual experience of the cityscape. Through the implementation of various decorative techniques, façades can draw the attention of the viewer and communicate information about a property's function, its occupants and its status within the community¹. This transfer of information is successful due primarily to the knowledge and expectations of the viewer, which help him/her decipher the visual language presented and thus complete the semantic circle, as it were². The situation was little different in antiquity, although for the modern researcher, deciphering the relationship between perceiver and material is considerably more challenging, because (1) identifying the expectations of ancient pedestrians is, naturally, quite difficult and (2) the material record with which they engaged has largely been destroyed.

In Roman cities, these problems are particularly apposite with respect to townhouses (*domūs*), which, unlike temples, *basilicae* and other public buildings, typically lacked characteristic exterior forms of architectural elaboration. Their primary decorative apparatus consisted of painted plaster, a perishable material that survives only in unique taphonomic circumstances³. Likewise, Roman writers, who often have much to say regarding the decoration of domestic interiors, are uncharacteristically quiet when it comes to façades. The only area to receive consistent attention in ancient texts is the house door, which is said to have been adorned with garlands and ribbons to mark important life events, such as births, marriages and deaths⁴. Material evidence from well-preserved archaeological contexts confirms that the door was often a point of emphasis within the overall decorative scheme. But there are no descriptions of façade paintings or architectural ornamentation, even in the sources that we might expect to focus on such topics, such as *De Architectura*⁵. Indeed, while

1 Moughtin et al. 1999, 25–31.

2 Recent studies conducted in the fields of neurology and cognitive psychology have shown that prior beliefs and experiences can modify the neural pathways in the brain (de Lange et al. 2018; Sohn et al. 2019), which seems to accelerate the process of visual recognition (Pinto et al. 2015).

3 In the Vesuvian cities, façades built using drafted ashlar of Nocera tuff were sometimes left unplastered, particularly during the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. (infra 125). There is little evidence for this phenomenon outside Campania, but one can imagine a similar situation occurring at Rome, where various friable stones were readily available.

4 Births: Juv. 6, 77–81; Stat. Silv. 4, 8, 35–40. Marriages: Juv. 6, 51f.; Luc. 2, 354f. Deaths: Plin. HN 16, 139; Serv. Aen. 3, 64. During the mid-Republican period, victorious generals sometimes adorned the doorposts of their houses with the *spolia* of battle (e. g., Liv. 10, 7, 9. 38, 43, 9f.; Plin. HN 35, 7), and Suetonius points out that many old houses still displayed these materials in the mid-1st century A.D. (Suet. Ner. 38, 2).

5 The only passage that provides a holistic depiction of a domestic façade is found in Martial's epigrams, in which the satirist gives directions to his patron's house on the Palatine: *Protinus a laeva clari tibi fronte Penates / atriaque excelsae sunt adeunda domus*; 'Straight ahead on the left, the shining façade and atrium of an eminent abode await your arrival' (Mart. 1, 70, 11 f.; translation by author).

Vitruvius dedicates considerable time to both the architectural layout and decoration of interior space⁶, the same consideration does not extend to the façade, which he fails to mention even in passing.

As a consequence of these lacunar textual and material records, studies dedicated to the exterior decoration of Roman houses are rare, even in Pompeii and Herculaneum, where the archaeological evidence is most robust⁷. Here, a lack of attention can also be attributed to the wealth of decorative media discovered inside Campanian dwellings, which has generated considerable interest in the semantic characteristics of Roman interior design⁸. This paper represents an attempt to fill the gap between inside and out, offering some preliminary thoughts on the communicative role that façade painting played in the daily lives of the towns' inhabitants. The focus here is primarily on 'ornamental' designs, which I define as the non-figurative decorative techniques that were employed to cover the full breadth of the façade. Particular emphasis will be given to those patterns and motifs that appear in both interior and exterior wall painting.

The Casa del Poeta Tragico

One could argue that the modern emphasis on Roman interior decoration found its genesis in the discovery of the Casa del Poeta Tragico (VI 8,5). In the autumn of 1824, excavators working along the Via delle Terme in Pompeii came upon the remains of this extraordinarily well-preserved house. Laid out in the traditional Campanian style, the dwelling gained almost immediate notoriety following its discovery, not on account of its size – which was modest by Pompeian standards – but rather its exceptional decorative programme⁹. After suffering considerable damage during the A.D. 62 earthquake, the entire property was redecorated in the Fourth Style, and much of this decoration was in excellent condition upon discovery¹⁰.

During the decade preceding the Poeta Tragico's excavation, public interest in the Roman world generally, and Pompeii specifically, had grown rapidly throughout Western Europe. This new wave of attention was spurred in part by the publication of William Gell's *Pompeiana* in 1817, a comprehensive two-volume work documenting many of the buildings that had been excavated at the site to date¹¹. By the mid-1820s, popular artists, inspired by Gell's words and images, had begun to produce their own works of art focusing on the ancient city, and more specifically, on its catastrophic final hours¹².

These apocalyptic compositions anticipated what was, until this century at least, the most famous literary work set in the city. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, published in 1834, was an immediate international sensation; it was reproduced in numerous editions over the course of the 19th century, and inspired theatrical and musical interpretations of its content¹³. When Bulwer-Lytton was seeking an appropriate abode in which to situate his protagonist, the affluent Athenian Glaucus, he chose none other than the Casa del Poeta Tragico for the task, going so far as to describe the dwelling and its paintings room-by-room¹⁴. In the decades that followed, the house

⁶ On layout: Vitruvius, *De arch.* 5, 2–5. On decoration: Vitruvius, *De arch.* 7, 3–5. See also Haug, this volume.

⁷ However, the subject has begun to receive more attention in recent years: see Hartnett 2017, 146–194; Helg 2018.

⁸ See, for example, Esposito, Lorenz and Dardenay, this volume.

⁹ For contemporary accounts of the discovery and description of the house, see Bonucci 1827, 112–124; Fiorelli 1862, 116–141; Gell 1832, 142–178.

¹⁰ PPM IV (1994) 527–603 s. v. VI 8, 3,5, Casa del Poeta Tragico (F. P. Badoni – F. Narciso) 527.

¹¹ Gell 1817. For a detailed study of Gell's publications and their impact, see Sweet 2015.

¹² These include John Martin's painting *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1822), Giovanni Pacini's opera *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* (1825), and Karl Bryullov's painting *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1833).

¹³ Bulwer-Lytton 1834.

¹⁴ Bulwer-Lytton 1834, 20–26.



Fig. 1: Photo-grammetric model of the Casa del Poeta Tragico's west façade.

and its decorative ensemble were immortalised in numerous drawings, watercolours, lithographs and scale models¹⁵. The images of the Trojan cycle that adorned the atrium, the panel depicting the sacrifice of Iphigenia found in the peristyle and, of course, the 'Cave Canem' mosaic decorating the floor of the *fauces* have been reproduced time and again in both popular and scholarly literature, and they remain central features of any introduction to Roman art today.

Despite the significant interest in its interior decoration, however, the paintings discovered on the façade of the Casa del Poeta Tragico have received comparatively little attention. Integrated into the southwest corner of *insula* VI 8, the house presented two elevations to the street. The south façade consisted of the house door (VI 8,5) and a pair of *tabernae* with characteristically wide entrances (VI 8,4 and VI 8,6)¹⁶. The jambs of these doorways, built in *opus testaceum*, offered comparatively little space for decorative elaboration, and no paintings or architectural sculptures were documented here during the process of excavation. But the dwelling's west façade, which measures around 40 m in length, offered a more expansive canvas with which to work (Fig. 1). Pierced only by a series of high, small windows and a narrow *posticum*, the paintings discovered here represent one of the most vibrant examples of exterior decoration from the mid-1st century A.D. At this time, a number of well-appointed houses throughout the city began to adopt certain aspects of the First Style schemes employed inside Campanian houses during the Late Samnite period.

In canonical First Style arrangements, interior walls were covered with a thick layer of stucco, which was sculpted to imitate the large, rectangular blocks employed in ashlar masonry (*opus isodomum*). These 'blocks' were then painted with swirling designs that mimicked the variegated stones used to build monumental public buildings throughout the Greco-Roman world. The aim was presumably to imbue the house with a sense of wealth and influence through the execution of these elaborate *trompe l'oeil* schemes¹⁷. On façades erected during the Samnite period, however, the ruse was often unnecessary, as many of the largest pre-Roman dwellings in Pompeii were constructed using drafted ashlar of Nocera tuff. These properties remained unplastered and unpainted at least through the mid-1st century B.C., a conclusion confirmed by the presence of *programmata antiquissima* painted directly onto the surface of the stones¹⁸. In the late 2nd century B.C., however, First Style decoration began to appear on the façades of properties built in less aesthetically pleasing masonry techniques, such as *opus incertum* and *opus africanum*. The typical arrangement consisted of a high, monochrome dado, topped with an upper zone of stuccoed isodomonic panels set in low relief. Rather than imitating coloured marble, the mock ashlars were painted uniformly white, a decorative technique that also began to appear on public buildings throughout Pompeii and Herculaneum at this time¹⁹. The scheme was completed through the addition of various mouldings and cornices, as well as sculpted pilasters topped with cubic capitals and an architrave around (and above) the house door.

¹⁵ Bergmann 1994, 227–232.

¹⁶ These doorways measure 5.3 and 4.4 m wide, respectively.

¹⁷ Clarke 1991, 39; Leach 2004, 61–63; Lorenz 2015, 256–258.

¹⁸ *Programmata antiquissima* is the term used to describe electoral prescriptions dating to the years immediately following the installation of the Sullan colony at Pompeii in 89 B.C.

¹⁹ Van der Graaff 2018, 95–97. Mock ashlar from the Late Samnite and colonial periods can be found on the city's walls, gates and towers (extant examples are visible around the Porta Ercolano and Towers VI, VIII and X), as well as the façade of the Sanctuary of Apollo (VII 7,32) and the lateral faces of the Capitolium.

Over the course of the next century, styles of façade painting changed significantly, mostly without reference to the similar stylistic progression that occurred inside the Campanian house. Certain aspects of the Third and Fourth Styles occasionally appeared on house frontages (these include the use of vegetal motifs, an emphasis on the vertical – rather than horizontal – organisation of the wall, and the integration of some aedicular elements)²⁰, but, in general, the design movements that dominated domestic interiors were not replicated on exteriors. In the period following the A.D. 62 earthquake, however, the First Style re-emerged on house façades. Unlike the Samnite-period examples, the entire façade was embellished with colourful ornamental flourishes. On the Casa dei Dioscuri (VI 9,6), for example, the dado was adorned with red panels framed by thick black bands; above, the joints between the mock ashlar were painted dark blue – perhaps to enhance the relief – while the draft-lines were embellished with a thin trefoil and flower-petal moulding (Fig. 2).

The west façade of the Casa del Poeta Tragico followed this ornamental trend, but pushed it even further. While the use of stucco helped to retain a sense of three-dimensionality elsewhere, here all pretence at realism disappeared. The lower part of the wall was divided into 22 red panels, separated from one another (and the upper zone) by thick yellow bands (Fig. 3). Above this dado (recorded as 4.5 feet high in the mid-19th century)²¹, six or seven courses of rectangular blocks were painted on a white background. Each ‘block’ was simply outlined in dark blue, with the boundary between the block’s worked face and the draft represented by a thin red line. This was the First Style extended to a highly simplistic, representative extreme. The fundamental components and general organisation of the scheme remained intact, but its chief aim – to convince the viewer that the components were real – was no longer a concern.

That such a forward-thinking arrangement appeared on the façade of the Casa del Poeta Tragico, a house dominated by elaborate Fourth Style ensembles throughout its interior, seems entirely appropriate. Yet descriptions of the west façade are absent from accounts of the building written immediately following excavation, as well as more recent treatments that focus on the overall dec-



Fig. 2: Mock ashlar design on the façade of the Casa dei Dioscuri.

²⁰ The best examples of these schemes can be seen on the exterior of the Casa dei Cinque Scheletri (VI 10,2) (Spinazzola 1953, Fig. 274) and the Casa di Nettuno e Anfitrite (V 8) at Herculaneum (Dardenay et al. 2018, 11–13).

²¹ Dyer 1868, 73 f. At 4.5 imperial feet (ca. 1.3 m), the Casa del Poeta Tragico’s dado is one of the lowest in Pompeii (cf. *infra* 128 n. 27).



Fig. 3: 19th century depictions of the Casa del Poeta Tragico's west façade.

orative programme²². Indeed, the only extant records of the dwelling's exterior appearance are an etching published by Gell in the second edition of *Pompeiana* (published in 1832) and a pair of cork models produced during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Fig 3)²³. The fragmentary nature of the west façade's documentation is no doubt a consequence of the dramatic deterioration of paint and plaster over the course of the last two centuries. Like many façades in the Vesuvian cities, no effort was made to protect the decoration discovered here, and consequently the combination of sun, wind and rain have reduced a once vibrant composition to a handful of faded fragments (Fig. 1).

The Casa del Poeta Tragico is, of course, not the only house in Pompeii to have suffered this fate. While many of the paintings discovered in domestic interiors were preserved, either via their removal to museums or through the construction of roofs for their protection, façade decoration has largely been left to the elements, with the result that much of what was visible upon excavation has now been destroyed. To make matters worse, the emphasis on recording and analysing interior painting, for which the Casa del Poeta Tragico set an unfortunate precedent, seems to have inhibited the implementation of similar practices with respect to façades. This, in combination with the absence of figurative decoration, is perhaps one of the reasons that scholarly engagement with façade painting has been so limited.

Austere exteriors?

One could also argue that in recent times the theoretical model that has dominated the study of the Roman house bears some responsibility. This model, which finds its roots in the scholarship of the late 1980s and 1990s, holds that the *domus* was first and foremost a social entity, and consequently its interior decoration was organised primarily with the non-resident in mind²⁴. It characterises the house itself as a status symbol, and suggests that dwellings were, to a certain degree, 'open' to the public²⁵. Thus, conspicuous consumption, generated in the form of wall and ceiling painting,

²² E. g., Bergmann 1994; PPM IV (1994) 527–603 s. v. VI 8, 3.5, Casa del Poeta Tragico (F. P. Badoni – F. Narciso).

²³ The latter of the two models, which resides in the Museo della Civiltà Romana, reproduced the house in section, including reconstructions of the interior paintings and mosaics, a hypothetical rendering of the second storey, and the exterior decoration on the south and west façades. More authentic to the appearance of the dwelling in Gell's day is the representation found on the so-called 'Plastico di Pompei', a cork model initiated in 1861 by the new director of the site, Giuseppe Fiorelli. It took more than 50 years and a series of model-makers to complete the Plastico, but the earliest phases of its construction were dedicated to the areas around the forum and the Via delle Terme/Via della Fortuna, an expanse that included the Casa del Poeta Tragico.

²⁴ Clarke 1991, 4 f.; Dwyer 1991, 27 f.; Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 44 f.; Zanker 1998, 9 f.

²⁵ Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 45; Zanker 1998, 10; Fagan 2006, 377; Beard 2008, 85 f.



Fig. 4: Remains of the dado on the façade of Maison VI O, Delos.

mosaics and sculptural ensembles, served to reinforce the social position of the *paterfamilias* and other members of the household. But if this reading of the house is accurate, then why are façades – which presumably offered the first and best opportunity for the homeowner to communicate his status to the public – entirely absent from the model? The answer seems a rather inconvenient one: it is largely because façade painting, which is typically described as ‘reserved’, ‘staid’ or ‘austere’²⁶, is incongruous with the comparatively flamboyant programmes of interior decoration and, as a result, with the model itself.

But were the façades of Campanian houses truly ‘staid’ and ‘austere’? One could perhaps make this argument for the pre-Roman period and the years immediately following colonisation. As noted above, when a house was built in tuff ashlar, the façade was often left entirely unpainted, creating an impression of solidity and *gravitas*. When constructed utilising a style of masonry that incorporated cement, such as *opus incertum* or *opus reticulatum*, properties were typically covered with thick layers of plaster and painted in two horizontal registers: a lower zone that rose to a height ranging from 1.6 to 2.5 m²⁷, and an upper zone that occupied the remainder of the façade. Generally speaking, the lower zone was painted in a darker hue and the upper in white or light grey, with the latter area offering a ‘blank canvas’ of sorts upon which figurative images or electoral *programmata* might be later added.

The earliest evidence for this bifurcated style of façade decoration can be found on Delos, where it was used widely following an influx of south Italians to the island after it was declared a free port by the Roman senate in 166 B.C. The quality of building materials available to the members of this insular community was quite limited, and thus many of the houses were constructed utilising irregularly shaped blocks of schist and granite, much of it quarried on nearby Mykonos²⁸. The preservation of these materials from the elements necessitated covering both the internal and external faces of walls with layers of mortar and plaster. Consequently, façade decoration was fairly standardised: first, a layer of white lime plaster was applied to the entire face of the wall; this was followed by a thick hydraulic mortar (*opus signinum*) that typically reached a height of around 2 m²⁹. The latter protected the bottom part of the wall from wind and rain, as well as the pools of water that tended to form around the foot during heavy precipitation. The lower mortar was naturally pink on account of the ceramic material that it contained, and this natural hue was often accentuated with a thin layer of red paint applied to its surface. As a consequence of this quite functional design, there was a noticeable difference in the thickness of the dado, which in some cases protruded more

²⁶ E. g., Amery – Curran 2002, 97; Adam 2007, 99; Hartnett 2017, 164, 180; Helg 2018, 89.

²⁷ Measurements of the dado (near house door) from select residential façades: Casa dei Ceii (I 6,15): 2.42 m; Casa di Meleagro (VI 9,2): 2.33 m; Casa del Centauro (VI 9,3): 2.12 m; Casa dei Dioscuri (VI 9,6): 1.80 m; Casa del Labirinto (VI 11,10): 1.89 m; Casa dei Vettii (VI 15,1): 2.09 m.

²⁸ Rauh 1993, 59.

²⁹ Chamonard 1922, 87.

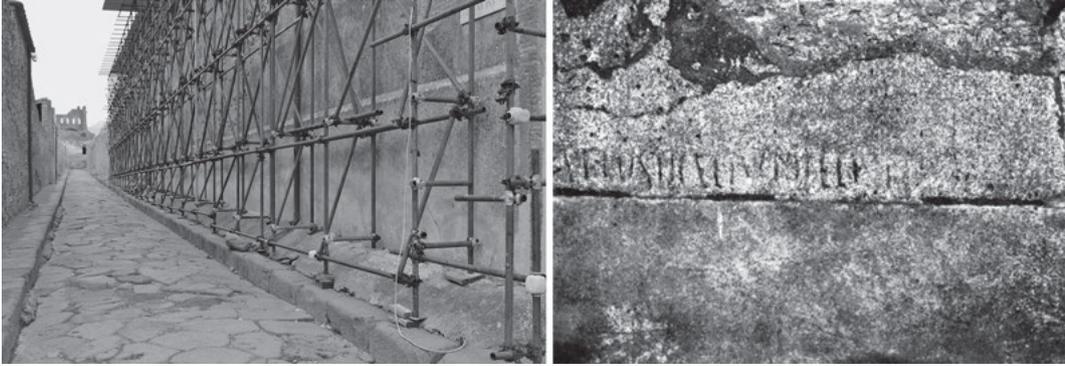


Fig. 5: Casa dei Vettii, west façade (left); detail of CIL IV, 3572 (right).

than 5 cm from the surface of the wall, and the plaster applied to the elevation, which clung tightly to the façade (Fig. 4).

Examples of a similar phenomenon can be found at Pompeii, although most date to a later period. On the façade of the Casa dei Vettii (VI 15,1), for example, the final pre-eruption plastering involved the application of a thick layer of *opus signinum* to the dado on all three sides of the dwelling (Fig. 5). A *terminus post quem* for this event is offered by a *programma*³⁰ discovered underneath this layer of *signinum* advocating for the election of Lucius Rusticelius Celer, a duumviral candidate who was active in the A.D. 50s³¹. Whatever the precise date of its application, we can be certain that the primary purpose of this waterproof mortar was to protect the house from the weather, as confirmed by the inclusion of small ‘masonry ramps’ along the south and west façades. These features were added to channel rainwater away from the foot of the wall and into the street, at the cost of eliminating the narrow sidewalks that flanked these two sides of the house.

As was the case on Delos, the owners of many Pompeian properties reinforced the natural pinkish hues of the *opus signinum* applied to the dado with a layer of red paint, but the extent to which this rather banal technique was employed has perhaps been overemphasised in both scholarly and popular publications. First, in the part of Pompeii where building façades were excavated most carefully – in the eastern Via dell’Abbondanza, which was explored by Vittorio Spinazzola during the 1910s and 20s³² – it was not houses that regularly employed the ‘white over red’ design, but *tabernae*³³. Spinazzola’s excavations also revealed the fluid and flexible nature of exterior decoration, for as layers of paint and plaster fell from the walls over the course of the last century, they often revealed the remains of previous decorative schemes underneath. While some figurative images – *lararia* in particular – were painted time and again in the same style³⁴, broader decorative schemes could change significantly.

This phenomenon is visible on the west façade of the Praedia of Julia Felix (II 4,10), where at some point between 1964 and the mid-2000s³⁵ a large section of plaster collapsed from the wall, revealing a plain white surface below, upon which a *programma* calling for the election of Lucius Ceius Secundus to the office of aedile was painted³⁶. This recommendation probably dates to the

³⁰ CIL IV, 3572: *L(ucium) Rusticelium Celerem Ilvir(um) i(ure) d(icundo) iter(um) d(ignum) r(ei) p(ublicae) o(ro) v(os) f(aciatis)*.

³¹ Van Buren 1932, 27.

³² Spinazzola 1953.

³³ Lauritsen, forthcoming.

³⁴ Examples of *lararia* with multiple layers of paint can be found at I 11,7 (Della Corte 1913, 478 f.) and IX 11,1 (Della Corte 1911, 417–424).

³⁵ The dates are established by two photographs: one taken by Stanley Jashemski in 1964 (No. J64f0971, University of Maryland’s Jashemski Archive) and another taken by Bob and Jackie Dunn in 2005 (visible at http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R2/2%2004%2010_files/image007.jpg).

³⁶ To my knowledge, this inscription has not been published. It reads: *L(ucium) Ceium Secundum aed(ilem) Orpheus facit*.



Fig. 6: Praedia of Julia Felix, west façade.

late A.D. 60s or early 70s, indicating that the top layer of plaster, upon which rectangular ‘blocks’ were drafted using thick red lines, dates to the years immediately preceding the eruption (Fig. 6)³⁷. The modern disintegration of this surface serves to remind us why regular re-plastering and repainting was necessary for Pompeian homeowners: if simply left to the elements, façade decoration could deteriorate relatively quickly. This process of deterioration is the other main reason that the execution of the ‘white over red’ design on house exteriors has been somewhat overestimated. One particularly telling example offers some insight into how poor conservation can affect modern interpretations of exterior painting schemes.

Our case study will be the Casa di Meleagro (VI 9,2), one of the largest dwellings in Regio VI. Positioned on the east side of the Via di Mercurio, a wide thoroughfare leading directly towards the northeast entrance of the forum, it is best known for the panel paintings that decorated its interior, including the image of Meleager and Atalanta in the *fauces*, from which the property takes its name. The house is arranged around two primary circulation areas: an atrium accessible from the street via doorway VI 9,2, and a peristyle, positioned just to the atrium’s north. The distinction between the two areas is visible also in the exterior masonry, with the older southern section of the façade built using ashlar of Sarno limestone, and the peristyle area in *opus incertum*. The thick layers of plaster applied to the exterior were clearly intended to hide this incongruity, and their remains can be identified across the full width of the property today (Fig. 7, top). Like many of the houses considered thus far, the decorative scheme was divided into two registers: a dado produced in pink *opus signinum* and an elevation rendered in light grey plaster. With virtually all traces of the paint that once covered these two zones absent, one could be forgiven for making the assumption that the Casa di Meleagro was once bedecked in the white-over-red design. Once again, however, a 19th century cork model and a handful of photographs taken during the 1920s provide clear evidence to the contrary. While the dwelling’s elevation was indeed painted white, the dado was adorned with 20 panels containing alternating black and white diagonal stripes; each panel was framed by thin red bands (Fig. 7, bottom)³⁸. With the panels rising to a height of 2.33 m above the pavement, the arrangement would have been particularly eye-catching for pedestrians passing along the west side of the street, where it could be seen in full.

³⁷ For an example in which two forms of decoration are visible at the same time, see the exterior of the Thermopolium di Assellina (IX 11,2–3). Here a black socle (1.61 m), crowned with a red band and divided into panels by thin white lines, was covered by the white-over-red design. Both layers are still visible in the vicinity of doorway IX 11,3.

³⁸ Due to the present state of the remains, precise widths for the panels (which vary slightly to the north and south of doorway VI 9,2) are impossible to determine.

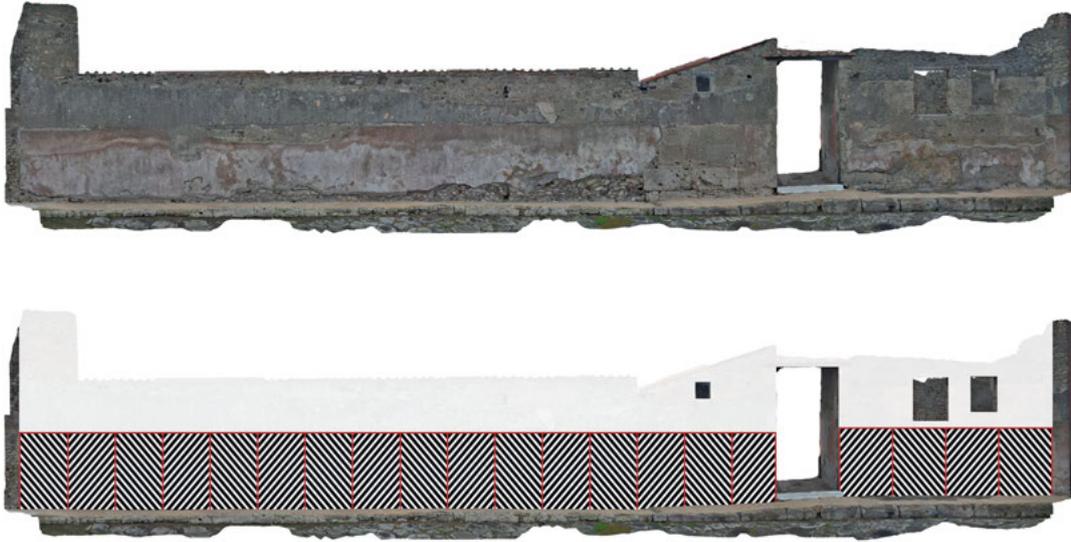


Fig. 7: Photogrammetric model of the Casa di Meleagro's west façade (top), with reconstruction of decorative scheme (bottom).

Checkerboards and zebra stripes

As the façade of the Casa di Meleagro suggests, by the 1st century A.D., a broader range of decorative schemes was being applied to the exteriors of houses in the Vesuvian cities. At this time, the rigid boundary between interior and exterior decoration was breaking down and ornamental patterns, in particular, were being used with less regard for the spatial context in which they appeared. In the following section, we will consider two particularly conspicuous instances of this phenomenon.

One of the most ubiquitous motifs employed on the walls of Pompeian dwellings was the so-called 'checkerboard' design. It seems to have appeared first on the walls of peristyles, gardens and other unroofed interior spaces before migrating outside to façades. Along the north wall of the garden in the Casa di M. Lucretius Fronto (V 4,a), the design appeared atop a series of megalographic panels depicting wild animals (Fig. 8). Both the panels and the checkerboard frieze are traditionally dated to the Fourth Style³⁹. Here the 'board' consisted of equal-sized squares painted red, green, yellow and white, staggered so that each colour followed a diagonal from the upper left corner of the field to the bottom right. In other houses, the white squares were elongated to form stretchers, as was the case in the Casa di Trebio Valente (III 2,1), where the checkerboard conspicuously adorned the rear wall of a summer *triclinium* (Fig. 9, left).

On façades, a similar design was often employed. Around the *posticum* of Casa IX 5,6, for example, the checkerboard pattern appeared above a black-panelled dado. On the front of the Casa di M. Fabius Ululitremulus (IX 13,5), positioned along the north side of the Via dell'Abbondanza, it adorned the zone between the dado and a second-floor balcony (Fig. 9, right). Etchings produced in the late 18th and early 19th centuries also document the checkerboard on a pair of high-status dwellings near the town's western escarpment. It appears on the façade of the Casa di M. Fabio Rufo (VII 16,22)⁴⁰, a multi-level residence built atop Pompeii's circuit wall (to maximise views over the Bay of Naples), as well as the exterior of the Casa delle Vestali (VI 1,7), a large house located just to the north on the Via Consolare⁴¹. The most notable example of the motif in 'elite' contexts can be found not in Pompeii, however, but in neighbouring Herculaneum, where it was applied to the

³⁹ PPM III (1991) 966–1029 s. v. V 4,a, Casa di M. Lucretius Fronto (M. De Vos), 967; Peters – Moormann 1993, 310–312.

⁴⁰ Mazois 1824, II, Pl. 55.

⁴¹ Piranesi 1804, Pl. 13; Hamilton 1777, Pl. 14.



Fig. 8: Checkerboard pattern on the north wall of garden in the Casa di M. Lucretius Fronto, reconstruction.



Fig. 9: Checkerboard pattern in the Casa di Trebio Valente, summer triclinium (left) and on the façade of the Casa di M. Fabius Ululitremulus (right).

upper zone of the Casa del Bicentenario (V 15), one of the largest and most elaborately decorated houses in the city.

If the checkerboard scheme calls into question the designation of façade painting as ‘austere’, the next example explodes this myth entirely. In the traditional reading of the Campanian house, certain decorative motifs served as a guide for visitors to the dwelling, indicating the function of various rooms, and delimiting those spaces to which guests were permitted access⁴². Arguably the most (in)famous of these motifs is the so-called ‘zebra stripe’, the colloquial term employed to describe the black and white stripes that alternate in orientation, as found on the façade of the Casa di Meleagro. The best known example of the design hails from the ‘slave peristyle’ of Villa A at Oplontis, where the stripes, divided into roughly equal-sized panels separated by red or yellow bands, appear on the walls, columns and even the ceiling of the porticos and dependent spaces of this circulation area (Fig. 10, left)⁴³. Until the turn of the 21st century, the stripes were generally thought to play a functional role in the organisation of the villa, demarcating to individuals unfamiliar with its layout an area that served as the hub of interaction for the household’s servile population⁴⁴. As a consequence of this association, earlier descriptions of the design typically refer to

⁴² Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 39–44.

⁴³ Cline 2014.

⁴⁴ De Franciscis 1975, 54; Jashemski 1993, 290; Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 39. For a recent publication advocating the same principle, see Joshel 2013, particularly 115–117.



the stripes as ‘crude’⁴⁵ or ‘inferior’⁴⁶. In the early 2000s, however, articles written by Crispin Goulet and Lara Laken called this reading of zebra stripe into question, suggesting that it should not be connected with ‘low-status’ areas in particular, because the design appears in a great variety of spatial settings, including the hallways of bath complexes and villas, as well as in gardens, shops and public buildings, such as the amphitheatre at Pompeii and the *palaestra* at Herculaneum⁴⁷. Goulet even went so far as to emphasise the decorative nature of the design, arguing that in its original state, zebra stripe attracted attention and was particularly ‘pleasing to the eye’⁴⁸. Both of these studies (and indeed a handful of others that followed them)⁴⁹ were written without definitive evidence for the common occurrence of the design on façades, however. Indeed, the combined catalogues of Goulet and Laken omit no less than 13 exterior locations that were adorned with zebra stripe in A.D. 79, including the Casa di Meleagro (Table 1, in bold).

In total, zebra stripe has been documented in or on 33 Campanian buildings, and more than a third of these are houses that employed it for façade decoration. Further, most of these properties were situated in the top 50 % of Campanian dwellings when ranked by size. At Pompeii, for example, only Casa VII 7,21, Casa VII 7,19 and Casa V 4,b measured under 350 m² in total surface area (Table 2). House size is, of course, not the only metric one could employ when estimating wealth and status, but in this case it offers clear enough evidence that zebra stripe cannot be associated with one particular end of the social spectrum – it is found on a broad range of houses in a variety of socio-economic and geographic settings. Its appearance on the exteriors of dwellings that are generally classed as ‘high-status’, such as the Casa di Meleagro, also offers further confirmation that the motif should not be connected solely with service (or servile) areas.

Fig. 10: ‘Zebra stripe’ in Campania: ‘slave peristyle’ at Oplontis (left); façade of the Casa dell’Altare di Giove (right).

45 Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 39.

46 Clarke 1991, 25.

47 Goulet 2002; Laken 2003.

48 Goulet 2002, 53.

49 E. g., Cline 2014; McAlpine 2014, 195 f.; Rauws 2016.

Table 1: Instances of zebra stripe in the Vesuvian cities (after Goulet 2002, 62–89; Laken 2003, 177–186). Previously unidentified examples in bold.

Site	Property	Address	Location
Herculaneum	Palaestra	<i>Insula Occidentalis 2</i>	Northern <i>porticus</i>
Herculaneum	Casa dell'Albergo	III 19	Corridor (A)
Herculaneum	Casa dell'Ara Laterizia	III 17	Façade
Oplontis	Villa di Poppea		Anteroom (1), corridor (3), room (4), corridor (6), room (27), peristyle (32), corridor (45)–(46), corridor (52), corridor (53), room (63), corridor (76)
Pompeii	Taberna I 6,10	I 6,10	South wall of shop
Pompeii	Taberna I 11,3	I 11,3	Façade
Pompeii	Caupona di Euxinus	I 11,10–11	Garden (4), room (5)
Pompeii	Casa I 12,11	I 12,11	<i>Fauces</i> (1), atrium (2), corridor (5), room (7)
Pompeii	Casa dell'Augustale	II 2,4	Façade (doorway 4)
Pompeii	Praedia of Julia Felix	II 4,10	Façade (doorway 6), hortus (8), room (89), latrine (90)
Pompeii	Amphitheatre	II 6	Main gallery and corridors
Pompeii	Caupona II 8,2	II 8,2	Façade
Pompeii	Casa di M. Lucretius Fronto	V 4,a	Façade
Pompeii	Casa V 4,b	V 4,b	Façade
Pompeii	Casa di Meleagro	VI 9,2	Façade
Pompeii	Casa dell'Altare di Giove	VI 16,26–27	Façade (doorway 27) and <i>fauces</i>
Pompeii	Casa del Bracciale d'Oro	VI 17,42–44	Stairway to second lower floor
Pompeii	Stabian Baths	VII 1,8	Corridor (H), corridor (J), passage (N5), latrine (O)
Pompeii	Suburban Baths	VII A,2	Entrance (A), stairway (B), corridor (22), passage (27)
Pompeii	Suburban Baths, Apartment A	VII A,2	Entrance (12), passage (13)
Pompeii	Suburban Baths, Apartment C	VII A,2	Corridor (34)
Pompeii	Forum Baths	VII 5,24	East entrance corridor
Pompeii	Caupona di Lucius Numinius	VII 7,18	Façade
Pompeii	Casa VII 7,19	VII 7,19	Façade
Pompeii	Casa dell'Altare di Giove	VII 7,21	Façade
Pompeii	Casa di C. Julius Primigenius	VII 7,23	Façade
Pompeii	Sarno Baths	VIII 2,17	Ramp (1), corridor (35)
Pompeii	Villa Imperiale	VIII 1,A	Stairway at Porta Marina
Pompeii	Casa IX 5,6	IX 5,6	Façade (doorway 17)
Pompeii	Casa IX 5,11	IX 5,11	Peristyle (N)
Pompeii	Casa IX 6,5	IX 6,5	Façade
Pompeii	Casa di Giulio Polibio	IX 13,1–3	<i>Fauces</i> (3), <i>vestibulum</i> (A), passage (E)
Stabiae	Villa Arriana		Corridor (26)

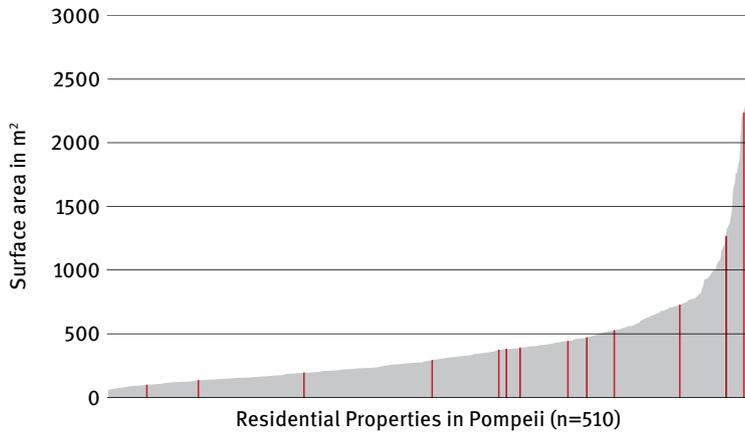


Table 2: Rank-size distribution of Pompeian houses; houses with zebra stripe on the façade indicated by red lines.

Unlike the checkerboard design, zebra stripe was applied exclusively to the dado and usually topped with a plain white upper zone. The owners of the Casa dell'Altare di Giove (VI 16,26–27)⁵⁰ went one step further, outfitting the upper part of the façade with ashlar and draft lines in dark colours (perhaps red and blue) in a manner similar to the Casa del Poeta Tragico (Fig. 10, right)⁵¹. But in most cases, the focus of the decorative programme was placed upon the zebra stripe panels themselves, which were typically arranged in contrasting diagonal and/or vertical orientations. When Amedeo Maiuri first recognised this design in the *palaestra* at Herculaneum, he assumed that the panels were intended to replicate marble revetment, specifically bardiglio, a grey stone with white veins hailing from Tuscany⁵². While Goulet wholeheartedly agreed with Maiuri's assertion⁵³, Laken dissented, pointing out that the high-contrast nature of zebra stripe did not replicate the bardiglio available at the time⁵⁴. More recent publications have continued to disagree about this attribution. Lynley McAlpine, Lea Cline and Regina Gee supported Maiuri's reading of the design, offering examples of bardiglio discovered in Oplontis as evidence⁵⁵, whereas Jacobus Rauws suggested that zebra stripe should be viewed as a 'Fifth Style' of Campanian painting, employed as a contrast to the more elaborate schemes of the 1st century A.D.⁵⁶. Although the original intention of zebra stripe may have been to produce a faithful copy of a real material, most of the examples visible in Campania today are too abstract, and their locations too impractical, to fulfil this aim. The ensemble found in the 'slave peristyle' at Oplontis offers compelling evidence to support this conclusion: here the stripes wrap around columns and splay across the ceiling, locations in which the use of real marble was either extremely unusual or outright impossible. The preponderance of zebra stripe on façades offers additional corroboration, for there is no evidence that stone revetment was ever applied to the exteriors of Vesuvian houses.

An alternative reading

The aim here is not simply to criticise previous interpretations of the zebra stripe design, nor the general concept that lies at the heart of its association with servile quarters, viz. that decoration was employed by Campanian homeowners to offer guidance to non-residents regarding the func-

⁵⁰ Not to be confused with the Casa dell'Altare di Giove (VII 7,21), which was also bedecked in zebra stripe.

⁵¹ The precise colours are unknown, as only a single greyscale photograph of this façade exists and no record was made of its decoration upon excavation. Today, all traces of paint in the upper zone have disappeared.

⁵² Maiuri 1958, 134.

⁵³ Goulet 2002, 61.

⁵⁴ Laken 2003, 172.

⁵⁵ Cline 2014, 567; McAlpine 2014, 195; Gee 2019.

⁵⁶ Rauws 2016.

tion of certain rooms. There can be little doubt, for example, that utilitarian spaces like kitchens and latrines were decorated in a manner simpler than circulation areas and dining rooms. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to point out that, as a consequence of the collective fixation on interior decoration (which arguably began with the excavation of the Casa del Poeta Tragico and continues to this very day), we have a quite limited understanding of how Campanian dwellings were decorated on the outside, and, by extension, what that decoration was trying to say. And clearly both the checkerboard and zebra stripe designs were intended to say *something*.

While it is true that some houses adopted a conservative approach to façade painting, we have seen that many others moved in the opposite direction, employing colours and motifs that rivalled some of the displays found inside the *domus*. By the post-earthquake period, even the ashlar façades of ‘traditional’ houses, such as the Casa del Fauno (VI 12,2), were covered with plasterwork⁵⁷. Other forms of decorative media, such as plaques and architectural sculpture (not to mention figurative paintings), were also incorporated into façade design. In the final decades of the cities’ existence, then, the exteriors of Campanian houses were anything but ‘staid’ and ‘austere’, and thus attempts to link domestic decoration with the social status of the residents should naturally take façade painting and other forms of exterior display into account.

To do so, however, reveals the inherent tensions present in traditional readings of domestic decorative schemes. If the wall paintings, mosaics and sculptural programmes that adorned the inside of the *domus* were employed as a status designation, and if houses were to a certain degree ‘open to the public’, either visually or physically, then why did a similar degree of luxury not extend to the façade? Recently, Jeremy Hartnett has tried to resolve this contradiction by arguing that the disunion between the schemes was precisely the point: *decorum* dictated that the public appearance of a Roman citizen (and, consequently, his house), should be controlled and reserved, with *ostentatio* and conspicuous consumption banished to the private sphere⁵⁸. But this interpretation doesn’t really deal with the presumed ‘openness’ of the Campanian house. If the traditional reading of the *domus* is correct, then not only the façade was offered up for public view, but also the *fauces*, atrium and other internal spaces. In an attempt to resolve this conundrum, I would like to briefly sketch an alternative take on the nature of façade decoration and its relationship with the domestic interior.

If no description of the *domus* was offered by Roman authors – or indeed if those authors and their works simply did not exist – our interpretation of houses in Pompeii and Herculaneum would be quite different⁵⁹. This is because, from an architectural perspective, the exterior of a Campanian dwelling seems designed to *control* access to the spaces beyond. The typical façade consisted of a long, high curtain wall pierced by small, square windows positioned far above the pavement (Fig. 7, top). Too high to grant visual access from the street, these were purely functional openings, providing light for the range of rooms that flanked the *fauces*⁶⁰. Indeed, the only opportunity for passers-by to obtain a view into the residence was via the main door, which also provided the lone pedestrian access through the façade. In virtually any other cultural context, archaeologists would regard this imposing street frontage as an indicator that the residents were seeking to separate themselves from the outside world, controlling interaction between the community and their residential unit by limiting points of access between the street and the house proper⁶¹.

⁵⁷ Hoffmann 1990, 491.

⁵⁸ Hartnett 2017, 161. For a critical assessment of this position, see Holleran 2019.

⁵⁹ Vitruvius is the primary source for information about the Roman house; a significant portion of the sixth book of *De Architectura* is dedicated to the layout of the *domus*. Naturally, references to houses appear in a great many other ancient sources, many of them emphasising the importance of social rituals and conspicuous consumption in the dwellings of the capital.

⁶⁰ In many cases, bars were placed in the windows as an additional measure of security.

⁶¹ E. g., Rapoport 1969, 79–82.



Fig. 11: Entrance and *fauces* boundary in the Casa dei Ceii during excavation. Cast of the transom visible at rear of *fauces*.

The house door consisted of two or three leaves, which were secured with a range of locking mechanisms, including padlocks, horizontal beams and props. Beyond the door, at the end of the *fauces*, some houses were equipped with a secondary boundary that regulated access to the atrium⁶². The typical design of this ‘*fauces* boundary’ required the installation of a wooden frame that occupied the lower half of the doorway. There were varying designs, but the most common was similar to that of the partition discovered in the Casa del Tramezzo di Legno (III 11) at Herculaneum, in which a transom spans the width of the doorway at a height of ca. 2.5 m. Additional framing beams were installed along the corners of the door jambs and the doors, typically hinge-hung, were attached to these vertical elements⁶³. In the Casa dei Ceii (I 6,15), the effectiveness of the *fauces* boundary as a visual regulator was enhanced by the slope of the entryway, which rises steeply from the house door towards the floor of the atrium (Fig. 11).

Once a visitor moved beyond the *fauces* boundary, s/he would have encountered another series of closure systems, employed to regulate access to the atrium’s dependencies and the spaces beyond. The presence of these boundaries, which include bi- and multi-valve doors, partitions, screens and curtains, has often been overlooked (or wilfully ignored) by scholars of Campanian houses. However, an architectural survey of interior doorways in 31 houses revealed that around the atrium in particular, most doorways were occupied by some form of closure system⁶⁴. It is possible that these systems remained open most of the time, offering a view from the street into the atrium and perhaps a bit further⁶⁵, but this does not negate their role as regulatory mechanisms. The house door might have stood open, with the curtains of the *tablinum* drawn, but only if the residents wished it to be so. This was the defining feature of the *domus*: it was a structure designed for the purposes of control, particularly in the direction of outside to in. Consequently, gaining access to the interior was a status signifier in its own right, and the elaborate painted and sculptural decoration that surrounded the guest upon entry served to confirm both his/her own social position and that of the property owners.

In this reading of the house, the decorative systems applied to exteriors are entirely appropriate, because they consistently reinforced the monolithic nature of the façade, emphasising its defensive posture and impenetrability. Ashlar masonry – or ornamental interpretations of this

⁶² Proudfoot 2013; Lauritsen 2014, 212–219.

⁶³ Lauritsen 2014, 212.

⁶⁴ Lauritsen 2011; 2012.

⁶⁵ There is evidence to suggest, however, that many of the doors around the atrium remained closed throughout the day: see Lauritsen 2012, 106–108.

form – connected the house with the past, with tradition, with the power and influence of public architecture. The horizontal division of the façade into two zones occupied by large monochrome blocks of colour also reinforced its solidity and two-dimensionality; that the break between the two often occurred just above the height of an average Campanian helped to emphasise the scale of the property⁶⁶. Even the owners of houses that adopted some of the more ostentatious decorative forms, such as the checkerboard or zebra stripe designs, only employed schemes that were two-dimensional. As a final point, the single part of the façade that received special decorative attention also happened to be the place that permitted access through it: the house door. In this way, painting and other forms of decoration worked hand-in-hand with the architectural design of the façade, enhancing its role as a regulatory mechanism that offered a controlled separation between the residents of the dwelling and society at large.

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Fig. 1. 4. 6. 7: M. T. Lauritsen.

Fig. 2: After Niccolini – Niccolini 1854, *Casa di Castore e Polluce Tav. I.*

Fig. 3: Gell 1832, Pl. 38 (left); *Plastico di Pompei*, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (right).

Fig. 5: M. T. Lauritsen (left); Van Buren 1932, Pl. 5, 2 (right).

Fig. 8: After Peters and Moorman 1993, Fig. 228.

Fig. 9: SAP Neg. C1066 (left); SAP Neg. C753 (right).

Fig. 10: M. T. Lauritsen (left); SAP Neg. C52 (right).

Fig. 11: SAP Neg. C815.

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⁶⁶ Studies of osteological material from Pompeii and near-intact skeletons from Herculaneum indicate that the average height of adult males in Campania at the time of the Vesuvian eruption was 1.63–1.69 m, while adult females measured between 1.52 and 1.55 m tall (Lazer 2009, 179–184). As noted above (supra 128 n. 27), dados in Pompeii generally ranged from 1.6 to 2.5 m high.

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