Katharina Lorenz
All the World's a Stage: On the Interplay of Decoration in Pompeian Houses

Abstract: The juxtaposition of three or four mythological figure panels within individual rooms is a key characteristic of wall paintings in Pompeian domestic contexts from the Augustan period onwards. While the mechanisms employed to create meaningful connections between the individual panels are well understood, appreciation of the relation of these panels to other elements of the decoration has been more limited. Concentrating on the wall decorations in one Pompeian dwelling, the Casa dell'Ara Massima, this paper examines the patterns of intermediality shaped by the choices made on the walls of this house, which was decorated in the period of the Fourth Style. For its interpretative framework, the discussion draws on parameters gleaned from Roman stagecraft, specifically the mechanisms of Roman pantomime, and applies them to describe and interpret the interdependency of *decor*, architecture and human practice.

The juxtaposition of figural scenes within individual rooms is a key characteristic of the wall paintings that feature in Pompeian domestic contexts from the Augustan period onwards[1]. Across Pompeii, the set of scenes chosen for such combinations is only rarely repeated exactly[2]. This high level of variation is indicative of individual decisions taken by those in charge of decorative design. The wide spectrum of decorative decisions evident for a town such as Pompeii hints at the inadequacy of a traditional argument in the scholarship of Roman painting, which proposes that patrons picked the designs for their houses virtually free of specific intention, dispassionately selecting pre-fabricated schemes from pattern books, or *Musterbücher*[3]. While pattern books may have provided a portfolio of material from which Pompeian customers chose, the evidence of the interior decoration intimates that the selections made from this pool of motifs led to highly individualised – and highly intentional – arrangements.

Heinrich Brunn was among the first scholars to pick up on the juxtaposition between mythological scenes in Roman painting, and more specifically, in paintings situated in Pompeian domestic contexts. Brunn argued for the deliberate conception of these arrangements by the designers, noting the absence of consecutive narrative displays and emphasising that the positioning of the panels in individual rooms facilitated comparative viewing and shaped narratives fuelled by analogy[4]. Brunn's early endeavours in this field have been expanded by Bettina Bergmann, who mapped out key mechanisms in the Pompeian juxtaposition of myths and their rootedness in Roman aesthet-

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1 My warmest thanks to Rona Johnston Gordon for her keen eye and for rectifying linguistic vagaries. This paper expands arguments presented in Lorenz 2013a and Lorenz 2018.

2 Notable exceptions are the Fourth Style decorations of room (15) in the Casa del Poeta Tragico (VI 8,3–5) and room (h) in the Casa di L. Cornelius Diadumenus (VII 12,26–27); in both rooms, pictures of Ariadne abandoned (in the former, Theseus is shown as leaving; in the latter, his ship has already departed), Artemis, Kallisto and the cupid's nest are combined: PPM IV (1993) 527–603 s. v. VI 8, 3.5, Casa del Poeta Tragico (F. Parise Badoni) 566–581; PPM VII (1997) 565–593 s. v. VII 12, 26, Casa di L. Cornelius Diadumenus (I. Bragantini) 571–581.

3 For Roman *Musterbücher*, see the summary of recent debates in Schmidt-Colinet 2009 and Clarke 2010. Ghedini 1997, esp. 834 f., provides a comprehensive survey of modes of transmission.

4 See the quotation of Brunn in Schefold 1952, 32 (without reference to its location in Brunn's work): 'The ancients were not at all keen to present in freely juxtaposed pictures temporally closely related facta, in which one would, as it were, constitute the continuation of the other. Such proximity would curtail the suggestive in the broadest sense and trap it within confines too narrow. The only exceptions were those comprehensive cyclical displays. Otherwise, they rather chose to combine narrative moments that were distant from each other, that would relate to each other as if beginning and end, or cause and effect; they even preferred sometimes when choosing pendants to pick elements from different mythological cycles and so contrast one scene with a poetic-mythological analogy from another cycle.'

ics[5]. The placement of pictorial information is now habitually tackled with descriptors borrowed from Roman rhetorical writing. Terms such as parallelism, intensification and contrast (*similitudo*, *uicinitas* and *contrarium*) are employed as if they designate formal devices and tropes that characterise potential combinations of mythological pictures within the Roman house[6].

In this examination of aesthetic and semantic connections at play in Roman interior decoration, I explore the juxtaposing of pictures not by pinpointing individual rhetorical tropes, but by teasing out how such formal features are layered in order to generate meaning. The placing of these features is not a matter of parataxis; rather, it facilitates rhetorical modes of a more general type – syncrisis, or *comparatio* – that is, it enables the viewers' lasting comparative engagement with the figures depicted on the walls. Concentrating on the wall decorations in one Pompeian house, the Casa dell'Ara Massima, I consider how we might think about both the juxtaposition of mythological panels and the panels' relationship to other elements of Fourth Style wall decoration within individual spaces in the Pompeian houses. Finally, by drawing on additional evidence from the Casa di Pinarius Cerealis, I apply an interpretive framework gleaned from Roman stagecraft, specifically the mechanisms of Roman pantomime, to describe the interdependency of *decor*, architecture and human practice

The Casa dell'Ara Massima

The Casa dell'Ara Massima (VI 16,15.17) is a small Pompeian dwelling decorated entirely in the Fourth Style (Fig. 1)[7]. Closed off from the other areas at the back of the house, room (G) combines on its walls four mythological panels[8]. Endymion and Selene on the south wall (Fig. 2) and Dionysus and Ariadne on the west wall (Fig. 3) are depicted as they become acquainted: in contrast to other Pompeian renderings of the myth, Endymion is wide awake and looks towards Selene; Dionysus is physically moving towards the sleeping Ariadne. Meanwhile, on the north wall, Mars and Venus are depicted in a tight embrace, already closely connected (Fig. 4)[9]. These scenes present stages in a relationship, both contrasting and consecutive. Each of the three images also articulates the attraction of bodily beauty: both men and women are largely undressed, which makes for a particular focus on the physical appeal of their bodies. This aspect is played out in side panels that frame the mythological frescos, with busts of attractive women looking out of the picture. Only the scene on the east wall evades the presentation of a normative relationship. This scene, which shows Heracles and two companions in front of an altar, inspired the modern name of the house, but the mythological episode underpinning it cannot be unambiguously identified, beyond being evidently charged with male *virtus* and sacrality (Fig. 5)[10].

The set of three pictures and the panel on the east wall feed two different moods, juxtaposing ideals of male-female romantic companionship with a representation of male status. With these two trajectories, the decoration of room (G) presents in a single room the type of mythological design found throughout spaces within the three-room groupings that commonly appear in Pompeian

5 Bergmann 1994.

6 For a critical review of these practices, see Lorenz 2014, esp. 183–188.

7 For the house: Schefold 1957, 156–158; Stemmer 1992; PPM V (1994) 847–886 s. v. VI 16, 15.17, Casa dell' Ara Massima (K. Stemmer).

8 Strocka 1989; Stemmer 1992, 53 f.; cf. Strocka 1997, 131 f.

9 For the myths cf. Lorenz 2008, 216–218 (Endymion and Selene); McNally 1985, 181; Fredrick 1995; Lorenz 2008, 111–123 (Dionysus and Ariadne); Strocka 1997; Lorenz 2008, 149–185 (Mars and Venus).

10 See Coralini 2001, esp. 194–196, who interprets this scene as one of Hercules and Admetus; for other interpretations, see Strocka 1989, 29–31; Stemmer 1992, 53 f.
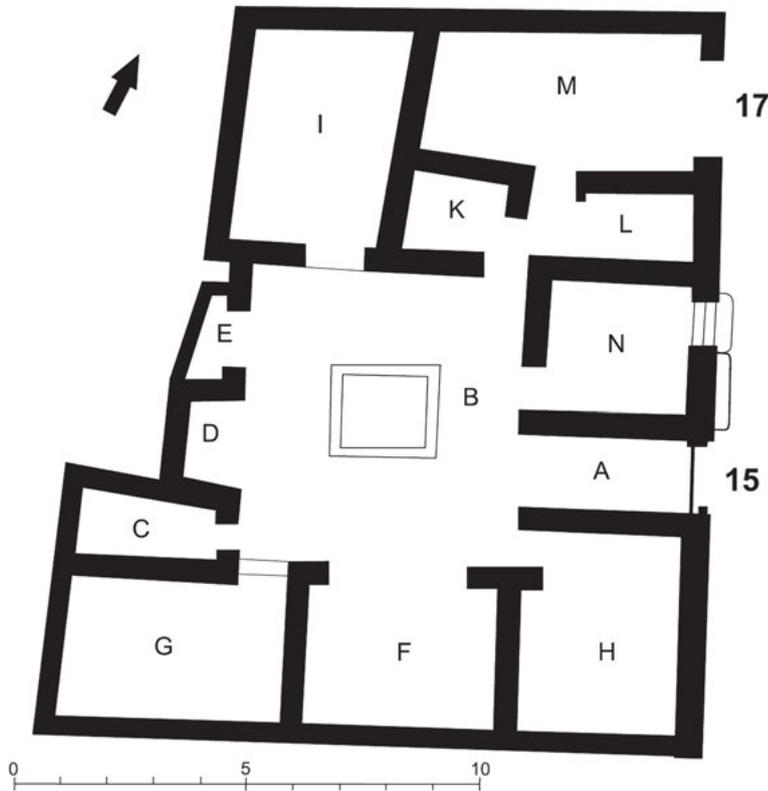
Fig. 1: Pompeii, Casa dell'Ara Massima, plan.

houses. Frequently, a single mythological fresco within a room accompanies the semantic connections formed by the other panels, as if triggering a paratext to the text generated by the rest of the decoration[11].

But this form of representation generally appears on three walls that could be appreciated in a single vista, whereas in the case of room (G), navigating the two trajectories of text and paratext requires a physical journey on the part of the viewer. Upon entering, the viewer comprehends the room and the panels depicting male-female companionship as a homogenous tableau, encountering a type of mythological decoration that accords with the typical atmosphere of smaller rooms in Pompeii, one that is thus in tune with the size and the secluded location of the room within the dwelling's configuration. But once the viewer has fully entered the room and looks back towards the entrance, the paratext of male *virtus* on the east wall comes into view, changing the tone of the arrangement and replicating associations more commonly found in larger reception rooms of grander houses.

While room (G) is more difficult to access, the second room featuring mythological panels, room (F), opens fully onto atrium (B), the dwelling's primary circulation area (Fig. 6). The room's openness is matched by the symmetrical arrangement and homogeneous thematic choices presented in the mythological panels that decorate its lateral walls: on the west wall Endymion (this time asleep) is once again visited by Selene (Fig. 7), while on the east, sleeping Ariadne is approached by a maenad (Fig. 8). Here the sleeping Endymion is presented in correspondence with the sleeping Ariadne, a connection underlined by the attending female characters. Although the maenad might herald the imminent arrival of Dionysus, the choices made in both pictures underscore the solitude of the two protagonists (Ariadne's partner is yet to arrive; Endymion cannot perceive his partner's presence) and their vulnerability in a state of slumber. With this focus on individual figures, viewers can engage with these frescos in a way that is characteristic of many Fourth Style mythological panels.

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11 Lorenz 2008, 361–379.

Fig. 2: Pompeii, Casa dell'Ara Massima, room (G), south wall: Endymion and Selene.

Fig. 3: Pompeii, Casa dell'Ara Massima, room (G), west wall: Dionysus and Ariadne.

Fig. 4: Pompeii, Casa dell'Ara Massima, room (G), north wall: Mars and Venus.

Fig. 5: Pompeii, Casa dell'Ara Massima, room (G), east wall: Hercules.

Fig. 6: Pompeii, Casa dell'Ara Massima, atrium (B) and room (F).

Fig. 7: Pompeii, Casa dell'Ara Massima, room (F), west wall: Endymion and Selene.

Fig. 8: Pompeii, Casa dell'Ara Massima, room (F), east wall: Ariadne.

Fig. 9: Pompeii, Casa dell'Ara Massima, pseudo-*tablinum* (D). Narcissus.

The display of figures in a reflective state in room (F) is matched by the depiction of Narcissus in the atrium proper (Fig. 9). In this panel, Narcissus sits in front of a large votive pillar gazing into the space beyond the picture's frame, his reflection staring up at him from the pond at his feet. This panel is set into the alcove of the atrium's west wall, a tiny space that is habitually referred to as pseudo-*tablinum* (D)[12]. The depiction works with the mythological panels in room (F) to create a connection across the extended area of the atrium, a decorative technique characteristic of the smaller rooms in Pompeian houses that were set aside for familiars. During the Fourth Style, these spaces were frequently decorated with combinations of Narcissus, the fishing Venus, Endymion and Selene, as well as Apollo and Daphne[13].

Other decorative elements

In terms of its mythological decoration, the Casa dell'Ara Massima displays patterns that are also found elsewhere in Pompeian houses painted during the period of the Fourth Style. Yet within this small house, certain decorative strategies are mixed anew to generate experiences greater than might be expected of spaces in a house of this scale. The atrium's extensive west wall is the most comprehensive example of a 'remixed' design (Fig. 6, right). Facing the entrance of the house, this wall permits a particularly rich case study of the interplay of decorations in a Pompeian domestic context. A bountiful assortment of visual stimuli are combined across the wall's surface, which measures c. 35 m²[14]. The wall is divided into a low, yellow dado, a central zone in red and a large upper field painted yellow in the centre and red at the sides that is greater in height than the two lower zones put together. The lower register of the wall is broken up by three openings: the door

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12 On the myth, cf. Zanker 1966; Balensiefen 1990, 130–166; Prehn 1993; 1997; Elsner 2007, 132–176. esp. 156–160.
13 Lorenz 2008, 380–390.
14 Careful analysis of the layers of plaster has shown that the whole wall was decorated in one phase during the Neronian period, thus invalidating the later Vespasianic date that had been proposed by Ludwig Curtius and Karl Schefold. See Stemmer 1992, 42. 46.

to room (C), the pseudo-*tablinum* (D), which contains the Narcissus fresco, and another niche-like space, room (E).

In the upper register, the tripartite scheme is continued by the figurative paintings: the lower part of the tall central panels serves as a faux-window looking out onto a landscape dominated by a temple structure, a *schola* held by a caryatid and further sacred architecture in the background. Either side of this central image, projecting *aediculae* are occupied by doorways and staircases. The central panel is surrounded by a series of devices set to enhance its spatial presence: a broad frame in brown, white and yellow sets it off from the upper part of the opening, with a blue curtain hanging from above, billowing on top and behind this frame and thus vouching for the opening's alleged physical existence as a window.

At the bottom of the window, a stuccoed cornice (of which little remains today) protrudes from the wall, enhancing the notion of spatial depth. Serving in effect as a funnel, the flanking *aediculae* also suggest depth, with their primary visual function underlined by the *imagines clipeatae*, or framed portraits, hanging from their sides. The portrait *protomes* on these shields are not alone in turning towards the central panel: female figures positioned on the staircases also look towards the window, as do the theatrical masks positioned inside the *aediculae* and the tall figures of the two gods, Neptune (left) and Victory (right), who stand on pedestals at the outer edges of the scene.

Serving the designer as an essential tool across this area, the viewers entering this space initiate a range of mechanisms that generate virtual spatiality. Two attempts to bring multiple perspectives into the physical space over which the west wall presides are indicative of their deployment. First, there is a notable discrepancy in the alignment of the west wall's built architecture with its niche and door opening and the decoration of its upper register – the former is aligned centrally to the room, whereas the perspectival axis of the latter is shifted to the north. Second, the lower register's decoration is oriented slightly to the south, with the pseudo-*tablinum* (D) offset to the left in comparison with the central panel of the upper register.

A shifting perspectival axis is a common feature in the built environment of Roman houses; with negated or displaced vanishing points, individual spaces can be made to appear more extensive than they physically are. Condensed into the space of the atrium and executed in two modes (architecture and decoration), a complex visual environment is created, characterised by attempts at virtual spatial extension and multi-perspectivity – a powerful means of supporting a variety of viewing situations and enthralling viewers, not least by continuously frustrating their viewing experience. When infused with the experience of the upper part of the wall, the visual counterpoint provided by the decoration of the pseudo-*tablinum* (D) reframes the meaning of the mythological panel depicting Narcissus at its centre and in doing so demonstrates the interaction between decorative elements (Fig. 9). The mythological panel sits above a faux-marble pedestal and is surrounded by wooden shutters, with the whole ensemble embedded in a white background that stands out clearly against the rest of the west wall.

In a cunning game of visual double-crossing, the shutters and the marble pedestal signal a venerable Greek pedigree, locating the niche in a world of precious wooden panels and Hellenistic cultural sophistication, while the panel itself heralds another type of visual transgression. The theme of Narcissus embodies the lure, and the dangers, of spectatorship. In the Casa dell'Ara Massima, that risk may have been explicit, protruding into the space in front of the pictorial surface, for a travertine water basin was perhaps originally positioned inside the niche, adding an actual reflection of the tragic youth to the painted counterpart. Considering the mythological fresco alongside the other decorative elements of this wall thus highlights matters of visual trespass beyond the communicative possibilities of the mythological panel alone.

Intermingling as intermediality

The unique decorative solution developed on the atrium's west wall, with its focus on aspects of nature, is modelled not on a passage into a garden, but rather on windows that provide views into the distance, such as those in the large *triclinium* of the Casa di Fabius Rufus (VII 16,22)[15]. On the west wall of the Casa dell'Ara Massima, these windows open not only onto nature (albeit a fictitious version), but also onto the realm of the mythological, as the niche with the Narcissus fresco demonstrates. The atrium displays a pervasive notion of space that is also evident in depictions of nature during this period, as in Villa A at Oplontis[16]. The notion of space here finds itself extended, however, with the incorporation of the mythological. It therefore no longer serves simply as a way to resolve the contradiction between nature and architecture, but instead fuses these different planes to create an experiential sphere where the real and the virtual are blended also on the level of narrative.

It would be a mistake to see this layering strategy solely as a mechanism intended to lend smaller houses the same credence as larger dwellings. In his seminal 1979 article, Paul Zanker argued convincingly that in the Imperial period the design of Pompeian houses was based on a construction kit inspired by Roman country villas, with water features and landscape vistas layered with picture and sculpture galleries even in the most restricted spaces; for example, in the garden of the Casa di Octavius Quartio (II 2,2)[17]. However, the layering phenomenon we observe in the Casa dell'Ara Massima cannot be fully explained as a mere symptom of the decorative aspirations of Pompeii's lower and middle classes. Rather, our focus on the intermediality of decorative elements helps us recognise that this layering is equally a result of a distinct notion of the modalities of space and new understandings of space as a conceptual framework for the communication of content that developed in the Neronian period.

The layering of different moods in the Casa dell'Ara Massima is to a considerable degree achieved by decorative strategies that match those employed in Roman stage sets, or *scaenae frontes*. These include (1) actions that take place on different spatial levels combined in a single panoramic vista, (2) figures that emerge out of the architectural background, (3) decorative elements that reach into the space in front of the façade and (4) views onto spaces beyond the architectural frame[18]. This alignment with stagecraft suggests an implicit intermediality, which is enhanced by an intermingling with elements of nature and mythology that also featured in the theatre setting. This intermediality produces a space that is non-homogeneous in the sense that the technical (the architecture) and metaphorical (the references to nature, mythology and other thematic spheres) characteristics of the space are not aligned. But, despite their heterogeneity, these features are welded together in various ways to overcome the dichotomy of reality vs. artificiality, creating a mood-scape that permeates the space.

This specific type of *skenographia* puts a considerable burden on the viewers, for it falls to them to perform the vital act of homogenising and, in turn, synthesising the differing elements on display. In the process, it is also the viewers' responsibility to explore a new form of pervasive virtual reality, deconstructing this spatial mood-scape down to its individual constituents. Elements of the theatre stage would seem especially suitable for stimulating such behaviour, given that the homogenisation of perspective is precisely what is required from theatre audiences, who have to negotiate plot, performance, costumes and setting. But as the evidence of the Casa dell'Ara Massima demonstrates, other decorative elements might function in a similar way.

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15 PPM VII (1997) 947–1125 s. v. VII 16, 22 (Ins. Occ.), Casa di Fabius Rufus (I. Bragantini) 1077–1097.

16 Bergmann 2002, 96–118; cf. Lorenz 2013a, 365 f.

17 Zanker 1979, esp. 522 f.; cf. also Lorenz 2013b, esp. 245–247.

18 On the house's decoration, cf. Moormann 1983, 112–114; for Roman *skenographia*, cf. Leach 2004, 114–122; Small 2013, 117–123.
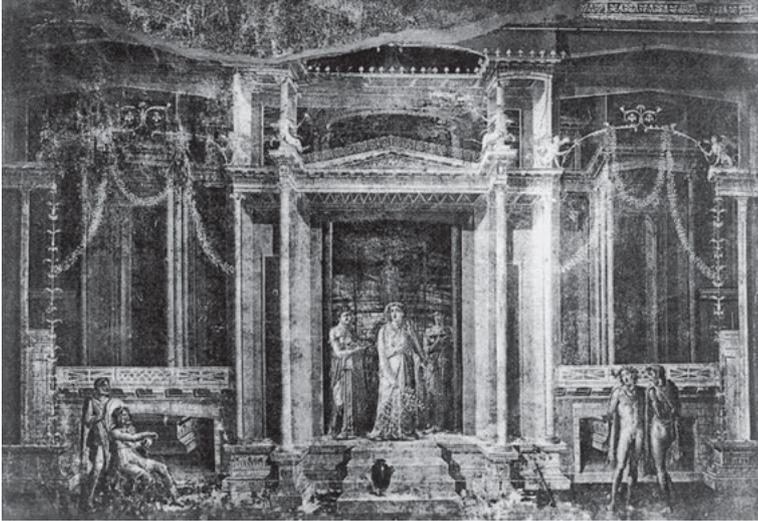
The use of *scaenae frons* decorations is not an innovation of Neronian wall painting. Vitruvius identifies it as an element of representational domestic art as early as the last quarter of the 1st century B.C.[19], and indeed, Second Style wall painting frequently features elements from theatre architecture, as visible in well-known examples from Villa A at Oplontis or the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor in Boscoreale. After a short spell of relative insignificance during the Third Style, the *scaenae frons* returns during the Fourth Style in a thoroughly remodelled guise. These paintings now habitually fill entire walls and incorporate elements of purely fantastic architectural reverie, such as masonry architraves resting on floral tendrils.

If the theatre paintings of the Second Style extend space into the wall, opening vistas onto distant architectural landscapes, in the Fourth Style, it is more common to progress forward into real space, creating an almost tangible form of pervasive virtuality. This apparent incursion is enhanced by another feature that clearly separates the *scaenae frontes* of the Fourth Style from earlier adaptations: the inclusion of figures within the scene. These individuals either look outwards towards the viewer or act within the virtual space, and in doing so create a false physical reality. They also serve to remind the external onlooker of their own act of viewing, and can be activated as narrative agents.

Cubiculum (a) in the Casa di Pinarius Cerialis (III 4,4–6), decorated in the A.D. 50s, offers a striking example of this new use of *scaenae frons* decorations (Fig. 10)[20]. Adjacent to a depiction of Attis with the nymphs of Sangarios, a scene from the myth of Iphigenia among the Taurians is set within a particularly outré *scaenae frons* arrangement. This scene is packed with fantastic building elements, stacked upon one another without concern for static loads or the rules of logic: the priestess stands in the centre of an elevated *aedicula*, accompanied by servants and holding the cult statue; on the right stand Orestes and Pylades, both with their hands tied behind their backs, and on the left sits King Thoas, with a companion standing behind him.

Ten additional examples of this particular episode have been found on Pompeian walls, more frequently in compositions of the Fourth Style than those of the Third Style, and always within self-contained mythological panels located in grand reception rooms. In these scenes, Iphigenia is always depicted in the central role, elevated on the steps of the temple, and in most cases the triangle between Orestes, his companion Thoas and Iphigenia is explored; only once is Thoas not depicted. The scenes are located within a sacral-palatial setting and generate an atmosphere of ceremonious piety (particularly with regard to Iphigenia) and male *virtus*, *amicitia* and friendship,

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19 Vitr. De arch. 7, 5, 2.
20 Moormann 1983, 76–84; PPM III (1991) 435–477 s. v. III 4, 4, Casa di Pinarius Cerealis (A. de Vos) 460–473.

embodied by Orestes and Pylades' standing in for one another, which hinders Thoas from establishing who is the real Orestes[21].

Spreading out the figures in a *skenographia*, as on the *cubiculum* wall, allows for two variations from standard mythological frescos of the type that decorate the Casa dell'Ara Massima. First, it brings the figures closer to the sphere of the viewer. They are not enclosed within their own demarcated picture field, but are instead distributed across the whole wall, in this case on a level with their audience; this proximity is enhanced by one of the youths' frontal posture. Second, the arrangement renders the narrative on display more accessible to the viewer, as if the figures can form a relationship with the viewer external to their roles within the depicted scene. In supporting this form of individual symbolisation, the mythological figures fulfil the role of a gateway into the scene, much like the spectator figures in the Casa dell'Ara Massima.

Meanwhile, in terms of the actual physical boundaries of the built environment, the architectural space established in *cubiculum* (a) remains unchanged. The walls do not extend outwards, as they would in a painted garden scene. But on a conceptual level, a range of possible connections can extend the viewer's imagination, a process comparable to the functioning of the Narcissus panel in the Casa dell'Ara Massima.

Whilst older scholarship saw the renewed appearance of *scaenae frons* in paintings of Fourth Style as a direct and ideological reference to Nero's interest in the theatre, Eric Moormann, among others, has shown that the appearance of these scenes can be explained by an increased interest in the theatre, and with it in issues of spectatorship on a much wider social scale[22]. Analysis of the decoration in the Casa dell'Ara Massima underscores precisely that position, as does investigation of the scene in the Casa di Pinarius Cerialis.

However, the interest in theatre and spectatorship seems to be only a symptom of an even more profound theme displayed by these paintings within the context of Pompeian houses: the modalities of space, including the potential of space to act as a carrier of meaning. Here again we can draw on theatrical practices to help us understand the cultural milieu within which this discourse emerged. Since the early Imperial period, the dramatic form of the pantomime had risen to great prominence across all social strata (not least in Campania), and included even the emperors among its fans[23].

In Roman pantomime, a solo dancer enacted all parts of the play in silent dance, using masks and props as required while being accompanied by music, percussion and a choir or spoken libretto. The plotlines were taken from Greek myths and could be loosely stitched together, as for a revue. Ancient texts emphasise the versatility of the performers, who were able to use their hands and limbs while dancing to convey the narrative as effectively as if they were 'speaking'[24]. Each dance sequence would end with the performer 'freezing' into a tableau-like pose, the so-called *schemata*, before carrying on with the next part.

The make-believe of the pantomime used the space of the theatre to accentuate its characters' dynamic movement through the architectural levels of the stage building, as well as to anchor them in the moments of pause. The *schemata* on display were thus offered up for syncritic (and therefore homogenising) consumption by viewers alongside all the other visual stimuli – sculpture, painting and architecture – that composed the Roman stage[25]. Just like the elements of *decor* on the walls of Roman houses, the dramatic strategies of the pantomime presupposed that viewers were able to appreciate the *modus potentialis* of the scene, especially the static displays, and were keen to

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21 Leach 2004, 118; Bielfeldt 2005, 241–251.

22 Moormann 1983, 116 f.

23 For the dramatic genre, cf. Hall 2013; for its potential impact on Roman art, cf. Dunbabin 2016, 85–113.

24 For Lucian's detailed discussion of the effects of pantomime, see Lada-Richards 2000; 2004; 2013.

25 For a recent comprehensive 3-D reconstruction of the visual effects of this stagecraft on the basis of the evidence from Augusta Emerita (modern: Mérida), one of the best-preserved Roman theatres, see Vergel Martínez – Mesa Hurtado 2018.

activate in their minds individual aspects of the bountiful offering in front of them[26] (while deselecting others), thus customising individual performance trajectories from a corpus of predesigned *schemata*.

Conclusion

Unravelling the relationship of mythological panels with other elements of wall painting allows us to discern how decoration of the Fourth Style, as it appears in the Casa dell'Ara Massima and Casa di Pinarius Cerialis, addresses the dichotomy between fiction and reality. It does so by scaffolding and constantly re-framing virtual spaces that blur the distinction between the real and the virtual with representations of the strictly fictitious – such as sacral landscapes or mythological settings – all the while featuring multiple points of connection that enable viewers to enter into a discourse firmly anchored in reality. Within these tableaus, as the viewers' expectations vis-à-vis the depicted spheres advance, they are constantly reframed by the painted surfaces. This type of semanticised aesthetic is facilitated by syncritic arrangements, such as the combining of mythological panels and other decorative features that renders the boundaries of those panels elastic, both in the literal sense, as with the faux-wooden frame of the Narcissus panel in the Casa dell'Ara Massima, and in a figurative sense, as with the Gorgoneia alongside the sleeping Endymion and Ariadne.

These syncritic arrangements, along with the non-homogeneous spaces they orchestrate, invite, even coerce, their viewers to synthesise the individual elements on display, just as the dramatic genre of the pantomime would have required its audience to do in a Roman theatre. This form of decoration appears to explore an intermixing of the technical and metaphorical aspects of space. The mathematical dimension of spatial representation – the technicalities of displaying objects, vanishing points and all – is considered alongside and with regard to its interdependency with the creation of meaningful relationships, whether they are narratives or conceptual descriptors in the shape of affirmative ideals embodied in the acts of mythological figures.

This exploration was driven not by the creation of an inverted, unreal world, but by an interest in generating and upholding reality and artificiality, as well as the wide areas in which these concepts overlap. A key parameter is the assumption that space creates a framework within which the relationships that are generated are not absolute, but rather relative and dynamic; these include relationships between objects (such as *decor*) and human practice (which incorporates ideas and emotions). The results are externalised, almost tangible 'experience-scapes', such as those found in the Casa dell'Ara Massima and the Casa di Pinarius Cerialis. These forms of decoration may exude confinement, reducing the fictional to mere subject matter for human consciousness, but for that very reason they also expand human consciousness, which functions as a vessel for the virtual.

Katharina Lorenz
Institute of Classical Studies
Justus-Liebig-Universität, Giessen
Otto-Behaghel-Straße 10D
35394 Giessen – Germany
g81120@uni-giessen.de

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26 For the term *modus potentialis* in reference to portraiture, see Boehm 1985, 29. 98 f.

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