

# Looking at Roman Wall Paintings in Oklahoma

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*The Painters of Pompeii: Roman Frescoes from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.* Curated by Mario Grimaldi and Paolo Giulierini. Oklahoma City Museum of Art, June 6 to October 17, 2021.

Catalogue: Grimaldi, Mario. *The Painters of Pompeii: Roman Frescoes from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.* Mondo Mostre, 185pp., color ill., \$60 cloth.

**T**HE PAINTERS OF POMPEII: ROMAN Frescoes from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples attempted a new look at the Roman wall paintings that have often been considered some of the most valuable artifacts excavated from the city. As the title suggests, the exhibition foregrounded the creators and the process of making these frescoes, introduced the figure of the painter (Latin: *pictor*, better understood as an artisan) as distinctly different than our modern conception of painter or artist, and explored the notions of workshops, workbooks, and copies as essential techniques for the creation and dispersal of themes in the ancient world. The exhibition presented over 70 objects from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, almost all of them wall paintings, some of which

had never been shown before in the United States, and displayed them to audiences in a sweeping four galleries at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art, the exclusive venue for the show. The exhibition fell short in supporting its valid yet expansive thesis, but was nonetheless dazzling given the quality and quantity of objects presented. One can't help but marvel when surrounded by 2,000-year-old frescoes, after all.

Roman wall paintings, executed in the fresco technique, are among the most vivid artifacts from the ancient world. In wealthy homes, paintings often decorated walls from floor to ceiling in bright colors, sometimes with scenes displaying well-known myths, history, or still life. *The Painters of Pompeii* was a feast for the eyes, and successfully transported its audience to a far different world: each gallery was intentionally painted in a different hue of deep green, ochre, lapis blue, or cinnabar red to mimic the rich tones found throughout the Roman house.

Entering the first gallery was initially refreshing, with its clear focus on painters, tools, and techniques (Figure 1). Here, two paintings of the same scene appear that explain how painters may have worked, using workbooks: a panel of Achilles on Skyros from the House of the Dioscuri



Figure 1 View of *The Painters of Pompeii* at The Oklahoma Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Molacek

(Pompeii VI.9.6-7) and a second of the same subject from the House of Achilles (Pompeii IX.5.2), which are almost certainly both derived from a single ‘model’ painting.<sup>1</sup> Both paintings share certain iconographic similarities while also having marked differences—stylistic elements or small additions to the scene, which can be attributed to the Roman painters who created each panel. A crowd and docent favorite, judging from the two tours that I saw during my visit, was the panel of a female painter from the House of the Surgeon (Pompeii VI.I.I.10) (Figure 2), in which a female

<sup>1</sup> The descriptive names often given to houses or buildings in the Pompeii, such as the House of the Dioscuri, were given by excavators and in some instances different names exist for the same building. The three-part notation, Pompeii VI.9.6-7, refers to the systematic naming of individual buildings throughout the ancient city of Pompeii, begun by the Soprintente Giuseppe Fiorelli (1863-1875). Fiorelli was responsible for widespread methodological and procedural changes at the site, including the process of pouring plaster into the cavities left by organic substances (e.g., animals, humans). He divided the site into nine *Regiones*; individual *insulae* (city blocks); and entrance numbers (thresholds and doorways)—thereby providing a tripartite, standardized naming system for future research.

figure is shown in the act of painting a panel, the in-process *pinake* partially visible to us, the viewers. Rounding out the gallery’s emphasis on technique were two cases displaying pigments and tools including several compasses, a set square/level, and a handful of ancient cups containing remnants of vibrant pigments.

The exhibition’s focus on the painter and process largely disappeared after the opening gallery, giving way to a textbook overview of Roman wall painting organized, loosely, according to common subjects and themes. Introductory text or wall labels in some cases referred to the overall theme, but in general, the show was a greatest hits of Roman wall painting. But greatest hits are great for a reason. The second gallery displayed a number of large and well-preserved panels exemplifying common themes, particularly those drawn from myth or related to banqueting, and, according to the venue curators, ties these themes to parts of the Roman house. Accordingly, grander painting schemes appeared in more public rooms of

the house, such as the large mythological scenes. Here also was the most prominent evidence for painting practice outside of the exhibition's first gallery: four panels of a nearly identical scene of Selene and Endymion arranged in a two-by-two grid in the center of the gallery. The paintings, from the House of the Dioscuri (Pompeii VI.9.6-7), the House of the Silverware (Pompeii VI.7.20), the House of Chlorus and Caprasia (Pompeii IX.2.10), and Herculaneum (MANN inv. 9245)—are almost identical iconographically, with Endymion depicted as a hunter, nude and lounging in a rocky landscape, and the goddess Selene in flight, drapery billowing around her and the crescent moon on her head. The four panels share many similarities and suggest a workbook tradition, but their small differences—details such as gesture, coloring, or execution—point to distinct painters.

Mythological paintings continued into the third gallery, which also included still life and motifs “inspired by Greek art,” including theater and the three Graces. A brief mention of the influence of Greek painting on later Roman practice reminded the audience of the painter, but overall, this individual (or more precisely *individuals*) was absent, and our focus remained on the visual variety before our eyes. The same rang true for the fourth and final gallery, devoted to rediscovery, including a timeline of excavations, several modern reproductions based on ancient artifacts, and several Roman paintings, including what could be considered the exhibition's highlight, the important and well-preserved scene of Jason and Pelias from the House of Jason (Pompeii IX.5.18-21), the painter of which was also represented by another panel in gallery two, the Cassandra's prophecy from the House of the Iron Gate (Pompeii I.2.28). Unfortunately, this important connection was lost due to the physical distance of the panels from each other.

As is sometimes the case with extensive exhibitions, the catalogue provides the commentary necessary to understand the overall premise or make connections between individual objects. Here, the accompanying volume is an overview of ancient painting more broadly, with concise and digestible essays on Roman painting in Pompeii, the rediscovery, and original context of the works—as well as Etruscan painting, and techniques of ancient Greek painting. Two essays offer insight more relevant to the supposed topic at hand: Mario Grimaldi reviews the social role of Roman painters, the practicalities of how they worked, and what we know about them from modern research. In a separate essay, John R. Clarke discusses how painters laid out their compositions using grids and made copies using various aids including model-books, outline-books, and figure-books—insights that were missing from the exhibition itself.

Especially helpful in the catalogue is the up-to-date bibliography, high-quality color images, and entries for each painting; these will be a welcome addition to English-language material on the subject, so much of which is in Italian or French, particularly for an undergraduate or lower-level graduate course. The object entries are also where some of the more interesting insights can be found about the paintings, their creators, and the process of making. It is here that we find a clear explanation of the Achilles on Skyros, Selene, and Endymion, and other ‘workbook-based’ paintings—outlining their similarities and differences that lead scholars to understand they were created by separate painters but based on a shared workbook—as well as discussion of paintings in the exhibition made by the same painter, the Jason and Pelias painting and Cassandra panel mentioned above, and the visual characteristics that lead to this conclusion. This rich information would





Figure 2 Fresco of a female painter painting a statue from the House of the Surgeon, Pompeii (VI.1.10, room 19, east wall), First century CE. National Archaeological Museum of Naples (inv. 9018). Photo: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain



**Figure 3** Fresco of a mask on vine leaves and bunches of grapes from the east wall of triclinium 13, House of V. Popidius, Pompeii VII.14.9, 55 x 55 cm, first century CE. National Archaeological Museum of Naples (inv. 9798). Photo: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo



have been welcome in the exhibition itself, and certainly have strengthened the narrative.

While the exhibition falls short of its lofty goal—to “be an immersive experience seen from [ ... ] the point of view of the *pictor*”—it had more than a few gems that made it a worthwhile display of Roman paintings.<sup>2</sup> Heavy hitters like those from the House of Jason or the two opening paintings of Achilles on Skyros were alone worth the visit; however, I was more entranced by the smaller, more intimate scenes, and the opportunity to view them up close. A small painting at the entrance to the second gallery especially caught my attention: a mask amidst bunches of grapes and vines from the House of v. Popidius (Pompeii VII.14.9) (Figure 3). Less than two feet by two feet square, the small fragment is from the genre of garden paintings, which became popular in the first century BCE. In the center a small round mask is visible surrounded by a field of grape leaves. Up close, one can see the layers of paint, which creates a texture and contributes to the feeling of lush, verdant greenery found in actual gardens. Yellow and purple grapes are carefully highlighted amidst the foliage and appear about to tumble off the vine and into one’s hand. Standing at eye level in front of this painting, only inches from the surface, I could truly appreciate these details and the individuals who executed them.

The true strength of the exhibition may be its versatility. I saw the exhibition with a non-art historian and our reactions were as different as one would expect, yet we both enjoyed the experience. He was most taken by the sheer number of paintings present. Having only before seen such a volume of

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2 Grimaldi, Mario. *The Painters of Pompeii: Roman Frescoes from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples*. Rome: Mondo Mostre, 2021. p. 91.

wall paintings on site at Pompeii itself, he was struck by the quality of preservation of many of these panels and vivid subject matter—the still lifes topped his list along with the close-to-life-size panels from the House of Lucrezio Fronto (Pompeii IX.3.5). Surprisingly, his least favorite aspect of the exhibition was my favorite: the four panels of Selene and Endymion, which he felt lacked context or explanation. Conversely, I left the exhibition feeling like I had just finished a live action speed-read of Roger Ling’s *Roman Painting*, but I was still infinitely satisfied after spending an embarrassingly long time staring at the four paintings of Selene and Endymion side by side.<sup>3</sup> I suppose there is truth in the adage that *there is something for everyone*.

One final note: *The Painters of Pompeii* would have been a momentous exhibition under any circumstances. As the exclusive venue for the exhibition, the Oklahoma City Museum of Art brought over 70 objects from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples to the Southern Plains of the United States, making visible some of the most vivid paintings from the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. This alone would have been enough. But given the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the opening of any exhibition over the past 20 months was an even more momentous occasion.<sup>4</sup> The organizers of the exhibition must be commended for the success of this beautiful and extensive project—a visual delight.

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3 Ling, Roger. *Roman Painting*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

4 For an understanding of the challenges the COVID pandemic created for international loan exhibitions, one need not look further than the exhibition, *Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain* at Dallas’ own Meadows Museum. Venue curator, Wendy Sepponen, explained how the Meadows overcame some of these hurdles in an interview with Erin Quinn-Kong for *Texas Highways*, “In Dallas, Curators Use WhatsApp to Stage an Exhibition of Renaissance Artwork” (September 19, 2020).

*From Heroes to Immortals: Classical Mythological Prints* May 15–November 28, 2021

*Room with a View: Scenes of the Italian Countryside* May 15–November 28, 2021

Running concurrent to *Painters of Pompeii* were two smaller installations consisting of objects from the OKMA's permanent collection. *From Heroes to Immortals: Classical Mythological Prints* featured over 15 prints from the museum's permanent collection. Works by familiar artists including Grace Hartigan and Leonard Baskin explored and reinterpreted familiar themes and stories from classical mythology such as Hercules, Theseus and the Minotaur, or Narcissus.

*Room with a View* presented paintings, prints, and photos depicting the Italian countryside. The sixteen works in this installation spanned a period of nearly 300 years, yet offered a surprisingly familiar look at the campagna. Particularly resonant was Thomas Cole's largescale painting, *An Italian Autumn*

(c. 1844–1877 CE) which occupied a single wall and, as the label explained, captured Cole's fascination with the Italian light. Having just spent time with the Roman frescoes (c. first decade of the first century CE), I couldn't help but be reminded of the landscape paintings that, like Cole's depiction of the Roman countryside, are dotted with buildings, carefully highlighted. What a rare privilege, to see two different painters visualize the Italian landscape, albeit roughly 1800 years apart.

These two smaller, more intimate exhibitions were a welcome bonus—they stood independently, but also complemented *Painters of Pompeii*, providing visitors with the chance to witness the ongoing legacy of themes and subjects, as well as the opportunity to reflect on these in a more digestible context.

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