The House of Augustus and the Villa Farnesina: The New Values of the Imperial Decorative Program

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THE HOUSE OF AUGUSTUS AND THE VILLA FARNESINA: THE NEW VALUES OF THE IMPERIAL DECORATIVE PROGRAM

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in the Art History

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the Art History have been completed.

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The House of Augustus and the Villa Farnesina:
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Introduction

In a society that lacked the post-industrial divisions of public and private, work and home, the house in Augustan Rome served as a locus of an individual’s social status and power, as well as the place in which he both displayed and exercised his dignitas (rank and public authority).¹ An elite’s social identity was both reflected in and augmented by the amenities of his home, which the Roman architect Vitruvius tells us should include atria, tablina, and exedrae.² The archaeological remains of houses at sites like Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Rome indicate that the architecture, furnishings and wall paintings of Roman domiciles were inspired by such diverse civilizations as Ptolemaic Egypt, Classical and Hellenistic Greece, and Republican Rome, and that these eclectic inspirations were mixed to become a style all of their own that reflected the persona and status of the homeowner. In many houses, the art commissioned by Augustus and his elite counterparts was also partially inspired by contemporary components of Rome, including the establishment of a new government, a new hereditary dynasty, and a new view on foreign subject matter.³ This thesis considers how the public interests of the Augustan age in globalization, a return to tradition, religion, and piety, and the revival of the mos maiorum (customs of the ancestors) intersect with the wall painting of two houses in Rome associated with the imperial family: the House of Augustus on the Palatine Hill (ca. 27 BCE) and the Villa Farnesina in the Campus Martius (ca. 21 BCE). The style of wall paintings in the House of Augustus place it near the end of the Second Style (40-25 BCE) while those of the house of Agrippa and Julia (the Villa Farnesina) mark the transition from the Second to the Third Style (ca. 25 BCE-40 CE).

²Vitruvius. De Architectura, 6.3.
The Rise of Augustus: Military Strength, Piety, and Moderation

Unrest was nothing new to the Romans who were present during the death of Caesar and the subsequent civil war that culminated in the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. These events eventually lead to Octavian’s control of Rome under the title of Augustus in 27 BCE. The future emperor’s contest for control over Rome began in 44 BCE after the death of Caesar, Octavian’s adoptive father and great uncle. Octavian heard of his great uncles death while studying in Apollonia and decided to return to Rome to claim his inheritance. The initial reason for his return was revenge for Caesar’s death, a case resolved through taking up arms against Brutus and Cassius alongside the other members of the Second Triumvirate, Marc Antony and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. After Octavian and Marc Antony were jointly victorious at Philippi in 42 BCE, Octavian became locked in a power struggle with Marc Antony and other characters that lasted another eleven years. It was not until the defeat of Sextus Pompeius in 36 BCE at the battle of Naulochus that the Roman people began to take Octavian seriously, at which point his alliance with Marc Antony was broken off. Following this battle, Marc Antony returned to Egypt and Octavian continued his rule in Rome. This period of peace was short-lived, for in 31 BCE Octavian declared war against Cleopatra VII and launched a naval battle at Actium that ended with Marc Antony and Cleopatra’s defeat. A year later Octavian laid siege to Alexandria where Antony had taken refuge with Cleopatra. Octavian forced Antony to commit suicide, and despite wanting to keep her alive for his triumph, Cleopatra soon died of suicide from the bite of an asp. After the respectful burial of both Antony and Cleopatra, Egypt became a Roman province. It was after this decisive victory over his last political and military adversary that Octavian began to redress the ruling of Rome and create a cultural program that became characterized as a complete moral
revival after this long period of unrest. In his Res Gestae, Octavian states that by 27 BCE he had restored the Republic by transferring the power of the state to the senate and people of Rome. Proclaimed savior of the state, he in turn received the honorific title of Augustus by senatorial decree. After this he made every attempt to separate this period of peace (the years during his rule) from the previous period of unrest.

In addition to being Imperator (commander in chief), Augustus also became a model of piety as he emphasized that he restored mos maiorum to the Roman state. Augustus’s role as a religious leader also stems from his emphasis on rebuilding the temples of Rome, and his relationship with Apollo, his personal patron deity. According to Suetonius, this affiliation can be traced all the way back to the year before he was born, when an omen announced that a king for the Roman people was about to be born, and thus the senate decreed that no male child that year would be reared. When Augustus’s mother, Atia, went to the Temple of Apollo in the night to perform worship to the god, she fell asleep and a serpent glided up to her before leaving. When she awoke the next morning she had marks of colors like a serpent. Ten months later Octavian was born and therefore was regarded as the son of Apollo. His devotion to Apollo continued as he studied in Apollonia, where Apollo was worshiped in his aniconic form as a baetyl, a form that Octavian would introduce to Rome. Apollo was so important to Octavian that he ascribed his victory over Sextus Pompey primarily to the help of Apollo and also named Apollo as the co-victor of the Battle of Actium. During the battle over Sextus Pompey, Octavian vowed to have a temple of Apollo built on the Palatine where a thunderbolt had conveyed the

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8 *Res Gestae divi Augustae* 34.
9 Suet. Aug. 7.
11 Suet. Aug. 94.
12 Suet. Aug. 94.
god’s will and designated the spot where he wished the temple to be built.\textsuperscript{13} This temple was dedicated in 28 BCE and stood beside his newly built Palatine residence, which was connected to the temple complex by a private corridor.\textsuperscript{14} The importance of his personal piety for the Roman state culminated in 12 BCE, when Aemilius Lepidus died and Augustus became Pontifex Maximus, or chief priest of Roman state religion.

Augustus strove to be viewed as a pious ruler who practiced moderation in his personal life, despite his many building programs, civic honors, and military victories. Augustus was a contradiction of sorts, for although he sought recognition for his accomplishments on and off the battlefield, and tried to raise his accomplishments and profile in the media of architecture, literature and art, he also renounced all insignia of personal power: no scepter, no diadem, nor the golden crown or purple toga of Caesar. The more evident his power became in the state during his fifty-seven years of rule, the more resolutely he opposed the appearance of being a monarch.\textsuperscript{15} His modesty in personal trappings are reflected in the life of Augustus told by Suetonius who describes the House of Augustus as one that “was remarkable neither for size nor elegance,” and notes that some rooms are without any marble decoration or marble pavements.\textsuperscript{16} Suetonius also gives Augustus’s view on the large and sumptuous palaces of the countryside, which he apparently disproved of—even the one his granddaughter Julia built.\textsuperscript{17} Like the architecture of his house, his household goods and furniture were plain and scarce, and Suetonius tells us that Augustus slept on a low and plainly furnished bed.\textsuperscript{18} This moderation practiced in his

\textsuperscript{13} Suet. Aug. 30.
\textsuperscript{14} Zanker, \textit{The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus}, 50-51.
\textsuperscript{16} Suet. Aug. 72.
\textsuperscript{17} Suet. Aug. 72.
\textsuperscript{18} Suet. Aug. 73.
daily life is something that plays an integral role in the decorative programs for the private spaces of both himself and other elite Romans of his time.

The Styles of Roman Wall Painting in the Augustan Age

In the last two centuries of the Republic, aristocrats could freely build lavish villas in the countryside around Rome and along the Bay of Naples that incorporated a wide range of cultural influences without being criticized by their fellow elites. Luxurious country houses are known in Campania as early as the middle of the second century BCE. These villas became a sort of safe haven for aristocrats who wanted to get away from Rome’s tradition bound constraints and indulge in frivolous distractions.\(^{19}\) Before the time of Augustus, these villas rarely had decoration that was quintessentially Roman, but rather decoration was pulled from Greek and Hellenistic motifs and themes. It wasn’t until Augustus that political imagery penetrated the private sphere and was combined with Greek motifs in addition to a variety of new themes.\(^{20}\)

The painting of villas in and around Rome and in the Bay of Naples are now grouped into what is known as the four Pompeian styles of wall painting, a modern categorization of the styles of wall paintings in use during the Late Republic and Early Empire. First introduced in 1882 by August Mau, the schema divides wall paintings by date into four styles, which will be referred to in this discussion simply as the First, Second, Third and Fourth Styles. Mau created this chronological system based not only on the remains of wall paintings at Pompeii but also on Vitruvius’ account of the development of painting from its beginnings until his own time.\(^{21}\) One of the main distinguishing characteristics of the First, Second, and Third Styles is the difference

\(^{19}\) Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 25.


in their use of architectural illusion. The First Style uses stucco to create an illusion of marble panels as well as architectural elements like cornices; the Second Style relies on paint and extends illusion into the third dimension, setting up architectural audicule framed by columns and stage-like settings; and the Third Style recedes from illusion, reducing the foreground of columns to “unrealistic” decorative motifs that simply frame central pictures.\(^{22}\) It is important to keep in mind that these styles and their characteristics are not mutually exclusive; the owner of the house, his status, and the decorative and stylistic trends of the time affect them in many ways. What matters is not the visual games played but rather the associations evoked, the power is not in the illusion but rather the allusion.\(^{23}\) The evocation of public buildings within the private sphere was one of the concerns of patrons and painting workshops.

The First Style, which began in the second century BCE, is also known as the “masonry style” or the “incrustation style.” The First Style is traditionally given an end date somewhere between 90 and 60 BCE, but it continued to be used in Pompeii and Herculaneum until 79 CE. In addition, elements of the First Style, such as the painted rendering of marble, continued to fill the dado of walls painted in the other three styles, both in villas and public architecture. The components of the First Style are commonly described as “geometrical” and consist of primarily rectangular, raised stucco blocks brightly painted to imitate different types of costly stone. The First Style is also known for rendering architectural elements in stucco, one hypothesis for the inspiration behind the First Style is that these fresco artists simulated marble and other masonry on painted plaster in order to look back at the architecture created in the Hellenistic kingdoms in the late 4\(^{th}\) to early 3\(^{rd}\) century BCE, particularly the lavish palaces whose interiors were

bedecked with marble and other stone coverings. Another is that they are imitating public architecture of their own time period, either seen in their own town or in Rome.

The House of Sallust, an upper-class Pompeian house dating back to the second or late third century BCE, provides an example of the First Style (Fig. 1). Both atrium and tablinum walls have a pronounced structural character. Cornices molded in stucco relief are present, and individual blocks stand out from the background in an imitation of drafted margin masonry. These are painted in a variety of colors: yellow and black, and an alternation of red, yellow, and purple in the zone of isodomes.

The language of architectural illusion becomes much more sophisticated in the Second Style. Scholarship has pointed to two main candidates for its origin: contemporary stage scenery and painting, and actual contemporary architecture of either Hellenistic palaces or the Roman luxury villa itself. These possible origins are not mutually exclusive for it is the allusion to public architecture that is of importance, an allusion that forms the basis for the imagery found in

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26 Eleanor Winsor Leach, The Social Life of Painting in Ancient Rome and on the Bay of Naples (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60.
all three venues.\textsuperscript{28} The beginnings of the Second Style can be traced to the House of the Griffins in Rome (Fig. 2). While retaining the masonry imitation of the First Style, illusionistic architecture stands on a narrow ledge in front of the painted masonry. Moreover, each wall of painted masonry is broken into three parts, and the painted columns help divide and frame this tripartite division. The Second Style marks the emergence of a new focus, the central picture, and a new aesthetic, in which pattern and color become more important than reality.\textsuperscript{29} It imitates architectural forms by purely pictorial means; in place of modeled stuccowork of the First Style, it uses trompe l’oeil in order to achieve perspective, an element that is well illustrated by a small room from the villa of Publius Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (Fig.3).\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} Wallace-Hadrill, \textit{Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum}, 27.
\textsuperscript{29} Roger Ling, \textit{Roman Painting} (Cambridge University Press, 1991) 23.
\textsuperscript{30} Roger Ling, \textit{Roman Painting}, 23.
This room provides a great example of Second Style wall painting closer in style to that of the later House of Augustus than of the earlier House of the Griffins. The room, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, comes from a *villa rustica*, or a country house of an elite that also functioned as a working farm. The lavish wall decoration, dated between 50–40 BCE, attests to the original owner as someone of elite status.31 The room includes a series of distinct architectural vistas that range from sacred landscapes to townsapes. Each vista features architectural details painted to resemble real ones and utilizes tromp l’oeil to render objects of daily life. For instance, metal and glass vases sit on shelves and tables that appear to project from the wall. A decade or two after the painting of the room at Boscoreale the full-blown Second Style is supplanted by a later incarnation of the Second Style that features less solid architectural elements and new themes. The beginning of the Late Second Style is roughly dated to the years of the Second Triumvirate and the early reign of Augustus (c. 40-30 BCE),32 which would support the thesis that this fundamental shift in decoration coincides with the shift in ideology

following the social and political changes implemented after the battle of Actium. We see the emergence of the Late Second Style decoration in the House of Augustus with the thinning of the architectural elements that stand on the narrow parapet at the front of the picture plane. These now frame central sacro-idyllic landscapes with mythological and divine themes surrounded by decorative Egyptian elements. Asymmetrical perspective is abandoned and pictures are placed within a central aedicule that replaces the regularly spaced columns that defined the perimeter of the room, and supported the painted architrave in the early Second Style. This shifts the viewer’s attention to the center of the wall and the central painting. Trompe l’oeil is still used for still lifes (e.g. bowls of fruit) and to render architectural elements to appear real.

The Villa Farnesina, which dates slightly later than the House of Augustus, provides a glimpse of the transition between the Second and Third Styles (Fig. 4). New motifs, including egyptianizing and miniaturizing elements, are painted with fine detail, architectural elements thin even further and the focus is switched to small painted panels that are held up by miniature figures or candelabrae. There is an appearance of all black rooms, and decoration is primarily in red and yellow coloring. But some Second Style characteristics are still in place; trompe l’oeil is used to render architectural elements that still take up a large portion of the wall, while perspective becomes shallower. The origin of the Second Style is a source of contention for scholars; many believe that the style originated from the wall painter’s imitation of the precious materials and elaborate architectural forms of Hellenistic palace, while others argue that theatrical stage decoration was the inspiration. While there are aspects in the decoration that is taken from Hellenistic palaces, in the House of Augustus especially the argument in favor of
theatrical stage decoration is stronger. This argument is supported by the inclusion of theatrical masks, and vistas that resemble wooden theater sets standing on the podium of a wood theater.  

Where the Villa Farnesina (21 BCE) is seen as the transition between styles, the Villa Boscotrecase ascribed to Agrippa’s son, Agrippa Postumus, provides an example of the mature Third Style (Fig. 5), which flourishes until about 40 CE. Where the impetus behind the First and Second Styles can be traced to the architecture of public places, the Third Style seems to be inspired by the art of private places, and particularly the pinocothecae (picture galleries) found in elite villas around the Bay of Naples. While there is more of an emphasis on the private with the Third Style, that does not mean the avoidance of public architecture all together, for there are

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34 Ling, Roman Painting, 52.  
still porticoes and columns represented. The Third Style is characterized by its rejection of architectural vistas and a conscious change of taste, one that is condemned by Vitruvius as an abandonment of traditional properties.\(^{36}\) In place of public architecture in the domestic interior we are now instead given more elegant decorative frameworks that set off panel paintings with mythological subjects. Core to the Third Style is the rejection of large architectural vistas and landscapes in favor of the decorative. The central picture is reduced in size and is supported by reeds, stalks, and candelabrae that substitute columns and other weight bearing elements. Architecture is thinned and made smaller, and from the architecture fantastic figures and vegetation arise.\(^{37}\) The central aedicula dominates almost every wall as it does in the Late Second Style, the architecture thins dramatically, perspectives become simpler and shallower, and the aforementioned egyptianizing motifs continue. The aedicula framing the center picture tends to be relatively substantial; the proportions of the columns are quite tall but are still quite thin, once again drawing attention to the pictures being framed. The architectural details that had originally formed the focus of the decoration are used only as a frame and this framework gives structure for the panel painting that is now the focal point.\(^{38}\) Ornate easels hold up pictures on either side of the aedicule. Similar to the House of Augustus, the painting in the aedicula now provides the spatial depth once achieved by architectural perspectives in the mature Second Style.

\(^{36}\) Vitruvius, *de Architectura*, 7.5.3-4.  
\(^{37}\) Vitruvius, *de arch.*, 7.5.3-4.  
The familiarity of these three styles of Roman wall painting are integral for the understanding of my argument towards the change in style and its relationship with the subject matter in the Villa Farnesina and the House of Augustus. In the following study of each individual villa I will be discussing the history, the common motifs and themes that can be traced back to Augustus and his ideological program. I have chosen specific rooms for each villa, these rooms are chosen for their ability to display a certain highlighted theme that plays into Augustus’s interests in globalization, tradition, and piety.

The House of Augustus

The House of Augustus, first called the ‘House of Livia’ upon excavation due to a water pipe bearing her name, was excavated by Gianfilippo Carettoni in the late 1950s and 1960s, and contains some of highest quality and best preserved examples of Late Second Style wall painting.\(^3^9\) When Octavian returned to Rome in November of 36 BCE after the defeat of Sextus Pompey at the Battle of Naulochus, he had been transformed from Caesar’s inexperienced and

youthful heir, and into a worthy leader. After this change in authoritative power, his visual
language from this point on increasingly drew attention to the traditional foundation of his
dignitas: military victory, familial connections, constitutional authority, and global leadership.40

His relationship with Apollo, and his military relations with the Greek east all stem from his
early experiences and are highlighted in his decorative programs. Themes of military victory,
Roman conquest over the east, and Augustus’s relationship with Apollo are elements evident in
the House of Augustus as well as in the Villa Farnesina.

The house itself, a key element in Augustus’s self-representation and in the reflection of
the mentality of the Augustan Age, is part of a larger complex on the Palatine Hill in Rome (Fig.
6). This Palatine location has a wealth of meaning for Augustus, for the house was built next to
the Temple of Apollo Palatinus, a temple Octavian built for his patron deity on the site struck by
lightning in 36 BCE. Our ancient sources tell us that the house stood above the Lupercal, the
grotto at the foot of the Palatine Hill that is associated with Rome’s mythical origins, as it is
remembered as the place where the divine twins were suckled by the she-wolf.41 In this way the
physical placement of the house provided physical proof of Augustus’s legitimacy.42 In addition,
the supposed lightening strike at the location of the Temple of Apollo during the battle with
Sextus Pompey demonstrates the future emperor’s clever use of a natural event to justify both the
temple site adjacent to his residence and the worship of a foreign god within the city’s sacred
boundary. 43

43 Daine Favro, “Making Rome a World City,” in Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus, ed. Karl Galinsky
et al. (Austin: University of Texas, 2007) 234-263.
For the purposes of this discussion, we will be referring to the date of the *domus* as 27 BCE, the year when the Senate decreed to hang the *corona civica* (an oak wreath) above the door and to plant laurel trees on either side of the entranceway.\(^4\)\(^4\) The excavated remains of the *domus* occupied the area on the Palatine near the end of the *Scalae Caci* (the steps leading up the Palatine)—otherwise known as the area near the later libraries of Domitian. The house was laid out on two terraces on the southwestern slope of the hill, one about nine meters below the other.\(^4\)\(^5\) The domestic rooms, modest-sized with simple mosaic floors and carefully painted walls, occupied the area to the west of the peristyle. The rooms that served a more public function were laid out around the northern and eastern side of the peristyle (Fig. 7) and had wall paintings, tiled flooring and stucco vaults.\(^4\)\(^6\)

As discussed in the preceding section, there was a significant change in the first ten years of Augustus’s rule in the decoration of domestic interiors, with a move away from the solid architectonic features of the Second Style toward the more fantastic renderings of the Third. The House of Augustus, largely thought of as being near the end of the Second Style, is illustrative of this change. Vitruvius, who opposed this change greatly, was one of the ancient writers who best described the conversion from architecture rendered to appear real and objects from the natural world in the Villa at Boscoreale, to central pictures supported by unrealistic weight-bearing elements such as candelabrae, stalks, and vines. Despite his devotion to Augustus, he speaks derisively of the change in *Ten Books on Architecture*:

…because similar forms never did, do, nor can exist in nature. These new fashions have so much prevailed, that for want of competent judges, true art is little esteemed. How is it possible for a reed to support a roof, or a candelabrum to bear a house with the ornaments on its roof, or a small and pliant stalk to carry a sitting figure; or, that half figures and flowers at the same time should spring out of roots and stalks?
And yet the public, so far from discouraging these falsehoods, are delighted with them, not for a moment considering whether such things could exist.\textsuperscript{47}

Vitruvius is not the best example of progressive thinking during his time, and he was an avid advocate for the commonsense art that looks “real” he wanted the wall decoration to keep with the traditional values of the past to strive towards naturalism in painting.\textsuperscript{48} Vitruvius expresses his anger at the taste of the present generation, which was moving away from naturalism, “But these which were imitations based upon reality are now disdained by the improper taste of the present. On the stucco art monsters rather than definite representations taken from definite things.”\textsuperscript{49} Some of the biggest changes that took place, that Vitruvius decries, includes the introduction of fantastic decorative elements made up of various flora and fauna, thin columns that are not realistic in their ability to bear a pediment, and the inclusion of what he describes as monsters.

Despite Vitruvius’s aversion to the change in decorative style, later ancient writers such as Suetonius praise Augustus’ house as a modest portrayal of the emperor.\textsuperscript{50} As described earlier, Suetonius’s praise of his modesty includes explicit references to the simplicity of his household furnishings.\textsuperscript{51} It can be conceived that Vitruvius’s aversion to this new style may have less to do with the amount of decoration, and more to do with his distaste of the move away from naturalism. Compared to the huge expensive building projects that Augustus and other members of the imperial family patronized in the civic sphere, the relatively inexpensive decoration of his house was truly in keeping with the princeps’ refusal to surround himself with luxury: no marble

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{47} Vitruvius, de Arch, 7.5.3-4.
\textsuperscript{48} John R. Clarke, “Augustan Domestic Interiors”, 266.
\textsuperscript{49} Vitruvius, de arch, 7.3.
\textsuperscript{50} Suet. Aug. 72.
\textsuperscript{51} Iacopi, The House of Augustus: Wall Paintings, 8.
\end{footnotesize}
columns, old master paintings, or famous statues.\textsuperscript{52} This evasion from over-decoration was present in other buildings as well, the Villa Farnesina carried out imitation picture galleries that were inexpensive and durable substitutes for the real thing.\textsuperscript{53}

Among these changes, the inclusion of a central aedicule and the abandonment of asymmetrical perspective are among the most fundamental of the period. The inclusion of this central aedicula shifts the viewer’s attention to the center of the wall.\textsuperscript{54} The shift in attention to the center of the wall is aided by the thinning of the architectural elements that focuses the viewer’s eye on the central scene specifically.\textsuperscript{55} This shift in attention from the perspective system designed for the whole room to a single axial focus on each wall-the picture in the aedicula- with all other perspectives converging on the aedicule is characteristic of the Late Second Style and continues into the Transitional and Early Third.\textsuperscript{56}

This new aesthetic dominates the Room of the Masks in the House of Augustus (Fig. 8). A new spatial organization is introduced, for a scheme is focused on a plain central aedicula on each wall that frames a hazy, nearly monochrome landscape painting. In Figure 8, we can see how each wall is a variation of the same theme. While the south wall’s design in the Room of the Masks represents a more reserved version of the central aedicular composition, the west wall attempts grander spatial effects with heavier red columns supporting the aedicula’s pediment, and three yellow columns pushing out to either side of the central picture. On both walls, fantastic creatures balance on top of the gables, and the theatrical masks that give the room its

\textsuperscript{52} Suet. \textit{Aug.} 72.
\textsuperscript{53} Clarke, “Augustan Domestic Interiors,” 277.
\textsuperscript{54} John R. Clarke, \textit{The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 50.
\textsuperscript{55} Clarke, “Augustan Domestic Interiors,” 268.
\textsuperscript{56} Clarke, “Augustan Domestic Interiors,” 268.
name sit on the walls to either side of the aedicula (Fig. 9).\textsuperscript{57} The artist is still articulating the flat wall with architectural features that recede and project, but in a less decorative manner.

\textbf{Figure 8}, Room of the Masks, House of Augustus, Rome, 27 BCE. Image Source: Irene Iacopi, \textit{House of Augustus: Wall Paintings}, page 20.

\textbf{Figure 9}, Rome, House of Augustus, Detail of Theatrical Mask, South Wall, 27 BCE. Image Source: Irene Iacopi, \textit{House of Augustus: Wall Paintings}, page 27.

The impetus of the Late Second style is subject for contention by many scholars. Some believe that the thinning of the columns and the inclusion of masks are representations of wooden theater sets standing on the podium of a stone theater.\textsuperscript{58} This would explain the thinness of the columns and piers. The excavator of the Room

\textsuperscript{57} Clarke, “Augustan Domestic Interiors,” 269.
of the Masks believed that the landscape paintings represented cloth hangings used to set theatrical scenes. The Room of the Masks supports this origin’s thesis of theater settings as well, for the explicit forms of the three-door stage set are underlined by the series of masks. The decoration of the wall becomes a backdrop against which action is to take place and transport the actors. The Late Second Style artist may have learned his craft from theatrical scene painters, for he knew the rules of perspective and trompe-l’oeil, and he also had the ability to create architectural vistas and to produce light and shadow on a variety of objects such as colored marbles, gilded tracery, and theatrical masks. While this is a convincing interpretation of the thinning of the architecture, it is possible the thinning could be simply to act as frames for the central pictures.

Although many believe that the Second Style originated from the wall painter’s imitation of the precious materials and architectural forms of Hellenistic palaces, the general consensus for the origin is from theatrical stage sets. The former argument supports the assimilation of various cultures that fueled the imperial decorative program and would be a continuation of the origins of the First style. And while Hellenistic palaces may have been the inspiration for the Second Style wall paintings of Boscoreale, to argue that these extravagant decorations were kept in mind later in the Second Style in the House of Augustus are means for contention due to the simplification of decoration and the use of thinner columns and stage-like settings- slim ionic columns bearing candelabrae formed of plant motifs break into the space of the orthostats and flank the aedicule as if they were stage wings. These reasons lead me to argue more towards the side of theatrical inspirations.

59 Clarke, “Augustan Domestic Interiors,” 266.
61 Clarke, “Augustan Domestic Interiors,” 266.
The meanings and themes behind the paintings themselves are a reflection of Augustus’s legitimacy as a ruler, his prowess as a military leader, and as pious religious leader. Nearly every aspect of the new decorative program described above—from their representation of thin architectural components, to the content of pictures and stuccoes (described further in the coming pages), reflect Augustan cultural themes. The appearance of egyptianizing elements in wall painting, that will be covered in the examination of the “Emperor’s Study,” was inspired by the triumph of Octavian over Egypt. The Late Second Style itself has been argued to become more staid and simpler in its last phase as a response to the sober code of behavior that Augustus advocated for public figures.\(^{62}\) This is seen in the simpler landscapes, the thinning out of architectural elements, and the inclusion of religious motifs and themes.

The House of Augustus, specifically the Room of the Masks, presents even more evidence to the public that Augustus is both legitimate ruler and pious religious leader. The decoration of the house depicts themes related to Apolline cult. Apollo stands for discipline and morality, two things, specifically the latter, that are important values to Augustus. On the south wall of the Room of the Masks the central aedicule frames a sacred landscape that features a baetyl in the center of a semicircular enclosure (Fig 10). The baetyl is a cone-shaped, aniconic representation of Apollo, the patron deity of Augustus.\(^{63}\) This same motif recurs on one of the terracotta plaques from the Temple of Apollo, aforementioned as part of the Augustan compound on the Palatine.\(^{64}\) In addition to themes of piety, themes of Rome’s foundation are also present. The spear set into the depiction of the baetyl could be a reference to that which Romulus hurled against the Palatine Hill at the moment of Rome’s foundation.\(^{65}\) Similarly, the rustic sanctuary

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\(^{65}\) Iacopi, *The House of Augustus: Wall Paintings*, 16.
shown at the center of the eastern and western walls has been identified as that of the faun Pan Lupercus, the deity linked with the Lupercal. It can be argued that this sanctuary is an allusion to Romulus and his links with the Palatine that have to do with the ideological significance of the placement of Augustus’s home.  

Figure 10, Rome, House of Augustus, South Wall, Room of the Masks, 27 BCE. Image Source: Irene Iacopi, *House of Augustus: Wall Paintings*, pg. 21.

Figure 11, House of Augustus, “Emperor’s Study,” Rome, 27 BCE. Image Source: Irene Iacopi, *House of Augustus: Wall Paintings*, pg. 47.

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Two themes that begin in the Late Second Style with the House of Augustus and develop markedly in the Third Style with the Villa Farnesina are miniaturism and Egyptianizing ornament. Miniature friezes, vegetal ornaments, and fantastic creatures encourage the observer to move close to the wall for examination, these ornaments are more of the innovations that incited Vitruvius’ disapproval.\(^6^7\) As we will see, these motifs in the House of Augustus emphasize his prowess as strong military and global leader. Where the Room of the Masks is the best example of Augustus’s imagery of Apollo and Roman foundation themes, the small room sometimes identified as “The Emperor’s Study” is the best example of the Late Second Style’s use of Egyptian motifs (Fig. 11). The paintings of the walls and vault of this space display an emphasis on the decorative. The floral and fantasy motifs that are characteristic of this “Second-Style” are employed in a detailed and imaginative decorative schema. The wall decoration plays upon different depths, and opens out onto landscape views. In the upper part of the wall are friezes containing various animal motifs that stand out against a black background.\(^6^8\) A black dais wraps around the base of all four walls, this has a golden yellow lacework cornice and serves as the base for the partition wall. Within the aedicule (enveloped by plants that act as weight-bearing elements) are depictions of idyllic, sacred landscapes.\(^6^9\) What is notable about this space, and will be discussed again with the Villa Farnesina, is the use of plant motifs as weight-bearing elements within improbable architectural compositions.\(^7^0\) The use of these decorative features is something that is seen further on the ceiling of the “Emperors Study” with the inclusion of more Egyptian ornament.

\(^6^7\) Clarke, “Augustan Domestic Interiors,” 271.
\(^6^8\) Iacopi, The House of Augustus: Wall Painting, 32-33.
\(^6^9\) Iacopi, The House of Augustus: Wall Painting, 33.
\(^7^0\) Iacopi, The House of Augustus Wall Paintings, 33.
Aspects in “The Emperor’s Study” that allude to Alexandria include: the emphasis on the decorative, the technical skill with which the artist achieves his affects, and symbols that are associated with the cult of Isis (specifically motifs found on the ceiling that will be discussed later). Certain motifs in the room stem from Egyptian religion including obelisks, uraei, situlae (libation vases), and lotus flowers but in this context they serve a purely decorative function (Fig. 12).\textsuperscript{71} The room contains other egyptianizing motifs such as griffons and decorative plants. Like the aediculae in the Room of the Masks, the aediculae in this room frame sacro-idyllic landscapes, but here there are simple indications of preparations for religious worship.

\textsuperscript{71} Iacopi, The House of Augustus Wall Paintings, 33.
such as the depiction of a servant and the statue of a deity within a sacred landscape (Fig. 13).

The vault of the room also contains imagery charged with egyptianizing motifs (Fig. 14). The ceiling is refined and meticulous and shows the skill of the artist. Gold leaf is employed, and while the walls were painted using vivid colors, the colors of the ceiling are lighter and more muted. The dominant tones are pink and white with shades of indigo, malachite green, porphyry, violet, ochre, and gold. The vault is separated from the walls by a stucco cornice and is divided into a geometrical pattern, the center of which is occupied by a tondo. This contains the depiction of two female figures, one of whom is winged and appears to be lifting the other in flight, the latter is veiled and in her right hand holds something out that Iacopi has identified as either a plant or a feathered object. Toward this tondo converge four vertical panels with candelabra of miniature winged figures and clusters of plant motifs. Laid out to form a cross.


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73 Iacopi, *The House of Augustus Wall Paintings*, 33-34.
along the main lines of the square, these seem to direct the viewer’s eye towards the very “heart” of the vault design. Throughout the ceiling are areas of raised stuccowork containing single clusters of acanthus and other plants; all within coffering that encloses an elegantly entwined series of lotus flowers.\textsuperscript{75}

On the bands that mark north and south of the vault are imaginary winged male figures that arise from plant motifs (Fig. 15). These occur together with satyr heads set within flower corollas that are themselves entwined with the leaves of plants. What is important to point out in this discussion of the vault of the room are the dynamic Nikai depicted between plant tendrils and floral spirals. Such features fully exemplify the type of decoration that Vitruvius would attack for being far too fanciful and unrealistic.\textsuperscript{76} The figure of Nike appears frequently here, and elsewhere during this period due to contemporary events of the time such as the battle of Actium. This embodiment of victory reoccurs in the Villa Farnesina and is again seen in a decorative style of plant tendrils and clusters.

\textsuperscript{75} Iacopi, \textit{The House of Augustus: Wall Paintings}, 35.
\textsuperscript{76} Iacopi, \textit{The House of Augustus: Wall Paintings}, 35.
The Villa Farnesina

The Villa Farnesina, unlike the House of Augustus, was not built for Augustus himself but rather for Agrippa and his new bride Julia (Augustus’s daughter) in 21 BCE. Agrippa was a friend of Augustus, a military general, and minister for arts and public works, making the construction of the villa a stage in the construction of the new imperial language in Roman art. By the time of his death in 12 BCE, Agrippa was the number two man in Rome. He served as consul, repaired the old aqueducts and built several new ones, and shared in many of Augustus’ military victories. His villa was discovered in the region of Trastevere in the excavations carried out between 1879 and 1885 for the installation of the Tiber river walls. The area of Trastevere occupied by the villa, connected to the left bank by a bridge built by Agrippa, was an unusual building location for wealthy Romans. The elite of the time typically preferred the slopes of the Janiculum and the area toward the Vatican. Trastevere housed small industries and workshops, often run by foreigners. The recovered portions of the décor—comprised of painted walls, stucco vault reliefs and floor mosaics—all came from the southernmost block of the villa, extensively surveyed and in better condition than its symmetrical counterpart (fig. 16). The two wings were connected by a cryptoporticus—an underground passage articulated by a series of pilasters and lit through window slits.

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79 Maria Rita Sanzi Di Mino, “The Villa of the Farnesina.” 215.
80 Maria Rita Sanzi Di Mino, “The Villa of the Farnesina.” 215
81 Maria Rita Sanzi Di Mino, “The Villa of the Farnesina.” 215.
The Villa Farnesina is traditionally regarded as the bridge between the architectural Second Style and the fanciful decorative motifs and monochromatic walls of the Third.\textsuperscript{82}

Similarities between the two include: central aediculae, attenuated architecture, avoidance of perspectives that pierce the wall, monochrome rooms, love of miniaturistic details, egyptianizing motifs, and the proliferation of painted representation of pictures (Fig. 17).\textsuperscript{83} Strays away from the Second Style include architectural details that act as frames that give structure for the panel painting that is now the focal point, ornate easels hold up pictures on either side of the aedicule, and there are no views into architecture “behind” the wall plane.\textsuperscript{84} These aspects are all ones that Vitruvius denounced further in his discussion on interior decoration. After discussing the past trends towards representing subject matter true to nature, Vitruvius states,


\textsuperscript{83} Clarke, “Augustan Domestic Interiors,” 272.

\textsuperscript{84} Wallace-Hadrill, \textit{Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum}, 33.
But these which were imitations based on reality are now disdained by the improper taste of the present. On the stucco are monsters rather than definite representations taken from definite things. Instead of columns there rise up stalks; instead of gables, striped panels with curled leaves and volutes. Candelabra uphold pictured shrines and above the summits of these, clusters of thin stalks rise from their roots in tendrils with little figures seated upon them at random. Again, slender stalks with heads of men and of animals attached to half the body.\textsuperscript{85}

The Egyptianizing themes that were evident in the House of Augustus are also present in the Villa Farnesina and seem to take precedence over architectural elements. Carefully painted lotus-bud capitals and friezes, palmettes, rosettes and symbols of the cult of Isis appear throughout. The cult of Isis in Rome is complicated; Cassius Dio mentions a series of actions taken by the Senate against Egyptian private cults between the 50’s and 20’s BCE.\textsuperscript{86} In 43 BCE the second triumvirate (which included Octavian) voted in favor of building a temple for Isis and Sarapis, but then Agrippa ordered the destruction of Isis shrines at the end of the 20’s. Meanwhile, the battle of Actium occurred, and between 20 and 10 BCE the Iseum Campense was built in the Campus Martius on Augustus’s orders as the first official site of Egyptian cult in Rome. This integration of Egyptian culture is the result of the conquest of Egypt that produced an influx of craftsmen from Alexandria to Rome. This “origin” of an artistic trend is not enough to account for its social function. Romans constantly borrowed goods from the eastern Mediterranean as new areas opened to them but now they turned them to their own social ends.\textsuperscript{87} While he did not allow Egyptian rites to be celebrated within the pomerium following the battle of Actium, Octavian did make provisions for the temples (of foreign deities) to be restored and repaired by him personally.\textsuperscript{88} It can be suggested that the decorative system of the Farnesina is a reflection of the cultural politics of its era.

\textsuperscript{85} Vitruvius, \textit{de Arch}, 7.5.3-4.  
\textsuperscript{86} Cassius Dio, \textit{Rome}, 54.6  
\textsuperscript{87} Wallace-Hadrill, \textit{Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum}, 30  
\textsuperscript{88} Cassius Dio, \textit{Rome}, 54.2.4
Other cultural and religious themes were broadcast in the Villa Farnesina alongside Egyptian ones. In Room B there is a large figural representation on the sidewall, that of Venus in an aedicula. On the opposite wall in the same room exhibits a central painting depicting nymphs caring for the infant Dionysus (Fig. 18). Flanking this are two white-ground panels held up by sirens whose feet end in those of birds of prey. In the anteroom, surrounded by small panels with erotic and theatrical scenes and set against a red background, a candelabra like Egyptian deity with the crown of Isis, holds two slender cornucopias. In place of the former architectural vistas are a plethora of framed pictures separated by slender caryatid-like figures.\(^{89}\) Egyptian and Hellenistic motifs are combined for a striking overall pictorial effect.

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\(^{89}\) Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, 183-185
Other imagery visible in the Villa Farnesina, and demonstrated in room B are Dionysiac motifs, references to Greek Classical art and Archaic art, and the use of Hellenistic style to represent genre painting. This eclectic mixture of styles combined with the egyptianizing motifs reveal a remarkable process of appropriation, of assimilation through an always increasing accumulation- a model of artistic practice which is the very definition of Augustan art.  

This mixture of styles has already been proven evident in the House of Augustus, but becomes even more decorative and eclectic with the Villa Farnesina. The use of the Hellenistic style to represent genre paintings, and the use of Dionysiac motifs, is seen in the central scene in Room B that depicts a figure (possibly Ino) caring for baby Dionysus. In the upper zone of the wall, the aedicula terminates in a vegetalized pediment surmounted by winged female figures that match the sirens underneath, which is then flanked by caryatids and smaller victory figures. The realistic modeling of bodies and drapery, simple architectural structures and natural setting all derive from Hellenistic landscape painting, an artistic model that may contrast with the

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90 Wyler, “Roman Replications of Greek Art at the Villa Della Farnesina,” 228.
91 Wyler, “Roman Replications of Greek Art at the Villa Della Farnesina,” 224.
classicizing panels on either side but nevertheless alludes to a common cultural tradition. On the stucco ceiling of Room B, the viewer witnesses the unveiling of the phallus for a young boy, who appears to achieve a Dionysiac paradise and the initiation of a woman who enters the same kind of heaven. By appropriating the visual language of Greece, the Augustan court was able to privilege a new style that invested the new political regime with a fitting grandeur.

The use of Dionysiac themes operates alongside the use of Egyptianizing motifs: where Dionysus reflects a set of Greek connotations, Isis and her realm (Egypt) are strongly present but are used more as a decorative aspect rather than the main subject of a painting, as we had seen earlier with the ornaments related to Ptolemaic Egypt in the House of Augustus. This use of Egyptian themes for decoration is seen with the painted statues of Isis and Jupiter Ammon, which are repeated several times, but are not integrated into the picture frames as the images of Venus and Dionysus are, rather they are painted directly onto the red background (Fig. 19). The reason for this use of decorative egyptianizing motifs alongside what we would consider typical Greek or Roman motifs (images of Aphrodite and Dionysus), could have to do with the stressed importance on the moral message of these narrative scenes,

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92 Wyler, “Roman Replications of Greek Art at the Villa Della Farnesina,” 221.
93 Wyler, “Roman Replications of Greek Art at the Villa Della Farnesina,” 227.
rather than just the simple exhibiting of cultures appropriated. Another possible scenario is that these decorative elements bring a flavor of the exotic to the room, but do not threaten the more familiar imagery of either the structural framework or the fully figural panels.  

The use of imagery from all of the cultures described previously, and all of the themes and motifs presented through each culture, serves as a stylistic reflection of an appropriation of the range of conquered cultures by means of integration. This process of integrating a wide range of cultures into the homes of the imperial family is reflective of the totalizing and globalizing frames of mind sought by the new Augustan *Principate.*

**Conclusion**

Yet another difference between the House of Augustus and the Villa Farnesina is the cause for the change from thin architecture with large central aedicule in the House of Augustus, to the excessive thinning of architecture and the use of smaller framed pictures in the Villa Farnesina. Rather than taking reference from Greek stage settings or Hellenistic palaces as the House of Augustus does, it is argued that the decoration at the Villa Farnesina, and other Third Style villas, take inspiration from picture galleries, supporting further this idea of cultural assimilation by the imperial interior decorative program pursued by Augustus and his fellow elites. Romans created art galleries and collections filled with famous Greek masterpieces that had been plundered by conquest and war, or bought at high prices on the art market. The standard setting for the third style wall painting was one framed in columns sustaining a pediment like a little shrine, in this way they appear on domestic walls as they do in public settings whether in temples.

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95 Wyler, “Roman Replications of Greek Art at the Villa Della Farnesina,” 227-228.
96 Wyler, “Roman Replications of Greek Art at the Villa Della Farnesina,” 217.
or collections in porticoes. This is also a new change in artistic tastes, for it was only during this time that Romans were starting to appreciate paintings in public.  

Instead of combining wall painting with hanging pictures, or even decorative sculpture for that matter, the artist chose to imitate such art galleries. With this choice the artist not only suggested a ‘politically correct’ version of luxury, he was also free to play with a wide variety of styles and themes. In rooms B and D this reference to Greek picture galleries is evident in a much more eclectic structure than in the cryptoportico (Fig. 20) of the Villa Farnesina where the paintings are displayed in a regular and paratactic structure. Rather the paintings are positioned in an elaborate composition: their size, style and position are varied, and they are subtly integrated into the arrangement of the walls. The wall of the alcove in room B displays a synthesis of this variety, it is so elaborate that it succeeds in combining architecture, sculpture and painting to replicate pictorially a proper art gallery.

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98 Wyler, “Roman Replications of Greek Art at the Villa Della Farnesina,” 217.
99 Wyler, “Roman Replications of Greek Art at the Villa Della Farnesina,” 218.
The decoration of the House of Augustus and the Villa Farnesina are models for how the themes promulgated by Augustus and his circle entered the domestic sphere in a way befitting the emperor. Compared with the large building projects he patronized, the decoration of both houses are inexpensive substitutes to displaying marble columns, old master paintings, and famous statues. Evident in both villas is the overall decorative program that plays on a range of cultural references such as Greek, Egyptian, and Alexandrian as well as references to Roman beliefs and religion and Roman foundation history. All of these references amass into an eclectic decorative program composed of cultures assimilated and Roman ideals propagated to support the image of Augustus and his regime’s power over military, culture, and religion through a high art that showed moderation in interior design.

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