

## Volume 3: Issue: 3

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Published online: 5 August 2016



Cardiff University Press  

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Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd



STUDIES IN HISTORY ARCHAEOLOGY RELIGION AND CONSERVATION  
ASTUDIAETHAU HANES ARCHAEOLEG CREFYDD A CHADWRAETH

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ISSN 2055-4893 (online)

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# **Painters and workshops in Pompeii: identifying craftspeople to understand their working practices**

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## **Abstract**

Given the scarcity of documentary sources dealing with ancient craft production, when trying to understand the ancient decorating industry's organisation the close examination of paintings is essential to scholars. My attempt to investigate Pompeian painters' working practices rests on the identification of individual painters' hands, specifically those who painted the figurative elements of the wall decoration. In order to do so, I applied a Morellian-inspired method for attribution of authorship, based on the close study of forms and invariant relations between them. This method allows us to pinpoint peculiar geographical distributions or recurring patterns of collaboration between painters, thus determining where and how they worked. My analysis focuses on Third Style paintings in Pompeii (about 20 BC - AD 45) and so far it has led to the identification of five different groups of attributed works which appear to be loosely clustered in the city. This could either point to the existence of roughly defined working 'areas' associated with specific groups of painters or as evidence that said craftsmen worked on different buildings in the same area at about the same time, later moving to a different zone or town. I will present and discuss these two possibilities.

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When trying to investigate the organisation and working practices of ancient crafts people, scholars must deal with a mostly anonymous production. Roman sculptors, painters and mosaicists were considered mere artisans and therefore their names and practices were not recorded in documentary sources. Of all ancient crafts, our understanding of the wall painting industry is the one that most strongly relies on the close examination of paintings, because examples of inscriptions and self-representations are extremely rare: there are only two, much debated signatures, which have survived to this day (Scagliarini 2001; Wyler 2006).

The evolution of Pompeian wall painting is conventionally divided into four styles, namely the First Style (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), the Second Style (1<sup>st</sup> century BC), the Third Style (about 20 BC-AD 40) and the Fourth Style (second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD). The majority

of scholarly work on Pompeian painters and workshops has focused on Fourth Style wall decorations, despite the fact that many Third Style decorations are still visible in Pompeii, given that the Third Style was not completely abandoned until circa AD 60. The aim of my study is to identify Third Style painters working in Pompeii and assess their handiwork as it appears in different buildings, focusing on figure painters and applying a Morellian-inspired method for attribution of authorship.

I am compiling a catalogue of Pompeian wall paintings and their authors, covering the period between 20 BC and AD 45. This inventory will allow me to pinpoint peculiar geographical distributions or recurring patterns of collaboration between painters, thus helping me to understand their working practices and whether teams of painters existed or not. It will also enable me to detect their mobility, contextualize their work economically and socially, and discern whether they specialised in specific subjects or modified their repertoire according to the tastes of the clients, thus addressing the topic of patronage and commissioning.

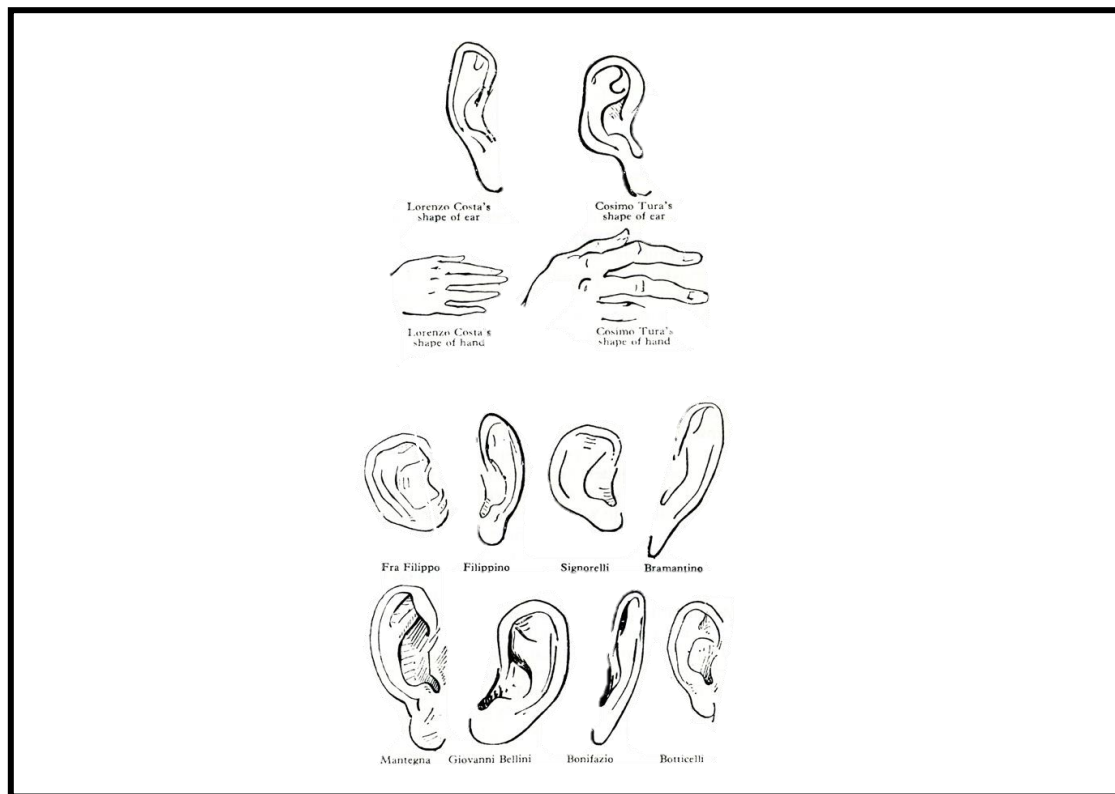
## Methodology

The identification the ‘hands’ of painters is essential to the investigation of the ancient decorating industry and many studies on this topic have applied a Morellian method for the attribution of authorship.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, art historian Giovanni Morelli developed a technique for identifying the hands of painters based on the careful analysis of minor diagnostic details, which were more freely drawn by the painter and that, therefore, were apt to reveal his personality. He referred to this method as the *study of form*, as opposed to methods based on intuition or general impression (Morelli 1892). Morelli paid so much attention to these details because he realised that the representation of certain parts of the human body was not strictly conventionalised by schools or traditions, thus leaving the artist a degree of freedom. He concentrated his study of Italian Renaissance paintings on the detailed examination of the shape of ears, hands, fingers and fingernails and, in general, on the analysis of the rendering of anatomy, trying to identify each master’s distinctive features. This approach was almost certainly influenced by his medical studies, especially his study of comparative anatomy.

The Morellian method for attribution of authorship paved the way for modern connoisseurship and the so-called ‘science of attribution’, which played an essential role in the study of both art history and archaeology. Its most exhaustive application to archaeology is Beazley’s ordering of Athenian figured vases of the 6<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC by artists and groups, an impressive

effort that allowed archaeologists to refine the chronology of Attic pottery (Beazley 1910, 1918, 1922, 1927). Beazley's method for attribution rested on stylistic analysis and proved the value of attribution when applied to archaeology. His achievements are nowadays hardly disputed, although his approach and, above all, that of his followers', was debated and often criticised for its emphasis on painters' personalities (Whitley 1997; Oakley 1998; Turner 2000; Oakley 2004).



**Fig. 1: Illustrations from Morelli 1892**

The extensive and systematic work of attribution carried out by Beazley and other scholars in the study of Attic pottery has not yet been matched in the investigation of Roman wall paintings. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century studies in this field relied largely on personal impressions and surface similarities rather than taking a more scientific approach, thus leading to inaccurate or mistaken conclusions (Herrmann 1904-1931; Klein 1912, 1919, 1926).

Also, for a long time scholars focused almost exclusively on the mythological panels painted in the centre of the walls, whose authors were considered as true artists, not as simple artisans. Thus, when trying to define the style of what they considered as Pompeian 'masters', elements such as the painters' 'personality' and compositional criteria often took precedence

over the analysis of the treatment of colours and light, the quality of the brushstrokes and the rendering of details (Gabriel 1952; Ragghianti 1963).

An explicit reference to the Morellian method for attribution is to be found in Richardson's work (1955, 2000), even though it was not always evenly and methodically applied by the scholar. However, stylistic analysis was successfully employed by Peters (1993), Moormann (1995), and Esposito (2007) in their analyses of Pompeian paintings, aimed at identifying decorators working in the same room or building. Their work has deepened our understanding of how wall painters operated together and organised their work according to different needs, varying degrees of expertise within the team or the function of a room, the way it was lit and so on. These scholars, however, did not always repeat the accurate method of analysis used for decorators when trying to identify figure painters, mainly due to the fact that it is somewhat easier to pinpoint discrepancies or similarities in the way small and repetitive decorative elements are painted, while it is harder to identify individual traits embedded in more complex compositions. The interesting results and insights reached thanks to the analysis of wall decorators, however, prove the worth of this approach: if accurately applied to the identification of figure painters it might lead to even more significant outcomes, for the analysis could be extended to a wider area than a single building.

### **Workshops or teams of painters?**

When trying to understand the productive dynamics of Roman wall painting, the first issue is with the definition of the word 'workshop', which is commonly used in scholarship. This definition, which should be at the basis of every study aimed at investigating any aspect of Roman artistic production, is still debated and the scientific community is divided into two opposed groups: those claiming that painters' workshops were organized structures based on long-term collaborations between painters (De Vos 1981; Peters 1993; Moormann 1995; Sampaolo 1995; Varone 1995; Bragantini 2004; Esposito 2007, 2009), and those who disagree (Blanc 1983, 1995; Allison 1995).

The word 'workshop' suggests the existence of a physical place where painters could carry out their work and conveys an idea of stability, which seems far from the actual organisation of Roman painters, who had to work *in situ* and were probably organised into different groups according to demand. However, it does seem rather inconvenient for painters to break up their 'team' once they had completed their assignment, only to create a completely different one when a new commission came about; not to mention the difficulties the owner of

a house would incur when looking for someone to hire, for whom could he turn to in the absence of a group or, at the very least, of a contractor? These observations are consistent with archaeological evidence showing that the production of wall decorations was carried out quickly and systematically by skilled and specialised professionals who were used to working in close quarters together. Yet this could be explained as the result of a highly standardised training system, rather than by long-term collaboration. The documentation provided by the excavations of buildings that were being painted at the time of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, such as the Casa dei Pittori al Lavoro in Pompeii (Varone 1995, 2002), has played an important part in helping us understand what was the organisation and the division of labour in an ongoing painting site. However, these findings are not conclusive and the topic needs to be further investigated.

### Preliminary results

The excavations of Pompeii have yielded 73 buildings with one or more rooms decorated in the Third Style. Among these, however, only 51 houses still retain their wall decoration, mostly belonging to the late Third Style (about AD 25-45). My analysis focuses on the 116 figure panels found in these buildings, together with the 22 floating figures, busts and *imagines clipeatae* that are still visible. The examination of these late Third Style figure panels has led to the identification of at least five different groups that show some remarkable similarities in style and technique. Together with these more clearly identifiable groups, two more could be recognised (Groups I and J below); however, the affinities shown by their paintings are less sound and the results are still inconclusive. The groups were simply named by assigning them a letter of the alphabet and their sequence only reflects the order in which each group was first identified.

Each of these groups is comprised of a number of figure panels and other figurative elements (mostly floating figures) whose close inspection has led to the identification of recurring ‘patterns’ in the representation of human figures, from small details such as the way of painting hands, feet and facial features, to more general observations on the rendering of anatomy, drapery and movement. Whenever a panel appeared to show some analogies with the paintings within a given group but not enough to unquestionably assign it to the group itself, a subgroup was created. Despite the similarities between paintings, it is still too early to claim that each group corresponds to the work of a particular painter, for it may simply point to a specific ‘style’ shared, for example, by a main artisan and his apprentices. However, Subgroup

O.1 might point to the presence of two painters sharing a similar style: either a ‘master’ and an apprentice or two artists who received a similar training, maybe as apprentices of the same ‘master’.

The groups of attributed works are set out in the table below.

### **GROUP B**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
I	7	7	Casa del Sacerdote Amando	(b)	Hercules and the Hesperides	PPM I, pp.590-2, figs.5-7
					Fall of Icarus	PPM I, pp.594-7, figs.10-13
					Polyphemus and Galatea	PPM I, pp.598-600, figs.14-17
					Perseus freeing Andromeda	PPM I, pp.602-5, figs.19-23
				(c)	Paris and Helen	PPM I, pp.609, fig.31
I	8	8	Termopolio	(10)	Amorino	PPM I, pp.608, fig.29
					Bellerophon harnessing Pegasus	Tella 1989, p.107, fig.2
					Europa and the bull	PPM I, p.821, fig.31
VII	1	25-47	CASA DI SIRICO	(8)	AENEAS WOUNDED	PPM VI, p.245, FIG.35

### **SUBGROUP B.1**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
I	2	6		(m)	Theft of the Palladium	PPM I, p. 15, fig.18

### **GROUP D**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
I	9	1	Casa del Bell' Impluvio	(7)	<i>imagines clipeatae</i>	PPM I, p.930, fig.18
				(11)	erotic scene	PPM I, p.938, fig.31

### **GROUP H**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
V	1	26	Casa di Caecilius lucundus	(i)	Iphigenia in Tauris	PPM III, p.589, fig.23
					Satyr and maenad	PPM III, p.589, fig.24
					Maenad carrying amorino	PPM III, p.589, fig.25
					Satyr and maenad	PPM III, p.600, fig.49
V	4	a	Casa di M. Lucretius Fronto	(5)	Theseus and Ariadne	PPM III, p.9992, fig.50
					Toilet of Venus	PPM III, p.997, fig.60
				(7)	Triumph of Bacchus	PPM III, p.1013, fig.85
					Wedding of Mars and Venus	PPM III, p.1018, fig.94



**GROUP O**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
VI	17	42	Casa del Bracciale d'Oro		busts of two women and a man	PPM VI, p.141, fig.182
					poet and woman	PPM VI, p.145, fig.187
IX	5	18	Casa di Giasone	(f)	Achilles meeting Polixena at the Temple of Apollo	PPM IX, p.694, fig.35
					floating figure	PPM IX, p.695, fig.36
					Jason and Pelias	PPM IX, p.697, fig.38
				(g)	Rape of Europa	PPM IX, p.705, fig.46
					Pan and nymphs	PPM IX, p.703, fig.44
					Hercules and Nessus	PPM IX, p.700, fig.41

**SUBGROUP O.1**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
VII	16	10	Scavo del Principe di Montenegro	(6)	Drunken Hercules	PPM , p.842, fig.2
					Perseus freeing Andromeda	PPM , p.843, fig.3
IX	5	18	Casa di Giasone	(e)	Paris and Helen	PPM IX, p.682, fig.17
					Phaedra and her nurse	PPM IX, p.685, fig.21
					Medea and her children	PPM IX, p.687, fig.23

**GROUP P**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
VII	2	23	Casa dell' Amore Punito	(f)	Punishment of Cupid	PPM VI, p.673, fig.14
					Mars and Venus(?)	PPM VI, p.675, fig.16
VII	4	56	Casa del Granduca	(11)	Punishment of Dirce	PPM VII, p.55, fig.19

**SUBGROUP P.1**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
VI	17	19-26			Music lesson	BMC, p.15 n.26, pl.X

**GROUP I**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
VI	9	3-5	Casa del Centauro	(26)	Meleager and Atalanta	PPM IV, p.852, fig.66
					Hercules and Nessus	PPM IV, p.854, fig.68
VI	14	20	Casa di Orfeo	(0)	Orpheus	PPM V, pp.284-6, figs.33a-c

**GROUP J(?)**

Regio	Insula	n.	House name	Room	Painting	References
I	8	17	Casa dei Quattro Stili	(16)	Theseus, Athena and Ariadne	PPM I, p.897-8, figs.82, 84-85
VI	10	2	Casa dei Cinque Scheletri	(6)	Cassandra's prophecy	PPM IV, p.1040, fig.18
					Ulysses and Penelope	PPM IV, p.1041, fig.19

Table 1: Groups of attributed workshops



**Figure 2: Map of Pompeii highlighting groups of attributions and their clustering**

When analysing the geographical distribution of the paintings attributed to each of the groups, it can be observed that they appear to be loosely clustered (see fig. 1). A MANOVA test (multivariate analysis of variance) proved that, when considering all houses in all groups, there is only a 5% probability for this clustered distribution to occur randomly, but when leaving out Group J, whose identification is questionable, the probability drops to 0.09%.<sup>1</sup> In scientific studies, a value of (less than or equal to)  $\leq 5\%$  is usually accepted as proof that a result cannot be purely assigned to chance: in this case, it proves that the distribution is not random. Further analysis of the archaeological data might help to determine whether this is proof of the existence of more or less loosely defined working ‘areas’ associated with specific groups of painters, or if the craftsmen simply happened to work on different buildings in the same area at about the same time, later moving to a different zone or town.

Unfortunately, the dating of the paintings is problematic; we do not know whether they were all painted at the same time or over a longer period. Furthermore, there is little external dating in support of stylistic attributions because Pompeian buildings were often excavated without much attention to stratigraphy and repeatedly looted in antiquity as well as in modern

<sup>1</sup> Results were calculated using the open source suite R (version 3.1.3).

times. As a result, chronologies are often based on architectural techniques, providing long and undefined phases, or on the stylistic analysis of wall paintings.

Broadly speaking, all the paintings belong to a fully developed Third Style and can therefore be dated to the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. However, within Group P the stylistic dating of the wall decoration of the Casa dell'Amore Punito and the Casa del Granduca seem to differ slightly: Sampaolo (1996) dates the paintings in the Casa dell'Amore Punito to the full Third Style phase Ic (about 1 BC-AD 25), while the panel from the Casa del Granduca is believed to be later and dated after AD 40 (Pappalardo 1991, p.226). Since there is, at the very least, a difference of 20 years between the two dates, it is highly unlikely that the same painter realised the figure panels in the two buildings. Therefore, it is more likely, given the undeniable affinities in style, that the paintings in the Casa dell'Amore Punito were realised by the 'master' of the painter working in the Casa del Granduca. It is interesting to note, however, that the 'pupil' seems to have worked in the same area as his 'master'. If all previous assumptions are correct, this might point to the existence of loosely defined working areas associated with specific teams of painters, a rather interesting conclusion that needs further analysis.

So far the results have not highlighted any recurring collaborations between painters, thus challenging the idea that Roman wall painters worked together as part of stable and organised structures (workshops), yet they seem to point to the existence of some kind of system where different craftspeople would claim more or less discrete working areas within the city. Further research might help refine the chronology of the considered paintings, thus clarifying whether painters tended to work in the same area over time or not. In addition, examining the distribution of the painted panels within each house, the repertoire of subjects and the clients' rank within society (whenever it can be determined) will shed light on the social and economic context within which these craftsmen worked. It might highlight whether painters specialised in specific subjects (which so far does not seem the case), if different artisans targeted specific clients belonging to specific social levels and if, within the same building, they tended to distribute work according to varying levels of expertise. As the study progresses, it will provide a better insight into the topic of patronage and commissioning, helping to define the role played by both craftsmen and clients in the creation of art.

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