

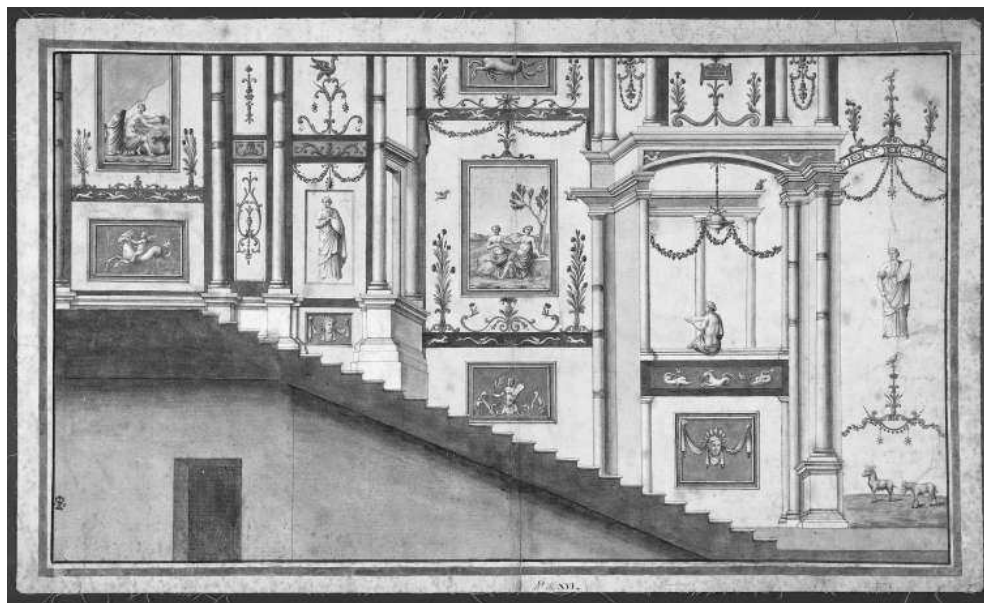


## Introduction: The Painting of Painting in Ancient Rome

This is a book about paintings of paintings. The physical paintings discussed here are murals. The depicted paintings, however, are painted panels – independent, portable paintings executed on wood, stone, or other material supports. This apparently simple pictorial conceit – the representation of representations – seems to have first appeared in Roman wall painting during the first half of the first century BCE; it would remain a common motif for more than a century. Such paintings of paintings were executed in Italy and beyond, and the breadth of their production elides traditional divisions within the study of Roman wall painting, traversing chronological boundaries between styles, adumbrating the public and private spheres, and appealing to both members of the elite and to the everyday Roman.

A watercolor documenting a now-lost painting unearthed during the early eighteenth-century excavations on the Palatine Hill in Rome helps to elucidate the power of this conceit (Figure I.1).<sup>1</sup> The image purports to show a room from the palace of Domitian, built at the end of the first century CE, after the largest and most cohesive surviving corpus of Roman wall painting, in the houses and villas of Campania, was covered over by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. It depicts a section view of a staircase and a mural, which in turn shows a combination of architectural forms, including columns on projecting podia and a gently arcuated *aedicula* opening on to a colonnade; decorative motifs such as stylized candelabra and acanthus scrolls; human and animal figures; and, finally, depictions of artworks. The latter category includes both freestanding and relief architectural sculpture and several framed, hanging panel paintings, with a particularly prominent example in the center of the drawing.

<sup>1</sup> See Ashby 1914: 60, no. 16; cf. Hülsen 1895: 265; Leach 2004: 267, fig. 200. This is one of four representations of the same staircase, including a plan, now in the Topham collection at Eton. Cf. Ashby 1914: 61, nos. 17–18. Ashby 1914: 3 indicates that these are all by Francesco Bartoli, though he does not explicitly attribute this example, and its current mounting has obscured whether or not it was once signed on the back. A drawing of the decoration on the same wall above the staircase, as well as a description of the excavations and of the mural itself, appears in one of Pier Leone Ghezzi's notebooks, currently housed in the Vatican libraries (*Ottob. lat.* 3108 f. 111), for which see Guerrini 1971: 20–21, pl. 33.1.



**Figure I.1** Painted Staircase from the Domus Augustana, Palatine Hill, Rome, late first century CE. Watercolor, likely by Francesco Bartoli.

The subject matter of these panel paintings is difficult to discern.<sup>2</sup> Yet perhaps most noteworthy is not what they show, but their very presence within a mural composition in an architectural complex known primarily for the grandeur of its design and the lavishness of its decoration.<sup>3</sup> It is worth pausing over the fact that, in one of the most prominent structures in the history of Roman architecture, adorned with plentiful marble cladding on its interior walls, a section of the decorative program was set aside for the comparatively cheap medium of fresco.<sup>4</sup> The aesthetic impulses associated with the rich material of marble and those attached to the more humble medium of painting are often set at odds, but in the palace of

<sup>2</sup> One panel in the upper left seems to show a seated figure leaning over a basket on the ground and looking back over a shoulder, while the central panel depicts two seated figures leaning away from each other and gesticulating. Note that in Ghezzi's sketch in the Vatican notebook (*Ottob. lat.* 3108 f. 11), the subject matter of the central panel more closely resembles two seated, reveling satyrs, or perhaps Dionysus and a satyr, and that what the Eton watercolor renders as a mask on the ground in front of the two figures may be a wreath. The left-hand panel does not appear in the Vatican drawing.

<sup>3</sup> Stat. *Silv.* 4.2; Mart. 7.56.1–2; Suet. *Dom.* 14.1, 16.2; Plut. *Publ.* 15.5. See Darwall-Smith 1996: 179–215; Zanker 2002; Sasso D'Elia in *LTUR* II, 40–45, s.v. *Domus Augustana, Augustiana*; Sojc 2012; Wulf-Rheidt 2012. Cf. Ashby 1914: 60–61.

<sup>4</sup> Though it should be noted that Nero's Domus Aurea had likewise combined decoration in marble and other stones with fresco. See e.g. Segala and Sciortina 1999: 29–39.

Domitian they seem to have coexisted.<sup>5</sup> This fresco, in turn, plays overtly on the border between reality and fiction by evoking just such a grand architectural space as existed nearby in the palace and by articulating that space with fictive works of art. Opulence and its representation here stand less in opposition than in complement.

The watercolor's rendering of this mural scheme may not be accurate in every detail, but given that it was executed before the widespread excavation of Roman painting at Herculaneum and Pompeii, it nonetheless resonates with features of more securely attested examples. The combinations of surface elaboration and illusionistic depth, the play of believable and impossible architectural forms, and the tension between "real" figures, such as the woman seated with her back to the viewer holding a cornucopia inside the large *aedicula*, and "merely" represented figures, such as those depicted inside the fictive panels, are all hallmarks of murals of the late Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods. These elements are evident at Nero's Domus Aurea, the other great source of ancient painting in the city of Rome known in the early eighteenth century, but not in precisely such combinations.<sup>6</sup> The decorative scheme depicted by the watercolor is plausible, in other words, even if its absolute veracity cannot be confirmed.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond attesting to the early fascination exerted by ancient paintings of paintings on modern observers, the purpose of evoking Bartoli's watercolor of the painted staircase from the palace of Domitian at the beginning of this book is to suggest that the appeal of the painting of painting exceeded many of the limits traditionally imposed by scholars on the study of Roman art. Even in the most richly decorated spaces of the empire, even after the time period in which most surviving Roman murals were produced, the painted wall could serve as the staging point for fictive works

<sup>5</sup> Pliny (*HN* 35.2–3), for instance, laments that marble revetment and decoration in precious materials had displaced painting in preeminence in his day.

<sup>6</sup> See for the Domus Aurea and its reception, e.g. Dacos 1969; Iacopi 1999; Segala and Sciortina 1999; Leach 2004: 156–166; Meyboom and Moorman 2013; Squire 2013e; cf. Joyce 1992.

<sup>7</sup> If the Eton watercolor is by Francesco Bartoli, Ashby 1914: 3 notes that he often cannot be trusted for color and sometimes not for detail. Nevertheless, in the depiction of the overall scheme of the painting and especially of the format and placement of the fictive works of art, both the Eton example and Ghezzi's Vatican sketch are in close agreement, a sign, perhaps, of their accuracy. Note that Ghezzi's sketch does differ from the more polished Eton example in a number of ancillary details: it depicts the wall from a sharper visual angle, removes the Eros figure riding the hippocamp in the upper left, replaces the triton just above the staircase with another hippocamp and the head with rayed crown just to the right with a winged figure, and omits the landscape background in the central panel. On the accuracy of Ghezzi's archaeological representations see e.g. Guerrini 1971; Polignac 1993; Fusconi and Moteldo 1997.

of art, dominated both compositionally and thematically by panel painting. In such murals, one level of mimetic rhetoric, the illusion of a well-appointed architectural space, is disrupted by a second level of mimetic rhetoric, the fictive panel painting. Every fictive panel bears its own representational content. Some show moments from the mythological tradition, others still lifes, genre scenes, even landscapes. Yet all function as distinctly second-order fictions, independent planes of representation whose independence both depends upon and works against the frameworks that contain them.

The depiction of one art form within another is by nature a complex matter. It raises questions of medium specificity and transferability, of the goals and limits of representation, and of the very basis of artistic value. Paintings of paintings are almost inevitably what W.J.T. Mitchell has termed meta-pictures: paintings whose subject is the practice and status of painting itself.<sup>8</sup> The depiction of panel painting in mural painting in first-century BCE and CE Rome was more complex still. Neither format was value-neutral. Rather, both carried deeply ingrained associations, and their interaction marked an important point of cultural negotiation. By incorporating the panel into the mural, artists and patrons folded a format of painting traditionally coded as Greek into one viewed as Roman. This act of embedding gave the domestic mural a role to play in the widespread re-evaluation of Greek culture in Roman life ongoing in the late Republic and early Empire.

This book examines how these fictive, mural panels played a key, and underappreciated, role in the repertoire of Roman painters from the first century BCE through the first century CE. The phenomenon spanned the uncertainty that marked the end of the Republic, the relative calm of the Augustan era, and the subsequent flux of Imperial succession and dynastic change. The appeal of the fictive panel, this book argues, was varied, but its longevity should serve as a reminder that it was not over-determined by the specific circumstances of its creation. The book argues that the representation of panel painting within mural ensembles provides crucial visual evidence for the reception of Greek culture, and that it models complex thinking about the intertwined ethical and aesthetic values of art in the Roman world. The art world elucidated by these paintings comprises an interconnected web stretching between many aspects of ancient society, including private houses, public monuments, elite literature, and epigraphic habits. But the primary evidence is supplied

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell 1994; cf. Gass 1970.

by the paintings themselves. The book thus makes the further claim, whose significance is as much methodological as historical, that the art objects discussed here are not simply subject to theoretical and historical thinking, but, rather, perform theory and history.

The book starts from a basic premise: that the depiction of one mode of painting within another is not just an act of imitation but also one of disruption. The fictive painted panel on the Roman wall provides an independent, discrete plane of representation which interrupts the primary spatial framework of the painted wall. The representational plane of the fictive panel works against that of the actual surface of the wall by offering an alternate conception of painting and of its role in the Roman house. This tension creates both literal and figurative space for reflection on the status of painting in Rome. It opens the wall to new pictorial genres, especially mythological and landscape painting. And it permits new perspectives on the history of painting, wherein significant formats of panel painting, well-attested historical styles, and famous subjects could be folded into contemporary compositions. This book argues that the fictive, mural panel provided a new, material way of negotiating the relationship between Greek and Roman culture. Through the representation of representation, painting effectively became a means to articulate the reception of a foreign but authoritative history within the production of contemporary Roman values.

The arguments marshaled here proceed thematically, moving from the modern historiography of Roman painting's relationship to its Greek precursors; to the acts of framing which both announce the fictive panel as a part of the painted wall and distinguish it from the other objects represented therein; the ethics and politics of art in Rome; the reciprocal play of medium, materiality, transparency, and opacity in the layering of painted fictions; and, finally, the historical relationships staged by the paradigmatic appropriation of Greek motifs, the arrangement of programmatic ensembles, and the creation of virtual collections.

Chapter 1 argues that the representation of panel painting within the Roman mural was an act of cultural negotiation which has had far-reaching repercussions for the evaluation of Roman painting. The chapter begins with the moment Roman painting entered the modern discipline of art history: a passage from Johann Joachim Winckelmann's foundational *History of the Art of Antiquity* discussing four first century CE paintings found in the *palestra* of Herculaneum. Through a close reading of Winckelmann's encounter with ancient painting, the chapter situates fictive panel painting as both a site where modern art history has felt closest to

the largely lost but much-lauded tradition of Greek panel painting, and where the Romans themselves navigated between their own painting traditions and those of the Greek past. It presents the case that in the late Republic and early Empire panel painting was coded as Greek and mural painting as Roman or Italic, and it introduces the complex and often ambivalent attitudes displayed by elite Romans toward Greece as a culture at once continuous with and disjunct from their own, which could alternately serve as a source of inspiration and a topology of anxiety.

Chapter 2 considers how the representation of panel painting in wall painting is as much an act of disruption as of imitation. The chapter presents the pre-history of the meta-pictorial act in the ancient world prior to the middle of the first century BCE. It focuses in significant detail on the many different kinds of panel paintings represented in first-century murals, with special attention given to their frames. These frames, almost all of which are attested in the Hellenistic epigraphic record, serve the dual role of both announcing the distinctness of the fictive panel they surround and situating that panel within the larger illusionistic world of the mural. The paradox that duality entails, the chapter suggests, is a necessary precondition of meta-pictorial reflection.

Chapter 3 further explores how the painting of painting encoded artistic value. It focuses first on one of the earliest domestic spaces to display a significant number and variety of fictive panels: the so-called House of Augustus, located on the Palatine Hill in Rome. It argues that in the context of the late Republican and Augustan-era elite house, the painting of painting contributed to larger discourses surrounding the distinctions between public and private life and the evaluation of Greek culture in Rome. In the first centuries BCE and CE, the private acquisition and display of Greek art could be frequently condemned. Its public dedication, however, was seen to benefit the state and the citizen body. By re-casting the Greek panel within the confines of the Roman wall, patrons were able to enjoy the kinds of content panel painting permitted without the extravagant expense that was often censured. One of the motivations behind the painting of painting, accordingly, was to produce pleasures without luxury, to use a phrase employed by Statius in his description of the villa of Manilius Vopiscus.<sup>9</sup> The chapter concludes that houses built for the uppermost echelon of Roman society deployed the fictive panel as both an ethical and political device, but one that was not necessarily attached to any specifically partisan message.

<sup>9</sup> *Luxuque carentes deliciae*. Stat. *Silv.* 1.3.92–93. Cf. Newlands 2002: 119–153.

Chapter 4 advances the argument that the imposition of the panel in the mural offered muralists the chance for unprecedented experimentation in the depiction of materials and media of representation, in which they focused especially on the play between transparency and opacity. The complexity of the experiments in medium these paintings display is all the more remarkable because they have no clear equivalent in surviving written texts. The result was a layered and self-aware web of representational strategies, marked by a tension between the overall techniques of illusion and immersion that dominated Roman painting and the plane of representation offered by the panel itself. In other words, the fictive panel permitted Roman muralists to put their techniques and objects of representation into a productive dialogue, and thereby to problematize the very act of representation.

The fifth and final chapter suggests that the fictive panel allowed Roman patrons and painters to dramatize the place of Rome in the history of Mediterranean art. It thus offers a unique perspective on the Roman conception of art history well before our primary surviving example of a written history of art, Pliny's *Natural History*. The chapter has three areas of focus. First, it argues that the phenomenon of the fictive panel, considered broadly, offers new insight into the question of artistic imitation and replication. In place of the unidirectional concept of the Roman copy of the Greek painting tradition, it offers a dynamic model of paradigmatic participation. Second, the chapter explores the programmatic possibilities of ensembles of fictive panels, which could be combined to display mythological cycles or to communicate more abstract messages. Finally, it examines the construction of fictive art collections. In one such collection, at the Augustan Villa della Farnesina, a striking array of panel types and styles from the history of Greek painting were depicted. The cumulative effect of this array, the chapter argues, was both to position Imperial Rome as the natural culmination of the achievements of Greek culture and to proclaim a desire to participate anachronically in the phenomenon of Greek panel painting. Ethics and aesthetics sit in inextricable stasis, and in this dual impetus we may find a powerful insight into the Roman conception of art itself.

The book concludes with a short epilogue, which moves outward from the specifics of Roman painting toward a larger-scale reflection on the Roman meta-pictorial act in relation to its modern successors. This book seeks, ultimately, to understand how fiction, ethics, and aesthetics were both embedded within and expressed by painting in the Roman world. It argues that painting was a significant mode of ethical and aesthetic

expression, which was deeply tied up with the most pressing issues faced by Roman society in the first centuries BCE and CE. The painting of painting provided a means to reflect on that significance, and thus served, at one and the same time, as a kind of visual history and theory of art and as the matrix for entirely new modes of creativity.