

COPY OR NOT A COPY? THAT'S THE QUESTION. THE CASE OF THE GREAT FRESCO IN VILLA DEI MISTERI, POMPEII

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ABSTRACT

The Great Fresco in Villa dei Misteri, Pompeii is perhaps the most famous painting from Antiquity. Is it a copy of a Hellenistic original? Or, is it local? The question is complicated because Campania was a Hellenistic blend of various cultures. And art in Roman contexts all around the Mediterranean is surprisingly similar both in style and content. Identification of elements from the local culture(s) depends on distinguishing “the original” from “the general”. Yet, I conclude: The Great Fresco of Villa dei Misteri is not a copy, but a local, Campanian composition of great originality.

The Great Fresco in Villa dei Misteri close to Pompeii in Campanian Roman Italy, covers all four walls of a triclinium (Fig. 1). The Fresco is commonly interpreted as showing initiation ceremonies to Dionysiac mysteries, but, in fact, it contains mysteries on many more levels. One of them is: Is the Fresco a copy of another, perhaps greater and better fresco? Or is it an original, local composition?

This question of copy versus originality has been approached in basically three ways:

“The first way” has been to look at the artistic quality of the Fresco. The logic being this: If it is of poor quality: it is a local production; if of good quality: it is painted by a Greek artist; and may even be a copy of another, even better, fresco.

“A second way” has been to evaluate whether the Fresco fits the room it is painted in. If it fits well, it is original and composed for the room; if it shows signs of not fitting in, it is a copy.

“A third way” has been to look for similar frescos elsewhere. If an older “original” is found, or if similar compositions or themes are found, then the Fresco is a copy. If extraordinary motifs or elements are found, the Fresco is an original. – I will discuss these three “ways”:

“The first way” of evaluating the Fresco, based on its artistic quality¹, is readily ruled out. It is no “rule”

that everything the Greeks made were of high artistic standards. This hellenocentric argument is more racist than scientific. Ethnic Greek painters worked in Italy; but Campanian painters, although descending from ancient Greek colonists, could hardly be called “Greek”. Finally, there is absolutely no consensus regarding the artistic quality of the Fresco; and even if the quality is deemed to be good, there is no reason why “native” Italic people could not produce skilful and creative works of art. So, the quality tells us nothing about its maker’s origin, ethnicity, or the Fresco’s originality.

An important part of the copy-hypothesis connected to quality, is the idea that a better original had existed in Smyrna², Pergamon³, or Rome⁴. But, no trace of any “original” fresco or similar works of art has ever been found. This serves to dismiss the copy-hypothesis.

“The second way” is to evaluate whether the Fresco fits the room it is painted in. If it seems “forced to fit” with a cramped composition, many overlaps, and problematic corners, it could indicate that it is copied from a larger original⁵. It is however, a typical characteristic of Hellenistic art that compositions may be vigorously cramped, with overlaps between thematic elements and figures, and merging of human

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¹ De Petra, 1910; Mudie Cook, 1913; Pottier, 1915; Macchiore, 1921; Curtius, 1929; Méautis, 1945; Simon, 1961; Zuntz, 1963; Bendinelli, 1968; Little 1972; Veyne, 1998.

² Mudie Cook, 1913; Curtius, 1929.

³ Simon, 1961; Zuntz, 1963; Veyne, 1998.

⁴ Schefold, 1952; Brendel, 1966.

⁵ Curtius, 1929; Little, 1972.

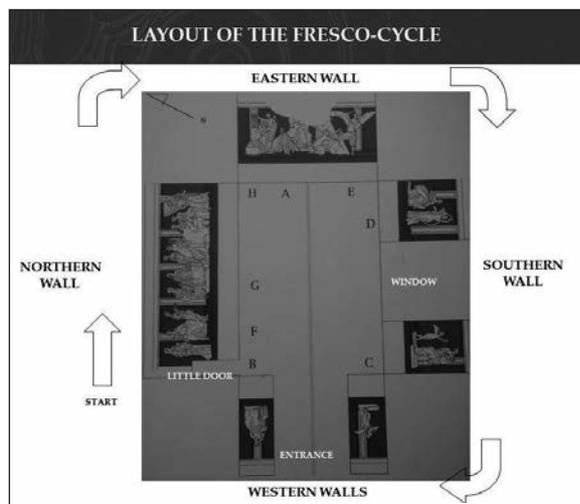


Fig. 1. The lay-out of the Fresco in the room it is painted in (a triclinium). The arrows indicate the most common direction for viewing (or reading), the Fresco. (Centre part from Sauron 1998, with permission).

and divine realms (f.ex.: the Pergamon Altar)⁶. So, compositional cramping and overlaps can not be used as an argument about fitness to the room or originality. And, when analyzing the corners, it is actually striking how the figures look at each other or interact across the corners. The corners actually add an exciting three-dimensionality to the Fresco. Instead of breaking up the continuity, the corners create it (Fig. 2). The Fresco therefore clearly fits the room⁷. Its fitness to the corners indicates that it is composed for its room, and is no copy.

“The third way” implies partly to look for “originals” of the whole Fresco (already discussed above); but also to argue for the copy-hypothesis by showing that the elements in the Fresco are also found in other works of art. However, this is a complicated argument. Painted around 40-60 BC (as a megalography in Pompeiian Style II, phase 1b⁸), the Fresco clearly is produced within the general “international”/“cosmopolitan” cultural trend of Hellenism. As such, one must expect to find motifs in the Fresco that are also found elsewhere, either similar or exactly the same. Motifs from Graeco-Roman mythology and literature pervaded all art in the Roman world, and copy-books showing popular themes were used by artists for their reproduction. This situation makes the question of “copying” of motifs almost meaningless. To find commonly used motifs in the

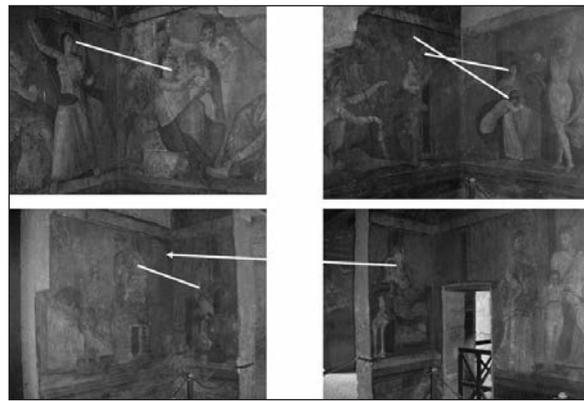


Fig. 2. The eye-contacts and interactions between figures across the corners, indicated by the white lines.

Fresco is simply to be expected. Only extraordinary motifs and elements can indicate local creativity and originality, and particularly if they can be connected to the local culture(s). The question of composition is also relevant, as the Fresco is a composite of several motifs. The essential questions then become: Is the same or a similar composition of themes found elsewhere, or is this a unique composition? And, are there original motifs in the Fresco, or original elements within otherwise well-known motifs?

That the Fresco should be an original Campanian work has been proposed by several authors⁹, but for various reasons. One argument is that the Fresco has such a coherent composition that it must meet local needs, and therefore be of local, original making¹⁰. Regarding two elements that are often regarded as being “local”: the two last scenes (women in a toilette scene and a seated woman), have in particular been used to interpret the Fresco as a Campanian, and therefore local, composition and production. My point, however, is that there are many other essential unique and extraordinary themes and elements that point to a local, Campanian production. And “Campanian” meant a mixture of indigenous Samnite, Etruscan, Greek, Roman, and possibly other, cultures and populations.

Look at Fig. 3. Scene 1 shows a standing woman and a reading scene. The pudicitia-posture of the standing woman is a well-known motif, but her Greek dress (peplos) is an extraordinary element. The reading-scene is common, but it is a bit special that “the teacher” (?) is a woman. The woman walking between

⁶ Höelscher, 2004.

⁷ Davis, 2000; Lindstrøm, in prep.

⁸ Beyen, 1938.

⁹ Pfuhl, 1923; Bieber, 1928; Schefold, 1952; Herbig, 1958; Houtzager, 1963; Boyancé, 1965-66; Brendel, 1966; Maiuri, 1967; Little, 1972; Kerényi, 1976; Grieco, 1979; Clarke, 1991; Ling, 1991; Turcan, 1996; Alexander, 2002; Lindstrøm, in prep.

¹⁰ Sauron, 1998.

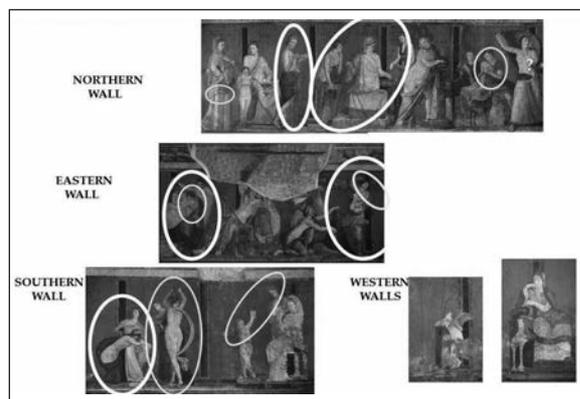


Fig. 3. Extraordinary and original themes and elements in the Fresco. Original themes indicated by thick white circles, original elements indicated by thin grey circles.

Scene 1 and 2 is extraordinary, both regarding what she carries in her hands, and because she may be pregnant. Pregnancy is not usually depicted. Scene 2 shows a sacrificial scene that is considerably different from all other sacrificial scenes. The main person is seated with her back towards the viewer, and all the persons' acts are unusual. Scene 3's Silenos and the two satyr-children are unusually serene, and it is highly extraordinary that one satyr is breastfeeding an animal. The running woman in Scene 4 might also be unusual. In Scene 5, the serenity of Silenos and the two young adult satyrs is special, and what they are doing, is highly original and disputed. It is often interpreted as divination (lekanomanteia or katoptromanteia) connected to Etruscan and Samnite practices¹¹. Scene 6 with Dionysos and Semele/Ariadne/Venus is a very common and well-known scene. But Scene 7 with a winged female holding a whip is unique. It is often compared to other representations of winged creatures showing rejecting attitudes towards phallos¹², but the resemblance is vague, and the whip extraordinary. She may be a blend of the Etruscan goddess Vanth and the Roman goddess Diana¹³. The apparent unveiling of a phallos however, is a well-known scene from Dionysiac initiations. Across the corner from the winged female, another unusual scene emerges, Scene 8, which must be interpreted in connection with the winged female. Whipping is a practice one would not find on a Roman dining-room wall. It is remarkable. The dancing bacchant is a very ordinary theme, but this woman is different from other representations of bacchantes in that she seems very controlled in her

movements, and not in an ecstatic state. Scene 9 shows a not uncommon "bridal" toilet scene, but the mirror and the "maid's" interaction with the mirror, is unusual. It may be connected to Etruscan and Samnite divination practices (see note 10) in connection with weddings. Finally, the last scene, Scene 10, shows a rather well-known situation with a woman/bride seated on a bed (cline). – Summed up: Among well-known motifs there are also many uncommon motifs, themes and elements in the Fresco, many of which point to local cultural traditions.

I conclude: The Great Fresco in Villa dei Misteri, Pompeii is most probably a local Campanian composition and production, composed in a Hellenistic style and context. The Great Fresco is not a copy, but a local, original, genuine and genial Campanian composition.

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¹¹ De Grummond, 2002; Taylor, 2008.

¹² Sauron, 1998.

¹³ Lindström, in prep.

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