

# ANCIENT HISTORY

## Paintings, mosaics and beyond

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The diverse range of **Pompeian** art offers historians a glimpse into an artistic style that was thought to have been lost, along with Pompeii as a result of the eruption in 79AD. Graffiti, pottery, mosaic and wall paintings were all part of the vast artistic culture that engulfed Pompeii. Although graffiti and pottery were present, they are not the two most significant artistic styles in Pompeii. They give valuable insight into the every day lives of Pompeian's, and express the cultural values of the time. They are not however, what the Pompeian's wanted to surround themselves with. Large scale mosaics and wall paintings are found in almost every private and public home or building in Pompeii. It is estimated that there is 3200 in total (according to Mau). This reveals that the subject matter of each painting and mosaic is culturally and aesthetically significant. Pottery and Graffiti was produced on a smaller scale, where as the evolution of artistic style found in paintings and mosaic show a region developing its artistic skill and expressive form. While both pottery and graffiti are important aspects of Pompeii, they do not showcase the perpetual movement of this ancient culture as painting and mosaic capture unarguably.

Framed canvases hung on empty walls is an artistic feature seldom found in Pompeii. Instead artwork was painted directly onto the "moist stucco"<sup>1</sup> (source 1.1) using watercolour in a fresco<sup>2</sup> stylistic practice. To prepare a wall, one (sometimes multiple) layer of sand mortar was used which was followed by "one or more coats of marble stucco" (source 1.2). The aim of this practice and preparation was to paint the design onto the wet and drying wall so the artwork would dry into the wall and effectively become part of the architecture itself. This is a key feature in Roman art, and an important part of Pompeian art. The original catalogue produced by Helbig<sup>3</sup> revealed 2000 entries of Pompeian wall paintings in 1868. Mau<sup>4</sup> writes in source 1.4 that he believes that there are "about thirty-five hundred" (source 1.3) wall paintings in Pompeii. This enormous figure shows that art was valued highly in society as it enveloped every house wall depicting scenes of every day life and spirituality.

Wall paintings and mosaics are an important part of observing Pompeian culture as they display the growth of society's aesthetic values. Mau's classification method charts the development of artistic values in Pompeii. When considering the study of interior compositions Mau's work is vital as it is still in place for modern classifications. The first style observed by Mau, "Incrustation" as it was named, seeks to imitate panels of marble or stone. Panels of wall are painted into square blocks to give the illusion that the wall is comprised of physical stone. Footings were also added to generate depth in the composition. Source 2 is a close up of this style. Although source 2 is located inside the Casa sannitica<sup>5</sup> in Herculaneum, this style was popular throughout Pompeii around 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. The Incrustation style's main function was to elude the viewer into believing the wall was made of stone or marble blocks. This style was used to create a feeling of wealth within the home, as well as vibrant decoration. The organic colours depicted in source 2 are not unified. The ochre red block on the bottom right is in stark contrast to the two pastel, sandstone-like coloured blocks above it. This heavy contrast shows that here society valued images and allusions of wealth, as opposed to aestheticism.

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<sup>1</sup> Stucco: Comprised of sand and marble mortar, applied wet to the surface of the building.

<sup>2</sup> Fresco: "The art of painting on fresh, moist plaster with pigments dissolved in water" (Sourced from [www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com))

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Helbig: Published the first catalogue outlining the amount of Pompeian wall paintings in 1868

<sup>4</sup> August Mau: German archaeologist, categorised the typology of Pompeian wall paintings into four styles.

<sup>5</sup> Casa sannitica: Also known as the Samnite house, located in Herculaneum.

The second style began to appear a century later than the first. It combined elements of the first with the trompe l'oeil<sup>6</sup> method. This is significant as it is the first artistic shift towards mythology and aestheticism, a concept that is expanded and over developed in the third style. Architecture was still present, but the trompe l'oeil method allowed optical illusion to create a large sense of space through compositional elements. Its intense realism and colour show societies progression towards the desire for beauty. This style is well known for its inclusion of pillars to add the illusion of an extra room connected to the wall painting. Other subtle illusions, such as the still life depicted in source 3, give the impression of a larger space, due to the intense realism of the painting itself. This style is clearly seen in the "Villa Boscoreale" Pompeii, as it was noted for its aesthetic excellence and magnificence upon its discovery. Source 3.2 also displays an extravagant example of second style art.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> (late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC – early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD) style moves from the art of creating illusion and transforms it into a figurative, ornamental and strictly geometric and symmetric art form. Wall space is broken up into specific zones through the use of minutely detailed columns, vines of foliage or multiple detailed candelabra<sup>7</sup>. The inclusion of the candelabra displays the shift in which Mau's classification system exposes. This image of wealth is used as a motif, which displays the value society has placed on objects of aesthetic value, and wealth itself. There is much conjecture surrounding the classification of the third and fourth styles as they are similar in style and technique. The first and second style differ both structurally and conceptually.

The arabesques and hunting scenes depicted in the "House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto" (source 4.1) have been commonly decided as third style works. The detail depicted in source 4.2 is also typical of this style as it clearly outlines the first artistic value of aestheticism.

The 4<sup>th</sup> style (post AD45) is seen as a return to the illusion present in the second style, and retention of third style fantasy, yet an extreme rejection of the mathematical third style discipline. It features large scale narrative scenes while retaining the concept of architectural division of the third style. This fusion of styles is illustrated in source 6. It's bright colours and flat style shows its geometrical discipline (not to the extent of the third style) and its ability to capture fantasy and imagination (seen in the second style). Its purpose was to become an ornamental type of painting. Unlike the Architectural style, the Fourth style of Pompeian art sought to aesthetically please, rather than create an illusion of wealth.

While there is much conjecture about classification of styles, Mau's contribution to the analysis of wall paintings was vital, as it was the first time they had been studied in detail. His work provides the foundational study for current and future work on Pompeian wall paintings. It is invaluable, yet not reliable as the classification of the third and fourth style is a highly subjective process. This highly scientific method (which reflects Mau's background), imposes some order on a vast wealth of information. Despite the scrutiny this method faces, subject matter contained within the paintings becomes easily read. Paintings and mosaics were intended to allude and entertain. Images such as source 7.1 were used to honour Gods like Bacchus for the Campanian plains. Where as the Alexander Mosaic depicted in source 7.2 found in the "House of the Faun", aims to honour courage, strength and political figures. Marine Still life (source 7.3) serves as a celebration of the abundant marine life of the bay of Naples. Each artwork has its purpose in Pompeii. Mau's method has contributed here, as all these works would be classified as "Fourth style" due to their colour, subject matter and accuracy. This tells the viewer that the works are designed to serve as an object of beauty, showcasing the most important aspects of the Campanian region and culture, as the original owner of the homes chose these images to adorn their abode. This reveals that the subject matter chosen were ones of significance.

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<sup>6</sup> Trompe l'oeil: Trick of the eye.

<sup>7</sup> Candelabra: A series of detailed, ornate candlesticks.

It is clear that through the progression of artistic style, much is revealed about the culture that created it. The Four Pompeian Styles is a key feature when discussing artistic movements in Pompeii as they outline the stages of art and cultural values. The purpose of the first two styles reflected society's desire for wealth. Wall paintings and mosaics of this period express this as they served as both objects of beauty and illusions to extra rooms. The Third and Fourth styles indicate wealth through subject matter. Grand images were framed by candelabras and vibrant colours. Realism was also used to convey beauty, which was valued by this point. Art at Pompeii is a broad topic as it is found in almost every building. Wall paintings and mosaics not only reflect stylistic values in terms of Trope l'oeil and geometrical division, but the desires of the Pompeian culture. In this way, paintings and mosaics are the most valuable sources for artistic analysis in Pompeii as they were found in every building, which displays the significant they had within the culture of the region prior to 79AD.