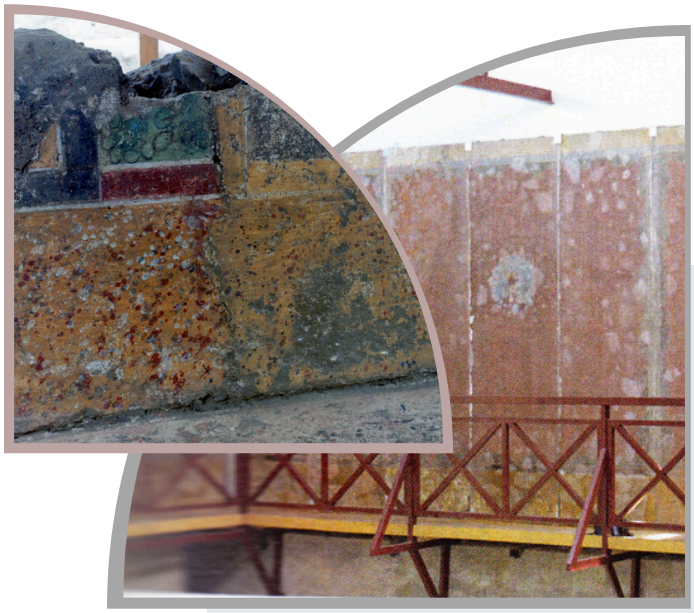
OBJECT OF THE SEASON

ROMAN PAINTINGS



Walls That Talk: How Ancient Romans Decorated Their Homes

Imagine walking into a house with almost no windows, where the rooms are small, dark, and cramped. To fix this, ancient Roman homeowners didn't remodel—they painted. Using the fresco technique (painting directly onto wet plaster so the colors became part of the wall), they transformed their living spaces into breathtaking masterpieces.



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Art historians group these decorations into four distinct styles that evolved over two centuries:

• **The Illusion of Wealth (The First Style, c. 200–80 BCE):**
Before they painted grand scenes, Romans wanted to show off pure luxury. Artists used plaster and paint to create 3D textures that looked exactly like expensive, colorful marble blocks. It was the ancient version of "fake it till you make it," making ordinary rooms look like grand palaces.

• T**he Window into Another World (The Second Style, c. 1st century BCE):**
As artistic skills grew, painters learned how to trick the eye (trompe l'oeil). They painted realistic pillars, grand hallways, and open windows that looked out onto beautiful gardens and distant hills. This completely dissolved the flat walls, making tiny rooms feel endlessly spacious.

• **The Elegant Wallpaper (The Third Style, c. 20 BCE–20 CE):**
Eventually, the trend shifted from realistic illusions to pure elegance. Romans embraced solid, colorful backdrops—like deep reds or rich blacks. These were decorated with delicate, thin columns, painted candlesticks, and tiny, charming miniature paintings of myths and nature that seemed to float in the center of the wall.

• **The Dramatic Grand Finale (The Fourth Style, c. 20–79 CE):**
The last style was the most chaotic and spectacular. It combined the grand architecture of the Second Style with the framed panels of the Third. The result was a crowded, theatrical collage of dramatic myths, grand structures, and busy storylines—a style cut short by the famous eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

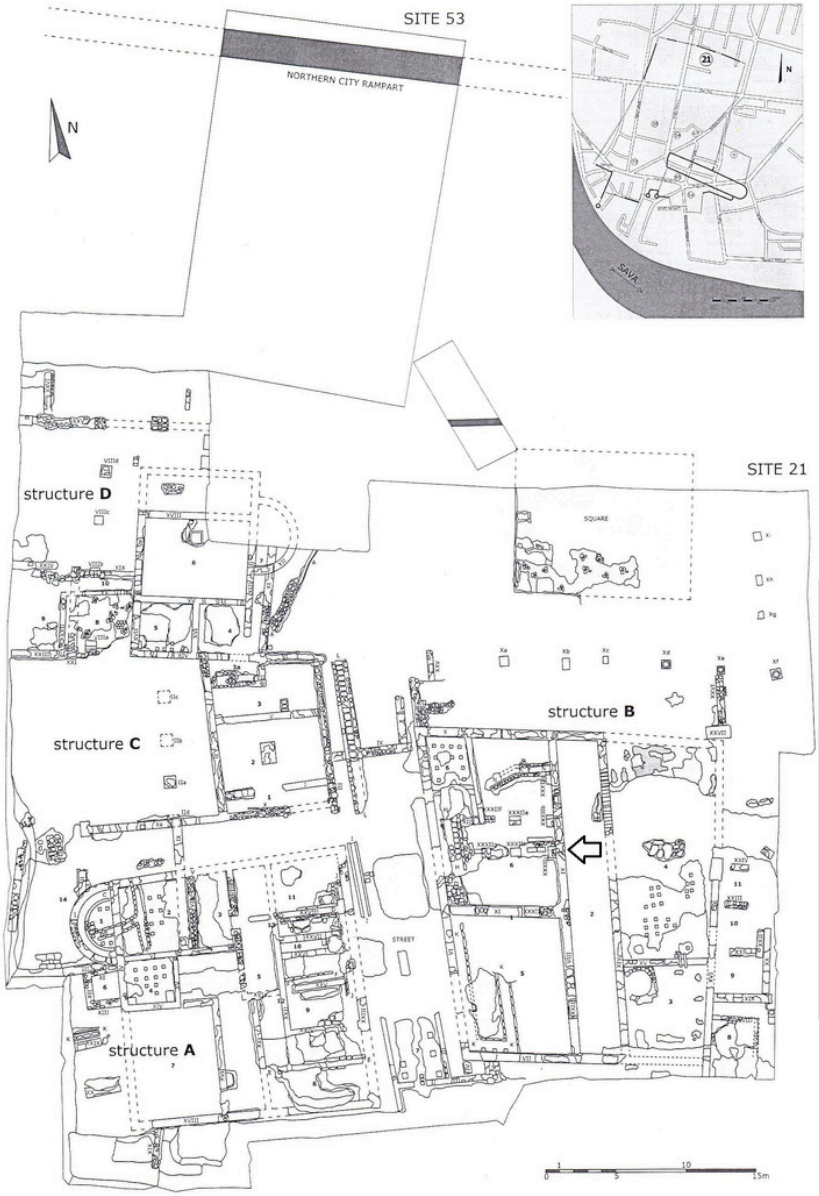
Paintings were more than just a decoration. These paintings served three major purposes in Roman daily life:

1. **Brightening the Dark:** With few windows to let in daylight, the bright, vibrant colors of the frescoes made dark interiors feel warm, open, and inviting.
2. **Bringing the Outside In:** Romans loved nature and storytelling. Their walls were filled with lush green gardens, peaceful landscapes, theatrical masks, and famous scenes from Greek mythology.
3. **The Ultimate Status Symbo**l: Just like luxury furniture today, a beautifully painted room was a way to show themselves off. The higher the quality of the artwork, the more it proved to visiting guests that the homeowner was wealthy, highly educated, and well-connected.

Case Study Sirmium

Introduction and Cultural Context

Sirmium is recognized as the richest Roman archaeological site in Serbia regarding the abundance of fresco-painted wall decorations. Although excavated over sixty years ago, this material has only recently been fully published, making it accessible to the wider public and the international academic community. The best-preserved frescoes in Sirmium date back to the 2nd century AD and were discovered in the northern sector of the ancient city, within a modest residential area located adjacent to the city ramparts. Stylistically, these wall paintings reflect intense cultural influences radiating from Northern Italy, Pannonia Superior, Noricum, and neighboring settlements in Pannonia Inferior, all heavily rooted in the Italic post-Pompeian style.



Architectural Layout and Visual Composition of Site 21

Site 21 stands out significantly from other excavated locations due to its complex iconography, which features numerous anthropomorphic representations of deities such as the Muses, the Dioscuri, Dionysos, and Venus. The most significant artistic ensemble within this structure is the "Room of the Muses," which occupied the central section of a long corridor along the west wall of Structure B. The preserved composition spans twelve panels that form four distinct compositional fields, measuring three meters in height and eleven and a half meters in total width.

1. Plan of site 21 of Sirmium, showing the position of the fresco-decorated wall with the representation of the Muses (Rogić et al. 2017, Plan 1, 29).

Room of the Muses

The artwork is structured into three horizontal zones, starting with a short upper zone adorned with semicircular garland motifs and a stylized egg-and-dart motif. The prominent middle zone is dominated by vibrant red color fields divided into four distinct segments, each framed by light blue, ochre, black, and white lines, and further embellished with semicircular floral borders. The four main fields are separated by long vertical black borders, two of which are decorated with elegant floral candelabras, while the third depicts an arrangement of fruits and leaves. The lower socle zone supports the whole composition. It depicts a wetland landscape filled with birds and swamp vegetation set against an ochre background.

At the upper center of each of the four red fields lies a light blue circular medallion containing a portrait of a Muse. Special attention is devoted to the iconography of the Muses. The artist demonstrated remarkable technical skill through careful modeling and color shading of their faces and clothing. Each deity is depicted with long, slightly wavy hair adorned with a flower wreath resembling a crown. Pearl earrings appear beneath the hair. Each of the Muses is dressed in light blue robes. Through specific iconographic attributes, researchers could conclusively identify two of the four of them. Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy, is recognized by a tragic mask painted next to her portrait, while Terpsichore, the Muse of Choral Song and Dance, is identified by an adjacent five-stringed lyre. Although the faces on the remaining two medallions have flaked off and lack visible attributes, scholars generally deduce that they represent Clio and Thalia.



2. Fresco-decorated panels from the "Room of the Muses" exhibited in the Museum of Srem, following reconstruction and conservation work carried out during the 1960s (Rogić et al. 2017, Fig. 10, 47).



3. Theoretical reconstruction of the composition featuring the Muses (Rogić et al. 2017, Fig. 35, 64).

Historical and Mythological Significance

In Classical antiquity, the Muses were revered as the inspiring goddesses of music, literature, the arts, and the sciences. Originally regarded as the nymphs of inspiring natural springs, their worship evolved from local Thraco-Boeotian traditions into a widely established cult across the Mediterranean. The classical tradition recognizes nine distinct Muses, including Calliope for epic poetry, Clio for history, Urania for astronomy, Thalia for comedy, Melpomene for tragedy, Polyhymnia for religious hymns, Erato for erotic poetry, Euterpe for lyric poetry, and Terpsichore for choral song and dance.

The Romans adopted these divinities directly from Greek culture, integrating them into the core of Roman literary and artistic society. Roman writers and poets regularly invoked them in their literary masterpieces. Their imagery frequently adorned relief sculptures, frescoes, and sarcophagi.

This cultural legacy persists today, as the Latin word museum derives from the Greek mouseion, which originally signified a sacred shrine dedicated to the Muses as a center for philosophical study, scholarship, and artistic contemplation.

Case Study Ruta Vía de la Plata

Mérida (Extremadura)

When entering a Roman house, one typically encounters small rooms with limited natural light.
In the case of the room from the house at 26 Suárez Somonte Street, now preserved in the National Museum of Roman Art, lighting was provided by a side window and two opposite doorways aligned along its central axis. The room formed part of a domestic complex excavated in 1970.

The reconstructed elevation defines a room measuring 6.75 by 5.9 metres, adjoining other rooms with opus signinum floors and mosaic pavements dating from the 1st to the 2nd century AD. Álvarez Sáenz de Buruaga (1974), who excavated the room, noted that it had been narrowed and that the preserved painting on stucco was executed on the final wall.
Using the fresco technique (painting directly onto wet plaster so that the pigments became integrated into the wall itself), Roman homeowners transformed their living spaces into impressive works of art.



MNAR. Author: Plana Torres. Lorenzo

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MNAR. Author: Otero Ibañez. Miguel Ángel

The rich painted decoration comprises a series of panels arranged in three horizontal zones. The lower zone consists of dado panels reproducing polychrome marble, similar to those found in Late Roman domus and villae, such as the Villa of "Las Ventas" and the houses uncovered on the site of the National Museum of Roman Art in Mérida.
The central zone features framed scenes set within garlands against a Pompeian red background. Further out, additional frames appear against the same red background, decorated with palm fronds crossed by a wavy band or ribbon. A triple meander border separates each central decorative section, framed by bands of solid colours: green, blue and yellow. Vertically aligned green-and-white palmettes adorn the dark background band forming the frame.

In the open section of the composition, a shield is depicted, with two pairs of crossed spears beneath it, decorated with infulae (ceremonial ribbons), together with two bluish trefoil motifs, similar to those found in the corners. The upper section is bordered by an angular geometric motif pointing to the left, while the lower section features the same reed motif and a brown-coloured band.
The central scenes depict a variety of subjects: a triumphant frontal view of a quadriga; a charioteer seen in profile during a race; a man standing while taming a horse; a hare hunt with a hunting dog; and finally, a wild boar hunt using a venabulum (hunting spear).

In both hunting scenes, the master is depicted on horseback, wearing a green chlamys (cloak), a red tunic and black boots. The final decorative element is a large central medallion featuring an eight-petalled flower.

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These scenes primarily depict the lifestyle and activities of the landowning elite of Roman Emerita during the Late Roman period. Particularly noteworthy is the portrayal of the master in association with horse breeding, training and use, both in hunting scenes and through the sponsorship of circus spectacles.

This imagery reflects the public image that the owner sought to project to visitors entering the room, which had probably been converted into a triclinium (dining room) by the time these decorations were painted.

Based on their artistic style and iconography, the paintings date from between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. Even more interesting is their correspondence with the decorative style found in 4th-century polychrome mosaics, suggesting the existence of shared iconographic workshops operating in the capital of Lusitania at a time when the city's political elite enjoyed considerable wealth (*Fernández Díaz and Castillo Alcántara, 2023*).





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Gijón (Asturias)

The Campo Valdés Roman Baths in Gijón (Asturias, Spain) have been a constant point of reference in the history of Gijón's origins since their discovery and partial excavation in 1903. The site underwent restoration and redevelopment between 1990 and 1994.

The thermal complex features several construction phases, which form part of two major building projects. Towards the end of the 1st century AD or the beginning of the 2nd century AD, a north-south-oriented bath building was constructed. It consisted of a succession of cold and warm rooms arranged along an axial or linear axis, following a retrograde circulation plan. This first project comprised an apodyterium (changing room), a frigidarium (cold bathing room), two tepidaria (warm rooms) and a caldarium (hot bathing room), arranged perpendicular to a long corridor or ambulacrum.
This initial design was subsequently modified or revised during construction, with the addition of a new heated room with a circular floor plan, which should be identified as a sudatio (sweating room).

From the first third of the 2nd century AD onwards, the complex was expanded towards the eastern section, with the addition of several rooms featuring interesting painted decorations.

On the lower sections of the walls belonging to this second expansion, in situ frescoes have been preserved. These feature motifs imitating marble (crustae marmoreae), yellow panels with triple borders, continuous decorative patterns, geometric and vegetal elements, and drapery motifs. In addition to these paintings, other remains were discovered and have recently been studied by researcher Elea Duquet.



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Her work has enabled the reconstruction and graphic restoration of several decorative panels from these walls, including designs imitating carpets, honeycomb panels, vegetal motifs and column decorations.

Featuring a style typical of the Hadrianic period, these paintings bear witness to the region's full integration into the official artistic trends of the Roman Empire.

Case study Aquileia

The paintings in the hall of the Episcopal Residence of Aquileia (4th century AD)

During the excavations carried out between 2009 and 2010 in the vicinity of Bishop Theodore's Basilica, a hall with a large apse was discovered, similar to others documented in wealthy houses located in other parts of Aquileia. Due to its location, it may have been part of the episcopal residence.

The apse, over five meters high, was elevated and connected to the hall by a large step.
The walls and ceiling were painted with frescoes, several fragments of which were found during the excavations. The decoration, composed of grape shoots and clusters and birds against a red background, made the apse dome stand out against the simple white ceiling of the hall.
The floor mosaic, featuring an original motif of shaded tesserae, highlighted the function of the space, which was used as a reception room and was therefore more lavishly decorated.



Domus e Palazzo Episcopale - ©G. Baronchelli

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