

Roman Wall Painting as Evidence for Egyptian Luxury Imports

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The mid-first century B.C. sees an explosion of Egyptian motifs in Roman wall painting. Drawing on pharaonic art (the art of Egypt under the pharaohs until the Hellenistic period), these motifs carefully reproduce the iconography and even artistic style such that the miniature pharaonic figures, crowns, and animals stand out prominently from their surrounding framework. Although once interpreted as a sign of the homeowner's adherence to Isiac cult, these motifs are now more commonly thought to reference Octavian's conquest of Egypt, or to be simply a new development in fresco "fashion." Yet none of these readings is satisfactory: the paintings overlap in no way with religious and political imagery, and even a "fashion" needs to be explained within its historical context. How then can we make sense of them?

Comparing select wall paintings in Rome and the Bay of Naples with other archaeological material reveals that the paintings, including their pharaonic interpolations, in fact depict actual luxury objects -- objects that were highly prized by Roman collectors and sometimes even stood within the same rooms that the painters were decorating. Indeed, that painters reproduced such precious items in fresco has already been recognized in the vessels and candelabra depicted in Second-Style schemes (ca. 45–20 B.C.); this paper demonstrates that the same artistic practice informs the pharaonic motifs. Moreover, it shows that these motifs draw on a great range of prestige objects: not only vessels and candelabra, but also jewelry, metalware, statuettes, and even textiles. Addressing each category in turn, this paper concludes that pharaonic motifs owe more to painterly process and the booming trade in luxury goods than any religious or political agenda. In this respect the motifs are actually analogous to many Greek elements in the paintings, which until now have been treated as a discrete and unrelated phenomenon, and rarely interpreted in terms of politics. That Roman collections of precious objects inform both sets of material requires us to rethink the widespread political readings of pharaonic motifs and, indeed, Roman wall painting more generally.