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Workshop: *Beyond Iconography: Materials, Methods, and Meaning in Ancient Painting Studies*

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Pattern Books: Making Meaning with a Common Toolkit

Scholars of ancient Roman wall painting have long recognized that pattern books formed an essential part of the ancient painter's toolkit. Several examples of mythological paintings from the Bay of Naples attest to the practice of painting from a set of common models; in these instances, two or more paintings from different locations show nearly identical compositions and figural rendering (even if they often differ in the level of detail and evident expertise of their respective painters). What has been less recognized in the scholarship, however, is that pattern books were useful not only to painters but to *viewers* as well. I argue that the pattern book was as useful — indeed, as necessary — a tool to the ancient Roman viewer as to the painter: both relied on it as a common tool to imbue a painting with meaning. Just as the painter selected and modified various models, especially figural types, for use in different contexts, so the viewer would pick up on the connotations of the type depending on how it was deployed: a certain reclining type was used for mythological characters whose beauty was central to their story; a striding type could represent any number of mythical heroes in the act of vanquishing a foe; and so on. Thus the repeated use of figural types (in painting just as in many other media) encouraged the viewer to become familiar with the type — and thereafter to rely on his knowledge of its connotations in order to quickly identify the subject of a mythological panel painting and to interpret it.

Moreover, painter and viewer both engaged in creative reimaginings of these types. They elaborated upon the possibilities offered by these common models to create scenes that were perhaps surprising, polysemous, or offered certain satisfactions unattainable without the common language of patterns. A painter could subtly vary a figural type in a particular context with the expectation that the viewer would register and appreciate the differences and the appropriateness to its context; and a viewer, equally conversant in the standard types, could create one or several valid interpretations of the painting before him.

In my view, then, the pattern book is by no means a crutch, as it has often been perceived in modern scholarship. Rather it is an essential device for both the production and the interpretation of Roman wall painting. In the framework of the *Beyond Iconography* workshop, the pattern book acts an invaluable link between not only materials and meaning, but between these and the very iconography which this workshop seeks to move “beyond:” for the pattern book is, after all, a primary agent in creating the iconography that has so often dominated scholarly discussion. As a material that creates both meaning *and* iconography, the pattern book is unique among the topics addressed in this workshop — one whose interpretive potential can only begin to be explored in this paper.