Repetition Breeds Polysemy: Copy Books and the Roman Viewer

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Only recently have scholars of ancient Roman painting begun to explore the possibility that some frescoes of figurative scenes may be intentionally ambiguous. The megalographic frieze in Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries was one of the first paintings recognized to deliberately conceal its content from the viewer (Beard and Henderson, *Classical Art*; Bettina Bergmann, "Seeing Women in the Villa of the Mysteries"), flaunting a reticence that invites speculation. Hérica Valladares further developed this idea in her treatment of the famous Four Women from Stabia, commenting on these mysterious women's long-disputed identifications as personifications or mythological characters.

I argue that we can push Valladares's examination further by introducing into the discussion, on the one hand, copy books employed by Roman painters; and on the other, Roman modes of viewing. Roman painters repeat time and again the same figures — striking the same pose, swathed in drapery flowing the same way — now acknowledged among scholars to derive at least in part from sketchbooks of figures and compositions. When modern scholars look at the surviving paintings, we see a repetition of figures that leads to an identification of the depicted mythological scene based on the other extant scenes in which the repeated figure appears. However, I argue that trusting this repetition can be misleading. Roman painters were more versatile than this model of rote repetition allows, and they clearly reassigned these stock figures according to their needs. Thus the coupling of Io and Argus in one painting copies very closely that of Penelope and Odysseus in another, and the female of the pair again appears as Omphale in a third. In these instances, attributes aid the identification of the figures; but when such attributes are lacking, identification has proceeded from the figural rendering — as it viably cannot, I believe, based on Roman painters' practice. Further, I argue (following the abovementioned scholars) that the importance of arriving at one identification for these figures, especially one based on the identity of their doppelgängers in other paintings far removed, is alien to the Roman mode of viewing. A Roman viewer would approach these images armed with extensive experience of the repeated types, and at each encounter would reformulate his interpretation of the painted scene in light of its specific variations and programmatic context (which could itself rely on repeated figures and compositions). He would modify and nuance his understanding of the painting based on his very exposure to its multiple reproductions, exploiting the polysemy wrought by its repetition.