

An Un-Augustan Understanding of the Third Style

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The Third Style of Roman wall painting, popular in the Italian peninsula from ca. 20 B.C. to A.D. 50, has long been identified with Augustus. For 60 years now scholars have related the colors, compositions, and motifs of Third Style walls to the emperor's moralizing political programs. In keeping with Augustan sumptuary laws, Third Style wall decoration is said to display a marked sobriety, severity, and restraint, as the variegated palette and rich three-dimensional illusionism of Second Style murals are replaced with flat panels of color in severe black, white, and red. Motifs common to the Third Style also resonate, it is said, with Augustus' political reforms and achievements: Egyptian figures and designs blossom in time with the victory at Actium, religious vignettes bespeak Augustus' promulgation of piety, and Neo-Attic and neoclassicizing elements coincide with the larger Augustan visual program intent on recalling Athenian glory.

While attractive, I claim that these Augustan readings of the Third Style are problematic. Chronologically, its birth does not coincide with Augustus' rise to power but rather postdates it; indeed, Augustus' own house was painted in not Third, but late Second Style, casting doubt on its moral-political significance. Further, the Third Style has now been convincingly argued to naturally follow the Second Style on formal grounds—that is, it evolves organically rather than dawning with a political event. Finally, the characterization of the Third Style as sober necessarily ignores the style's equally essential lavish, whimsical details. This paper thus argues that, while productive when treating imperial sculpture, such political readings lead us astray when applied to Third Style painting.