The few references to Roman painting in ancient literature usually concern portable examples on materials such as wood and ivory. Because these works have not survived, the Roman painters most highly praised in antiquity have passed into obscurity. During the late Republic, portrait painters like Iaia of Kyzikos (late 2nd—early 1st century B.C.) commanded high prices, according to Pliny, higher even than “the most celebrated painters of the same period, Sopolis and Dionysios.” So too we read in Pliny that Arellius, who worked at the end of the first century B.C., was highly esteemed and would have been more so but for his regrettable habit of portraying goddesses in the image of his mistresses. The same author also tells us that the emperor Augustus exhibited two paintings in his forum: the Visage of War and Triumph. He displayed other paintings in the Forum of Julius Caesar, his adoptive father, and it is clear that the medium was used for propaganda and war reportage as well as for decoration.

The Roman paintings that have survived are in the durable medium of fresco, used to adorn the interiors of private homes in the Roman cities and in the countryside. According to Pliny, it was Studius “who first instituted that most delightful technique of painting walls with representations of villas, porticoes and landscape gardens, woods, groves, hills, pools, channels,
2. Mount Vesuvius looms at the left behind the ruins of Pompeii’s commercial center, the Forum. From Amedeo Maiuri, Pompeii (Rome, 1929), illus. p. 25.

rivers, coastlines.” Some have speculated that Studius was responsible for the decoration of the Villa Farnesina, in Rome, probably completed in 19 B.C. on the occasion of Agrippa’s marriage to Julia, daughter of the emperor Augustus.

Despite a lack of physical evidence, we can assume that some portable paintings depicted the same subjects that are found on painted walls in Roman villas. It is even reasonable to suppose that Roman panel paintings, which included both original creations and adaptations of renowned late Greek works, were the prototypes for the most popular subjects in frescoes: the Fall of Icarus, Polyphemus and Galatea, Perseus and Andromeda, and the Death of Actaeon. It is probable that artists from Rome specializing in fresco often traveled to other parts of Italy with copybooks that reproduced popular paintings as well as ornamental patterns. The decorative elements shared by certain villas in the capital and in the region of Naples make this explanation all but certain.

The richest concentration of surviving frescoes has been found in Campania, the region around Naples. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius on August 24, A.D. 79, buried much of the countryside surrounding the volcano, including the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, as well as dozens of
private residences nearby. As so often happens in archaeology, a disaster served to freeze a moment in the past—and allowed excavators from the eighteenth century onward to delve into the life of the region's ancient inhabitants.

The many examples of fresco painting that have survived as a result of the eruption of Vesuvius are nevertheless but a fraction of what existed in the Roman world. Pompeii was not even among the thirty greatest cities of the Roman Empire. Thus with each discovery in the Vesuvian region or in Rome, scholars are forced to rethink issues related to chronology and style.

Because of two major acquisitions made early in this century, the Metropolitan Museum has the finest collection of Roman frescoes outside of Italy. Sections of painted walls from villas of the first century B.C. in the Neapolitan suburbs of Boscoreale and Boscotrecase were purchased and exported with the permission of the Italian government in 1903 and 1920 respectively. In the case of the second group of paintings, discovered in Boscotrecase in 1903 and acquired in 1920, the sequence of events was fortunate indeed, for had the paintings not been removed from their original context and offered for sale, they might well have been lost forever during the 1906 eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

3. The villas of Boscoreale and Boscotrecase were located north of Pompeii and were buried during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79.
The painted walls of Roman villas provide an unparalleled record of the life and worldview of the well-to-do two millennia ago. They are not only the physical remains of a site, but also mirrors of the Romans' cultural and artistic concerns. Frescoed walls in private Roman houses seem to have been almost exclusively decorative, only rarely appearing to have served a cultic or religious purpose.

It is a truism that the Romans were deeply indebted to the magnificent legacy of Greek culture. Roman narrative paintings are often presumed to copy works from the Greek Classical and Hellenistic periods, yet when they include mythological themes popular in the Greek world, the paintings are often casual and sentimentalized variations of earlier works. We must remember that for Roman patrons, as for us, Greek art had a historical fascination; Latin authors refer to the Greeks as the "ancients." The gap between the Greeks of the mid-fifth century B.C. and the Romans of the first century B.C. was as great as that between the High Renaissance and the Beaux-Arts period of the late nineteenth century.

Our knowledge of Roman and Pompeian villas of the first centuries B.C. and A.D. has grown considerably in the last decade and a half through systematic excavation and study. It has become clear that the decorative elements of these private homes are more profitably considered in their historical setting than as echoes of lost Hellenistic (late 4th–1st century B.C.) masterpieces. The nineteenth-century fascination with great ancient artists and shadowy cultural impulses has yielded to a more objective scholarly method, which seeks to examine each period and place as a particular milieu that drew to a greater or lesser extent from the past. It has become possible to conceive of a Roman private setting in Roman terms—as a place designed for first-century patrons who lived in rooms with elaborately decorated walls, ceilings, floors, and furnishings.

A development of Roman painting in four styles was discerned by August Mau in his seminal study of Roman painting of 1882. Although Mau's system is still basically sound, recent research has revealed frequent revivals of styles in later periods, leading to qualifications of the progression described by Mau. The First Style (ca. 200–60 B.C.) was largely an exploration of the possibilities of simulating marble of various colors and types on painted plaster. Artists of the late Republic (2nd–1st century B.C.) drew upon examples of early Hellenistic (late 4th–3rd century B.C.) painting and architecture in order to simulate masonry walls. The wall was routinely divided into three horizontal painted zones, and the uppermost was crowned by a stucco cornice of dentils, based upon the Doric architectural order (fig. 4). In general the mosaic floors of this period were more ornate than the walls, which lacked figural decoration.

The decline of the First Style coincided with the Roman colonization of Pompeii in 80 B.C., which transformed what had essentially been an Italic town with Greek influences into a Roman city. Going beyond the simple representation of costlier building materials, artists borrowed from the figural repertoire of Hellenistic Greek wall painting to depict gods, mortals, and heroes in various contexts. The stern-faced marble portraits of the late Republic might mislead one to imagine that it was a time of great austerity in contrast to the splendor and opulence of the imperial age, but it was in fact as socially variegated and populated by art collectors of extravagant taste as that which followed.
In the earliest phase of the Second Style, prior to the middle of the first century B.C., the masonry wall of First Style painting endured, but columns appeared to break through the picture plane in an imaginary foreground. The next phase is found in both the Villa of the Mysteries near Pompeii (ca. 60 B.C.; fig. 7) and the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (ca. 50–40 B.C.). The panels from Boscoreale, as we shall see, are an exceptional example of late Second Style decoration, teasing the eye with perspectival recession and providing copies of lost but presumably once-famous Hellenistic paintings. In the architectural vistas, deeply receding colonnades and projections of column bases into the viewer’s space became commonplace. Often the wall was no longer acknowledged and simply embellished, as had been the tendency in the First Style, but was instead painted in such a way as to seem knee-high. We are encouraged to look above this socle, the only barrier before us, and out into fantastic panoramas or architectural confections (see figs. 27, 28). The fact that the viewer’s eye was methodically tricked on such a scale gives us insight into the nature and extent of aesthetic refinement in the art of the late Roman Republic.

In the Second Style copies of earlier paintings, as in the Boscoreale paintings of Room H, the intention was to create a picture gallery, of the kind we read about in ancient literature, that displayed elaborate reproductions of famous Hellenistic works (fig. 32). The combination of paintings in a gallery was occasionally meaningful, as in the religious cycle of the Villa of the Mysteries, and occasionally haphazard, as in Boscoreale’s Room H. At Boscoreale, the connection among some paintings is no greater than we would expect to find in a well-appointed residence of the nineteenth century; the choice of subjects appears to have been based on the quality and renown of the original pictures rather than some mysterious thread of meaning.

With the political transition from Julius Caesar’s rule to that of Emperor Augustus (r. 27 B.C.–A.D. 14) in the second half of the first century B.C., sweeping artistic changes were introduced. When Octavian (later named...
Augustus) defeated Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C., there followed a trend toward opulence in public monuments, epitomized by Augustus’s declaration that he had found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble. During much of the Republic, elaboration was eschewed in public buildings, but in the early Empire, a change in political climate encouraged both public and private celebration of what was uniquely Roman in art rather than purely Greek-inspired artistic traditions.

Under Augustus, a new impulse to innovate, rather than re-create, asserted itself in architecture, portraiture, and other arts as well. Augustus oversaw the development of a new architectural order, the Composite Order, which mixed classical forms with Roman innovations and was first apparent in the Forum of Augustus in Rome (19 B.C.). His approach to official portraiture, which quickly influenced private portraiture, is exemplified by his statue from Prima Porta (ca. 20–17 B.C.; Museo Chiaramonti, The Vatican Museums). This magnificent work fuses fifth-century classicism and Hellenistic idealism, and suggests by the calm visage of the emperor, clad in the armor of a victorious general but barefoot like a deity, the security and prosperity that his reign would guarantee.

During the Third Style (ca. 20 B.C.—A.D. 20), coincident with Augustus’s reign, the subject matter and style of fresco painting also changed abruptly. The introduction of this new style may in part be attributed to Augustus and Agrippa, his close friend and a patron of the arts, who sponsored many
public buildings, such as the Pantheon in Rome. In fact, Agrippa’s own villa in Rome, the Villa Farnesina (ca. 19 B.C.; fig. 8), anticipated the Third Style.

During this new phase of mural decoration, walls often had a single monochrome background color—such as red, black, or white—and were decorated with elaborate architectural, vegetal, and figural details. These drew upon familiar forms, including mythical beasts like sirens and griffins, but the original mythological symbolism of such animals seems to have been of practically no interest to the artists, who treated them as decorative devices. In decorative arts, the same basic indifference to subject matter was characteristic of the so-called Neo-Attic movement, which began to serve the Roman appetite for classicizing style as early as the late second century B.C. and was especially popular during the Augustan period.

Additional evidence of this primarily decorative, rather than symbolic, approach to wall painting is the fact that the multiplicity of figural scenes characteristic of the Second Style ended, and only a few stock scenes were used. These usually appeared in the center of the wall. As in the Second Style, they may be understood to serve as the equivalent of framed paintings, in which figures and landscapes were shown in fairly natural spatial perspective. These later paintings lose the importance they had earlier enjoyed, however, and are only a part, not the dominant element, in the overall decorative scheme. The paintings’ subjects, which during the Second Style had begun to matter less than the fame of the works copied, became

10. The paintings of the Third Style Villa Imperiale at Pompeii (ca. 12 B.C.) show careful attention to detail and have much in common with those from Boscotrecase. Here an incense burner rises in front of a delicately described frieze and fantastic architectural features. The small paintings to either side of the incense burner are subordinated to the other decorative elements.
Above: In a detail of the north wall of the Black Room from Boscoreale, Egyptian figures propitiate the deity Anubis in the form of a jackal. Below: A similar scene with a crocodile is part of a predella in the Third Style tablinum, or vestibule, in the Villa of the Mysteries. Augustus’s defeat of Antony and Cleopatra gave Egyptianizing motifs a symbolic character in Boscoreale’s imperial residence; in a private home such as the Villa of the Mysteries they merely reflected the taste of the day. (See also fig. 48.)
less significant than the harmony of the paintings with the surrounding sections of the wall, the ceiling, and the mosaic floor.

Interest in reproducing famous Hellenistic masterpieces and portraying elaborate vistas was replaced by an acknowledgment of the two-dimensionality of the wall's painted surface. Third Style artists were preoccupied with artistic form rather than content and no longer fascinated with simulating depth. Although very skilled technically, they eschewed the perspectival exaggerations of the preceding style, except to poke fun at them, as on the north wall of Boscotrecase's Black Room (ca. 11 B.C.; figs. 47–50, back covers). Here the Second Style's distant landscapes seen through massive pediments are parodied by a miniature painting of a landscape on the wall—not in the distance—and a spindly canopy barely protruding into the viewer's space.

The Metropolitan's paintings from the imperial villa at Boscotrecase are among the finest anywhere of the Third Style, in some ways the most revolutionary phase because its insistent two-dimensionality reflects a moment when artists reacted against tradition rather than built upon it. This impulse, which is familiar to students of modern painting, was rarely attested in the history of the classical world.

It was in large measure the perspectival conceits and playful attitude governing the late Second and Third Styles that prompted the condemnation of Vitruvius, the late first-century B.C. architect and writer. In one passage of his book De Architectura, Vitruvius laments:

Imitations based upon reality are now disdained by the improper taste of the present…. Instead of columns there rise up stalks; instead of gables, striped panels with curled leaves and volutes. Candelabra uphold pictured shrines and above the summits of these, clusters of thin stalks rise from their roots in tendrils with little figures seated upon them at random…. Slender stalks with heads of men and of animals [are] attached to half the body. Such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been…. For how can a reed actually sustain a roof, or a candelabrum the ornaments of a gable?…. For pictures cannot be approved which do not resemble reality. (7.5.3.4)

The crusty rhetoric of Vitruvius's conservative voice echoed Republican distaste for the novel artistic direction taken during the monarchy of Augustus, but the early Third Style, which was in effect the court style of the emperor Augustus and his friend Agrippa, eventually gave way to a rekindled interest in elaboration for its own sake. The color palette of the Third Style also evolved, so that the initial stark and restrained red, white, and black backgrounds eventually changed to green, blue, and yellow. This progression signaled a gradual revival of the ostentation and flourish of late Republican taste.

During the Fourth Style (ca. A.D. 20–79) there was a revival of interest in the simulation of depth on the painted wall and the depiction of fantastic panoramas, as well as a revived emphasis on narrative painting. In the Julio-Claudian phase of this style (ca. A.D. 20–54), a textilelike quality dominates and tendrils seem to connect all of the elements on a wall. The colors warm up once again, and they are used to advantage in the depiction of scenes drawn from mythology. A second subtype of the Fourth Style involves a flattening of the picture plane once more, and a third introduces a complete blanketing of the wall with painted images, a manifestation of the amor pleni (love of abundance) that is typical of contemporary Flavian (A.D. 69–96) architectural sculpture and decoration.
The decoration of a Roman villa was a highly organized enterprise. Wall paintings were carefully planned in advance with intricate systems of proportions and geometry, hinted at by Vitruvius. Private interiors were probably a cooperative effort of artists in itinerant workshops who specialized in painting backgrounds, landscapes, and figures, molding elaborate stucco cornices and ceilings, and creating mosaic pavements in conjunction with the wall paintings.

Some of the best evidence for the techniques of Roman artists is in Pliny’s *Natural History* and in Vitruvius’s manual *De Architectura*. Vitruvius describes the elaborate methods employed by wall painters, including the insertion of sheets of lead in the wall to prevent the capillary action of moisture from attacking the fresco, the preparation of as many as seven layers of plaster on the wall, and the use of marble powder in the top layers to help produce a mirrorlike sheen on the surface. Sections of each room were painted at different times, and the edges of each section (or *giornata*, meaning the extent of a day’s work) are faintly visible on the surface. It seems that preliminary drawings or light incisions on the prepared surface guided the artists in decorating the walls *a fresco* (on fresh plaster) with strong primary colors; the lighter colors were apparently often added *a secco* (on dry plaster) in a subsequent phase, although there is vigorous and continuing debate about the exact methods of Roman painters.

Vitruvius is helpful as well in informing us about the colors used by Roman mural painters. Black was essentially drawn from the carbon created by burning brushwood or pine chips. Ocher was extracted from mines and served for yellow. Reds were derived either from cinnabar, red ochre, or from heating white lead. Blues were made from mixing sand and copper and baking the mixture. The deepest purple was by far the most precious color, since it came from certain sea whelks, but Vitruvius also describes less expensive methods of obtaining purple pigment by dyeing chalk with berries.

Affluent Romans of the first centuries B.C. and A.D. often had more than one residence, including a house in the city and a country villa, and those of a higher station, like senators and knights, frequently had several villas. The expenditure of vast sums on the construction and furnishing of these homes prompted considerable criticism; Lucretius noted sourly that boredom drove the rich from their city home to their country one and back again. Such was the quest for creature comforts and diversions that pisciculture—the breeding of fish in ponds—became a passion similar to the cultivation of tulips in seventeenth-century Holland, and many Roman writers complained that the business of government suffered because of it.

Certainly much of the condemnation of *luxuria* in Roman country estates was pure Republican lip service; Cicero was among the critics but had several villas himself and corresponded actively in search of statues for his gardens. The elaborate retreats of the late Republic and early Empire were amenities that seem to have been indispensable to the wealthy.

The *villa rustica*, or country villa, which permitted the owner to oversee the farms at his disposal, must have originated early on in Campania, which was first colonized by the Greeks in the middle of the eighth century B.C. Evidence for such villas is preserved only from the second century B.C. onward, however, when prominent Romans like Scipio Africanus Maior had a secondary residence outside of the capital for occasional stays. At that time, imported objects from Roman military conquests in Greece filled the
homes of Roman patrons both in the cities and in the countryside. Such booty fired the imagination of artists working in the region and accounts for much of the imagery in villas of the second and first centuries B.C.

During the late Republic, the agricultural productivity of farms adjacent to these villas became less important than the enjoyment the owners derived from the residences themselves. This trend was a source of irritation as early as the mid-second century B.C. to men like M. Porcius Cato, who saw in the striving for *luxuria* a debasement of longstanding Roman virtues associated with hard work and devotion to the state.

As the role of the country villa changed from a simple residence for overseeing agricultural productivity to a comfortable retreat, more slaves were kept year-round on the grounds and more rooms and service buildings were added. Similarly, as the owners grew increasingly sophisticated, it became fashionable to invite Greek philosophers and Roman literati to these retreats. The settings in which an owner entertained his guests changed accordingly, and simple paintings imitating masonry walls yielded to scenes drawn from Greek mythology.

The cultivated taste that replaced mere ostentation was in no small measure responsible for the growth of the Second Style. The painted walls of dining rooms, libraries, and bedrooms, like those of the villa at Boscoreale, soon reflected the villa owners' intellectual and aesthetic savoir faire and were meant to be appreciated by visitors from the neighboring Greek city of Neapolis (ancient Naples).

18. Vesuvius can be seen to the northwest in this photograph of the villa at Boscoreale taken during its excavation, in September of 1900. In the foreground is the olearium (Room 24 on the plan, fig. 21) for the manufacture and storage of wine and oil. The villa’s entrance is at the right. Between the entrance and the olearium was the Room of the Musical Instruments, named after the subject of its frescoes; paintings from both rooms are now in the Louvre. Two columns of the peristyle emerge from the mound of earth at the right, still unexcavated at the time, and Bedroom M is just beyond the column farthest from the observer. From F. Barnabei, *La villa pompeiana di P. Fannio Sinistore* (Rome, 1901), pl. III.
The two paintings at the left are from the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto in Pompeii. Mount Vesuvius may be described in the background of the view of a seaside villa (above). The other painting depicts a suburban villa with its gardens in the foreground. Both images are datable to the early Fourth Style, about A.D. 50-75 or shortly before Vesuvius’s eruption in August of 79.

Tacitus tells us that during the early Empire, from the end of the first century B.C. through the middle of the first century A.D., those who could live in “profusis sumptibus”—lavish extravagance—as the private residences of the period attest. Condemnations of such self-indulgence by writers like Martial continued, but Campania was filled with sumptuous properties, including the imperial estate at Boscotrecase, and until the end of the Roman Empire remained an inviting resort area of thermal cures, glamorous social life, and intellectual stimulation. Each villa’s extensive grounds provided ample space for innovative landscape design and architectural and decorative experimentation, but the proliferation of such villas also resulted in motifs shared from one to the next, which has facilitated the archaeologist’s tasks of establishing relative chronology and sorting out workshops.

The discovery of Roman villas in Campania has proceeded slowly, since so much of the countryside surrounding Vesuvius was covered over and subsequently built upon. By contrast, the remains of seaside villas—often owned in addition to villae rusticae—may be spotted underwater to this day in the Bay of Naples, especially in the area around Posilipo, ancient Pausilypon. The chance discoveries of the two villas at Boscoreale and Boscotrecase are especially important, since these were superb examples of late Republican and early Empire interior design. Dozens of other extraordinary villas in the region, both imperial and private, await careful excavation.
21. The villa at Boscoreale is shown here in a roofless isometric plan that includes features known only from the excavation report published by F. Barnabei in 1901. Retaining Barnabei's unorthodox system of identification, we can proceed around the villa clockwise:

B. Interior entrance
C. Passage way
D. Room of the Musical Instruments
E. Peristyle. The six-column arrangement was imitated on the painted walls below the cantilevered roof of the courtyard. A large bronze vase (fig. 39) was painted on the wall across the entrances of Rooms N and O, and the Corinthian column (fig. 38) was at the southeast corner of the peristyle.
F. Olearium, for the production of wine and oil
G. Summer dining room(?). Paintings in the Mariemont and Naples museums
H. Probably a dining room. On the wall facing the south entrance were three paintings (left to right): Dionysos and Ariadne, Aphrodite and Eros, and the Three Graces. Only the center panel is preserved; it is in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. Above each painting were smaller triptychs; two of these, in very poor condition, are in the Metropolitan Museum. On the right (east) wall were the Metropolitan's paintings (figs. 34–36). A winged Genius was at each side of the southern entrance from the peristyle; one is in the Louvre, and the other is in the Mariemont museum. On the left (west wall), not visible, were three paintings now in Naples
I. This room was decorated with paintings of rusticated masonry, now in the Louvre and in the Mariemont museum
J. Cubiculum with a north window, which may have been original or added after the earthquake of A.D. 62 (see fig. 23)
K. An open exedra with three walls painted with garlands. The wall visible in the drawing is in the Musée Royal et Domaine de Mariemont, Morlanwelz, Belgium; the Metropolitan's panel (fig. 43) was on the facing wall
L. A large bronze vase (fig. 39) was painted on the wall across the entrances of Rooms N and O, and the Corinthian column (fig. 38) was at the southeast corner of the peristyle.
M. Winter triclinium (dining room)
N. Colonnaded courtyard
O. Sitting room
P. Tentative identification of a suite of rooms on the southern side of the courtyard:.
Q. Servants' quarters

22. Opposite: Detail of a mask of Pan from the Metropolitan's section of Room L