

## The Cult of Isis and Ancient Egyptomania in Campania

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Before I address, from an archaeological perspective, the two themes I will deal with here – the cult of Isis and “Egyptomania” in settlements in ancient Campania, some preliminary remarks are in order. In a situation where a certain interpretive confusion reigns, it may be useful to try to clarify the nature of the evidence that has come down to us, focusing especially on the following aspects:

- chronologies;
- social levels of patrons; and
- the function of images within their contexts of origin.

A correct analysis of this evidence should thus first of all distinguish between images and objects that are presumably related to the performing of a domestic cult, and images showing Egyptian subjects or settings that are, instead, unconnected to cult.<sup>2</sup>

For painted images or statuettes in domestic shrines, it is also useful to distinguish between those appearing in a “representative” area of a house and those gracing “service” areas. The former are especially significant, as they identify the *domini* as devotees of the cult of Isis,<sup>3</sup> whereas the latter must have been worshiped by the servants.<sup>4</sup>

In the peristyle that constitutes the center of the House of the Golden Cupids (VI 16,7) at Pompeii are two domestic cult installations, both dat-

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<sup>2</sup> M. Söldner, “Zur Funktion ägyptischer Elemente in der römischen Wanddekoration,” in *Fremdheit – Eigenheit. Ägypten, Griechenland und Rom. Austausch und Verständnis*, (eds. P. C. Bol, G. Kaminski and C. Maderna; Städel Jahrbuch 19; Munich: Prestel, 2004), 201–212.

<sup>3</sup> S. Adamo Muscettola, *I culti domestici*, in *Pompei. Abitare sotto il Vesuvio*, catalogue of the exhibition (Ferrara 1996–1997) (Ferrara: Ferrara Arte, 1996), 175–179, here 178.

<sup>4</sup> R. A. Tybout, “Domestic shrines and ‘popular painting’: style and social context,” *JRA* 9 (1996): 358–374.

able to the last decade of the city's life. Next to a large and lavishly decorated cubiculum, for which the house is named, is an aedicule shaped as a temple on a podium. Here were found bronze statuettes of the Capitoline triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva), the two Lares, and Mercury.<sup>5</sup> At the opposite corner of the peristyle is a shrine for the cult of Egyptian deities. On its socle are painted two snakes converging towards an altar with offerings, a habitual image in lararia. Above, against a bright yellow background framed in red that must have stood out in the shade of the peristyle, are accurate depictions of the instruments of the cult of Isis: a sistrum, two cists, a patera, a situla, towards which a uraeus (the sacred cobra) makes its way (fig. 1). Beside these are portrayed the deities worshiped in the cult: Anubis, jackal-headed and clad in red; Isis with a sistrum in her right hand and a situla in her left; Osiris, also holding a sistrum in his upheld right hand, and a cornucopia, symbol of abundance, in his left; and little Harpocrates, also holding a cornucopia. Next to the deities is the officiating priest in front of the altar (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> The excavation also yielded some objects connected to this shrine, which help us to reconstruct its appearance and imagine the actions performed there. These include an alabaster statuette of Horus (cat. N. III.115, 133230) and a large glazed-terracotta lamp on whose disc are pictured Isis, Harpocrates and Anubis (cat. N. III.105, 19286), both on display in the *Egittomania* exhibition (see p. 32 below, bottom).

Isis, Serapis and little Harpocrates were also painted on one of the walls of the garden of the House of the Amazons (VI 2,14) at Pompeii (fig. 3). They stood inside a temple surrounded by a luxuriant garden with a marine landscape in the background. The presence of a masonry altar in front of the painted shrine seems to indicate that a domestic cult was performed for these deities in this representative area of the house.<sup>7</sup>

Another image (cat. N. III.51, 112285) was found in the service area of a house (IX 7,21–22), and must hence have been worshiped by the slaves. It was painted on the wall in a corridor leading to the latrine. In this case, too, the presence of a small terracotta altar under the painting assures us that this, too, was a cult image. The attributes of the deity depicted here reflect the assimilation of Isis to Fortuna, an especially popular goddess among slaves and freedmen.<sup>8</sup> In this case, however, account should be taken of the fact that a shop straddling two streets was annexed to this house. In such a

<sup>5</sup> F. Seiler, "voce (VI 16,7.38). Casa degli Amorini dorati," *PPM V* (1994): 714–846, here 758–759, figs. 82–83.

<sup>6</sup> Seiler, "voce (VI 16,7.38). Casa degli Amorini dorati," 764–767, figs. 93–99.

<sup>7</sup> I. Bragantini, "voce VI 2,14. Casa delle Amazzoni," *PPM IV* (1993): 168–197, here 174, fig. 13.

<sup>8</sup> T. Fröhlich, *Lararien- und Fassadenbilder in den Vesuvstädten. Untersuchungen zur "volkstümlichen" pompejanischen Malerei* (RM Ergänzungsheft 32; Mainz: Von Zabern, 1991), 42.

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context it is likely that there were no significant differences in social class among the inhabitants of the house.<sup>9</sup>

The provenance of painting cat. N. III.50,8836, is less clear. An inscription qualifying it as a votive gift, however, bears witness to its religious significance.<sup>10</sup>

The presence of devotees of Egyptian cults in Pompeian homes is also documented by the finding of statuettes picturing Isis and the deities associated with her cult. Like the painted images, these sculptures often show the goddess in "mixed" forms combining the attributes of Isis with those of other deities, notably the globe or rudder of Fortuna. Different functions can be reconstructed for such sculptures on the basis of context of provenance, material, and size.

Especially remarkable examples include a group of silver statuettes from a lararium in a rural villa in the Pompeian countryside (cat. III.19–21, 125709–125711); reconstructed groups of statuettes from Herculaneum (cat. III.27–31); and a complete installation including a statue (cat. III.45, 1996/2) placed among trees in the center of an open area in the house of C. Arrius Crescens (III 4,2), at Pompeii, to form a sort of "sacred wood", in spite of the small extension of the area – a function confirmed by the finding here of a bronze brazier.<sup>11</sup>

Further evidence for Isis worshipers is brought by objects used in the cult of the goddess, especially *sistra*; the *Egittomania* exhibition catalogue includes a representative sample of the twenty or so found at Pompeii so far (cat. III.1–16).<sup>12</sup> Jewels and amulets worn on the person appear to indicate a wish for a more direct bond with the deity and a request for her protection.

The above-mentioned images and objects, being more directly linked to private cults, can be regarded as fairly reliable testimonies of the presence of Isis worshipers in the houses where they occur.<sup>13</sup> For other images, instead, a religious function is not as easy to establish, because of their specificity,

<sup>9</sup> I. Bragantini, "voce IX 7,21–22," *PPM IX* (1999): 865–869.

<sup>10</sup> Fröhlich, *Lararien- und Fassadenbilder in den Vesuvstädten. Untersuchungen zur "volkstümlichen" pompejanischen Malerei*, 294.

<sup>11</sup> V. Spinazzola, *Pompei alla luce degli Scavi Nuovi di via dell'Abbondanza (anni 1910–1923)* (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1953), 727–762; P. Zanker, *Pompei* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983), 179–182.

<sup>12</sup> M. de Vos, "Egittomania" nelle case di Pompei ed Ercolano," in *Civiltà dell'antico Egitto in Campania. Per un riordinamento della collezione egiziana del Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. Raccolta di studi in occasione della Mostra allestita nel Museo Archeologico Nazionale* (Naples: Tempi moderni, 1983), 59–71, here 69.

<sup>13</sup> A connection between the worship of Isis and the position of a house near the temple of Isis in Pompeii has been suggested for the House of Acceptus and Euhodia (VIII 5,39), in whose lararium Isis-Fortuna was depicted (M. de Vos, "Egittomania" nelle case di Pompei ed Ercolano," 62). This house yielded statuettes of Ptah-Pataikos and Bes on display in the *Egittomania* exhibition (cat. III.126–127, 116666, 116665).

rarity or complexity, or the peculiarity of their context of provenance. Examples include two depictions of Isiac ceremonies from Herculaneum, and the image of a priest of Isis on a wall in the House of Octavius Quartio (II 2,2), in Pompeii.

The paintings from Herculaneum (Naples Museum, 8919 and 8924, fig. 4), datable to the first half of the first century C.E., show a priest exhibiting cult objects to the faithful. It is hard to gauge the significance of these pictures, since they were found during eighteenth-century excavations, which at Herculaneum were conducted by tunneling, and the context near the theater from which they were removed has not been identified.<sup>14</sup> Considering their insistence on cult objects brought forth to be worshiped by the faithful attending the ceremony, I doubt that they can be interpreted in an exclusively "exotic" key, as a mere expression of a predilection for scenes drawing on Egyptian imagery.

Similar considerations probably apply to the above-mentioned depiction of a priest of Isis in the House of Octavius Quartio at Pompeii (fig. 5). The subject is recognizable by his white garment and fringed shawl, clean-shaven head, except for a tress descending from the top of his head onto his right ear, the sistrum held in his right hand, and the situla hanging from his left wrist. He is painted on the wall beside a large window looking onto a garden crossed by a long euripus. An inscription painted under the priest must have identified him, thus adding meaning to the presence of the figure, which can hence hardly be dismissed as a mere exotic ornament, although the rest of the wall decoration of the room contains no other distinctive elements.<sup>15</sup> A glazed terracotta lamp showing Isis, Harpocrates and Anubis (similar to cat. III.105), two glazed terracotta statuettes, one of Bes and another of a pharaoh, and a marble group showing an ibis biting a snake, were found outside the room and thus seem to enhance its significance.<sup>16</sup>

The meaning of a marble sphinx (cat. III.134, 2930) from the same house is less clear. It was found in a very heterogeneous sculptural ensemble lacking any other Egyptian connotations, and there is no evidence of a connection with the other above-mentioned materials.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> A. Allroggen-Bedel, "review of Tran Tamh Tinh, *Catalogue des peintures romaines du Musée du Louvre*," *Gnomon* 50 (1978): 428–430; U. Pannuti, "Il 'giornale degli scavi' di Ercolano (1738–1756)," *MemLinc* 26,3 (1983): 161–410, here 218–220.

<sup>15</sup> I. Bragantini and M. de Vos, "voce II 2, 2. *Casa di D. Octavius Quartio*," *PPM* III (1991): 42–108, here 70–79, figs. 46–54.

<sup>16</sup> Spinazzola, *Pompei alla luce degli Scavi Nuovi di via dell'Abbondanza (anni 1910–1923)*, 394–396, figs. 449–451; M. de Vos, "Egittomania nelle case di Pompei ed Ercolano," 63.

<sup>17</sup> Spinazzola, *Pompei alla luce degli Scavi Nuovi di via dell'Abbondanza (anni 1910–1923)*, 397–406.

A different reasoning applies, instead, to the many scenes of "Egyptomania" representing "the landscape of Egypt" with no cultic implications. These fall into two main genres designated in the literature, respectively, as "Nilotic" and "Pharaonic," which are chronologically distinct and had different functions in Roman house decoration.

There has been a heated debate among scholars over the last few decades concerning these paintings. The disagreement arises in part from the lack of a rigorous analytic distinction between the two genres, as well as attempts to jump to general conclusions without adequate consideration of the contexts in which the paintings occur; above all, however, it is a consequence of the lack of a shared vision of the function of house decoration in Roman society of this age.

The 1950s and 1960s were dominated by an approach that we could label "panreligious", often characterized by somewhat uncritical interpretations, seeing even the most tenuous allusion to Egypt as a testimony of Isiac faith. In later years, this approach was rejected by scholars who rightly stressed the need for more discriminating analysis and did away with many excessive interpretations. By overreaction, however, these same scholars refused to grant any significance to any of these references to the Egyptian world, dismissing them as manifestations of a generic "exoticism" devoid of deeper implications.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, they, too, omitted to examine this evidence more carefully according to the parameters I referred to above (p. 21): chronology, clientele, and context.

The current increased interest in the language of house decoration and the mechanisms informing visual perception in the ancient world invite us to reconsider these "images of Egypt," trying to understand what they could communicate to a hypothetical ancient viewer. These images are an adaptation within the Roman culture of habitation of a vast store of themes and iconographies portraying Egypt as a land of mystery, miracles and oddities. For a public of Hellenistic culture, this image could be evoked by means of a limited number of stereotypes or "icons," which sufficed to represent Egypt, its landscape, and its peculiar religious practices.

These considerations, which help us to understand how visual perception is constructed and works, are also useful as a mean of analyzing different iconographic genres, and thereby shed light on the mentality and ideology of a given society. These specific figurative themes, too, need to be approached from the perspective of an interpretive discourse that places them back in their original context, whenever this is possible, and reconstructs

<sup>18</sup> M. Söldner, "Ägyptische Bildmotive im augusteischen Rom. Ein Phänomen im Spannungsfeld von Politik, Religion und Kunst," in *Ägypten-Griechen-Römer. Begegnung der Kulturen* (eds. H. Felber and S. Pfisterer-Haas; Kanobos 1; Leipzig: Wodtke und Stegbauer, 1999), 95–113, here 96–97.

their function within it, a discourse formulated in the awareness that the figurative language of a given society is not a "description" of reality, but a system of communication, and as such calls for a holistic approach. By analyzing how a given image developed within the ancient figurative repertoire as part of a specific figurative system it appears in (in our case, the system and language of house decoration), one can rescue this evidence, at least in part, from the isolation and fragmentariness to which it has been relegated so far. Meaning can be restored to these images by exploring the *reasons for* and *modes of* their appearance in a historical perspective (how did a historical theme develop within the mentality of the time? what can the motivations of the clientele have been? how was a given theme figuratively translated by craftsmen, and how did it become part of their repertoire?). Any interpretation, however intriguing, that dispenses with such an effort at reconstruction can be nothing more than a gratuitous and unprovable hypothesis, and will not shed light on the meaning of these images for the society that produced them.

In Republican times, as late as the mid-first century B.C.E., papyrus boats, palms, exotic animals and certain types of buildings alluded to Egypt and the Nile. This genre has come down to us through some exceptional testimonies from the previous century, such as the mosaic of Palestrina and the mosaics from the House of the Faun at Pompeii.<sup>19</sup>

Among the examples of the popularity of this "Nilotic" repertoire in the Vesuvian towns are two small mosaic pictures in reception rooms, respectively in the House of the Menander (I 10,4) (fig. 6) and the House of Paquius Proculus (I 7,1) at Pompeii.<sup>20</sup> These are variations on the same theme, that of pigmies on a boat on the Nile, which is evoked by its typical flora and fauna (crocodiles and hippopotami, as well as ducks and palm trees) against the background of a built-up landscape alluding to a city, presumably Alexandria. A long painted frieze from the House of the Sculptor (VIII 7,23–24), a fragment of which was on display in the *Egittomania* exhibition, dates from the same period (cat. III.66, SAP 41654).<sup>21</sup>

The protagonists of these images are pigmies appearing in a setting defined by the same elements that encode the image of the Egyptian landscape during this period. These pigmies are engaged in "caricatural" actions, such as animatedly fighting against innocuous animals or, conversely, attempt-

<sup>19</sup> P. G. P. Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina. Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 121; Leiden: Brill, 1995); F. Zevi, "Die Casa del Fauno in Pompeji und das Alexandermosaik," *RM* 105 (1998): 21–65.

<sup>20</sup> R. and L. Ling, *The insula of the Menander at Pompeii: vol. II. The decorations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 53–55 and 201–202.

<sup>21</sup> A long frieze from House (VII 16,17) at Pompeii dates from the same period: I. Bragantini, "voce (VII Ins. Occ., 17). Casa di Ma. Castricius," *PPM VII* (1997): 887–946, here 940–946, figs. 123–140.

ing in vain to stand up against crocodiles or hippopotami with inadequate weapons.

These images hark back to a stereotype of Hellenistic art, documented by a series of small bronze statues usually ascribed to the Alexandrine milieu. Through the startling association of a grotesque subject – misshapen dwarfs or “pigmies” – with precious materials and a refined technique, these statuettes must have contributed to an atmosphere of great domestic luxury.<sup>22</sup>

The two polychrome mosaic visual representations and the painted frieze, in spite of the difference in medium, show the same theme, and help us to understand the function of such images in homes of the time. They bear witness to the gradual spread, from the mid-first century B.C.E. onward (ca. 50–25 B.C.E.), of a “Nilotic” repertoire employed both in reception rooms and in gardens, as one of several forms that domestic luxury can assume among these social classes in this period. These images appear in rooms destined for the receiving of guests, or in open spaces within the house decorated with special care. By portraying the characteristic landscape of the Nile and the Delta, with its imaginary protagonists, its flora and its fauna, these images visually generate an “other” world, whose function within the decorative system of the Roman house lies precisely in this “otherness”. Their purpose is to stress the *distance from the real world* which, in the figurative system of the Roman house, characterizes the space where the *dominus* and his guests live and interact.

Typological and iconographic distinctions aside – these lie beyond the scope of the present essay – “Nilotic” images were only *one* of the visual repertoires available to artists and their clients. Their function within the decorative system of the Roman house can be likened to that of depictions of banqueting couples in Greek garb surrounded by servants and luxury tableware (fig. 7). The latter images – whose distance from the real world should always be kept in mind – draw on another stereotype – that of the luxury and pleasures of the Hellenistic lifestyle – to generate an imaginary “mental space” for the *dominus* and his/her guests.

A completely different repertoire, which we can call “Pharaonic”, features images and symbols imitating the style and iconographies of ancient Egyptian art. Such images are believed to have entered the imagery of the time through their introduction in Rome, in milieus close to the court, dur-

<sup>22</sup> For a broad perspective and an interpretation in an ideological and social key of some leading themes of Hellenistic figurative culture, see P. Zanker, “Un’arte per i sensi. Il mondo figurativo di Dioniso e Afrodite,” *I Greci. Storia Cultura Arte Società*, vol. II, 3. *Una storia greca. Trasformazioni* (ed. S. Settis; Torino: Einaudi, 1998), 545–616; idem, *Eine Kunst für die Sinne. Zur hellenistischen Bilderwelt des Dionysos und der Aphrodite* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1998). On these Alexandrine bronzes, cf. *Das Wrack: der antike Schiffsfund von Mahdia*, catalogue of the exhibition (Bonn 1994–1995) (ed. G. Hellenkemper Salies; Köln: Rheinland, 1994).

ing the final decades of the first century B.C.E., following the conquest of Egypt.<sup>23</sup> Originally destined for an elite clientele, these elements were allegedly adopted into the repertoire of house decorators, who employed them in ways similar to how they appear in the House of Augustus on the Palatine. These “Pharaonic” elements do not alter the house decorating system and do not constitute in themselves a *theme* within the figurative language of house painters; rather, they are an addition to a decorative scheme that is otherwise undistinguishable from those in use at the time. Due to the period of their occurrence – the first half of the first century C.E., the age, that is, of the emperors who belonged to Augustus’ dynasty – and the alleged circumstances of their introduction into the repertoire, “Pharaonic” images – whose use was in any case rather sporadic<sup>24</sup> – can be interpreted as a sign of adhesion to a specific political climate by prominent citizens of the Vesuvian towns.<sup>25</sup> It is significant that this “Pharaonic” genre is attested in houses in the Vesuvian area whose owners must have been leading members of the ruling elites in their respective cities: the Boscotrecase villa figures in the archaeological evidence as the first, highest-level example of this new genre.<sup>26</sup>

Among various possible examples, I chose those in the House of the Golden Bracelet (VI 17,42) and the House of the Floral Cubicula (I 9,5),

<sup>23</sup> M. de Vos, *L’egittomania in pitture e mosaici romano-campani della prima età imperiale* (EPRO, 84; Leiden: Brill, 1980); Söldner, “Zur Funktion ägyptischer Elemente in der römischen Wanddekoration,” 201–212.

<sup>24</sup> M. de Vos, “Egittomania nelle case di Pompei ed Ercolano,” 60.

<sup>25</sup> Pictures showing Io freed by Hermes from Argus’ custody have also been interpreted as a political allegory: Through the assimilation of Io to Isis, and of Augustus to Hermes, it has been argued, they allude to the conquest of Egypt as a liberation (S. Adamo Muscettola, “L’arredo delle ville imperiali: tra storia e mito,” in *Capri antica. Dalla preistoria alla fine dell’età romana* (eds. E. Federico and E. Miranda; Naples: Edizioni La Conchiglia, 1998), 241–274, here 254–256, with further bibliography at note 63). Hermes is absent in the picture showing this subject on display in the *Egittomania* exhibition (cat. III.56, 9556), while he is very conspicuous in that from the House of the Citharist at Pompeii (I 4, 5 and 25): M. de Vos, “voce (I 4,5.25), Casa del Citarista,” *PPM I* (1990): 117–177, here 130–131, fig. 21. Both pictures, at any rate, appear to be later than the age of Augustus, being datable to after 50 C.E., possibly in the time of Nero.

<sup>26</sup> P. H. von Blanckenhagen and C. Alexander, *The paintings from Boscotrecase* (RM Erg.-Heft 6; Mainz: Kerle, 1962 = reprint Mainz: Von Zabern, 1990). The fact that a decoration of this type also graced the triclinium of the House of the Centenary (M. de Vos, *L’egittomania in pitture e mosaici romano-campani della prima età imperiale*, pp. 35–49, n. 20; cf. also pp. 49–60, n. 23), whose last renovation does not suggest an especially high social level for its occupants, may be explained by a change of property of the house in its last phase: cf. D. Scagliarini Corlaita, “La casa del Centenario (IX 8,3–6.a),” in *Storie da un’eruzione. Pompei Ercolano Oplontis*, catalogo della mostra (Napoli 2003) (eds. A. d’Ambrosio, P. G. Guzzo, M. Mastroberro; Milano: Electa, 2003), 283–285, here 284–285. The presence of Egyptianizing elements in the House of the Deer at Herculaneum is also significant (inv. 8561, 8974, de Vos, *L’egittomania in pitture e mosaici romano-campani della prima età imperiale*, 23–25 n. 12, no provenance).

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both in Pompeii, because here the Pharaonic images can be examined in the context of the pictorial decorative system of the house as a whole.

In the former, two adjacent rooms, opening onto a garden with a pergola and a fountain, were frescoed with images of gardens around the middle of the first century C.E. Room 32 is graced with a view of a luxuriant garden crowded with marble ornaments – herms, fountain-vases, small pictures in relief, decorative reliefs and hanging masks – and peopled with realistically rendered birds. In the adjacent room (31) is a similar garden, whose marble ornaments, however, evoke Egypt, including, as they do, statues of pharaohs, sphinxes, and marble reliefs showing the Apis bull (fig. 8, cat. III.59–60, SAP 87229, 87228).

The same artists who painted these two differently decorated gardens in the House of the Golden Bracelet – for expediency's sake, we will designate one as “Roman”, the other as “Pharaonic” – painted two rooms, 8 and 12, in the House of the Fruit Orchard (I 9,5). The same elements employed in the House of the Golden Bracelet are found in two rooms distinguished by their background color – respectively, light blue and black. Here, however, the “Roman” and “Egyptian” sceneries, which were distinguished in the other house, are merged. Pharaonic statues, reliefs with Egyptian figures and the Apis bull, hydriai and situlae of precious materials mingle with fountain-vases and marble pictures showing characters from the Dionysian world (fig. 9). It would hence appear that here the painters, by the customer's request, adapted and reduced the elements of their repertoire.

Not long thereafter, a biclinium was built in the innermost part of the apsed room decorated with the “Egyptian garden” in the House of the Golden Bracelet. Masonry couches faced with marble were erected on either side of a basin into which water flowed from a stepped fountain set in the apse, which was converted into a faux cave by facing it with calcareous concretions imitating the walls of a natural cave. The walls behind the beds were graced with a glass mosaic also showing a garden crowded with rich ornaments. This new decoration completed and enhanced the pre-existing “Pharaonic garden” theme. The whole installation looks up to larger-scale aulic models attested in contemporary court architecture.<sup>27</sup>

The complex of Julia Felix in Pompeii (II 4,3), also has a triclinium with a fountain opening onto a garden (fig. 10). At the back of the room, whose barrel vault is faced with calcareous concretions to imitate a grotto, is a fountain with a marble-faced stepped cascade, from which the water ran down into a low basin set between the couches. On the walls are depicted crocodiles, hippopotami, lotus flowers, and pigmies (fig. 11, cat. III.63, 8608).

<sup>27</sup> P. Gros, *L'architecture romaine 2. Maisons, palais, villas et tombeaux* (Paris: Picard, 2001), 244–252, 351–360.

The room opened onto a garden crossed – as in the house of D. Octavius Quartio – by a long canal, a euripus of sorts. From the triclinium the guests enjoyed a view of the garden closed off on the opposite side by a long row of recesses with alternately rectangular and semicircular plans, also faced with calcareous concretions to imitate caves. Here the use of wall mosaic was limited to rows of blue glass tesserae.<sup>28</sup> It is significant that next to the southern extremity of this row of niches was a room containing a now lost Isiac lararium with painted images of Isis, Serapis and Anubis, along with Fortuna, while Harpocrates was represented by a silver statuette.<sup>29</sup>

From the highest-level example among those selected here (which for methodological reasons must take priority), that from the House of the Golden Bracelet, whose owner must have been a leading member of Pompeian society,<sup>30</sup> to the decoration of the House of the Fruit Orchard, the mosaic fountain-niche addition to the House of the Golden Bracelet, and the “Villa” of Julia Felix, where the mosaic fountain is replaced by a stepped marble fountain and completed with a Nilotic painting (probably coeval with the mosaic fountain in the House of the Golden Bracelet): all these testimonies show that, in the central years of the first century C.E., house painters were variously combining the elements of their repertoire to meet the different requirements of individual clients. Once this evidence is placed into context, highlighting chronological, economic and social differences, it appears that the painters were using the same iconographic motifs in a modular way, amplifying and spreading them out or, on the contrary, reducing and combining them in the same room. The interchangeability of individual elements speaks against a religious purpose for them, which would have required a more systematic organization. They appear, instead, as testimonies of a specific aspect of domestic luxury that is an integral part of the decorative system of the Roman house, and probably not unconnected with political motivations.

The *painted garden* can be regarded, in this period, as a “genre”<sup>31</sup> within Roman house decoration. The examples I have just illustrated are an “Egyp-

<sup>28</sup> V. Sampaolo, “voce (II 4,3). Villa di Giulia Felice,” *PPM* III (1991): 184–310, here 230–236, figs. 73–80; pp. 260–267, figs. 135–141.

<sup>29</sup> F. Pesando, “Abitare a Pompei,” in *Gli ozi di Ercole. Residenze di lusso a Pompei ed Ercolano* (eds. F. Pesando, M.P. Guidobaldi; Roma: l’Erma di Bretschneider, 2006, 16), assumes that the corporation of the *Isiaci* were among the “users of the complex”. Cf. also C. C. Parslow, *Rediscovering Antiquity. Karl Weber and the Excavation of Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Stabiae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 110.

<sup>30</sup> A parallel, albeit a more modest one, can be found in the garden of the House of Julius Polybius (IX 13,1–3) at Pompeii, which has been attributed to freedmen connected to the Imperial family on the basis of epigraphic evidence: F. Zevi, “La Casa di Giulio Polibio,” 73–79.

<sup>31</sup> S. Settis, “Le pareti ingannevoli. Immaginazione e spazio nella pittura romana di giardino,” *Fondamenti* 11 (1988): 3–39 (reprint in *Le pareti ingannevoli. La villa di Livio*

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tian” adaptation of a model already documented in the villa of Livia at Prima Porta, in a semi-subterranean room with faux cave concretions on the wall, to amplify the “reality-distancing” effect of the decorations. As we have seen, however, this is only *one of the possibilities* of the genre.

The triclinium of the Villa of Julia Felix substitutes a Nilotic landscape for the Pharaonic setting of the gardens of the Houses of the Golden Bracelet and the Fruit Orchard, a shift that may reflect a slight chronological difference, possibly of a couple of decades.

To sum up, trying to set the interpretations I have proposed here within a wider perspective, we could ask ourselves why the Nilotic repertoire, originally attested in the late Republican age by the images on fig. 6, resurfaced in the last decades of the life of Pompeii after having been obscured by more austere themes, in line with the preference accorded by the court to exemplary stories about the great heroes of Greek myth (Theseus, Perseus). These heroes can be regarded as “transfigurations” of Augustus and of those among his successors who patterned themselves after him. The Pharaonic repertoire, if it truly reflected adherence to the political climate of the early Empire, would have been a fit complement to this genre.

The large-scale changes in Roman society that followed the advent of the Empire also had important consequences for the culture of habitation. In the central decades of the first century C.E., the number of people increased whose economic and social condition allowed them (indeed, required them!) to live in houses with decorated rooms. In the houses belonging to this new class of patrons, open spaces, even of small size, were often graced with paintings and sculptures to set them up as a “scenery” of sorts – a space for the pleasure, real or presumed, of the *dominus* and his guests.

The mental model at work here is the same that informed the creation and use of the figured language in the Roman culture of habitation, its *ideology of habitation*. As Zanker argued long ago,<sup>32</sup> the pictorial evidence from the Vesuvian centers, and Pompeii in particular, is nothing but a reduction to the economic and social level of the inhabitants of these towns of a series of elements characterizing the villas and residential spaces of the great families of Roman society in the Republican age. These, in their turn, must have looked up to the habitative models of Hellenistic courts.

It is in this climate that Nilotic paintings make their reappearance, in the last few decades of the life of the Vesuvian towns. The pigmies are now engaged not only in the caricatural actions described above, but also in

*e la pittura di giardino* (ed. S. Settis; Milano: Electa, 2002); S. De Caro, “Due ‘generi’ nella pittura pompeiana: la natura morta e la pittura di giardino,” in AA.VV. *La pittura di Pompei. Testimonianze dell’arte romana nella zona sepolta dal Vesuvio nel 79 d.C.* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1991), 262–265.

<sup>32</sup> Zanker, *Pompeii*, pp. 147–230.

erotic performances under the eyes of their mates; a testimony of variations in the preferences of the local clientele, which we are not always able to understand.

I have proposed the above distinctions between different genres to shed light on the function of specific elements of figurative language at the time of their appearance in the social system of visual communication, which in the Roman world is usually influenced by the trends prevailing among the upper classes. Once these elements have entered the circuit of communication, the reasons for their presence, however, can change; they can become, that is, an integral part of the imagery of the period, and orient the choices of the clientele and the artists. Thus, the connection with the initial reasons for their presence must be historically reconstructed case by case, whenever this is possible. Through the example of these different figurative genres, we realize that the language expressed by a specific iconographic and figurative theme needs to be analyzed in the modes of its formation to shed light on the reasons for its presence and the communicative function it performed in the society that produced and adopted it.

In the wake of the recent interest in the representation of “other” worlds in antiquity, and notably in the Roman world, I have investigated these images of Egypt – an especially representative case both for the abundance of testimonies and for the thematic variations that can be recognized in an apparently unitary genre – to try to understand how the image of an “other” world is constructed in Roman society<sup>33</sup>; a problem and exercise for which Egypt – the “other” world par excellence due to its geographical, religious and social peculiarities – offers abundant material.

*Inventory numbers refer to the Archaeological National Museum, Naples. SAP numbers refer to inventories in Pompeii. Catalogue numbers (cat.) refer to Egittomania. Iside e il mistero, catalogue of the exhibition (Napoli 2006–2007) (ed. S. De Caro; Milano: Electa, 2006). The Publisher and the Author wish to thank Electa publisher for granting permission to translate the essay by Irene Bragantini in the aforesaid catalogue.*

<sup>33</sup> M.J. Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana. Nilotic scenes and the Roman views of Egypt* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 144; Leiden: Brill, 2002); R.A. Tybout, “Dwarfs in discourse: the functions of Nilotic scene and other Roman Aegyptiaca,” *JRA* 16 (2003): 505–515.

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*Captions to figures*

*Fig. 1:* Pompeii, House of the Golden Cupids (VI 16,7), details of frescoes lararium with instruments of the cult of Isis (after *PPM V*).

*Fig. 2:* Pompeii, House of the Golden Cupids (VI 16,7), detail of frescoed lararium with Egyptian deities (after *PPM V*).

*Fig. 3:* Pompeii, House of the Amazons (VI 2,14), lararium (Francesco Morelli, after *PPM IV*).

*Fig. 4:* Isiac ceremony from Herculaneum, 8919.

*Fig. 5:* Pompeii, House of D. Octavius Quartio (II 2,2), detail of fresco with priest of Isis (after *Egittomania*).

*Fig. 6:* Pompeii, House of the Menander (I 10,4), polychrome mosaic showing pigmies on a boat on the Nile (after *Egittomania*).

*Fig. 7:* Pompeii, House of the Chaste Lovers (IX 2,16), picture of couples at a banquet.

*Fig. 8:* Pompeii, House of the Golden Bracelet (VI 17,42), detail of painted garden with marble ornaments (after *Egittomania*).

*Fig. 9:* Pompeii, House of the Fruit Orchard (I 9,5), detail of painted garden with Egyptian-style marble ornaments (after *Egittomania*).

*Fig. 10:* Pompeii, Villa of Julia Felix (II 4,3), triclinium with fountain, general view (photo Author).

*Fig. 11:* Naples, National Archaeological Museum, detail of Nilotic landscape (from Pompeii, Villa of Julia Felix [II 4,3]) (after *Egittomania*).