

A Narrative of Wealth: The Nuanced Principles of Interior Décor and Roman Art

Samara Murray

Abstract

The study of Roman art during antiquity leads to a greater understanding of the cultural and artistic priorities of the time. The Alexander Mosaic and the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries are key examples of interior decor that explore the public and private spheres, wealth and power, and narrative and storytelling within ancient art. The essay acknowledges the nuances within these key aspects of interior decor and highlights the necessary balance between them. Through this lens, the influence of Greek culture and myth in Roman art becomes evident.

The study of art in the ancient world does more than merely produce fun facts and trivia questions—it offers profound insight into an entire civilization and culture that no longer exists. Interpretations of mosaicism and wall painting as small pieces of the broader category of interior décor allow for careful consideration of each aspect of those art works: their location, their quality, and their influences. Analysis of the Alexander Mosaic and the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries as key examples of their art form brings forth principles of interior decor in Roman antiquity of wealth and power and the ancient value of narrative and storytelling; Roman artistic and cultural priorities shifting toward the influences of Greek culture become evident through this analysis.

Exploring the preliminary information and context surrounding the Alexander Mosaic and the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries is crucial before analysis may begin. The former work, the Alexander Mosaic, is dated to the late second-century BCE and was originally found on a floor in the “House of the Faun” in Pompeii.¹ The work is currently preserved in the National Archeological Museum of Naples.² The common belief is that the mosaic is a copy of a fourth-century Hellenistic original painting, which may have been referenced by Pliny the Elder in his work *Natural History*.³ As told by Pliny, there was a painting of Alexander and Darius engaging in battle that was completed by Philoxenus of Eretria for King Cassander.⁴ This painting must have been magnificent enough to warrant imitation, and Pliny certainly thought so too, saying that the work “may bear comparison with any.”⁵ The frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries (also in Pompeii and built in the early second century BCE) are magnificent in their own right.⁶ These frescoes vary greatly in subject and narrative, but the most famous are the panels depicting a Dionysus cult initiation (i.e. a Dionysus Mystery) that gives the villa its name.⁷

¹ A. D. Lee, “Review of *The Alexander Mosaic*, by A. Cohen,” *The Classical Review* 48, no. 2 (1998), 431.

² “Alexander Mosaic,” In *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*, edited by Ian Chilvers. Oxford University Press, 2004.

³ Lee, “Review of *The Alexander Mosaic*,” 432.

⁴ John Bostock, transl, *Pliny the Elder: Natural History*, (Perseus Digital Library, 1855), 35–6.

⁵ Bostock, *Pliny the Elder*, 35–6.

⁶ Jarrett A. Lobell and Pasquale Sorrentino, “Saving the Villa of the Mysteries,” *Archaeology* 67, no. 2 (2014): 26.

⁷ Lobell and Sorrentino, “Saving the Villa of the Mysteries,” 26.

These frescoes remain in the original villa in Italy and are open to tourism following the preservation efforts by archaeologists and excavators to restore the villa to its original beauty.⁸ Both aforementioned works offer insight to the encompassing fundamental aspects of interior décor.

The Alexander Mosaic is a breathtaking piece of work that emphasizes the balance between private and public aspects of interior décor, along with its ornateness and connection to status. The ancient world placed heavy value on the nuances of private and public work, and they decorated their homes, with the most ornate interior décor being public.⁹ This was primarily done to emphasize the status (or sometimes lack thereof) of the homeowner. Located along the axis of the House of the Faun in Pompeii, the Alexander Mosaic is visible from both the peristyles and their corresponding gardens between which it was settled.¹⁰ Based on its prominent location, although the mosaic is flooring, it originally functioned as a public painting meant to be viewed.¹¹ The public aspects of the mosaic's viewership are prominent despite the mosaic's private ownership in a home. In this case the Alexander Mosaic is a crucial example of interior décor being accessible for public viewing, and the explicit magnificence of the mosaic creates a strict connection to wealth.

The mosaic of a fierce battle between Alexander the Great and Darius is extremely representative and "realistic." Its impressive detail is created through tonal rendering and highlighting—despite the limited palette¹²—allowing for distinctions between the metal of armour and the flesh of man and horse. The mosaic is executed in tetrachromacy: the combination of yellow, black, white, and red was a common palette for ancient painters, suggesting that the limited colours of the Alexander Mosaic was created intentionally to further its imitation of the Hellenistic original.¹³ The Alexander Mosaic is similar to many other mosaics from Pompeii that compare to those of Greek tradition and draw their technique from Hellenistic mosaicism.¹⁴ Part of this Hellenistic tradition that was borrowed by the Romans may come from Vitruvius's extensive process of laying tesserae mosaics. The Greek writer explains in detail the process and concludes by saying that "floors thus constructed will not soon be spoiled."¹⁵ It is likely that the owners of the house in Pompeii utilized the knowledge of Vitruvius to ensure that their floor mosaic, which they expected to be treated as an exhibit, would be long lasting.¹⁶ A substantial amount of effort has gone into this Roman copy, not only to make it an objectively mastered mosaic and a respectful imitation of an original, but to make it lasting and durable.

Effort of this magnitude is only possible with money, and when combined with the inherent wealth of mosaicism it is obvious that the Alexander Mosaic displays the connection between interior décor and status. Roman copies of Hellenistic originals were often a sign of the

⁸ Lobell and Sorrentino, "Saving the Villa of the Mysteries," 31.

⁹ Kelsey Koon, "Interior Décor: Mosaics." CLAS 252: Ancient Art and Architecture, Class lecture at Grant MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, October 22, 2024.

¹⁰ Paul Zanker, *Pompeii: Public and Private Life*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Harvard University Press, 1999), 39.

¹¹ Zanker, *Pompeii*, 40.

¹² Dimitris Plantzos, "Wall and Panel Painting," In *A Companion to Greek Art*, ed. Tyler Jo Smith and Dimitris Plantzos (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2012), 181

¹³ Plantzos, "Wall and Panel Painting," 181; Susan Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2020), 102.

¹⁴ Ruth Westgate, "Pavimenta atque emblemata vermiculata: Regional Styles in Hellenistic Mosaic and the First Mosaics at Pompeii," *American Journal of Archaeology* 104, no. 2 (2000): 263, <https://doi.org/10.2307/507451>.

¹⁵ Morris H. Morgan, transl. *Vitruvius Pollio: The Ten Books on Architecture*. Perseus Digital Library, 1914.

¹⁶ Zanker, *Pompeii*, 40.

lower class and were used to decorate modest homes.¹⁷ Interior décor's value on public spaces likely made the copies a cheap and easy way to decorate one's home without the hassle or money necessary of producing an original. The Alexander Mosaic, however, is not merely a copy done with haste; as observed previously, the mosaic was crafted with considerable care. A technically skilled artist must have produced the work and produced it well to ensure survival. Mosaics have an inherent connection to the wealthy class due to its labour-intensive process of collecting (or producing) tesserae, creating the plaster and grout, creating a design, and then laying the design. All such aspects of mosaics require a considerable amount of money.¹⁸ The owners at the House of the Faun certainly would have needed to be part of an exclusive and narrow wealthy class to commission this level of work, so their¹⁹ required wealth for masterful interior décor is highlighted by the Alexander Mosaic.

Even the subject of the Alexander Mosaic expresses status. It is a great battle of an emperor, and although there is much drama and pathos present, it is clear Alexander will be the winner.²⁰ Alexander in the scene is empowered by his status as an emperor secured. The subject of the Alexander Mosaic then promotes wealth just as much as the mosaic itself. Similar subjects of wealth are in the mosaics from the Basilica of San Vitale. These mosaics also depict a powerful emperor along with servants of God, but instead of emphasizing power through battle, they do so through jewelry.²¹ There is an abundance of pearls, emeralds, and sapphires being worn by the people in the mosaic, each piece highlighting how much wealth and status the subjects have.²² The mosaics from the Basilica of San Vitale were intended to impress the Byzantines, Italians, and Ostrogoths, just as the Alexander Mosaic was intended to impress those who went to the House of Faun.²³ Both mosaics display key aspects of interior décor as belonging to both private and public spheres, being ornate, and displaying a connection to status and wealth.

The frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii display some of those same key factors of interior décor as the Alexander Mosaic, that is of public and private viewership, detail and artistic skill associated with wall paintings, and wealth. The Villa of the Mysteries is an enormous house at around 4,000 square feet, containing sixty rooms.²⁴ The function of each of these sixty rooms would have differed, but the room of interest depicts the initiation ritual of the cult of Dionysus.²⁵ The nature of the subject and the mystery associated with the Dionysus cult rituals has some believing that the location of the frescoes was in a secret room.²⁶ The frescoes of the Dionysus ritual are extremely ornate and technically profound, so the idea that they belonged to a secret room directly contradicts the balance of private and public viewership that was displayed by the Alexander Mosaic. There is nuance within this principle of interior décor

¹⁷ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 130.

¹⁸ Koon, "Interior Décor: Mosaics."

¹⁹ Westgate, "Pavimenta atque emblemata vermiculata," 263.

²⁰ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 102.

²¹ Katharine R. Brown, "The Mosaics of San Vitale: Evidence for the Attribution of Some Early Byzantine Jewelry to Court Workshops," *Gesta* 18, no. 3 (1979): 57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/766791>.

²² Brown, "The Mosaics of San Vitale," 57.

²³ Irina Andreescu-Treadgold and Warren Treadgold, "Procopius and the Imperial Panels of S. Vitale," *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 4 (1997): 721; Zanker, *Pompeii: Public and Private Life*, 40.

²⁴ Lobell and Sorrentino, "Saving the Villa of the Mysteries," 26.

²⁵ There are other interpretations of this section of frescoes that will be discussed later on.

²⁶ Matt Donovan, "Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii," *The Threepenny Review*, no. 131 (2012): 27.

however, and the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries explore those nuances to display a balance.

Although interior décor commonly comprises private and public aspects, wall painting specifically comprises domestic ideas.²⁷ Pliny the Elder infamously disapproves with wall paintings for their focus on the domestication of art, calling it the “inferior style” compared to panel paintings:

For with [panel painters], it was not the practice to decorate the walls of houses, for the gratification of the owners only; nor did they lavish all their resources upon a dwelling which must of necessity always remain a fixture in one spot, and admits of no removal in case of conflagration.²⁸

To Pliny, the value of art is placed on its ability to be shared with the public (outside of private ownership), as well as the work’s ability to be saved should disaster come way of the private residence.²⁹ However, Pliny fails to acknowledge that wall paintings have the public aspect that he praises and panel paintings have an aspect of “gratification of the owners” that he criticizes.³⁰ Panel paintings within a domestic space would also create gratification for the owners, and wall paintings within a public space would be to the benefit of a grander community. Of course this is seen most obviously in the Alexander Mosaic, but even the frescoes in the “secret room” within the Villa of the Mysteries would have been seen by people other than the owners during ritual. In this, the quality of secrecy does not remove the key factor of public viewership; it only limits it. The frescoes in the Villa of the Mysteries emphasize a balance between interior décor’s quality of public and private spheres, and through analysis of the frescoes as extraordinary examples of Pompeiian second style wall paintings, their connection to wealth and status becomes clear.³¹

The frescoes in the Villa of the Mysteries utilized color to create and promote the power and status of their owner. The second Pompeiian style is intended to trick the eye and create an illusionary image and perspective for the viewer.³² The secrecy of the cult of Dionysus initiations would certainly benefit from a less-than-real scenery. The owners and the commissioner (or both) certainly did all in their power to achieve a holistic subject; The Alexander Mosaic and its respective producers achieved similarly with their dedication to replicating the Hellenistic original.³³ The paintings in the villa use brilliant colour (mainly red) to create this trick as the brightly coloured scenes create a “psychological power” that incites emotions.³⁴ For the frescoes at the Villa of the Mysteries, power is about control. Second style paintings trick people into seeing a fantastic reality, a fact of which demonstrates the power of those who made it. A piece of interior décor that is created so well and so beautifully, ensuring that the viewer can not help but *feel* gives the owners nothing but sickening wealth. The house was a luxury home, so

²⁷ Kelsey Koon, “Interior Décor: Wall Painting,” *CLAS 252: Ancient Art and Architecture*, Class lecture at Grant MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, October 25, 2024.

²⁸ Bostock, *Pliny the Elder*, 35–7.

²⁹ Bostock, *Pliny the Elder*, 35–7.

³⁰ Bostock, *Pliny the Elder*, 35–7.

³¹ Vincent J. Bruno, “Mark Rothko and the Second Style: The Art of the Color-Field in Roman Murals,” *Studies in the History of Art* 43 (1993): 237

³² Koon, “Interior Décor: Wall Painting,” 2024

³³ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 102.

³⁴ Bruno, “Mark Rothko and the Second Style,” 238.

wealth of this stature is not out of the ordinary.³⁵ The abundance of red pigment in these frescoes that creates this level of wealth mirrors those from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale. These frescoes showed clear signs of wealth through their capacity to acquire and use the red pigment, cinnabar. It would not be absurd to draw that same conclusion in relation to the frescoes from Pompeii.³⁶ Both sets of interior décors prove a case for the ostentation of Romans, and the Villa of the Mysteries simultaneously offers key illustrations for common principles of the wall painting genre.

Interior décor discussions and the analysis of the Alexander Mosaic and the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries reveal the value of cohesive narratives and storytelling within the art that was dominating antiquity. The specific narrative of the Alexander Mosaic, although unanimously thought of as a depiction of a battle between Alexander and Darius, is still much debated.³⁷ The top cases for the mosaic's narrative are that it is a literal depiction of a real, historical battle (either the battle of Issus in 333 BCE or the battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE) or that it is merely a representation of a theoretical battle that never occurred.³⁸ The idea of ancient sources providing rhetorical narratives of Alexander is not unique to the mosaic, as many literary sources describe such narratives, however these literary sources do not directly correlate with a description of the original painting.³⁹ Instead, these sources further the common rhetorical tradition of producing and discussing Alexander narratives—a notion with which the mosaic's academic discourse is well-acquainted.⁴⁰ For the Alexander Mosaic, the focus on narrative is nuanced in that it does not maintain a single and obvious narrative of an historical event but instead offers a thorough narrative of something representative. The impression of interior décor as providing conceptual but understandable narratives is prominent in the Alexander Mosaic, evident in the Riot in the amphitheatre painting.

The Riot in the amphitheatre is a Roman wall painting from the first century BCE that conveys a vivid narrative—like that of the Alexander Mosaic—despite its nuances regarding “realism.”⁴¹ Both pieces are not completely historical such that they show the viewer exact occurrences (or in the case of Alexander, if it even did occur) but they show the viewer information necessary to understand the subject: this is called “conceptual truth.”⁴² The wall painting is visually illogical since the scale and perspective is unnatural, yet the understanding of the event by the viewer is achieved magnificently because of it.⁴³ The Riot in the amphitheatre and the Alexander Mosaic are two pieces of Roman interior décor that argue the value of narrative within art during antiquity, while also emphasizing some variation along with them.

³⁵ Lobell and Sorrentino, “Saving the Villa of the Mysteries,” 26.

³⁶ Rudolf Meyer, “The Conservation of the Frescoes from Boscoreale in the Metropolitan Museum,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 67 no. 4 (2010): 34; Some grace is warranted for the two bodies of interior décor and their connection to wealth. The frescoes from Boscoreale have increased visual red because of a chemical reaction during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (Meyer 2010, 36), and the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries face a similar effect but this time because of the efforts of conservationists to preserve the original red (Donovan 2012, 27).

³⁷ Marco Merola, “Alexander PIECE by PIECE,” *Archaeology* 59, no. 1 (2006): 38.

³⁸ Merola, “Alexander,” 38.

³⁹ Joshua J. Thomas, “The Ptolemy Painting? Alexander’s ‘Right-Hand Man’ and the Origins of the Alexander Mosaic,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 35 no. 1 (2022): 312, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759421000532>.

⁴⁰ Thomas, “The Ptolemy Painting?,” 313.

⁴¹ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 143.

⁴² Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 122.

⁴³ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 143.

The case for the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries displaying narratives and stories is relatively more straightforward than the much-debated Alexander Mosaic and the illogical riot painting. For the frescoes, the aspect of narrative is not conceptual but rather extraordinarily real, while also being contradictorily theoretical and interpretive. Although the Villa of the Mysteries is known for the frescoes that (supposedly) depict the Dionysus Mysteries, the dozens of figures are also interpreted as representing either a play or a bride getting ready for marriage.⁴⁴ Different aspects of the entire painting all highlight a focus on narrative, and some scholars even suggest that the many interpretations work together to create a cohesive story of a woman's initiation into the cult of Dionysus as a prerequisite for her marriage.⁴⁵ It is then inherent that despite the interpretive story, the life-size figures and their capacity to bring the room to life through a cohesive relationship with one another promotes both the interior décor value of narrative.⁴⁶

The frescoes from the Casa della Farnesina in Rome mimic the narrative subject of the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries; through interpretation of these interior décor works, knowledge of female value in Roman society becomes apparent. The wall paintings from the Casa have many depictions of female figures that are heavily focused on their actions and small behaviours, the same way the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries are focused on female actions.⁴⁷ In the painting of the Dionysus initiation, much discussed throughout this essay, female figures are prominent; if interpreted with the thought that these actions are actually a marriage, the value of females and feminine subjects becomes emphasized. One of those subjects is a female, winged daimon with her head in her arms, representing a suffering womanhood.⁴⁸ From female intricacies of marriage to broader strokes of womanhood, the two sets of frescoes offer great insight into how Roman culture and art viewed female subjects. Roman civilization thought highly of women and their actions and behaviours, saw them as valuable subjects who would create magnificent art and thought that representing them in and of itself was worthwhile.⁴⁹ The case for narrative in these frescoes combined with the same case in the Alexander Mosaic, emphasize the influence of Greek culture and artistic priorities on Roman works of art.

The Roman works of interior décor discussed in this essay—the Alexander Mosaic and the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries—are crucial pieces of art that can explain much about Hellenistic influence in Rome. Despite how both works are from Pompeii, they show distinct Greek characteristics. Decades following the production of these works marked when Greek civilization, culture, and mythology had been incorporated into Roman culture.⁵⁰ The value of narrative that they both magnificently display is a Greek value brought forth by early works of architectural sculpture.⁵¹ Greek art emphasized cohesive storytelling; despite how the

⁴⁴ Lobell and Sorrentino, "Saving the Villa of the Mysteries," 26

⁴⁵ Victoria Hearnshaw, "The Dionysiac cycle in the Villa of the Mysteries: A Re-Reading," *Mediterranean Archaeology* 12 (1999): 43.

⁴⁶ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 135.

⁴⁷ Vineeta Patel, Essey Aron Kahsay and Brianna Cleet, "Casa della Farnesina, Rome," *Class discussion, CLAS 252: Ancient Art and Architecture*, Grant MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, October 17, 2024.

⁴⁸ Karl Lehmann, "Ignorance and Search in the Villa of the Mysteries," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 52 (1962): 63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/297877>.

⁴⁹ Patel, Kahsay and Cleet, "Casa della Farnesina," 2024.

⁵⁰ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 147.

⁵¹ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 49.

Roman works previously discussed have differences when it comes to realism, their cohesion and intellectual understanding is never of doubt.

The artists of the Roman interior décor pieces would have likely garnered inspiration from Greek culture when creating their works. The most obvious inspiration would be the Hellenistic original painting of the Alexander Mosaic for which great measures were taken towards creating a respectful imitation.⁵² The Greek original was of value as it was painted by a respected artist in Philoxenus, and the owners of the House of the Faun were affected enough by the original to commission their own.⁵³ For the frescoes, Greek influence occurs through an influx of Greek mythology. The Dionysus Mysteries and the heavy influence of Dionysian subject matter decorating the walls throughout the Villa of the Mysteries is evident, and there are other references to Greek mythological subjects such as the winged daimon as a display of Greek motifs.⁵⁴ These are both cases where artistic liberties of subject matter were taken, inspired from Greek culture despite the distinct Roman households which would house the art. From this analysis of artistic priorities, it becomes clear that the development of art during the second and first century BCE was leaning towards Greek culture.

The discussion of the Alexander Mosaic and the frescoes from the Villa of the Mysteries produces analysis of Roman artistic and cultural priorities and the shift toward Greek culture. It stems from analysis of the works as pieces of interior décor and their corresponding locations, quality, and influences, showing the values of status and narrative in Roman works. These conclusions are only drawn through open study of the ancient world with the goal of discovering and learning about ancient Greece and Rome.

⁵² Lee, "Review of *The Alexander Mosaic*," 432.

⁵³ Bostock, *Pliny the Elder*, 35–6.

⁵⁴ Hearnshaw, "The Dionysiac cycle," 44; Lehmann, "Ignorance and Search," 63.

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