

IMITATION VS. REALITY: ZEBRA STRIPE PAINTINGS IN THE FOURTH STYLE AT OPLONTIS

(Taf. CLXXII, Abb. 1–4)

Abstract

Le pitture parietali conosciute nel gergo anche come stile zebrato, non sono un fenomeno isolato, né sono ignote agli studiosi della pittura romana. Le pitture a strisce bianche e nere, alternante in direzione verticale e orizzontale, si attestano principalmente nelle latrine e bagni pubblici di Pompei. Nella maggior parte dei casi, le fasce rosse o gialle che incorniciano le pitture creano un'illusione di segmentazione pari a quella esistente fra ortostati nei rivestimenti di marmo. Questi "blocchi" sono allineati diversamente, e le loro strisce danno vita a una vibrante sensazione di movimento. Alcuni studiosi hanno interpretato questo stile come un indicatore di movimento, finalizzato a esortare sia gli schiavi che i visitatori a muoversi attraverso gli spazi della *villa*. Tuttavia, l'evoluzione stilistica di questi pannelli e la loro esecuzione, devono ancora essere studiati in modo soddisfacente. Lo scopo di questo articolo è di presentare le pitture zebrate ad Oplontis nel loro contesto domestico, ed esaminare il loro sviluppo come schema decorativo nel quarto stile.

L'attento esame dello stile e dei pannelli, suggerisce che lo stile zebrato si sviluppò non per incoraggiare movimento attraverso gli spazi domestici, ma è piuttosto come un'imitazione di marmi pregiati, perlopiù importati. La collocazione dei pannelli e la loro cornice allude chiaramente ai rivestimenti parietali di marmo, sia imitati che reali. L'uso di marmo negli schemi decorativi come quelli usati alla Villa A di Oplontis (ambienti 5,14 e 15) è ben conosciuto nel territorio di Pompei. Recenti indagini petrografiche dei marmi sotolineano sia la quantità che l'alta qualità dei marmi colorati e bianchi usati nella villa. La predominanza di marmi grigi (lesbica e *domikion* in particolare) dimostrano qui una preferenza per pietre venate di grigio e bianco, riscontrati anche ad Ercolano nel periodo Neroniano.

Nel loro resa più accurata, le pitture appaiono ad Oplontis durante la prima fase del quarto stile (ambienti 63, 97, 71, 94 e 97). Il vasto programma di restauro dopo il devastante terremoto del 62 d.C. è caratterizzato da soluzioni economizzanti e non dall'esibizione di abbondanti ricchezze. In questo contesto le pitture a motivo zebrato furono aggiunte al cosiddetto peristilio degli schiavi (ambiente 30), il corridoio 45/46/76, nell'ala orientale, e l'ambiente 4 nel primo nucleo della *villa*. Tuttavia questi schemi sono chiaramente differenti dai loro predecessori in quanto i pannelli sono meno dipinti e creano un'impressione di venatura evitando però un'imitazione diretta. La ricorrenza del motivo a strisce quindi è un'imitazione intenzionale della precedente decorazione marmorea della *villa*.

The so-called zebra-striped paintings in Villa A at Oplontis are neither an isolated phenomenon nor unknown to scholars of Roman painting (for a general plan of Oplontis, Villa A see Abb. 1 in J. R. CLARKE's article in this volume). These black-and-white striped paintings, alternating in vertical and diagonal patterns, are also attested in Pompeii and Herculaneum¹. In most cases, red or yellow bands frame these paintings creating the illusion of segmentation, like the bands between orthostates in marble revetment. These "blocks"

¹ Although there are examples of these zebra striped walls in the *palestra* at Herculaneum, the Amphitheater at Pompeii, and in a select number of private houses in Pompeii, this pattern occurs most often in corridors and high-traffic areas in bath complexes and apartment buildings. This type of wall painting is not, however, exclusive to this area; small areas of it have been found in the *forum* at *Lutetia* (modern Paris) and in *Asia Minor*. Further study is required, though, to make any generalized statements about placement and meaning; this paper is concerned only with providing the context of zebra paintings within the wall painting schemes at Oplontis. Laken 2003, 173 f.; Goulet 2001–2002, 62–89.

are variously aligned and misaligned, their stripes meeting and intersecting creating a dynamic sense of visual vibration. Because of this, scholars have seen them as indicators of movement, visual encouragement for slaves or visitors to move through the villa's spaces. However, the stylistic development of these striped panels, and indeed their modelling and execution, has yet to be satisfactorily examined. The purpose of this paper is to present the zebra-stripe paintings at Oplontis and, within their own domestic context, examine their development as a decorative scheme in the Fourth Style.

Zebra Stripe Paintings at Oplontis

Zebra-patterned walls at Oplontis appear in four different schemes. In the first, the zebra pattern appears in tall vertical orthostates, separated by red borders, covering the lower half of the wall surface (cf. Rooms 63, 67, 71, 94, 97; see R. GEE in this volume for a numbered plan). The striped orthostates, unbordered at the floor, are topped with white, undecorated upper zones (see Abb. 1). The zebra stripes themselves alternate within each orthostate, among the following, repeating patterns: diagonal lines running right or left, radiating chevrons, radiating diamonds, horizontal single- and double-swags, and vertical stripes. Each of these patterns is made, alternatively, with straight or wavy lines of varying widths; these lines are combined in different variations and painted using black, white, and grey pigment in fresco on a white ground. A less common variant to this color scheme, preserved only in Room 63, occurs when the white, wavy lines are applied to a still-wet black background; the effect is similar to that of the white ground versions, though darker in value. The red borders that delineate the panels in both color variants are, more often than not, applied secondarily and in secco. The zebra-patterned orthostates of this schema are occasionally finished with a thin white painted line running parallel to the red border bands on three sides (top, right and left); these lines create a sense of visual projection, or dimensionality, expected of a faceted marble panel.

In this first scheme, the triple horizontal division of the wall is abandoned; the artists focus instead on the division of the wall according to imitation orthostates and the vibrant sensation created by the intersection of pattern. Most striking about this scheme is the precision of the pattern; on the west wall of Room 94, for example, a radiating diamond pattern is made according to visible painted gridlines (see inset of Abb. 1). Here, the specificity of the pattern and exact articulation of symmetry is the artist's concern. As a result, the impression of these orthostates is ordered and stiff, despite the loose, rapidly applied brushstrokes of the pattern.

The second scheme replicates the syntax of First Style wall painting (Abb. 2). The zebra-striped orthostates are bordered by simple, yellow bands and positioned above a low red ochre socle with spatter decoration (in black, white, grey, and yellow) that is divided vertically into "blocks," misaligned with the orthostate divisions above. In the upper zone, at least four horizontal courses of zebra patterned pseudo-ashlars cover the wall vertically (cf. Room 32 and the western-most portion of Room 45). As in the first scheme, the artist deliberately alternates the zebra patterns. Although here he finishes the painted stripes in three colours (white, black, and grey), the stripes are less varied and less carefully applied to the wall surface. The patterns follow the typology of the first scheme, but the stripes are applied free-hand and thus the rigid symmetry of the former is lost. In the case of Room 32, the so-called Slave Peristyle, the artist repeats the orthostates and ashlars as ceiling decoration (divided by yellow bands); he also wraps the stripes, divided by red bands, around columns. The white, interior lines used by the artists of the first scheme to indicate three-dimensional projection have been abandoned in favor of a flattened, two-dimensional appearance.

The third and fourth schemes of the zebra pattern appear in fewer spaces. Both schemes retain elements of the first two phases, though they become increasingly abstract in their rendering. In the third phase, the artists combined the zebra-patterned orthostates in the middle zone with both an uninterrupted low socle (red ochre ground with spattered pattern) and one or two courses of Fourth Style decoration in the upper zone (Rooms 1, 45, 46, and 76). The articulation of these orthostates, divided by yellow bands, is most similar to the second schema in that they are not strictly ordered; because of the height and large size of these rooms, however, the zebra panels remain the focus of the wall decoration. The fourth scheme only appears in one room, Room 4. Here, the zebra pattern is greatly reduced in detail and is relegated to a low socle. A regular rhythm of straight, thick, black diagonal lines set against a white ground replaces the variegated mono-

chromatic colour scheme of the previous types. Instead of the segmentation as seen in previous schemes, the stripes run continuously across the socle of the wall without interruption. Above the socle are green and yellow painted imitation marble panels, offset by strong red and black framing bands; a white-ground Fourth Style scheme fills the upper zone. The traditional, tripartite wall division has returned and the zebra panels are reduced in size and subordinated in the overall decorative system.

Origin of Zebra Patterned Wall Paintings

The few scholars who have examined zebra-patterned wall decoration focus on deciphering the relationship between this decorative scheme and the room function; most notable are those who tie this scheme to the navigation of the villa's spaces by slaves and visitors². The source of the style itself, and its relative development as a decorative scheme, is, with little discussion, diagnosed as imitation marble in the tradition of A. MAIURI's First Style. This interpretation was first proposed by A. MAIURI. In his description of the *palaestra* of Herculaneum, A. MAIURI described these black-and-white patterned walls as imitation *bardiglio* marble revetment³. This type of patterned revetment, in which marble panels are deliberately cut and arranged in order to create contrasting patterns, is preserved in later structures all over the Roman world. Examples of a grey-and-white type appear in the decoration of the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, and the Green Mosque at Iznik (Nicea)⁴. Although not contemporary to the decorative schemes at Oplontis, the proclivity for this pattern in late antique wall ornamentation suggests the possibility of its use during the Imperial period as well.

L. LAKEN is the first to challenge A. MAIURI's interpretation based primarily on what she deems an inconsistent visual comparison between known *bardiglio* in excavation and the painted zebra schemes; specifically, L. LAKEN believes that the strong contrast between black and white stripes in the painted decoration is not matched by the *bardiglio* marbles that would have been available in ancient times (*bardiglio antico*)⁵. L. LAKEN also notes the absence of *bardiglio* marble in handbooks on the use of marble in Roman architectural decoration: Pliny (book 36) and *Vitruvius* (book 7). Instead of direct copies, these patterned walls are, for L. LAKEN, abstract references to unknown stones, emulating a pattern conceptually without direct imitation. Equating zebra patterns to other geometric patterns (like the swastika-meander pattern in Herculaneum V 18), L. LAKEN sees the variations as stylistic variations related more to the function that they served within an architectural space than any reference to a specific material⁶.

The descriptions of Pliny and *Vitruvius* aside, the architects of Villa A made liberal use of *bardiglio* and other types of grey-and-white veined marble, providing appropriate comparanda for the zebra-patterned walls within the villa itself. Room 60, for instance, the long, open portico running parallel to the pool in the East wing, was elaborated with both a Lesbian grey socle and colonnade⁷. *Bardiglio* marble appears in the floors of both Room 60 and the Slave Peristyle (Room 32). In the Slave Peristyle, where the walls are treated with the most extensive zebra patterning in the villa, large, irregularly shaped pieces of *bardiglio* marble inserted in a cement floor bear a strong resemblance to the stripes on the walls above (Abb. 4). In a contemporaneous *opus sectile* floor excavated in Room 86 in 2010, grey panels of Apennine slate are divided into

² Whereas S. JOSHEL argues that these stripes indicated spaces meant for, though not restricted to, slave use, L. LAKEN sees an incitement to movement, no matter the social class of the participant. Joshel 2013; Goulet 2001/2; Laken 2003.

³ Maiuri 1958, 134.

⁴ The connection to Iznik is not simply visual. Chemical petrographic analysis of all of the marble found *in situ* at Oplontis was recently carried out by D. ATTANASIO and M. BRUNO (Istituto di Struttura della Materia del CNR, Rome, Italy) and revealed that the villa's east wing contained several pieces of grey veined marble quarried at Iznik.

⁵ Laken 2003, 172.

⁶ Laken 2003, 176.

⁷ Chemical petrographic analysis of this material, performed by D. ATTANASIO and M. BRUNO, awaits publication. The preliminary results of these analyses, though, demonstrates that the patron of Villa A at the time of the construction of the East wing relied heavily on Carrara marble, both in white and grey varieties. In addition, of the other imported marbles found in the villa, there is a particular concentration of Lesbian material, all dark grey in colour, in this wing; Barker – Fant – Attanasio, forthcoming.

rectangular blocks and lined with bands of pink *breccia corallina* marble repeating a scheme similar to that in the upper zone in the Slave Peristyle (Abb. 4).

As imitations of strikingly-veined marble revetments, these zebra-striped panels fit well into the established decorative systems in Villa A. In addition to the examples of grey varieties, it is clear that, from its earliest phases, Villa A was adorned with both fine stones and painted imitation marble. Massive, monolithic alabaster thresholds dot the villa's western, ancient core, and brightly colored pavonazetto, giallo antico, and cippolino verde decorate both walls and floors in the East wing. Finely painted imitation stone appears most notably in the Second Style decoration in Rooms 14 and 15, and along the corridor running behind *Atrium* 5. In the context of Villa A, imitation and real petrographic decoration existed side-by-side in its most heavily trafficked spaces.

Chronology and Analysis

As imitation marble panels, I believe that the zebra-striped designs at Oplontis reflect both general patterns of wall decoration in Italy and an aspiration to replicate the villa's own lavish decorative schemes. Although Nero's *Domus Aurea* is often credited with popularizing the use of marble veneer in palatial structures, Pliny (*NH* 36) makes it clear that the predominance of marble in Nero's house was not just another expression of that emperor's extravagance, but a fashion that had become evident more generally in elite Roman residences⁸. This taste for fine, coloured marbles is evident in the later phases of Villa A at Oplontis.

Sometime after 45 AD, Villa A underwent a lavish expansion and redecoration⁹. The addition of an East wing, complete with an impressive pool and sculpture garden, demonstrated both the wealth of the villa's owners and their interest in expressing that wealth through their villa's design and decoration. The zebra-striped walls in this wing are finely painted, deliberate and symmetrical; the hand of the artist is discernable in the creation of exact copies of marble veneer, complete with highlight lines to create the illusion of three-dimensionality¹⁰. These painted panels are accompanied, in neighbouring rooms, by marble-revetted dados (Rooms 64, 65, 69, 73, and 74) and fine *opus sectile* floors. Thus, the marble imitation was not executed in lieu of real marble for the purposes of cost; rather, the imitation occurs here, as C. FANT has discussed, as an illusionistic act in the tradition of the Second Style¹¹. As much as the precious marble spoke to the owner's ability to access these materials, so too did the imitation panels speak of the specialized artisans hired for the purpose—each allowing the owner to keep step with elite decorative trends in Rome and neighbouring maritime villas¹².

The zebra patterned schemes that appear in the central and western rooms of the villa are less precise than those in the East wing and likely date to a later phase of renovation¹³. These varieties are more loosely painted, more highly varied, and, though consistent in their directional variation, they are not as convincing as marble imitation carried out in the first scheme. These areas of the villa experienced extensive structural damage sometime after 45 AD; whether this was caused by the earthquake of 62 or some other natural event is not known. What is clear, though, is that the villa owners sought to repair walls and floors in keeping with the villa's preexistent decoration¹⁴. *Opus sectile* floors were repaired with marbles less valuable but readily

⁸ Meyboom – Moormann 1992, 139–145. L. BALL, in fact, positions both architectural and decorative features of the East wing at Oplontis as a precursor to, not a follower of, Neronian fashion.

⁹ Clarke – Thomas 2008, 206–209.

¹⁰ Gazda 2002, 7.

¹¹ Fant 2007, 339.

¹² Although Pliny does not speak directly on the importance of convincing mimesis in the depiction of marble, he does (*NH* 35. 36) expound on the value of artists who could create images of the natural world that could be passed for the real. The famous example of the horses judging *Apelles'* depictions of their kind is but one example. In the case of imitations of natural materials, much has been written in modern literature. cf. Fant 2007, *passim*.

¹³ Clarke – Thomas 2009 posit as many as four Fourth Style (thus post 45 AD) renovations of the villa. These renovations may have coincided with a natural disaster, though this is not necessarily the case. What is clear, though, from the material excavated near the Southern end of the Villa's pool, is that the villa underwent more than one renovation in the Fourth Style.

¹⁴ The most obvious example of this is the redecoration of Room 8, the former *caldarium* of the villa's bath. The Third Style decoration in this room was damaged and, instead of removing the plaster and repainting the damaged Eastern side of the room with contemporary Fourth Style paintings, the owners chose to repair the room with imitation Third Style work. Clarke – Thomas 2008, 468–470.

available in Pompeii, and damaged walls repainted in imitation of the zebra paneling already present near the pool¹⁵. The zebra panels that occur in the Slave Peristyle and the corridors connecting the ancient core of the villa to the East wing appear to have been redecorated in this phase.

The renovated zebra-striped walls in the villa's western rooms were less an attempt at imitating fine *bardiglio* than they were an effort to continue the decorative syntax of the villa's East wing into the core of the villa. The results of this artistic lineage are not direct copies of *bardiglio* but "free copies" or *imitationes* of the original imitation marble panels, stylistic reactions to the exactly-rendered marble imitations in the elegantly-decorated East wing. The zebra patterns in the Slave Peristyle alone can prove this point; here, the artist applied the zebra pattern in a manner impossible for actual revetment – that is, as slab ceiling decoration and wrapped around columns. This free use of the pattern as a pattern, not as an *interpretatio* of marble itself, belies a fundamental detachment of the scheme from the original referent.

Although it is tempting to assume a chronological as well as a stylistic evolution in these schemes, that is from early and better to later and less, such a rubric cannot yet be supported by the archaeological evidence. At the least, these stylistic differences are the result of different workshops carrying out the decoration of the villa. Over time, these workshops became less interested in the exact rendering of *bardiglio* paneling and more interested in the black-and-white patterning on the walls.

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¹⁵ In particular, the spectacular black (Lesbian grey and africano) and gold (giallo antico) *opus sectile* floor of Room 69 was repaired with small pieces of similarly-colored, more easily available materials. The result is a semblance of the original but even a cursory investigation would have revealed the repair.

Abbildungen

Abb. 1: Room 94, West wall. Inset detail from far left panel. Photos by the author. Courtesy of the Oplontis Project

Abb. 2: Room 32, the so-called Slave Peristyle, South wall. Photo by P. BARDIGY. Courtesy of the Oplontis Project

Abb. 3: Room 46, North wall. Photo by P. BARDIGY. Courtesy of the Oplontis Project

Abb. 4: Three examples of *bardiglio* marble found *in situ* in Room 32 and newly excavated floor in Room 86 (lower right). Photos by the author and P. BARDIGY. Courtesy of the Oplontis Project

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