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Landscape in romano-campanian mural painting

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The genres: the contents of the paintings, the position and function of the various elements, the nature and composition of the landscape

In a few paintings derived from stage scenery (fig. 6), and closely related to garden representations it is the landscape, and not the architectural elements, which is of primary importance, but in all other instances the landscape is subordinate to the subject represented, viz, mythological themata, sacrificial ceremonies, sacral and profane rural buildings, villae, a harbour, a naval battle, the life of the pigmies, a group of animals and occasionally also a still life. Each of these subjects represents a genre on its own.

The paintings showing sacred trees, rural temples, columns, statues, funeral monuments and farm buildings are referred to collectively as 'sacral-idyllic' landscapes (figs. 1, 3-5, 8-9, 14, 25-34, 41-49, 52-54, 56-57, 96-97, 140-145, 147, 151, 153-156, 160, 162-168, 171, 173, 175-176, 181). Man is rarely absent from these paintings: praying and sacrificing he illustrates the functions of the sanctuaries, whilst the portrayal of his every-day rural activities enhances the idyllic character of the whole. In the foreground and the centre plane the landscape consists of fairly flat ground which usually has a great deal of water and occasionally gives the impression of being inundated. Either the background is enclosed by hills, or land and sky merge into one another in the absence of a clear dividing line. The scene as a whole often reminds one of Egypt rather than of Central or Southern Italy. The buildings include types found throughout the Mediterranean area as well as specifically Egyptian ones. The sacral-idyllic landscape has greatly influenced the other genres.

The pigmies are in all cases represented as being on the partly flooded banks of the Nile (figs. 24, 152, 169, 178-179). The landscape here is more than simply a background for the figures. We see these lilliputian figures in their every-day life and often also in comical situations. Buildings occupy an important place in these paintings, particularly during the Fourth Style. Most of the sanctuaries bear an Egyptian character. Among the profane buildings Roman villae stand side by side with Egyptian houses and huts made of wood, clay and reed.

In accordance with reality, the villae are preferably depicted in a coastal setting (figs. 94-95, 98-102, 148-150, 158-159, 161, 172, 174). Save for the shore, one sees on the whole little of the further surroundings of the houses. It appears certain that the buildings have a basis in reality, but it is impossible to say whether they include faithful reproductions of certain contemporary villae. The villa landscape is closely related to the sacral-idyllic type. The combination of sanctuaries and villae may have been derived from existing situations, and need not point to a mixing of the genres. The actions of the human figures in the villa landscape are less varied than are those on the sacral-idyllic landscapes.

The representations of harbours and the backgrounds against which the naval battles are depicted (figs. 146, 177), are closely related to the villa landscape. In the case of the harbours, too, it is impossible to discover whether they present a topographically correct picture of reality.

The animals – in most cases we see the weaker one fleeing from the stronger – are always seen against a faint slope in a plain hilly landscape (fig. 170). In some cases we see on the terrain a statue, a column or another sanctuary familiar to us from the sacral-idyllic representations.

The mythological themata are usually derived from Greek sources, whilst Roman myths are rarely used (figs. 11-12, 15-21, 35-36, 38-40, 50-51, 58-93, 103-139, 180). In addition to the figures which are directly connected with the story, many mythological scenes show mountain gods, mountain, coast and water nymphs. Helios and Selene are depicted only if they play a part in the story. In the Odyssey landscapes the winds are personified (fig. 16). If the story does not require any special setting, the scenery chosen by preference is a hilly region whose elements have been arranged in such a way as to enclose the background; plains and distant views are exceptions. Sacred trees and buildings often play an important part. On the whole they add to the sacred character of the surroundings in which the myth is set. There are in addition a few instances in which the trees indicate the metamorphosis of the mythological figure represented, or in which they are dedicated to a deity who is connected with the event depicted. The buildings sometimes belong to the story, and then function as a palace or a temple, otherwise they are sanctuaries of a god playing a part in the myth concerned, or are a monument to the principal hero. In several cases we see combinations of a tree and a column or a tree and a temple, which then have the same functions as described above. These sacral elements are never merely pieces of décor without any further meaning, as they are sometimes reported to be in older literature. The buildings are on the whole derived from sacral-idyllic scenes. Egyptian types are apparently avoided, unless the story requires them. Sometimes the buildings dominate the scene to such an extent that the mythological figures do not primarily draw attention. In most of these instances, however, the myth should nevertheless be looked upon as being the principal theme. Only in exceptional cases does the myth clearly have a subordinate function in a sacral-idyllic landscape. Some stories which lend themselves to it, have been set in a landscape closely resembling that found in animal scenes.

The few scenes showing sacrificial ceremonies (figs. 2, 23, 55) are partly related to the mythological genre and partly to the sacral-idyllic one.

The settings of a few still lifes with landscape background are most closely related to the sacral-idyllic representations.

The composition of the landscape is based on nature, but the elements are, on the whole, arranged in such a way as to make the scene show up to best advantage. The colours used are in most cases very close to the natural ones. Occasionally a limited number of colours, or a number of shades of one particular colour is used; sometimes the painter makes no attempt to reproduce the natural colour of the water and the sky, and is content to employ the colour which the wall happens to have already, whilst the rest is executed oligochrome or polychrome. Even when the painters used a limited number of colours, they try to create an impression of spatial depth in the landscapes. The effects of light and shadow are based on nature, but are applied so as to benefit the scene represented. The painters use both aerial and linear perspective. In the mythological scenes the eye level is nearly always horizontal with the figures, though the other elements in the background rarely concur in this respect. In the other genres the horizon is at a fairly high level, but here, too, the painters rarely kept to one fixed point, so that it varies from one building to the next. In the separate buildings the laws of perspective have been applied rather arbitrarily. The buildings and the figures moving in the various planes nevertheless help greatly to create an impression of spatial depth, particularly in the monochrome paintings, in which the possibilities of aerial perspective are less great.

The rendering of the landscape

Here and there we observe phenomena which make us think of spring, autumn or winter, but no season other than summer has been rendered consistently anywhere. In a few instances a landscape is enveloped in the haze of dawn, whilst sunrise and sunset have also been depicted. In most cases, however, the lighting does not suggest any particular part of the day. Night is represented only if required by the story. Certain weather conditions were not depicted at all by the mural decorators. On the sole occasion that a real clouded sky was depicted, it was called for by the mythological theme (fig. 139). The few grey skies which occur, are due to a limited colour scheme. The painters do not intend these skies to indicate rainy weather, since the light on these paintings does not differ in any way from the light observed on pictures with a blue sky. Nowhere can it be demonstrated with any degree of certainty that a landscape exhales the mood which would have been appropriate to the story which it serves as scenery.

When the painters were not tied by the genre to a certain type of landscape they made a good use of the liberty to introduce variety. This is particularly apparent in the mythological scenes. Generally speaking the decorators appear to have composed and executed the landscapes from memory. There are indeed indications that they may have been inspired by their surroundings, but none of the painted land-

scapes may be identified as being a representation of natural scenery now extant. In this connection it may be pointed out that the painting depicting the fight in the amphitheatre and showing part of Pompeii (p. 182) cannot be considered as being a genuine landscape as such. The rendering of the separate elements rarely gives us any reason to suppose that they were the result of outdoor studies.

The origin of landscape representation

It may be considered probable that prior to the Second Style landscapes existed which, as regards spatial depth, were very closely related to those which we see on Roman walls.

The villa landscape probably came into being within the Third Style period, but all other genres had already taken shape before they were used in Roman mural paintings. The landscapes showing pigmies and ducks are bound to be of Egyptian origin. The sacral-idyllic landscape is strongly affected by Egyptian influences.

The interrelatedness between landscape representation and the decorative systems of the successive styles in Roman mural painting

SECOND STYLE: FIGS. 1-48, 50-51; THIRD STYLE: FIGS. 49, 52-102; FOURTH STYLE: FIGS. 103-181

In the Second Style period one can still observe, as regards the grouping and treatment of the various landscape elements, differences between the somewhat severe character of those representations reminiscent of theatre décors and those with more pliant lines and another origin. The paintings showing pigmies differ from those of the other genres in the attention given to the landscape throughout. For the rest, the differences in composition and execution are connected not so much with the difference in genre but with the shape, the dimensions and the manner in which the subject painting has been incorporated in the decoration, i.e. as a prospect – whether or not consistently so –, as a tabula or as a ‘mural painting’ on an illusionistically rendered wall or frieze. The frieze calls for a different composition to that of the tabulae, and in the latter the possibilities vary in accordance with their having the shape of a horizontal rectangle, a vertical rectangle or a square. The prospect is always polychrome, whilst the ‘mural painting’ is preferably executed in monochrome or oligochrome. Larger, centrally placed tabulae are generally polychrome and worked out in great detail, whilst smaller ones in less important places often have a decorative function and have been painted less painstakingly and often in a smaller number of colours. On the one hand we see that the very small dimensions offered the wall decorator fewer chances of working out the surroundings of his theme in any great detail, whilst on the other hand one finds that the very large ones also presented certain difficulties to him in this respect.

In the interior one and the same genre is nearly always chosen for the centres of the walls, usually mythological themata, sometimes sacral-idyllic representations, villa landscapes or still lifes. On the whole they are presented in the form of tabulae,

but the two first-mentioned genres may occasionally be found as prospects. The pigmies do not occur as *pièce de milieu*. In other parts of the wall and in *viridaria* and *peristyles* there is more freedom as far as the combining of the various types is concerned, but here, too, it seems to be common practice to choose the same or similar genres in corresponding positions. Mythological scenes not placed centrally on a wall are rare; only on a few occasions do we see them as friezes; the *Odyssey* landscapes are utilized as prospects in the upper portion of the wall in an interior (figs. 15-21), whilst furthermore a few large prospects with mythological themata occur in *viridaria* and *peristyles*. One of the consequences of the fact that the mythological scenes were given a special place, is that a great deal of care is often devoted to their landscape part.

Paintings in corresponding places are usually adjusted to each other with respect to the relationship between the figures and the architectural elements, as well as to colour, but not always in regard to the composition of the landscape.

The differences in composition and treatment due to changes in fashion are also determined by the choice which the decorators made among the above-mentioned possibilities when integrating paintings in the decorative system. Whereas the Second and Fourth Styles used all of them, the Third Style practically restricted itself exclusively to a subject painting in the centre and a few small decorative vignettes or panels outside it. Whereas the central picture is fairly large in the Second as well as in the early and middle Third Style, the dimensions are usually much smaller in the late Third and the Fourth Style. In the Second Style the central picture is occasionally still used as a prospect, whilst in the Third it is nearly always depicted as a *tabula* and in the Fourth Style it is always a *tabula*.

Within the paintings proper, the most striking difference in style is to be found in the relation of figures and buildings to their surroundings. Whilst the Second and particularly the Third Style usually leave ample room for the landscape, this is only very rarely the case in the Fourth Style. The Second and the Third Styles prefer composing round the centre, and often start from a horizontal as well as vertical division into three parts, at least if the shape and the size of the picture make it possible to do so. This system continues to be applied during the Fourth Style, but side by side with it we find, particularly in the square-shaped paintings, compositions based on one of the diagonals or on a vertical division into two parts.

In the rendering of the various elements the differences in style are most apparent in the figures. In a group of mythological representations which may be taken to be characteristic of the Third Style (figs. 80-85, 88-90), they are tall and slim, stiff in movement and usually clothed in bright-coloured garments which have been wrapped round the bodies in parallel pleats and angular folds. The easy grace of the equally slender Second Style mythological figures is a great contrast, and equally so the natural rounded forms of the Fourth Style which occasionally have a baroque elegance. The figures of the Second and the Fourth Style are clothed in less conspicuous colours.

The figures on the sacral-idyllic and villa landscapes during the period of the

Second Style are nearly always worked out in detail. They have the same slim appearance as the mythological figures, and their various actions are usually well delineated. This partly applies also to the Third Style, but in the small paintings of this period we already find many instances of the careless manner in which the figures on this type of pictures are dealt with in the Fourth Style. During the last-mentioned period the figures continue to be worked out in detail on the large paintings, albeit that they are far less well elaborated than during the Second Style, but on the small landscapes they are often painted in only a few strokes, which are usually without effect; they are often reduced to mere indications of men in which it is no longer possible to recognize any action whatsoever. Care continues to be devoted, however, to the pigmies who always retain their importance, even during the Fourth Style.

In mythological scenes the architectural elements are nearly always kept plain. The Second and Third Styles give slightly more detail than does the Fourth. In the Second Style the influence of the architectural prospect can occasionally be observed.

More details occur on the paintings on which architectural elements are of primary importance, and also in the buildings found on the pigmy scenes. The Third Style often represents slender shapes and clear-cut drawing. The villae retain this character even in the period of the Fourth Style. In addition the Fourth Style, like the Second usually employs more massive structures, while less attention is given to the details of the buildings than to their general appearance in the landscape. In a few instances the Fourth Style arrives at an impressionistic method in which the light is considered of far greater importance than the rendering of the buildings.

In the representation of the various landscape elements the differences in style are most noticeable in the trees and shrubs. On a number of Third Style villa landscapes we see parks made up of formalized pines and cypresses. This style further shows a certain preference for fully detailed trees with compact tops, whilst the Second and Fourth Styles employ more open forms. Particularly during the Fourth Style we often observe a harmonious distribution of branches and foliage over the surface. During this period the shape of a tree is often considered of less importance than its function in the picture as a whole. On a few Fourth Style paintings, trees share the impressionistic treatment of the buildings depicted. In the Fourth Style it is considerably more difficult to identify the trees than it is in the Second and Third Styles. In the Third Style the hills and rocks are often formalized, their surfaces are not on the whole treated suggestively and the impression created is frequently that of stage scenery. The Second and Fourth Styles render these elements far more true to nature. In three Third Style mythological scenes in the triclinium of the house of the priest Amandus the sky is of a peculiar bluish green colour also occurring in the surrounding decoration. In Fourth Style paintings the sky sometimes is a special kind of deep blue. For the rest the various styles do not noticeably differ in their rendering of the sky.

In the manner of execution of the elements of the landscape, the differences in style also make themselves felt in the degree to which the requirements of the picture as a whole are taken into account. Particularly in the Fourth Style, most of the

paintings form units in which the landscape has also been included. This unity has been achieved through harmony between drawing, colour scheme and touch. In this Style the figures and buildings have been most successfully distributed over the landscape and integrated into the surroundings. Most of the Second Style landscapes also possess these qualities, though in a lesser degree. The Third Style comprises a fairly large group of paintings precisely lacking these qualities, and showing a real discrepancy in style between the sharply outlined figures and the more picturesque appearance of their surroundings. Side by side with these the Third Style, too, includes paintings passing on the tradition of the Second Style to the Fourth.

With respect to the paintings with certain Third Style characteristics in Fourth Style surroundings, it is not always possible to decide whether they should be dated to the time of Vespasian or to the initial period of the Fourth Style. The data at present at our disposal do not make it possible to obtain an insight into the question of whether the painters in the time of Vespasian consciously returned to the style of a preceding period. It is equally difficult to find out whether certain negative qualities in paintings dating from the last years of Pompeii ought to be looked upon as being characteristics of style or should be attributed to external conditions after the earthquake of 62/63 A.D.

Paintings presented as prospects fit in excellently with the decorative systems of the Second and Fourth Styles. Even the fact that the Fourth Style does not consistently adhere to the prospect character is in keeping with the irrational nature of this system. Between the paintings themselves as such – prospects, tabulae and mural paintings – and the styles just referred to, a degree of unity exists which not only makes itself felt in the most obvious way, viz, in the architectural elements, but also in the style of the figures and the linear pattern of the picture as a whole. This agreement is indeed far greater in the Fourth Style than in the Second. In the Third Style it is possible to find points of agreement between different elements in a large number of subject paintings and the surrounding decoration, viz, the division into three parts, the slim and clear-cut appearance of figures and buildings. But in the same way as there are often differences in style within the paintings themselves, there are also many discrepancies between the subject paintings on the one hand and Third Style decoration as a whole on the other.

Groningen, November 1962.