

Wall painting: polyphemus and galatea in a landscape



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Wall painting: Polyphemus and Galatea in a landscape, from the imperial villa at Boscotrecase

Wall painting: Polyphemus and Galatea in a landscape, from the imperial villa at Boscotrecase is a nearly perfect example of Augustan art, commissioned by one of the members of the imperial household, Marcus Agrippa, and his wife, Julia, also the daughter of Augustus. The subject matter addresses classic Hellenistic themes of love, emotions, civilization, nature, and Greek gods, which would have been familiar to well-educated Romans during this period. The wall painting was used as decorative art for one of several rooms that led to an open-air courtyard, which was a key element of the homes of wealthy Romans.

The Villa at Boscotrecase, along with the entire city of Pompeii, was covered in volcanic ash in 79 CE. The Polyphemus and Galatea fresco was discovered in a subsequent excavation at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Polyphemus and Galatea fresco is a work which dates from after 11 BC or sometime during the last decade of the first century BC (von Blanckenhagen, *The Augustan Villa*). Although there is no artistic credit for the piece and its companion, the Perseus and Andromeda fresco, both are considered to be among the finest examples of Roman wall painting and are considered masterpieces of the Third Style Roman wall painting (Alexander). These works were executed in a style very similar to those found in the Villa Farnesina in Rome, also owned by Marcus Agrippa and Julia. It is thought that the decorator of the Villa at Borcostrecase, “ must have come from the

Farnesina atelier, a brilliant pupil rather than the master himself, a painter who reflected the lively, elegant, and sophisticated society which we associate with Julia” (von Blackenhagen, The Augustan Villa). The paint materials used for the fresco reflects hues and pigments found in Middle Eastern territories conquered during the reign of Augustus. The artist uses color, light and shading to establish the competing moods of the two stories. The texture of the work is very smooth aside from the obvious fragmentation that has occurred because of age and restoration efforts.

Today, the Polyphemus and Galatea wall painting is part of the Greek and Roman Art Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with the accession number 20. 192. 17. The work was first discovered during an excavation of the Villa de Boscotrecase from 1903 to 1906 and included three bedrooms—the Red Room, the Black Room, and the Mythological Room. The latter room holds the Polyphemus and Galatea fresco on the west wall and the companion fresco, Perseus and Andromeda, which was on the east wall (Alexander).

The Mythological Room is the most fragmented of the three rooms and was only partially excavated before another volcanic eruption occurred in 1906. The two wall paintings and sections of the surrounding walls are the only pieces of the room that survived, however, the Mythological Room “ strikes one as the most vivid” (Knauer). Of the two surviving wall paintings, Polyphemus and Galatea has had more restoration. For the most part, the center of the wall painting is intact. However, the upper right corner of the piece and the edges of the painting along the bottom have been filled in.

The Villa de Boscotrecase belonged to Marcus Agrippa, friend and son-in-law of Augustus, first of the Roman emperors. Construction was believed to have been started between 21 BC and 16 BC and completed after Agrippa's death in 12 BC. When the villa was discovered during a public works project in 1903, the owner of the property, Cavaliere Ernesto Santini, excavated a large portion of the villa with the help of the well-known Italian archeologist Matteo Della Corte. Of the four bedrooms, three, including the Mythological Room with the Polyphemus and Galatea wall painting, were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The fourth bedroom was acquired by the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples (Anderson).

The Villa was designed to be the home of an upper class Roman, particularly a member of the imperial family. It had an open peristyle courtyard, which was surrounded by bedrooms and other rooms for entertaining with slave quarters and kitchens on the east side of the house. The Mythological Room is one of these rooms on the south side of the courtyard. All of the rooms enjoyed a southern exposure to the Bay of Naples. The Mythological Room consisted of three wall paintings: Polyphemus and Galatea on the west wall, Perseus and Andromeda on the east wall, and a third complementary wall painting on the north wall. " The paintings took the place of the wall covering, wood paneling, and pictures of a modern room. With the scant furniture of the Roman interior, the effect must have been orderly and enviable indeed" (Alexander).

The wall painting is comprised of several stories about Polyphemus, the son of Poseidon. The narrative in the upper right corner of the painting and moving to the center is the story of Polyphemus and Odysseus from <https://assignbuster.com/wall-painting-polyphemus-and-galatea-in-a-landscape/>

Homer's, *The Odyssey*. A smaller Polyphemus is standing on a rock formation hurling a large boulder at the escaping Odysseus. Odysseus had blinded Polyphemus's one eye before escaping with his men in a boat. From the lower left side of the painting to the center is the story of Polyphemus's love of the sea-nymph, Galatea, which is a very story different about Polyphemus. She is riding a dolphin amidst calm seas, and he is gazing down on her, perched on a cliff above where he is tending his sheep. The calm waters surrounding Galatea imply that Polyphemus is allowing ships to pass peacefully. Interestingly, there are several versions of the Galatea and Polyphemus story, and this painting seems to be the one favored by Ovid, the court poet for Augustus. However, Galatea has her back to Polyphemus, presumably signaling that she is not returning his adoration because her true love is Acis who does not appear in this painting (Anderson).

There is a secondary theme of nature versus civilization that is suggested by the Greek temple placed upon the hill in the upper left corner of the painting. This is a classical theme of the Greeks and is played out in several ways in this wall painting (Anderson).

The upper left corner of the painting highlights one of the secondary themes of nature and civilization. There is a classic Greek temple atop a mountain surrounded by vegetation, which has since faded again projecting a darker feeling.

In the middle of the painting is a large column with a vessel on top. It appears to serve as a separation between the three story panels, dividing love versus rage and nature versus civilization. It draws your eye

immediately to the center and then take in the smaller narratives that are presented to upper right and lower left

The mythological frescos from the Villa de Boscotrecase are particularly interesting because of the materials and colors used. With their seascapes and landscapes, this fresco is rich with green and blue hues, which were produced by grinding minerals. The minerals were ground coarsely to produce a refractive effect. (Knauer, Roman Wall Paintings). The paint was also applied thickly to “ adhere well and produce a luster” (Knauer, Roman). The Egyptian blue used in the fresco speaks to the breadth of the Roman Empire, under Augustus. “ Unlike the more common hues made from plants, Egyptian blue was, according to classical texts, not only difficult and expensive to obtain” but also had special application requirements (Knauer).

The Polyphemus and Galatea fresco is the darker of the two wall paintings, with a blue-green seascape dominating the work. The blues have lost their lighter tones moving more towards a blackish color that gives the work a dark, menacing feeling. Homer’s Polyphemus is an uncivilized and barbaric cyclops. He welcomes Odysseus to the island and then promptly eats his men. Despite Polyphemus’ love of Galatea, he is a tortured mythological character who slips between good and evil. The darker palette of this work reflects the evil side of Polyphemus. Even the narrative on the lower left of the painting where Polyphemus is gazing upon his love, Galatea, evokes the feeling of discomfort and foreboding. Galatea does not gaze back at Polyphemus rather she looks away as if repelled by him. The story of Galatea and Polyphemus ends with Galatea’s love, Acis, being killed by Polyphemus

(Alexander)

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The use of light is a critical tool in this wall painting. Within the stories, the use of light provides the key some of the important emotional elements such as the rage of Polyphemus suggested The swirling of the dark sea of water and the waves crashing upon the rocks with their white foam caps suggest a feeling of churning emotions and mirrors the wildness of Polyphemus' rage. Alternatively, the lightness of Galatea as she sits upon the dolphin.

The light and shading of the overall picture is used to suggest the lighting of the room in which it was placed and its position on the wall relative to the natural source of light from the window. The light sweeps across the painting as it would have if the light was coming from a southern exposure. In the room, the painting was on the west wall so the light would have crossed it from left to right, which is how the lighting in the picture appears.

The use of the space in the piece is centered in the middle with the large column and the larger scaled Polyphemus sitting upon the cliff tending his sheep. This central figure draws your attention and your attention wanders diagonally downward and left, as well as diagonally upward and to the right to each of the corners of the fresco where most of the stories take place.

Peter von Blanckenhagen notes that the paintings appear to have several perspectives or viewpoints, with the surrounding background as the element that unites them. " Strange apparent opposites are unified by the surrounding atmosphere-bird's-eye viewpoint and elements seen at the observer's eye-level, the unrealistic scale of some of the figures and a desire for illustrative narrative detail in the general landscape surroundings: this is

what gives these frescoes their peculiarly illusionistic reality and what makes them so significant in the history of Roman wall painting.”

In addition to the primary stories of the Greek gods, there are other classical themes depicted in the fresco. In the upper left-hand corner is the image of a Greek temple symbolizing civilization amidst the nature of the other images in the painting (Heibrunn). Although, it may be a secondary theme in the Polyphemus and Galatea wall painting, the homage paid to Greek art, architecture and the adulation of civilization—democracy, science, rationality and reasoning— is in keeping with the ideals of Augustan society. These were all values embraced by the ancient Greeks and admired by Imperial Rome and its leader Augustus who was a great artistic benefactor.. The use of the Greek temple in the upper left of the painting is a fitting nod to the rise of the ideals of the Greeks under Augustus (Anderson).

The frescoes of mythological themes are particularly interesting as “ They provide clues to the education and knowledge of the Roman citizen that are not found in public art.” These provide a “ rare glimpse into the lives and interest of wealthy Roman villa owners” (academia. edu). The two primary echoes in the wall paintings are the ancient Greeks and the Egyptians, both civilization that greatly influenced Augustus. “ The Third or Ornate Style (from the reign of Augustus to A. D. 50), which moves away from structural correctness in the direction of fantastical and impossible architectural forms; it is characterized by the appearance of Egyptian motives, reflecting the close relationship of the Empire with Egypt following the battle of Actium” (Alexander).

Augustus was an enthusiastic art patron in awe of the ancient Greek civilization. He was determined to heighten the value of art and architecture during his reign. Imperial art often referred back to the Classical art of the past and those themes can be seen in the Polyphemus and Galatea fresco. We see the idealized shape of Polyphemus when he is really a cyclop of grotesque form along with the beautiful Galatea. Other “ Classicizing” elements include the smooth lines, elegant drapery, highly naturalistic forms and balanced proportions that the Greeks had perfected over centuries and the Romans adopted (Khan academy).

III. CONCLUSIONS

Polyphemus and Galatea fresco is an excellent representation of Augustan art because of its subject matter, composition, materials, purpose and placement. The Augustan period of art and architecture revered the Ancient Greeks and the Egyptians. Although, the Romans had been victorious over both these cultures, their cultural sensibilities were admired and absorbed by Augustus during his reign. The Polyphemus and Galatea fresco is one of the purest reflections of this phenomenon.

The fresco and its companion pieces were placed in one of the many rooms at the Villa de Boscotrecase which was owned by Agrippa, son-in-law of Augustus, and his wife Julia. It was a classic summer house overlooking the Bay of Naples and provided all the necessary elements to support the lifestyle of one of the members of the Imperial family. The Mythological Room off the colonnade surrounding the peristyle open courtyard was

lavaishing decorated with three wall paintings along with classic Augustan wall decorations.

The Polyphemus and Galatea fresco, along with its companion fresco, had a unifying seascape motif which were painted with colors using the minerals from Egypt which were difficult to obtain and expensive. Given they were source only from Egypt would have been impossible to secure prior to Augustus' victory at Actium. It was a signature color of the Augustan period.

The subject of the fresco and the themes played out in the narrative are also key to the Augustan period and its elite. The story of Polyphemus and Odysseus as well as Polyphemus and Galatea were popular stories in the court of Augustus. The contrasting themes of love and rage, light and dark, nature and civilization played out by the Greek gods are the principles of Hellenistic art and so aptly displayed in the frescoes of this Imperial Villa.

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