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The “Zebra Stripe” Design: An Investigation of Roman Wall Painting in the Periphery

In questo articolo viene trattato un particolare tipo di decorazione parietale, finora marginalmente studiato: il cosiddetto disegno a “zebra”, caratterizzato da pannelli delimitati in rosso con strisce verticali o oblique in bianco e nero alternate. Tale tipo di decorazione è stato considerato in genere come destinato ad ambienti secondari o servili; l’Autore lo mette piuttosto in relazione con il primo stile ad incrostazione, di cui sarebbe una tarda ripresa. L’articolo inoltre mette in evidenza, ed è punto interessante, che, a differenza di quanto già da altri affermato, tale disegno “a zebra” è in effetti caratteristico di parti pubbliche, anche se non di rappresentanza, della *domus*: zone di passaggio, spesso non illuminate e in pendio, per cui necessitanti di un tipo di decorazione in qualche modo brillante. Segue ampio catalogo di tali pitture nei siti vesuviani (RED. su indicazioni dell’Autore).

INTRODUCTION

This paper will address a previously unassessed feature in Roman wall painting: the so-called “zebra stripe” design (fig. 1). This distinctive pattern has not yet been fully catalogued or investigated because, in line with traditional scholarship on Roman painting, it does not belong to, and in fact for the most part exists in rooms and areas completely separate from those adorned with, one of Mau’s four Pompeian painting styles.¹ The zebra stripe design has been traditionally considered simple and crude, thought to adorn only less important or minor locations such as utility rooms and servant areas. Yet evidence as gathered suggests the following two points: 1) The zebra design was in fact more decorative in antiquity than it appears today, and 2) the type of area to which the design has been traditionally assigned is incorrect. This paper suggests that, in its original state, the design was decorative and pleasing to the eye, and that it adorned vital areas of homes or buildings, areas that were highly trafficked and used by all individuals – inhabitants, visitors and servants alike.

BACKGROUND AND INVESTIGATION

The zebra stripe design appears on walls of many buildings in and around the ancient city of Pompeii. In broad terms, it may be described as a sequence of large red band-bounded panels intensified on the interior with black and white “stripes,” settled beneath an all-white upper wall



1. The zebra stripe design, Villa Imperiale. Author’s photograph.