MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL RELIGION IN POMPEIAN PAINTING

Nathaniel B. Jones

Abstract

Painting was an essential part of the material religion of Pompeii. Executed in a broad range of styles and across the chronological span of the city's life, Pompeian frescoes both depicted religious activities and decorated religious spaces, ranging from grand public temple structures to intimate household shrines. More than merely documenting a strikingly broad array of religious practices, paintings in Pompeii also deliberately played on their dual status as both powerful attestations of the divine and works of human ingenuity and craft. This essay focuses on one way in which this apparent paradox was explored: the depiction of religious artworks, especially statues and panel paintings, within Pompeian murals. It argues that such paintings simultaneously erect and blur boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the mythological and the everyday, and the real and the represented. In so doing, they expose both the affective and aesthetic power of ancient painting itself.

Keywords: Pompeii, religion, fresco, votive, metafiction, epiphany, Dionysus, epigram
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Biographical note

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Banner image: Detail from a garden painting, from the House of the Golden Bracelet, Pompeii (VI.17.42), collection of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. (Photo: Fine Art Images/Heritage Images via Getty Images)

MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL RELIGION IN POMPEIAN PAINTING

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Pompeian painting is rife with material attestations of religious practice. Whether in the city's ubiquitous lararia and street shrines, the decoration of its temple complexes, the depiction of religious rites, or even the representation of moralising mythological narratives, the painted environment of Pompeii attests to the religious life of its inhabitants in what seem to be direct and unmistakable ways. As this essay explores, however, the materiality of religious experience promised by Pompeian painting frequently threatens to dissolve into the immaterial play of fiction. The essay examines this tension by focusing on one particularly complex mode of pictorial reference to religion: the depiction of religious artworks, especially statues and panel paintings. It proposes that such representations of representations worked, at least in part, to expand the religious world of the Pompeians, offering access to ideas and rituals from a broad historical span and throughout the Mediterranean basin. But the matter is complicated by the ways in which the historicity and materiality of these depicted objects, and thus their status as human-produced works of art, is often overtly emphasised. The essay will argue that such meta-paintings were neither just powerfully affective religious images nor simply cultured allusions to precious works of art. Rather, they self-reflexively commented on their role as both a material point of access to the divine and the product of human ingenuity and craft. On the one hand, the paintings conceal the mechanisms of representation through techniques of illusion; on the other, they lay bare the artifice of such representation by self-consciously breaking those illusions. Pompeian murals featuring representations of religious artworks simultaneously erect and blur boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the mythological and the everyday, and the real and the represented. In so doing, ultimately, they point to the duality of ancient painting as a site of both affect and aesthetics.

The materiality of painting is never quite as simple as it seems. A painting is, of course, a material product, a suspension of pigment and binder on a surface. But in the case of Pompeian painting, the final product – the resulting material object – is also typically representational. It depicts, by techniques of imitation that could rise to the heights of extreme illusionism, something else: another object, body, or more frequently a collection of bodies and objects arrayed in a spatial organisation which has both a real order on the surface and an imagined order in the pictorial world that the painting constructs.

Unlike the representational act of sculpture, that of painting does not typically physically intrude into the world of the viewer, no matter how persuasive its illusions. Rather, it creates another, notional world, a hypothetical as-if alternative to reality which is only ever ambiguously related to the living body of the viewer (Grethlein, 2017). This may seem like a simple point, but it is an important one. Such an essential ambiguity lies at the heart, for example, of Platonic philosophy's discomfiture with the potentially deceptive craft of painting (Vernant, 1991, pp.164–85). And it may help explain the fact that, although statues of deities were often simply referred to as the deities themselves by Greek and Roman writers, this kind of elision seems to have been less common in the case of painting (Gordon, 1979, pp.7–8; cf. Stewart, 2003, pp.20–8). Put in another way, painting is never fully able to shake off its status as a medium, a go-between or point of inflection, and thus never quite presumes to deliver reality in a fully transparent, immediate fashion. Perhaps one way of accessing this point lies in an example in which painterly skill does transcend medial status: the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius. The two artists, embodying different traditions of producing pictorial illusions, sought to outdo one another by persuading bodies to act through paint alone. Zeuxis' painting of grapes, according to Pliny, was so lifelike that birds attempted to eat the fruit, while Parrhasius painted a curtain with such subtle precision that Zeuxis asked that it be pulled back to reveal the painting lying behind it (Plin, *HN* 35.65). But this is precisely meant to be a limit case, an extreme of illusion achieved by some of the greatest painters in history, and even here painting does not deliver reality: in the disconnect between the perceiving and acting body not only painterly skill but the medium of painting as such is revealed (Bann, 1989, pp.27–31; Bryson, 1990, pp.30–32; Elsner, 1995, pp.16–17). This acknowledgment of its own medial status, what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin have called hypermediacy (1999), stands as a constant corrective to illusionism's pretenses of real presence.

There is thus an inevitable duplicity to the material of figural painting. Aristotle makes this point almost in passing in his discussion of the function of memory. In Aristotelian epistemology, all acts of cognition depend upon the use of internal images (Arist. *De an.* 431a16, 432a8; Polansky, 2008, pp.481–9, 497–500). In his

Figure 3.1: Lararium painting, Pompeii VII.6.3, MANN 8905. First century CE. (Photo: Vanni Archive / Art Resource, NY)

theory of memory, the philosopher further asserts that memory and recollection are also image dependent, and that the act of recollection is a kind of viewing of a mental image of a prior experience. But to recollect is not to simply re-live that prior experience, nor is it the same as to engage in an act of imagination or fantasy. Instead, a memory image is a representation, an object (albeit a mental one) with its own existence, which depicts a previous experience through a relation of likeness or similarity. It is characterised by an inherent duality. Aristotle explicitly compares the duality of the memory image to that of a painting (*Mem*. 450b21–24): 'Just as a figure painted on a panel is both a figure and a likeness, and though one and the same, is both, yet the essence of the two is not the same, and it is possible to behold it as both a figure and a likeness' (translation adapted from Hett, 2000, pp.294–7). An apparent paradox is involved in this formulation, an ability for the painting to be two things at once, both independent entity and conduit to something else. The implications of this point for our conception of painting as material religion are significant. It suggests that a painting is never simply an irruption of transcendence into the world, but also never simply just a human fiction.

The double nature of representational painting can appear even in what seem to be straightforward cases of popular religious paintings in Pompeii, which problematise their status as material points of access to the divine through the ambiguous representation of material objects. Let us take as an example a painting from one of the Pompeii's many lararia, now housed in the archaeological museum in Naples, which may have come from House VII.2.03 (Fig. 3.1) (MANN 8905; Bragantini and Sampaolo, 2009, pp.428–9, cat.222; Fröhlich, 1991, pl.10; Flower, 2017, pp.54–7). For discussion of the materiality of religion articulated by this painting I am especially indebted to a lecture delivered by Jennifer Trimble at King's College London in June of 2017. As the decoration of a shrine to household gods, it seems to present simply and without pretense the key elements and actors in this sphere of domestic religion. The painting is divided into two registers. In the upper register the two *lares* stand holding *rhyta* that pour out wine into *situla*, flanking the *genius* of the house, who in turn holds out a *patera* over an altar in the presence of an aulos player, a *victimarius*,

and an altar attendant. In the lower register two snakes, like the Lares probably also representing protective deities of place (Flower, 2017, pp.63–70), wind sinuously through tall grasses, tails pointing out and heads facing a round altar topped with eggs. The altars at the centre of both registers focalise and complicate the picture. The site of sacrifice, the altar is one of the most significant loci of religious practice, a place where human and divine meet through the act of offering. Both altars have an emphatically material presence within the picture; they sit on ground lines and, even in the spare and sketchy technique of this painting, both are equipped with a sense of three-dimensionality. The altar on the top register appears to have been made from a variegated, and thus implicitly imported, marble. The material of the bottom altar is less legible from the painting, though it may, conceivably, be a white stone such as limestone or marble. But both altars are also curiously dematerialised. That on top sits in front of a leafy bush, whose branches spread out around it and frame it. This compositional device is presumably designed to isolate the altar, demarcating it as worthy of visual as well as ritual attention. But it has the added opposite effect of causing the branches of the bush to blend together with the variegation of the stone, dissolving the boundaries between the objects and thus the integrity of the altar.

On the bottom register, material indeterminacy is produced through the application of figural decoration. At least three high-relief human figures are visible on the surface of the altar: one central and frontal and two flanking figures in profile. Yet, as Trimble (2017) has articulated, how we are to imagine those figures were actually produced is left underdetermined in the painting. On the front, we see an outline, as though the figure had been painted, or were a raised relief. On the sides, however, are only dark silhouettes. Do we see them in shadow? Have they been produced from a different material than the body of the altar? Or have we simply reached the limits of the artists' ability to render other media in paint? Given the finely rendered scales of the snakes and the bright white highlights gleaming off their underbellies, this latter option seems unlikely. Regardless of the reason, the material status of the relief figures is simply not decipherable from the painting, and the added visual effect is to once again blur the border between altar and surrounding grasses. This is all to say: even in the most apparently direct attestations of painted material religion, immateriality and indeterminacy find their way in.

Similar modes of indeterminacy appear elsewhere in Pompeii. In the well-known Room of the Mysteries in the Villa of the Mysteries, for example, we encounter a dynamic tension between the representation of a divine epiphany and the disclosure of a purely fictive artificiality (Fig. 3.2). Verity Platt has demonstrated that epiphany is frequently a fluid, uncertain process, in which questions of representation can be subject to as much concern as those of divine presence itself (2011). As Platt articulates, the dynamic tension between the idea of epiphany as an '*unmediated* visual encounter with divinity', and the reality that the gods could only be perceived through human acts of creation was an animating force in Greco-Roman religious culture (2011, p.48). In the Room of the Mysteries this fact is highlighted through the unstable relationship between figures – both real inhabitant of the room and painted figure on the wall – and their material environment (Jones, 2019a, pp.67–9). As we move around the room, we seem to follow along with an initiation scene into a Dionysiac cult, in which human and divine figures, including the god Dionysus himself, intermingle, and in which, according to an interpretation which sees the room as the locus of actual initiation rituals, the painted bodies on the wall provide a model for the living bodies within the space (Maiuri, 1931; Nilsson, 1957, pp.66–76, 123–30; Brendel, 1980; Sauron, 1998). The painted figures are carefully modelled in light and shadow. They move with a clarity of purpose and their gestures and expressions highlight the drama of the depicted events. They have been painted at an almost life-size scale, and the fact that they are set against a bright red backdrop pushes their bodies out vertiginously into the space of the room's inhabitants. The living body of the viewer is further incorporated into the unfolding drama when depicted actions break into real space by taking place across the room's corners, as in the flagellation scene in the back right, or when figures turn to look directly out of the picture plane, as the woman with a silver offering tray on the left wall does. The techniques of illusionism are employed to epiphanic effect; they produce the sensation of real presence (Grau, 2003, 25–9; cf. Zanker, 1998). Yet, at the same time the figures are also posed in obviously artificial groups, and the shallow green platform and bright red backing wall make it seem as though we were looking at a kind of stage building. The activities of a rustic mystery cult, which should be taking place at an outdoor woodland shrine, as they do in the stucco decorations of the Villa della Farnesina in Rome (Wyler, 2006; 2019), are instead presented as though they were a part of a theatrical performance. The materialism of the painted environment, as illusionistically persuasive as it is, serves above all to dislocate us from a full sense of immersion, that is,

Figure 3.2: Room of the Mysteries. Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii. First century BCE. (Photo: author, with permission of the Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)

from the idea that we are genuine participants in the depicted actions, and thus witnesses to the presence of Dionysus himself.

If this kind of play of dualities – presence and absence, epiphany and artificiality, material religion and immaterial fiction – is a feature of a broad swathe of religiously oriented Pompeian painting, it is especially concentrated in the pictorial representation of other representational media. An illusionistic painting has a nearly unique ability to figure other media within itself. Yet, Roman paintings rarely do so in simplistic or straightforward ways. We have seen this already in the case of the altars of the *lararium* painting or in the paradoxes of figure and environment in the Room of the Mysteries. But the duality of figured media is heightened even further when paintings represent other forms of religiously oriented representational art within themselves. In the remainder of this article, we will examine how paintings of figurative religious artworks from Pompeii engage with issues of format, medium, historical and regional style, literary gloss, and metafictional reference in order to both expand the religious world of the Pompeians and to call attention to their own artificial status, and thus to simultaneously offer access to the divine and draw upon an august art-historical tradition, marked above all by a sense of human achievement.

The painted decoration from Room 4 from the Villa of the Mysteries accentuates this point (Clarke, 1991, pp.94–7; Scheibler, 1998, p.5; Wyler, 2008; Jones, 2019a, pp.52–4). The architectural conceit is largely the same as in the nearby Room of the Mysteries: a narrow stage sits in front of a red backing wall, with vibrantly coloured, dramatically posed figures highlighted against it. In one corner of the room, a satyr stares out aggressively toward the viewer and leaps in dance, with cymbals poised as though to add the clamour of music to the scene (Fig. 3.3). Next to him a woman in a mantle and a long garment is shown with body in profile but head turned to look out directly into the space of the room's living inhabitants. In another corner a drunken, stumbling Dionysus shows the after-effects of revelry and indulgence (Fig. 3.4). His muscles are loose, his body almost entirely without tension, and his gaze is vacant, as though his divine presence had been spent in the ecstatic release which must have preceded this moment. As the god lifts his right arm up above his head, we see in this conventional iconography of

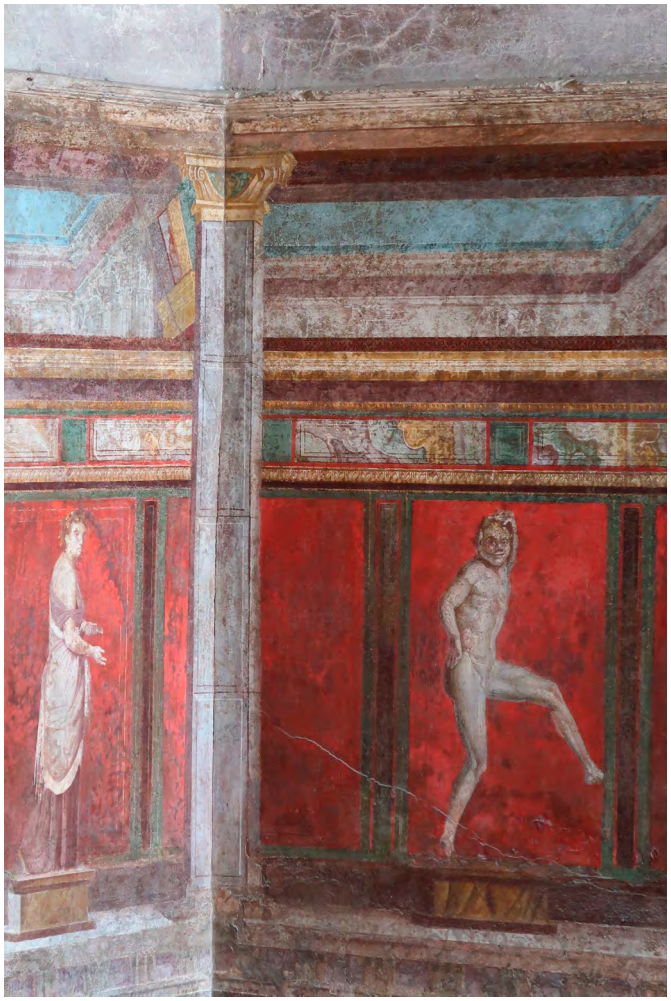

Figure 3.3: Leaping Satyr and Woman in Mantle. Room 4, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii. First century BCE. (Photo: author, with permission of the Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)

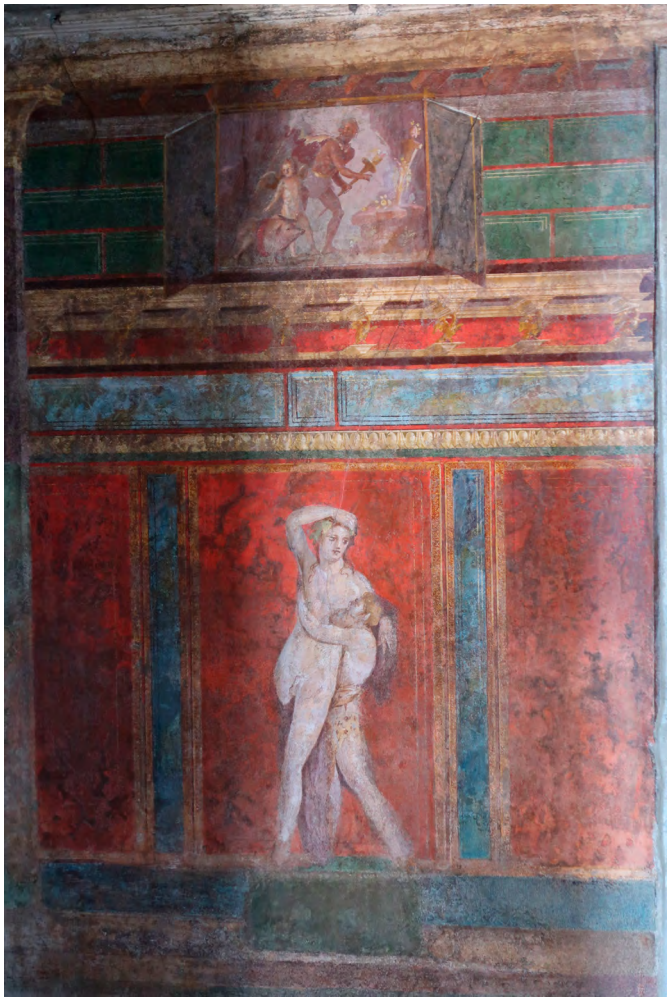

Figure 3.4: Dionysus and Satyr. Room 4, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii. First century BCE. Photo: author, with permission of the Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei.

drunkenness just how fleeting a moment the painting captures. Were it not for the satyr vigorously grasping Dionysus, we might imagine that he would simply slump to the floor.

What we initially appear to be confronted with, accordingly, is something very much like the scene in the Room of the Mysteries: a Dionysiac scene of celebration involving divine actors, including the god himself, who have been brought into the confines of the house and made present to its inhabitants through the virtuosic skill of the painters. And, as in the Room of the Mysteries, despite the artificiality of the conceit, the stark contrast between red background and light flesh only accentuates the painting's relief effect, blurring the border between the spaces of the viewer and the painting. But the situation is more complicated than that initial impression might lead us to think, for the figures are placed not just on the stage but on individual, elevated green bases. This pictorial device, already in use during the archaic period, is almost certainly meant to indicate that the figure standing on the base is a statue (Moormann, 1988, pp.224–5). What we must infer, accordingly, is that despite the depth of illusionism, and despite the vibrancy of the mural's affective appeal, we have not been made party to the epiphany of the god in private, such as in the series of so-called Ikarios reliefs, in which a drunken Dionysus and his ecstatic retinue are shown visiting the outdoor garden space of a man and woman reclining on a couch (Pollitt, 1986, p.197; Moreno, 1999; Ridgway, 2002, pp.236–9). Instead, we are just looking at still, immobile statues, mere matter.

The primary fiction of the mural is, therefore, the representation of representation, and not the godhead itself. But this fiction is riddled with deliberate contradictions, and rather than a kind of prim abeyance, a deferral from the challenges of making the divine present in favour of the mere make-believe of artistic fiction, it points instead toward the importance of both. For the figures are self-evidently not mere

statues. We would have to imagine, for the sake of logical consistency, that they are painted marble, a phenomenon for which we have an abundance of evidence, and which appears as an object of overt artistic reflection already in fourth-century BCE South Italian vase painting (de Cesare, 1997, pp.103–5; Marconi, 2011). Yet, we also cannot imagine that marble could actually be made to behave like this, that it could support the extreme ponderation and louche languor of the Dionysus and satyr, nor that it could hold the dancing satyr just in the moment before an explosive spring into the air. These are statues, in other words, which could not exist, or which more accurately could only exist in paint. What the painters of the room have managed to accomplish, accordingly, is to display their ability to both create and resolve paradox, to give the viewer both an epiphanic irruption of the divine into the everyday and an urbane, witty meta-commentary on art, mediality, and, of course, the superiority of painting over sculpture.

But we cannot stop there, for these statues are also not the only meta-pictures in the room. Resting on a cornice above the Dionysus and satyr group, with shutters open at oblique angles to the picture plane, is a small, rectangular, horizontally oriented panel painting of a type which was known in Hellenistic temple inventories as a *pinax tethurōmenos*, or a panel with doors. The painting is meant to exist within the same fictive spatial reality that contains the painted statues and their immediate environs (Vallois, 1913; Scheibler, 1998; Jones, 2014). The bravura of its open shutters and the precariousness with which it rests on the cornice make this point clear: it is a representation of a material object in space. But it is a material object which dissolves its own material surface into the stage for another fictive space, another imaginary world, in which a man and a winged boy lead a large pig to sacrifice at an altar set in front of a herm within a kind of grotto. This is not the only such panel in the room, and one above the woman in the mantle is even depicted from the side, such that we largely see the wings of its shutters and only a small portion of its painted surface, at an extremely oblique angle. But the sacrifice panel most clearly exposes the complexities of the game the room's decorators have played. It is both an object of representation and a representing object, both a part of the depicted world and an opening onto somewhere else. The explicit idea of a painting as a window is an early modern one (Alberti *De Pictura* 1.19), but the painters of the Villa of the Mysteries have made something like that claim, a point emphasised by the fact that elsewhere in the room, above the dancing satyr and mantled woman, the courses of green wall behind the sacrifice panel drop away, and the resulting view gives onto the upper portion of a portico and an expanse of blue sky, and thus the promise of a larger world beyond what we can strictly see. And it can be no accident that the scene depicted on the panel takes place in precisely the kind of outdoors, rustic environment in which we would expect all of the Dionysiac activities depicted in these two rooms to have occurred.

But the relationship between this Dionysiac environment, which is only a second-order fiction, and the world in which the statues have been erected remains unresolved, just as does the relationship between the first-order fiction of the mural as a whole and that of the real house. Where does religious experience happen, then? And when are these actions occurring? I would propose that they are here and there, then and now, and that this dual existence must have been a part of the appeal of the meta-pictorial conceit. I would further suggest that at least part of the purpose of the ecstatic worship of Dionysus was precisely to blur the boundaries between worlds that, on the surface, seem discrete and immiscible. Both framing devices and iconographic content, on this view, are working in tandem to emphasise the importance of both the aesthetic and affective in religious experience.

Underlying the play of epiphany, reality, and representation in the Villa of the Mysteries is a further game of medium and materiality. What kind of matter we see, in both absolute and representational terms, is at once acknowledged and denied. Such a game is taken to a further extreme in a painting recovered from the House of the Golden Bracelet in Pompeii (VI.17.42) (Fig. 3.5) (PPM 6.117–128; Moormann, 1998, pp.202–3; Ciardiello, 2006; Bergmann, 2014, pp.264–72; Carroll 2015, pp.540–1; Jones, 2019a, pp.156–7). The setting here is at once more immersive and more theatrical than the Villa of the Mysteries. The decoration of the room combines the broad colour fields and quasi-abstract patterning typical of mid-to-late first century CE painting with the depiction of a garden. A deep blue background places us distinctively elsewhere, yet, we are prevented from visually entering that elsewhere by a series of screening devices: a thicket of foliage punctuated by bright flowers and birds, and a series of human-made artifacts. A white marble fountain sits in the central foreground, bright white theatrical masks hang from decorated cords, and herms are topped with panels displaying figural scenes, both of which appear to be Dionysiac in subject – on the left a reclining woman, perhaps Ariadne on Naxos, and on the right a lounging maenad who has set aside her thyrsus and tympanum.

Where the frescoes of the Villa of the Mysteries, in

Figure 3.5: Garden painting, House of the Golden Bracelet, Pompeii (VI.17.42) First century CE. (Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY)

both the Room of the Mysteries and room 4, flirted with the idea of bringing the divine into the world of the human, here the pre-occupation hinges more overtly on liminality and borders. Herms traditionally serve as boundary markers, and masks, *personae*, articulate the point of transition between the living body of the actor, a real human with a mundane life, and the fictional life of the character. This liminality is overtly religious; we should not forget the traditional association of the theatre with Dionysus, and it is noteworthy that the rectangular format, stone material, framing, and mode of display of the panels resting on top of the herms seem to evoke votive plaques. The votive is a powerful device of material religion (Weinryb, 2015, 2018; Hughes, 2017). It announces that contact has been made, or that it is expected to be made, between human and divine, that what is at least nominally a border has been crossed, and that the human world has been materially changed in the process.

The subject matter of such plaques, moreover, often reinforces the effect of boundary crossing by picturing a meeting of mortal and immortal, one which could be dreamed or imagined but not actually grasped with the senses. We may think of the votive plaque of Archinos from the sanctuary of Amphiaros at Oropos (Fig. 3.6), which characterises the interaction between human and divine – in the form of healing – in multiple ways (Sineux, 2007; Platt, 2011, pp.44–8; Barrenechea, 2016, pp.268–70; Elsner, 2018, pp.11–13). On the far right of the plaque we witness a standing figure, presumably Archinos, dedicating a votive plaque of roughly the same proportions as the object as a whole. The other two vignettes in the relief further attest to the human-divine interaction in which the votive plays such a key part. The middle scene shows the process of incubation, with the devotee, again seemingly Archinos, asleep, visited by a sacred snake that licks or bites his arm. The leftmost scene, which proportionally takes up the greatest amount of space, shows the divine hero Amphiaros himself standing before Archinos, binding that same arm with a bandage. Yet, although the meeting between the devotee and the divinity occupies the foreground of the relief and is in some sense metaphysically primary, we cannot mistake that this direct encounter between deity and human is the dream representation of the physical event depicted in the background (regardless of the documentary veracity of that depiction). In this vein the liminal focus of the mural from the House of the Golden Bracelet is accentuated by the fact that the plaques seem to document moments on either side of the human-divine interaction: Ariadne on Naxos just before her discovery by Dionysus, and the exhausted maenad, whose ritual implements have been set aside and whose return to the world of everyday life has already begun.

Figure 3.6: Votive plaque of Archinos, from the sanctuary of Amphiaros at Oropos. Fourth century BCE. National Archaeological Museum, Athens 3369. (Photo: Vanni Archive / Art Resource, NY)

The theme of the liminal is accentuated through the mural's articulation of medium. None of the depicted objects are unambiguously one medium or another. The panels, evidently made of stone, would initially appear to be relief sculpture, but the fact that the bevels of their raised frames are alternately in shadow and highlight would suggest that the rest of their surfaces are otherwise flat. The actual figural scenes on the plaques, moreover, are executed in a highly painterly technique, and that they feature multiple indications of depth in space that would be difficult, although not impossible to achieve in stone. Likewise, the heads of the herms would seem, a priori, to be a hard, permanent material such as stone or perhaps bronze. But in practice these faces are the most lifelike and vivid aspects of the painting, and, taken in isolation, they would certainly be interpreted as belonging to living bodies (Stewart, 2003, p.40). The theatrical masks, finally, take this liminal mediality to an extreme, as they counterpoise the living material of vivid green wreath, auburn hair which seems as though it belonged to a real human head, and shining white stone with an exaggerated but immobile expression. Just as the painting as a whole marks out a space between human and divine, the materiality of the depicted objects is likewise present and absent, fixed but mutable. Part of the purpose of this painting, it seems, is to demonstrate the inherent fluidity of the gods' place in the material world.

At the House of the Epigrams in Pompeii (V.1.18), the dynamic of epiphany and fiction is set within a human history of artistic achievement through the combination of meta-pictorial device and literary gloss. The paintings from a small room at the back of the house (*exedra* y) have captured scholarly attention in particular thanks to the presence of accompanying Greek epigrams, some of which were composed by well-known poets and preserved in the Greek Anthology (PPM 3.539-573; Dilthey, 1876; Strocka, 1995; Bergmann, 2007; Prioux, 2008, pp.29–64; Squire, 2009, pp.176–89). The basic structure of the murals in *exedra* y combines a sense of immersion within a pavilion with a series of stage fronts punctuated by what appear to be large panel paintings embedded into the backing walls, what are called *pinakes embletoi* in Hellenistic temple inventories (Vallois, 1913; Jones, 2014). The overall effect is intensely immersive. In the centre of the west wall, to the left of the entrance, Pan and

Figure 3.7: East wall, Exedra y, House of the Epigrams, Pompeii (v.1.18). First century BCE. (Photo: author, with permission of the Ministero della Cultura Parco Archeologico di Pompei)

Eros wrestle in front of a circular *tholos* shrine while Aphrodite looks on. To the right of the central scene is another large, vertically oriented panel, which eschews any suggestion of depth in favour of a flat, monochrome background, against which a winged woman, perhaps Autumn, stands on a green base, holding fruits gathered in the folds of her robe in between her hands (Moorman, 1988, pp.162–4). The composition of the east wall of the room closely mirrors that of the west wall (Fig. 3.7). Two narrow monochromatic panels, each framing and displaying a single figure standing on a statue base, Psyche on the left and a priestess on the right, flank a central *aedicula* framing a vertically oriented, rectangular panel. In this instance the panel shows a figure standing next to a rustic shrine, topped by a gilded statue group of Dionysus and a panther.

On the north wall, all three panels shows multi-figure scenes, and all were accompanied by epigrams (Fig. 3.8). The left-most scene shows two men standing before a rustic shrine to Pan, which includes a statue of the god on a dedicatory column. In the middle panel of the wall, we see two men approach Homer, identified in an inscription, who is seated before a dedicatory column topped by a statue of Neptune. Finally, on the far right of wall is a fragment of a third panel. Here two figures lead a goat to sacrifice at an outdoor shrine to Dionysus; a second goat eats at the vine wrapped around a dedicatory column. The epigrams accompanying the paintings both complement and complicate their visual iconographies. As the three figures in the left panel offer dedications to a shrine of Pan, the text lays out the hoped-for reciprocity embedded in the votive act:

> Οἱ τρισσοί τοι ταῦτα τὰ δίκτυα θῆκαν ὅμαιμοι,
> ἀγρότα Πάν, ἄλλης ἄλλος ἀπ᾽ἀγρεσίς
> ὧν ἀπὸ μὲν πτανῶν Πίγρης τάδε, ταῦτα δὲ Δᾶμις
> τετραπόδων, Κλείτωρ δ᾽ὁ τρίτος εἰναλίων.
> ἀνθ᾽ὧν τῷ μὲν πέμπε διᾳέρος εὔστοχον ἄγρην,
> τῷ δὲ διὰ δρυμῶν, τῷ δὲ διᾳόνων.
>
> (CIL IV.3407.2)

> Huntsman Pan, the three brothers dedicated these nets to you, each from a different chase: Pigres placed these from fowl, Damis these from beast, and Clitor his from fish. In return, send them easily caught game, to the first through the air, to the second through the woods, and to the third through the shore-water.
>
> (trans. adapted from Paton, 1916, p.305).

Figure 3.8: North wall, Exedra y, House of the Epigrams, Pompeii (V.1.18). First century BCE. (Photo: author, with permission of the Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)

But the apparent directness of the scene and equivalence of art and text is in fact filtered through a screen of literary history, as this is not a spontaneous gloss on the painting but an epigram of Leonidis of Tarentum, which long pre-dated the decoration of the Pompeian house (*Anth. Pal.* 6.13). Not just records of rustic communion between hunter and god, both image and poem traffic in intertextual reference and urbane, sophisticated distance from the actions they depict. Elsewhere on the wall, the seriousness of the act of dedication is undercut by humour. The scene of goats being prepared for sacrifice is accompanied by an epigram by Evenos of Ascalona (*Anth. Pal.* 9.75), which gives voice to a grapevine addressing the goat eating it:

> Κἤν με φάγῃς ἐπὶ ῥίζαν, ὅμως ἔτι καρποφορήσω,
> ὅσσον ἐπισπεῖσαι σοί, τράγε, θυομένῳ.
>
> (CIL IV.3407.6)

> Though you may eat me to the root, goat, I will still bear fruit, enough to provide a libation for you when you are sacrificed.
>
> (trans. adapted from Paton 1917, p.39).

These paintings and their epigrams place us directly within the votive scenario. Perhaps more than any other aspect of Greco-Roman religion, the process of dedicating a votive acts a bridge. This bridge works in both directions. The votive memorialises a fleeting human moment by giving concrete physical form to an invisible wish or vow. But it also serves as a locus for the accretion of divinity itself, which, it is hoped, can be made to draw near by the physical object. The fact that *exedra* y in the House of the Epigrams features paintings of paintings, which themselves represent acts of dedication, points to the potential instability of the votive as a hinge between human and divine, material and immaterial world. And the ludicrousness of Evenos' epigram, moreover, which is marked not least by the petty glee of the vine's revenge, reminds us that not every religious interaction need have been characterised by total seriousness of purpose.

By way of conclusion, let us turn now to an example which is noteworthy perhaps less for the success of its execution than for the audacity of its conception. On the back wall of the garden of the House of the Marine Venus in Pompeii (II.3.3) is a tripartite painting, framed by a lattice fence and square pillars (Fig.

Figure 3.9: Back wall of garden, House of the Marine Venus, Pompeii (II.3.3). (Photo: author, with permission of the Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)

3.9) (PPM 3.137–143; Moormann, 1988, pp.159–60; Stewart, 2003, pp.38–40; Bergmann, 2008, pp.65–7; De Carolis et al., 2012; Carroll 2015, pp.541–2; Jones, 2019a, p.157). On the right and left are garden views, punctuated by both wading and song birds, which seems to expand the actual space of the garden into a lush, exotic elsewhere. The presence of two large marble objects – a fountain flowing with water on the right and a statue of Ares on the left, reinforces the point that this is a cultured, cultivated space. But the central scene belies this premise. It depicts a woman, nude but for jewellery, reclining on a conch shell in the midst of waves, attended to by a cupid on the right and a boy on a dolphin on the left. A maritime scene, this is assuredly not taking place in the same space as the garden views. Nor does it appear to be occurring at the same time, for what we are presented with is a distinctly mythological narrative: the birth of Aphrodite in the sea and her arrival on Cyprus, one of the most venerable traditions about the goddess, attested already in Hesiod's *Theogony* (173–206).

We are transported in time and space, accordingly, to a far-away land and a distant past. But there is another element involved here, for this scene also supplied the subject matter of the single most famous painting in the ancient world: Apelles' *Aphrodite Anadyomene*, which had been executed in the fourth century BCE, purchased by Augustus in the first century BCE, and subsequently stood in the Forum of Caesar until the reign of Nero, when it was determined to be in such disrepair that it was replaced with a picture by the otherwise unknown Dorotheus (Strab. 14.2.19; Ov. *Tr.* 2.521–528; Plin. *HN* 35.91). The pronounced red-and-white border of the scene in the House of the Marine Venus indicates that its origin as a discretely conceived panel painting (albeit likely on a smaller scale) has at least been acknowledged. But what do we imagine the relationship to the 'original' painting, so to speak, really was? Was this mural perhaps meant to serve as a kind of local substitute for a prestigious and authoritative artwork, something like what modernity would come to call a copy, and what antiquity seems to have called an *antigraphos* or *apographos* (Lucian Zeuxis 3; Plin. *HN* 35.125) (Bergmann, 1995; Jones, 2019a, pp.180–97; Jones, 2019b)? Would visitors to the house have actually mistaken this painting for the original, as Encolpius seems to do in the Petronius' *Satyricon* (83.1) when he identifies paintings which were highly unlikely to be products of the fourth century BCE as having been executed by Apelles and Zeuxis (Elsner, 2007, pp.177–99; Dufallo, 2013, pp.177–205)? The quality of the execution of the painting in the House of the Marine Venus, to be frank, is not especially distinguished, and a viewer expecting Apelles should have been sorely disappointed.

Perhaps we need not fixate on the original-copy dichotomy, however. References to images in Rome that melded the aesthetic, political, and religious were not beyond the scope of Pompeian painting. As Susan Walker (2008) has proposed, a painting from the House of Marcus Fabius Rufus (VII.16.22) may represent a statue of Cleopatra VII in the guise of Venus Genetrix that also once stood in Caesar's Forum. At the House of the Marine Venus, more significant is the directness of the garden painting's appeal to its viewer. Aphrodite, presented at life size or even larger scale, is made present at a moment of crowning glory which highlights her power and ineffability. The idea that we might be witness to the mythological event itself, however, is complicated by the statue of Ares. In

the conception of his body, he is more persuasive than his lover, who fails to capture his attention, and from whom he is separated by numerous compositional boundaries. Yet he is also clearly a statue, made from shining white stone, whose pigmented hair and cloak only highlight his fixed immobility. It is left entirely up to the viewer to think through the narrative relationships between the two figures that would lead to Aphrodite's husband, Hephaistos, capturing them *in flagrante* in an unbreakable net (Hom. *Od*. 8.267–369). But the painting also articulates for the viewer that such narratives are always only presented in artistic terms, whether in poetry, performance, or through the medium of statue or painting. In this humble garden space, Pompeii has been brought into contact with Cyprus and Olympus, and with several moments from a far-off, mythical past. It has also been put into touch with a literary and artistic tradition, stretching back nearly a millennium, which acts as the primary mediator between past and present, human and divine. Epiphany and fiction are given as equals, so to speak, and the painters of the mural have apparently refused to choose between the two. What this and the other murals discussed in this article attest to, ultimately, is the fact that religion's materiality and immateriality are often inextricable from one another, and that the dynamic tension of affect and aesthetics need not be resolved in favour or one or another.

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