

**Abstract for 13th conference of the
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Preferred panel: Panel 1 – 'Images, texts, reality'.

Paper title: 'Image, word and make-believe: The art and text of illusion in the Casa degli Epigrammi, Pompeii'

Abstract:

This paper proposes to re-examine the famous combination of text and image in the exedra of the Casa degli Epigrammi (Pompeii V.1.18), relating it to an overlooked element of the room's Second Style design: its make-believe *illusionism*. The five paintings of the room, each apparently accompanied by an epigrammatic inscription (*CIL* 4.3407), have received much attention since their excavation in 1875. Although scholarship has traditionally focussed on their supposed relation to a lost tradition of book illustration (e.g. Schefold p.46: 'es muß eine alte Tradition von Bilderfolgen mit Epigrammen gegeben haben, wie man längst gesehen hat'; compare also Dilthey, Gigante, Leach, Rossi), more recent critics have exposed the playful interactions between the room's visual and verbal media (cf. Strocka, Bergmann). As Bergmann in particular has demonstrated the combination of art and text in this shared physical space prompted questions about the priority of words and picture – about whether we should privilege visual or verbal programmes in making sense of this assemblage as viewers-cum-readers.

What has not received due attention, though, is the way in which these questions were literally framed by the mural framework of the room's Second Style decoration. The room's five panel-paintings, or *pinakes*, have often been viewed independently from their original context – within make-believe painted *aediculae*, and surrounded by virtuoso garlands, metal baskets of fruits, and lively (paintings of) statues. Not only did the room thus challenge viewer-readers to consider which medium is collectively the more *true* – the visual image or the verbal epigram; I argue that it also projected such questions onto a much larger performative stage. To apply Tom Mitchell's terms, the exedra's 'suturing' of words and images in a combined visual field was itself sutured by the room's complex suturing of nature and artifice, reality and representation, and authenticity and illusion. If viewers were thus asked to plot the interstices between pictorial and linguistic signification on the one hand, and nature and convention on the other, they were also encouraged to contemplate the *intersection* between these two axes – to speculate not only on the relative value, but also on the relative arbitrariness, of visual and verbal media at large...

Selective bibliography:

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