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**A DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE OF ROMAN PAINTINGS FROM ANCIENT CORINTH, GREECE:  
PERIOD STYLES AND REGIONAL TRADITIONS\***

(Taf. LXVI–LXVII, Abb. 1–9)

**Abstract**

Le site de Corinthe abrite une vaste quantité de peintures romaines dont la chronologie est certaine. Datées entre le premier et le quatrième siècle de notre ère, ces peintures ornaient des bâtiments publics, domestiques et funéraires situés dans la ville et aux alentours. Une étude de l'ensemble révèle une évolution distincte. Les peintures corinthiennes du premier siècle reflètent l'emploi des techniques et de l'iconographie italique après sa fondation en tant que *Corinthiensis Colonia Laus Iulia* en 44 avant J.-C. Les conventions italiques indiquent les liens artistiques étroits entre Corinthe et l'ouest et suggèrent l'activité d'artisans venus d'Italie dans la ville durant cette période.

Etonnamment, après le début du deuxième siècle, les peintures corinthiennes subissent des changements radicaux indiquant une cessation de liens artistiques directs avec l'ouest, une situation qui semble se maintenir jusqu'au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle. Certains aspects spécifiques de technique et de matériaux dans les peintures plus tardives à Corinthe manifestent des affinités avec la peinture grecque hellénistique antérieure: il y a donc un changement dans les liens artistiques avec les ateliers locaux de la Méditerranée au II<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C.

Du point esthétique, cependant, les peintures les plus récentes de Corinthe, des II<sup>e</sup> et III<sup>e</sup> siècles, possèdent de profondes affinités stylistiques et iconographiques avec la peinture italique antérieure. En fait, certaines peintures de Corinthe paraissent classiques ou traditionnelles lorsqu'on les compare aux groupes de peintures contemporaines provenant de sites romains à la fois dans l'ouest italique et en Méditerranée orientale. La popularité des styles classiques est également évidente dans les ensembles sculpturaux de Corinthe à la même période. Considérées dans leur ensemble, les particularités visuelles des peintures plus récentes et des sculptures de Corinthe reflètent les goûts des clients locaux et révèlent les compétences acquises des artisans romains actifs à Corinthe.

Cette communication présente deux phases de la peinture romaine à Corinthe: la plus ancienne correspond stylistiquement et chronologiquement à la peinture Pompéienne. Les exemples plus récents à la période tardive, révèlent une préférence durable pour les formes romaines rendues dans un style naturaliste et relient, d'un point de vue artistique, Corinthe à d'autres grandes métropoles d'Asie Mineure à cette époque.

Corinth preserves a large corpus of securely dated paintings that once decorated civic, domestic, sacred and funerary structures in and around the Roman city (Abb. 1). The paintings range in date from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD and their representations draw from a standard Graeco-Roman visual reperto-

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ry, including large-scale figural, floral, geometric and architectural motifs within framed ensembles<sup>1</sup>. For instance, masonry-style paintings covered the walls in the eastern rooms of the South Stoa, dating to the latter 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, and large-scale venatorial scenes encircled the *cavea* wall of the Roman Theater in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD<sup>2</sup>.

The large size of the corpus as well as its long chronological span presents an unparalleled opportunity to observe how painting practices change over time in a Roman provincial capital in the central Mediterranean. Drawing from an intensive visual and contextual study of the paintings along with chemical analyses of examples from specific buildings, this paper offers a diachronic perspective of Roman painting in Corinth<sup>3</sup>. This perspective reveals a complex pattern in painting practices that demonstrates shifting artistic influences and interchange during these centuries.

The early 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinthian paintings demonstrate a complete adoption of Italic painting techniques and iconography following its founding as *Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthiensis* in 44 BC. These Italic traits are strikingly different from those preserved in earlier Hellenic painting at Corinth. Paintings from Classical Greek and Hellenistic buildings at Corinth (to the extent that we can tell at present) are executed on thin and hard mortar layers, whereas Roman paintings employ thick layers, in which the penultimate layer usually contains transparent aggregates, such as quartz or marble flakes<sup>4</sup>. The latter plaster technology is associated with fresco (wet) painting practice and was known in the pre-Roman Mediterranean, but was only widely employed in late Hellenistic Delos and in late Republican Campania and Rome<sup>5</sup>. It was not used at Corinth, however, until the city became a Roman colony<sup>6</sup>.

Stylistically and iconographically, the early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD paintings from Corinth also show close affinities with Italic painting. Both C. WILLIAMS and L. GADBERRY have discussed stylistic connections between paintings from the series of buildings in the area to the east of the Theater and examples in Campania<sup>7</sup> (Abb. 1). One example of many is an early 1<sup>st</sup> century architectural scheme with a Corinthian capital, an elaborate epistyle and a painted egg-and-dart moulding (Abb. 2). The capital, which is one of five preserved, is executed in perspective on a scarlet red ground; the white acanthus leaves are set against a bright-blue *kalathos*, on which they cast black shadows<sup>8</sup>. As L. GADBERRY has noted, the capital displays affinities with those preserved in Campanian paintings, in particular late Second Style paintings from Boscoreale<sup>9</sup>. Despite the more modest rendering of the column and capital from the area east of the Theater, close stylistic affinities between the Corinthian scheme and the example from Boscoreale suggest a direct artistic connection between Campania and Corinth in the early first century<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Corinthian wall paintings in civic and religious buildings. Roman Forum area: Julian Basilica, Weinberg 1960, 31–57. 80 f.; South Stoa, Broneer 1954, 100. 134 f.; Southeast Building, Meggiolaro *et al.* 1995; 1997; Pappalardo 2000; Central Shops, Scranton 1951, 114; Williams – Zervos 1986, 37; Peirene Fountain, Duell 1964, 110–115; Robinson 2001, 18–26, Robinson 2011, 601–615; *Odeum*, Broneer 1932, 62 f.; Theater, Stillwell 1952, 87–98 (venatorial scenes), Williams – Zervos 1984, 97. 104–106 (erotes frieze and associated schemes), Williams – Zervos 1986, 150 f.; Williams – Zervos 1988, 112 f.; Sturgeon 2004 (dating of phases); East of the Theater, Williams – Zervos 1984, 104–107; Williams – Zervos 1986, 139 f. 145 f. 150 f. 156. 158; Williams – Zervos 1988, 112 f. 118 f. 123. 129; Williams – Zervos 1989, 13–19; Williams 2005, 236–242; Gadbery 1993; Hykin 1993. North of the city: Fountain of the Lamps, Wiseman 1972, 13. 17; Corinthian wall paintings in domestic structures: Roman Villa at Kokkinovrysi (Shear Villa), Shear 1930; Panayia Field *Domus*, Sanders 1999, Stirling 2008, Lepinski 2008. Painted Tombs: Painted Tomb, Robinson 1963, 77–80; Robinson 1965, 293 fig. 20; Tomb with Painted Walls: Shear 1931, 424–441; Charitonidis tomb, Charitonidis 1966, 122; Pallas tomb, Pallas 1969, 121–134; Pallas 1975, 1–19.

<sup>2</sup> Broneer 1954, 100. 134 f.; Stillwell 1952, 87–98.

<sup>3</sup> Lepinski 2008; Lepinski – Brekoulaki 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Pappalardo 2000, 351 footnote 12; Strocka 2007, 304 footnote 3. See also Klinkert 1957, 124; Barbet – Allag 1972, 969–970; Mora *et al.* 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Kakoulli 2009, 27–34.

<sup>6</sup> Corinth seems not to have participated within the same artistic and cultural networks as Athens and Delos in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

<sup>7</sup> Gadbery 1993, 51 f.; Williams – Zervos 1988, 123.

<sup>8</sup> The paintings were found in fill deposits in and around the north-south street to the east of the Theater. Williams – Zervos 1988, 123 pl. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Gadbery 1993, 52 fig. 3. In particular those from the west and east walls of *cubiculum* M in the Villa of *P. Fannius Synistor*. Color illustration in Anderson 1987 fig. 27; Bergmann 2010 fig. 55–56.

<sup>10</sup> Gadbery 1993, 52 f.

Two additional Corinthian schemes dating to the early 1<sup>st</sup> century further illustrate close artistic links to Italic workshops. The first example depicts a pair of swimming dolphins, again from the area east of the Theater, that shows close compositional and stylistic affinities with Campanian examples<sup>11</sup> (Abb. 3). A second scheme consists of a decorative frieze with alternating rosettes and palmettes on a yellow-ochre band; the frieze originally decorated an early 1<sup>st</sup> century house in Panayia Field at Corinth<sup>12</sup> (Abb. 4). It is associated with a number of motifs including framed lotus blossoms, pendant rosettes, a water bird and encrusted columns. Comparable friezes with variations of alternating palmettes, lotus blossoms, and rosettes are common in Third Pompeian Style ensembles in Campania and elsewhere, particularly in rooms that contain Egyptianizing themes<sup>13</sup>. Many of these schemes date to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC<sup>14</sup>. The Corinthian scheme was painted at least fifteen years later; this temporal discrepancy illustrates a measured rate of diffusion for the transference of the Italic motifs to Corinth. Similar patterns in the dispersion of practices and the adoption of Italic motifs in paintings are apparent in other provinces, in particular in Gaul, where Second and Third Pompeian style schemes were integrated into paintings soon after their wide application in Campania and Rome<sup>15</sup>.

The nature of this diffusion is not completely understood, but in general the movement of artisans (and with them pattern books, materials, and tools) is undoubtedly related to the expansion of colonial cities in the first part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and the extensive commissions that likely resulted from building programs. The clear artistic connections between Corinth and Italy certainly suggest the presence of Italian painters (or painters trained in Italy) in the city during this time, a situation that is further supported by the existence of Italian masons at Corinth in the first generations following its foundation as a Roman colony<sup>16</sup>. The relationship between 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinthian paintings and the significantly earlier Campanian examples underscores the importance of archaeological data in the dating of Roman paintings and cautions against the easy application of dates to provincial paintings on the single basis of stylistic or compositional similarities to those from Campania. In part, the wide-applicability of Third Pompeian Style motifs fostered their long endurance in provincial paintings, and in the case of Corinth, long-lived styles were also likely sustained by workshops set up by Italian-trained painters who relocated to Corinth (or its proximity) and catered to its community of patrons that grew in size and wealth during the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD painting practices change at Corinth; the later 1<sup>st</sup> century and early 2<sup>nd</sup> century paintings show strikingly different technical and material characteristics from those employed in the earlier 1<sup>st</sup> century paintings. The most recognizable change is found in mortar techniques. The new technique employs a very thin final layer of plaster (*intonaco*) on which the pigments have been applied in a *secco* or *tempera* technique. Ongoing chemical analyses of the paintings (with chromatography) have distinguished binders, but have yet to identify specific proteins such as egg or gum arabic<sup>17</sup>.

There is also a change in pigment-use at this time, which is particularly identifiable in the use of the vibrant and less-accessible pigments such as cinnabar and Egyptian blue. Both pigments are used liberally as backgrounds in earlier 1<sup>st</sup> century paintings but were employed only for details in later representations. Economic factors may have dictated the change in mortar techniques at Corinth and interrupted the trade of specific pigments. Certainly thinner layers of plaster require fewer materials and less preparation time, although

<sup>11</sup> Williams – Zervos 1988, 118 pl. 38b footnote 24. One of many such schemes is from *oecus* 62 in the Casa di Rufo at Pompeii (Aoyagi – Pappalardo 2006, 383). I wish to thank CH. WILLIAMS for bringing the similarities between these figures to my attention.

<sup>12</sup> The paintings were found in fill deposits beneath the floors of the third century *Domus* in Panayia Field and are associated with *in situ* paintings preserved on a leveled wall beneath Room A11.

<sup>13</sup> For other similar friezes see Ehrhardt 1987, Taf. 108–118 and especially those from Casa del Bell' Impluvio (I 9, 1) 74–76. Taf. 166–187. Paintings from the Imperial Villa at Boscotrecase, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, preserves vivid examples. See Blanckenhagen – Alexander 1990, pl. 6–7 for a similar entablature frieze, pl. 65.6 for a stylized palmette on bright green ground, and pl. 21 for a comparable frieze on the north wall of room 16.

<sup>14</sup> The paintings from Boscotrecase are dated to the beginning of the last decade of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. Blanckenhagen – Alexander 1990, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Barbet 1982, 54; Barbet 1983, 164 f.; Barbet 1987. As A. BARBET'S work shows, however, different regions and cities reveal different patterns of adoptions and integration of Italian painting practices and visual influence.

<sup>16</sup> Shoe 1964, 300–303; Millis 2010 for consideration of other crafts in the early Roman colony at Corinth.

<sup>17</sup> Lepinski – Brekoulaki 2010.

this mortar technique may also result from the more common use of mud brick in walls at Corinth in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century<sup>18</sup>. In terms of pigments, similar patterns to those at Corinth are apparent in the use of cinnabar in contemporary paintings in Italy and Gaul. In her study of paintings in Gaul, A. BARBET associates the limited use of cinnabar in later 1<sup>st</sup> century paintings as an indicator of Italian practice. She suggests that the decline in the use of cinnabar is due to fluctuations in commercial and trade patterns at this time<sup>19</sup>.

The use of madder lake and lead white as pigments in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century paintings further illustrates shifting painting practices at Corinth. Lead white is particularly prevalent in a series of figural paintings from Building 7 in the area east of the Theater as seen in the background of an *Eros* from the series<sup>20</sup> (Abb. 5). The use of these two pigments are significant because both madder lake and lead white are common in Greek Hellenistic painting tradition (both in mural paintings and grave *stelae*) but are not found in the early Roman paintings at Corinth<sup>21</sup>. These pigments are not compatible with fresco painting techniques, which necessitates the application of multiple layers of lime plaster and therefore their use is inextricably linked with the change in plaster<sup>22</sup>. These technical changes demonstrate that Corinthian artistic relations likely shifted or expanded to local and/or regional centers in Roman Greece (or in the eastern Mediterranean at large) after the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, thereby integrating facets of earlier Hellenistic painting traditions into current painting practices; whether this shift reflects economic and/or political circumstances or was a result of other factors awaits further research.

While there is a break in technical practices in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD at Corinth, aesthetically, the later paintings maintain stylistic and compositional affinities with western types. As is evident in the adeptly painted *Eros*, Corinthian workshops are active and Corinthian patrons continue to invest in extensive decorative programs during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. Later figural paintings from a 3<sup>rd</sup> century *Domus* in Panayia Field also show close stylistic and compositional similarities with Roman types (Abb. 6). Two painted Victories originally stood on the northern wall of Room A12 and were part of an extensive painted program, which includes a maenad as well as floral and vegetal decorative schemes.

The Victories, which are approximately one-third life size, are painted in an expressive, quick and deft manner; each carries a palm frond and a wreath<sup>23</sup>. In general their pose and other aspects, such as their corporality and the movement of their garments, are reminiscent of earlier painted Victories in Campania and Rome. Certain visual characteristics, however, such as their round ‘Severan’ eyes and associated illusionistic cornices place them alongside contemporary later 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century paintings in Rome and Campania<sup>24</sup>. Nonetheless, when compared to contemporary painted Victories from sites throughout the Roman world, they appear strikingly classicizing or traditional<sup>25</sup>. The Corinthian Victories, instead, find close affinities with contemporary Roman sculptures from Corinth.

For example, a sculpted Victory that originally decorated the South Basilica in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD closely resembles the painted Victory in terms of general stance, with her outstretched arms, and garments<sup>26</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The walls of the *Domus* in Panayia Field and the upper walls in Buildings 5 and 7 in the area east of the Theater were constructed of mud brick pisé rather than stone masonry and the lower walls of these buildings in the area of the Theater were constructed of *poros* blocks and *opus africanum* brickwork. Gadbery 1993, 54; Williams – Zervos 1984, 107.

<sup>19</sup> Barbet 1990, 260. See also R. GEE in this volume.

<sup>20</sup> Lepinski – Brekoulaki 2010. Portable XRF analysis of the figure identified both calcium carbonate white and lead white, which was used in substrate and mixed with other pigments. The figural program in Building 7 is dated to around or slightly after 100 AD. Williams 2005, 237 and personal communication. C. K. WILLIAMS’ publication of these paintings is forthcoming.

<sup>21</sup> Lepinski – Brekoulaki 2010; Kakoulli 2009, 44. 80 (see also bibliography therein).

<sup>22</sup> Kakoulli 2009, 44. Plin, HN 35, 49.

<sup>23</sup> The Victory painted on a red ground is illustrated here. The second Victory is rendered on yellow ground. Sanders 2005 fig. 16.3.

<sup>24</sup> For one example of many in Rome see the paintings in the building under S. Crisogono (Piazza Sonnino), now in the Musei Comunali, De Vos 67, 1, 2. See also Mielsch 2001, Abb. 128 and footnote 6 for paintings in the *Cryptoporticus* in the Via Friuli in Rome.

<sup>25</sup> Rome: Victory from room 28 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century villa beneath S. Sebastiano, Mielsch 2001, Abb. 110; Wirth 1934, 89–91 Taf. 19–20; Painted Victories from Room E in the catacomb of Via Latina, Ferrua 1960, 59 tav. 45. Spain: Mérida (Badajoz) Victory from House of the *Mitraeum*, Barbet 1984, 72. North Africa: Dar Buc, Ammèra, Roman villa, Augrigemma 1962, tav. 43. Syria: Dura Europos from Bath, Kohlmeyer – Strommenger 1982, no. 194.

<sup>26</sup> This sculpture is one of a pair that decorated the South Basilica (S1932). Broneer 1935, 68 pl. 20c; Weinberg 1960, 73 f. 76 pl. 46.1; Ridgway 1981, 435 footnote 57.

(Abb. 8). Like the painted Victories, the sculpted version wears a high-girted *chiton* that covers her breasts and that exposes her right leg as she moves forward<sup>27</sup>. While it cannot be securely determined that the paintings were modeled after large-scale sculpture (for small-scale media like lamps and coins may have also served as sources of visual influence) it is compelling to posit that the artisan and/or homeowner of the *Domus* in Panayia Field found inspiration from the city's visual landscape.

In light of the topic of this colloquium 'Ancient Painting between Local Style and Period Style', a diachronic perspective of the technical and aesthetic characteristics of Corinthian paintings demonstrates a dynamic pattern of artistic influences from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. In summary, Corinth's painting practices and artistic tastes follow Italic trends following its foundation as a colony in 44 BC; Campanian period-styles are represented in Corinthian painting at least a decade later than their popularity in the cities around the bay of Naples. Corinth, which was a thriving mercantile center and the provincial capital of Achaia, maintained this western cultural link for more than a century, throughout a period of intense growth, both in terms of city-building (architecturally and politically) and economic interaction. In the late 1<sup>st</sup> century, changes in painting techniques and material-use show a break, technically, from western practices and a connection with local (and/or regional) Hellenic traditions. Corinthian painters remained active and skilful through at least the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and classicizing aspects in the paintings, both in terms of style and composition, which are likely drawn from local monuments or widely circulating visual types, characterize Corinth's regional (or local) style in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD.

While these characteristics distinguish Corinthian painting from most contemporary examples, Corinth's traditional tastes are not completely unique; similar continuities in classicizing styles are also seen in the large urban centers of Ephesus and Zeugma, as well as Aphrodisias, where classicizing artistic traits are preserved well into the 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>28</sup>. This shared aesthetic connects Corinth to an Eastern Mediterranean artistic and cultural network in these centuries. One final scheme illustrates the extent of these connections. A vertical vegetal motif (or stylized *candelabra*) that decorated the medial zone separating panels in Room A11 in the *Domus* finds very close parallels with contemporary schemes in Ephesus and Zeugma (Abb. 9). The schemes share general compositional characteristics, such as the dark (black or dark green) vegetal motif in the intermediary panel on a white ground with corresponding black, red and green framing lines<sup>29</sup>. The variation of stylistic execution among these examples, however, which is seen even in the contemporary schemes from different houses at Zeugma, shows a diversity of artistic conception that is a hallmark of later Roman painting<sup>30</sup>. These schemes draw from a widespread decorative type, well evidenced in earlier Roman paintings both in Italy and the provinces, but they are painted according to local tastes by local artisans and workshops<sup>31</sup>. The overall compositional similarities between the schemes demonstrate both the longevity of certain visual schemes and the common visual culture shared by metropolitan centers in the later middle imperial Mediterranean. These connections do not establish "direct" artistic interaction between painters in these regions in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, although continued research into other modes of cultural interaction(s), such as political and economic interchange, will further elucidate such questions.

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<sup>27</sup> Another Victory was found in the western part of the Forum (S2073). Scranton 1951, 68 f. pl. 25 1, 2; Stillwell 1936, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Smith – Roueché 1996; Smith 2006.

<sup>29</sup> For vegetal *candelabra* in Hanghaus 2 at Ephesus in both the third and fourth building phases see Zimmermann 2002, Abb. 23–26; Zimmermann 2005, Taf. 85.14, 85.12, 85.6 and 85.8 (phase II) 86.4, 86.6, 87.7 (phase IV). These building phases are dated to the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the second quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD.

<sup>30</sup> Barbet 2005, 110–119. 144–157. The houses date to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

<sup>31</sup> The evolution of the *candelabrum* motif from representations of metal work in first-century paintings to abstract floral and vegetal motifs in the second century has been identified within the paintings from Gaul. Ellis 2000, 121 f. used mid-2<sup>nd</sup>-century paintings from La Croisille-sur-Briance as examples of this phenomenon. See also Dumasy-Mathieu – Bucur 1991, 100–176.

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## Abbildungen

- Abb. 1: Corinth. Plan of the Roman Forum. (Corinth Excavations)  
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