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Stylistic Changes of Pompeian Floor Mosaics

Sharon Wussow
College of DuPage

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by Sharon Wussow

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The Assignment: Write an 8-to-10 page, fully cited, MLA format research paper about an art history topic of your choice from the Ancient through Medieval time periods, and from the Western region.

This analysis explores the reasons underlying the stylistic changes in Pompeian floor mosaics produced from the second century B.C. through the first century A.D. During this time the style progressed from artistically simplistic to exquisitely complex to modestly detailed. The change from highly complex to less detailed at first seems to be a step backwards because of its diminished intricacy. This examination will show that the latter changes in the style of Pompeian floor mosaics may be attributed to the efforts of mosaicists to make the people within the room at ease by avoiding unnaturally placed illusionistic images, and by minimizing competing wall and floor décor.

Excavation of Pompeii has been going on for more than 250 years. The ancient city, which was buried by approximately twelve feet of ash and pumice from the eruption of the volcano Vesuvius in A.D. 79 (Stewart 75), remained hidden for nearly seventeen centuries before haphazard exploration began in 1748. In the 1860s, a systematic effort of excavation was instituted. Archeologists began to make casts of the eruption's victims, introduced a numbering system for identifying buildings, and adopted the practice of conserving finds in place (Ward-Perkins and Claridge 11). Two thirds of the buried city has been excavated, and work is still in progress. Early in the process, excavators removed objects as they were unearthed and moved them to museums for display. Now archaeologists strive to preserve their findings in their original resting places in order to present a more accurate depiction of life in Pompeii (Skurdenis 62). Fortunately, as items were removed, the excavators took notes so that today we can reconstruct the original arrangement (L'Orange and Nordhagen 36).

Various methods of construction were used on the floor mosaics of Pompeii. The means of decorating a floor date back to the fifth century B.C., and has its roots in Greece, where many pebble mosaics have been preserved. In these earliest floor mosaics, Turner explains that uncut pebbles were arranged with some detail in interlocking and overlapping figures (159). This led to the early method of mosaic construction evident in Pompeii known as *opus signinum*, defined by Joyce as "a cement embellished with designs picked out in white marble tesserae" (253). Ling's definition, "mortar containing an aggregate of crushed terracotta," emphasizes the substrate rather than the design (139). In both cases, the method lacks the precision that becomes apparent in later techniques. A more exacting method of mosaic construction also found in the earliest mosaics is *opus sectile*, a term which Ling uses to describe mosaics in which the "surface decoration [is] obtained by cutting pieces of stone to special geometric or other shapes" (139). This method typically fits the pieces of stone closer together than in *opus signinum*. *Opus tessellatum* is a term used to describe any floor mosaic made from tesserae (Ling 7), the cubes of stone, terra cotta or marble embedded in the cement or mortar (Ling 139). When the tesserae are

small and closely packed, they produce complex and subtle effects through juxtapositioning of colors that merge when viewed from a distance, much as the mixing of pigment in a painting (Ling 10). When the tesserae undulate around figures in a worm-like fashion, particularly in highly detailed mosaics such as emblemata, the method is known as *opus vermiculatum* (Ling 25).

The surviving Pompeian floor mosaics provide a wealth of information about their construction methods. Turner explains that we rely primarily on the surviving examples of mosaics for evidence of construction methods with backing from some written and epigraphic records. Based on this information, she states that "It is generally believed that ancient floor mosaics were produced *in situ*" (154). Turner later allows for the exception of "emblemata, which are inset panels of images or ornamental motifs made of fine, precisely set tesserae that could be produced in another location. Emblemata were normally preset on trays of stone or terracotta, which were then embedded in the setting-bed" (155). Ling concurs with Turner, adding that there is both literary and archaeological evidence that emblemata were manufactured for export (14).

The styles of Pompeian floor mosaics progressed through distinct phases during their relatively short history. The earliest examples are geometric designs of white marble tesserae inlaid in mortar. According to Joyce, the earliest mosaics of Pompeii are of *opus signinum* with geometric designs of trellis and cross-star, and of *opus sectile* in which the pavements are of irregularly cut stones. Joyce dates these pavements to the third century B.C. by associating them with "distinctive and datable styles of building construction and wall decoration" (253-4).

Geometric patterns play a major role in Pompeii's floor mosaics. An early style that remains in use throughout Pompeii's history is the use of one or more geometric patterns of white and black tesserae set in cement mixed with bits of terracotta. The simplest design is an arrangement of rows covering the entire floor (Figure 1), or surrounding a section with a different pattern (Figure 2). Nearly as common is the meander pattern, which appears both as a border (Figure 2) or as a central panel (Figure 3), and the trellis, which is used to cover the whole floor or the center section (Figure 3). Less frequently used is the imbrication pattern (Figure 2). These examples demonstrate that the floor mosaics use a limited set of geometric patterns that are combined in a great variety of ways. Occasionally mosaicists included foliate motifs such as leaves, vines, and palmettes, with geometric patterns (Joyce 254-5).

The period of First Style wall decoration was concurrent with the production of many fine emblemata (singular, emblema). These delicate panels, often prefabricated on trays of marble or terracotta, were installed in the middle of mosaic floors and surrounded with designs made from coarser material. Highly skilled craftsmen produced sophisticated illusionistic images using tesserae sometimes as fine as a millimeter in width (Stewart 94). The color scheme of basic hues of red, yellow, black and white was dictated by the natural colors of the material (Ling 29). These panels could be constructed in a workshop and even exported. An example of an emblema which was imported into Pompeii from the East, judging from the signature of Dioscurides of Samos, an island in the eastern Aegean, is the panel depicting a scene from a comedy by the Athenian playwright Menander (Figure 4) (Ling 15). At times emblemata were reused; they were removed from one mosaic pavement and installed in another, sometimes in a different house. Ward-Perkins gives an example of this practice in the mosaic portrait of a woman. It was found in the middle of a colorful *opus sectile* pavement made shortly before the eruption of Vesuvius, but the emblema is believed to have been made near the end of the first century B.C. (Figure 5) (138).

As styles changed, mosaicists became more skillful in producing illusionistic pavements. One of the most spectacular examples of detailed pictorial mosaics, dating to the late second century B.C., is the pavement known as the Alexander Mosaic from the exedra of the House of the Faun, a private residence rivaling some palaces in size (Figures 6, 7, and 8). This mosaic coupled with the size of the patron's home left no question about the affluence of the homeowner, because as Stewart points out, wealth in that day was exhibited not only by the size of houses, but also by the skill required to execute the mosaics within the houses (97). This expansive image measuring about 3.13 x 5.82 meters represents the battle between Alexander the Great and the Persian king Darius III (de Grummond 33). The style and content of the scene lead most scholars to conclude that the mosaic is a copy of a painting (Stewart 94). The mosaicists extensively used the technique of *opus vermiculatum* to achieve a high level of illusionism including the use of remarkable foreshortening and intricate spatial recession (Turner 160). Some argue that the mosaic may have been imported from the East as were the Menander emblemata (Ling 32).

The art of mosaics sustained its pinnacle of intricate emblemata through the first century B.C., while gradually shifting to a style of less detail. By the beginning of the first century B.C. mosaicists had long demonstrated superior ability in varied coloring, modeling, perspective and foreshortening by intricate arrangements of tiny tesserae. Yet, for all the beauty of these highly detailed pavements, there were dissatisfactions associated with them. The placement of a picture on the floor caused distortion because of the angle from which people viewed the image. Also, from most locations within a room, the picture was not seen in an upright orientation. In response to these challenges, mosaicists began an aesthetic shift away from the use of illusionistic emblemata. They adopted the use of central abstract images or all-over patterns such as perspectival cubes in three colors, which could be achieved by the use of tesserae or with larger pieces using the *opus sectile* method, as was the case in a pavement in the House of the Faun (Figure 9) (Ling 32-33).

As floor decoration moved away from the use of colorful figures and began to use black figures on a white background and monochrome patterns, some pavements were produced that seemed to straddle the styles. A mosaic from the third quarter of the first century B.C. which represents this transitional stage is a pavement in the bath suite of the House of the Menander at Pompeii. This mosaic has both black and colored figures: the people are executed as black silhouettes, and the sea creatures and plant incorporate some red and grey. The images are surrounded by borders of the wave-crest and meander patterns (Figure 10). The placing of the figures on a white background rather than in an illusionistic landscape, plus the change of orientation among figures, achieved the desired effect of allowing the viewer to see the images as mere floor decoration (Ling 39-41). Another example of a mosaic which straddles styles is a pavement that incorporated the now less popular emblema with the newly emerging geometric pattern of a labyrinth. This mosaic from the House of the Labyrinth (so named because of the mosaic unearthed there) dates to the early first century B.C. (Figure 11) (Ling 38-39).

Black figures and patterns became the prominent style in the next century. A theme that was repeatedly used in floor decoration after emblemata fell out of favor was a fierce guard dog worked in black and white that was usually placed in the vestibule of a house (Figures 12 and 13) (Ling 38-39). L'Orange and Nordhagen point out that this technique is sometimes called 'black-figured', a term used in the study of Greek vases, here used to describe black figures on a white background (38). Joyce explains that some of the new two-dimensional black and white patterns were translations of designs that were popular in the polychrome mosaics. An example

is a large central panel of a pattern of intersecting circles (Figure 14) (261). These monochrome floors were undoubtedly less expensive to make since they used larger tesserae and were greatly simplified by their basic color scheme. Furthermore, mosaicists developed a method for creating larger portions of mosaics, such as arms and legs of figures, in their workshops, which allowed greater prefabrication off site (L'Orange and Nordhagen 38).

To summarize the chronology of changes in Pompeian floor mosaics, they began as pieces of marble and stone pressed into mortar to create a pattern. In these earliest decorative pavements, much of the mortar remained exposed. This progressed to more advanced geometric patterns of black and white tesserae that covered the surface of the mortar. Later, mosaicists used illusionistic panels in the center of the floors surrounded by polychrome or monochrome geometric patterns. In some notable cases, the illusionistic area was made so large as to cover the whole floor. Gradually, floor decoration became more conservative, using all-over lozenge or geometric patterns of various colors. Lastly, floors returned to black and white designs, this time incorporating figures in the central area of the floor and bordering the floor with geometric patterns. The question at hand is why the styles changed in the way they did. There are numerous opinions on this issue.

Ling sees the change in floor styles as a reaction to the awkwardness of viewing an illusionistic image on a pavement coupled with the shift to placing illusionistic pictures on the walls. He observes that by the beginning of the first century B.C., at a time when walls were decorated in the First Style with plaster worked in blocks to resemble marble, tessera mosaics had progressed as far as possible in the replication of illusionistic pictures. Mosaicists had achieved "[v]aried colouring, modeling by light and shade, perspective and foreshortening… by painstaking arrangements of thousands of tiny pieces of different kinds of stone" (Ling 32). Although they had produced some illusionistic mosaics that filled entire floors, they usually restricted this fine work to a small area in the center of a floor, probably due to considerations of time and money. Ling theorizes that people were not satisfied by the placement of illusionistic images on floors because in this setting it was difficult to view them to their full advantage (33). The perspective was distorted by viewing the image from an angle rather than straight-on unless an individual stood directly above the picture. Also, the images were generally oriented toward the entrance of a room, meaning that anyone elsewhere in the room saw the picture from the side or above. Ling furthers his theory by pointing out that "an illusionistic picture, with its capacity for opening a window into another spatial dimension, is curiously out of keeping with the function of a floor as the architectural element which should above all seem solid and impenetrable" (32-33). Ling says that all these reasons led mosaicists to abandon the use of illusionistic panels in favor of abstract images on a white background that did not require a particular orientation, or all-over patterns such as a much used design of receding and advancing cubes shown in perspective (32-33). Ling connects this change in floor decoration styles with the shift to Second Style wall decorations with their expansive illusionistic paintings, stating that to use such detail on both the floor and walls would be overwhelming (35).

Joyce implies that mosaicists tired of illusionistic panels after pushing this art to its limit, and chose to use their increased skills on a new implementation of the ageless geometric style. Joyce suggests that mosaicists at Pompeii replaced the illusionistic style with its centralized emblema with monochrome surfaces that were readable from any point of view as an adaptation to the "architectural milieu" (82-83). Joyce states that other scholars theorize that mosaicists changed to a black and white floor decoration in order to distinguish the floors from mosaic walls, but refutes this point of view by arguing that black and white floor mosaics had already

become popular when walls were painted. Instead, Joyce argues, after mosaicists recovered from their initial enthusiasm with illusionistic panels, they returned to their traditional geometric style but now executed the designs with a tessellated technique and translated illusionistic motifs into monochromatic patterns (83). In other words, they took their new knowledge and implemented it on an old style.

Stewart observes, as Ling has, that the floor designs did not mimic wall designs in either their styles or images, but did seem to change somewhat in step with changes in wall design. Stewart also notes that the more elaborate illusionistic floor mosaics frequently accompanied the simpler First Style walls (93-94). Stewart concludes that mosaics served the function of decorating rooms in a grand or humble style, commenting on the wealth and status of their owners, while providing a durable and decorative floor. He attests that the variations in their appearances are the result of different levels of skill as well as different tastes and traditions (97).

Turner sees the shift from the labor intensive emblemata which were installed on site to the more practical and efficient workshop-produced designs as a means of meeting the demand for floor mosaics in "houses of every sort." This could also account for the shift towards emblema-free designs and the use of fewer colors and larger tesserae (160).

The change in the style of Pompeian floor mosaics from the elaborate illusionistic emblemata and whole-floor images to the more reserved black figure and geometric designs can be attributed to several factors all related to making the people within the room more at ease in the setting. Illusionistic images placed on a floor were disquieting because of the distortion caused by viewing them at an angle. Furthermore, these detailed pictures had inherent direction, and were meant to be viewed from a particular place within a room. When people were anywhere else within the room, which happened frequently, they would see the picture from the side or the top, which was not optimal. These challenges of distortion and orientation were met by moving to the use of simpler motifs and figures that were easily interpreted by the viewer from any angle. Several figures could be scattered across the white background of the floor in many different orientations, thus making every angle a comfortable one for viewing the design. Another factor that contributed to this change was the emergence of Second Style wall decorations. The placement of illusionistic images on both the wall and floor would be overwhelming, so subduing floor styles eliminated competition between the décor and provided illusonistic pictures optimal placement on walls. This combination of stylistic changes made rooms in Pompeian homes a more inviting and visually comfortable place to be.

Figures

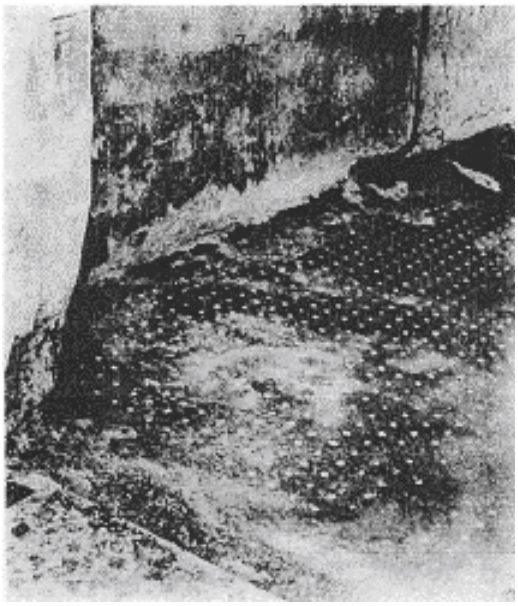

Figure 1: Pavement in House V 2 showing rows of dots covering floor

(Courtesy German Archaeological Institute, Rome: Joyce Plate 33)

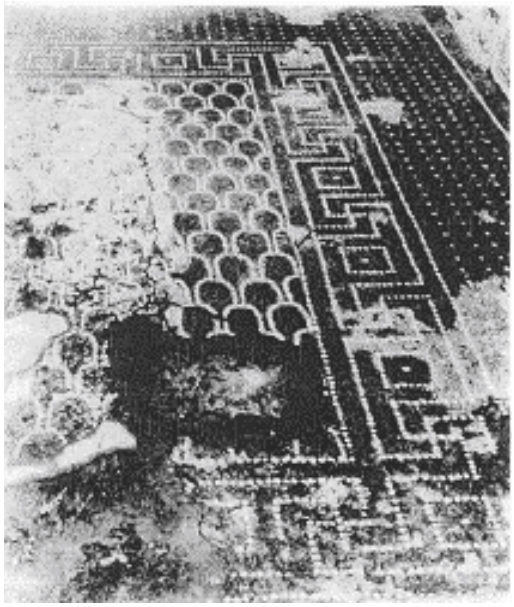

Figure 2: Pavement in House VIII 2,39 showing imbrication in center of floor, surrounded by meander and dot borders.

(Courtesy German Archaeological Institute, Rome: Joyce Plate 33)

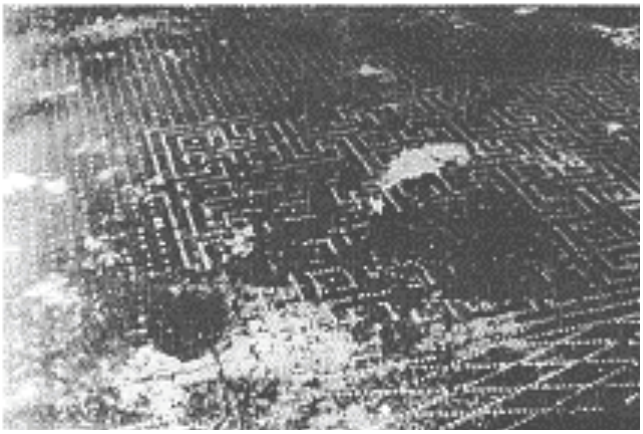

Figure 3: Pavement in House I 6,13 showing meander pattern in center of floor, with trellis and dot patterns.

(Courtesy German Archaeological Institute, Rome: Joyce Plate 33)

Figure 4: Imported emblema depicting a scene from a comedy by the playwright Menander, from Villa of Cicero.

(Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Wim Swaan Photograph Collection: Ling 15)

Figure 5: Emblema believed to have been transferred from one floor to another; from a cubiculum in House VI 15, 14.

(Strüwing Reklamefoto, Birkerod, Denmark: Ward-Perkins 138)

Figure 6: Alexander Mosaic (aka Battle of Issus) from the exedra in the House of the Faun.

(Museo Nazionale, Naples: L'Orange Plate 9c)

Figure 7: Detail of Alexander Mosaic depicting Alexander the Great.

(Museo Nazionale, Naples: L'Orange Plate 10)

Figure 8: Detail of Alexander Mosaic depicting Persian king Darius III.

(Museo Nazionale, Naples: L'Orange Plate 11)

Figure 9: Perspectival cubes, *opus sectile* pavement in the House of the Faun.

(R.J. Ling: Ling 33)

Figure 10: Mosaic floor of the Caldarium in the House of the Menander; an example of black figures combined with colored figures.

(Leonard von Matt/Photo Researchers: Brilliant 191)

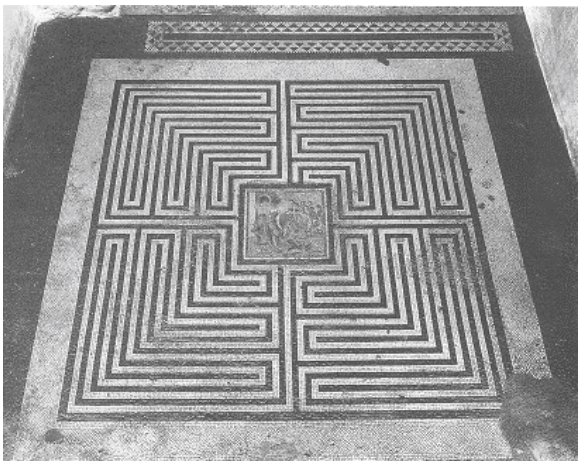

Figure 11: Labyrinth mosaic from the House of the Labyrinth. Emblema shows Theseus killing the Minotaur.

(German Archaeological Institute, Berlin: Ling 39)

Figure 12: Mosaic in the entrance of the House of the Tragic Poet.

(Princeton University, Department of Art and Archaeology, Antioch Archive: Ling 40)

Figure 13: Vestibule mosaic with guard dog.

(Museo Nazionale, Naples: L'Orange Plate 16b)

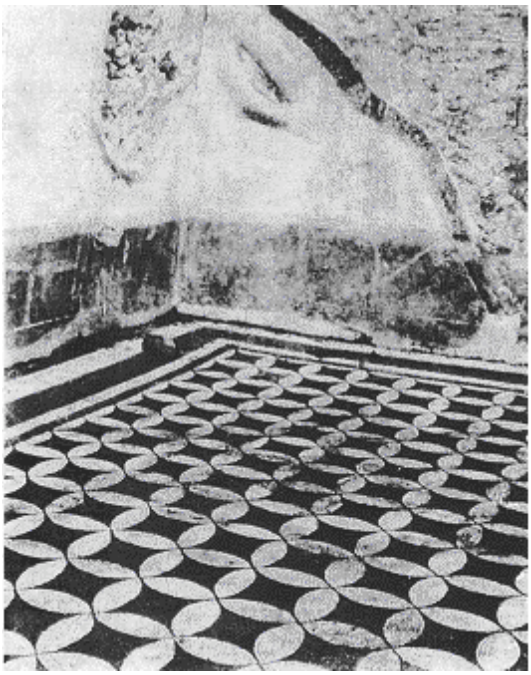

Figure 14: Intersecting circles; mosaic pavement in House VIII 2,1.

(Courtesy German Archaeological Institute, Rome: Joyce Plate 36)

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