

The Aesthetics of Pompeian Electoral Inscriptions: Questions and Hypotheses

One of the most striking features of Pompeii are the over 2,500 painted electoral posters that have been recorded from the city. Typically, each *programma*, as they have come to be called, lists the name of the candidate for municipal office and the title of the office he was seeking. In fewer cases, an endorser or a brief descriptor is listed as well. The *programmata* have been well studied and discussed as a corpus. Scholars have mined the texts and locations of the inscriptions to establish the relative dating of individual candidacies, to sketch the rise and fall of Pompeii's leading families, to explore the relationship between candidates and their endorsers, and to gauge the degree to which election campaigns were organized. Yet a potentially rich facet of the *programmata*—their physical appearance—has been overlooked. The present paper adopts a street-level view to consider the aesthetics of the campaign posters. Analysis of where, how, and why *programmata* present differing forms substantially alters our view of this well-known phenomenon, its impact on the physical fabric of the town, and its strategies of appealing to its audience.

While scholars of the *programmata* tend to treat all the inscriptions as equivalent, investigation from the streetgoer's point of view first shows that, on the contrary, the posters have a stunning variety of appearances. Along the façade of the so-called Taberna of Asellina (IX.11.2-5), for instance, are visible both large, beautifully-lettered paintings and smaller endorsements that do not even follow a horizontal line. Though we have long known about professional poster painters, so-called *scriptores*, attention to aesthetics argues against a phenomenon of interpretation that Keith Hopkins called Mount Everest syndrome, in which scholars cobble together individual fragments of scattered evidence and assume that they apply in all cases. In short, even for a fairly formulaic epigraphic genre, all *programmata* are not created equal. The formulaic nature is in fact restricted to content; in appearance, the *programmata* show a diversity of visual forms, which warns against treating these paintings as an undifferentiated collection.

This paper approaches the aesthetics of electoral inscriptions through both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, we investigate the spatial distribution of different sizes of electoral posters. Where do the largest, longest, and tallest posters appear in the urban landscape? On which streets—the busiest, the widest, the ones between gates? We present here the initial quantitative results of a database that correlates inscription measurements (given in the *CIL*) with topographical data such as property size, street measurements, and distance from a cross street. Second, we offer a qualitative analysis of the variety of forms of electoral inscriptions, evaluating the reasons for this differentiation. Here, one must take into account the larger environment in which such inscriptions were painted. Where were electoral inscriptions impacted by other elements (e.g. architectural or other inscriptions)? How does the overlaying of inscriptions affect their reception? What was the visual impact of seeing a decade-long conglomeration of political activity, as at the House of Trebius Valens (III.2.1)? Is it possible to

detect any patterns in where the inscriptions were painted (close to the door, up high, etc.) in this agglomerative process? If, as our sources suggest, there was a deep bond between a house and its owner, then what messages did a façade rich with handsomely-painted endorsements send about its owner? To that point, what do the *programmata* suggest about the relationship between owners and facades? Do the inscriptions respect the underlying (if minimal) decoration on houses and other buildings? In the end, paying closer attention to the aesthetics of electoral inscriptions reveals the active negotiation of painter and designer in making a statement—both in terms of content and style.