

## *Scaenae Frons*: The Roman House as Stage

On his last day on earth, the emperor Augustus called his friends onto his deathbed, asking if he had “played the comedy of life fitly.” In Greek, he added, “since well I’ve played my part, all clap your hands and from the stage dismiss me with applause” (Suet. *Aug.* 2.99). These final words illustrate not only the emperor’s interest in the concept of performance, but also the very theatricality of Roman life. We see this pervasive notion of theatricality and performance in the wall paintings of Roman elites with the adoption of scene painting to the domestic setting. H.G. Beyen, citing archaeological evidence and Books V and VII of Vitruvius’ *De Architectura*, was the first to publish on the incorporation of scene painting techniques into Roman frescoes (Beyen 1938). *Scaenarum frontes* (stage fronts), painted in the illusionistic manner characteristic of Second Style wall painting, existed as backgrounds to aristocratic life. The *scaenae frons* model of wall decoration reflects the sometimes-ambiguous relationship between public and private in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome, at once interiorizing the public and exteriorizing the private. Serving as backdrops against which to navigate one’s identity as a wealthy member of the elite, this theatrical decoration reinforced the client-patron relationship, bringing the public relationship of benefactor-beneficiary into the domestic setting. The *scaenae frons* further complicates established binaries of public and private, fictive and real, *otium* and *negotium*, and many others.

In this paper, I engage with and seek to contribute to the ever-growing amount of recent scholarship on *scaenae frons* wall paintings and Roman illusionism since Beyen’s revelation in 1938 (especially Bergmann 2002, Leach 2004, Jones 2019, Beacham & Denard 2023). My specific contribution considers Heinrich Drerup’s characterization of *Realraum* (real space) and *Bildraum* (image space) within the Roman house (e.g. a painting of a garden (*Realraum*) juxtaposed with a doorway view of an actual garden within the villa complex (*Bildraum*)) (Drerup 1959). I contend that these instances of facture, or the breakage of the picture plane, which disrupt the upkeep of the illusion of space within the room itself, relate to the Roman genre of metatheater. The definition of

metatheater, provided by Niall Slater, is “theatrically self-conscious theatre, i.e., theatre that demonstrates an awareness of its own theatricality” (Slater 1985). The actors in a work of metatheater would acknowledge both the fiction of the performance and their identities as actors taking on certain roles. The boundaries between the real and theatrical worlds become blurred until it is difficult to distinguish between the two. The wall paintings of the Second Style operate similarly, calling attention to themselves as fictive, yet imitating scenes and objects from real life. Ultimately, I argue that the illusionistic effects of the frescoes and the slippage between real and fictive space contribute to the theatricality of the elite Roman house. A selection of the frescoes of Villa A at Oplontis and Room M of the villa at Boscoreale (the latter of which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art) serve as case studies.

N.B. I will have a PowerPoint slideshow prepared to accompany my talk, thus necessitating a projector.

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