

Campanian Couture: Identifying Women's Costume in Painting

Eleanor Winsor Leach

This paper develops from an ongoing investigation of costume in Roman wall painting with an emphasis on the costumes of women which are more varied than those of men. With few exceptions heroic nudity and the chlamys are the standard male costumes but heroines, both virginal and matronly wear garments of widely varied drapes and colors. A preliminary consideration is the constituency of the audience for painting Unlike Greek ceramic painting which, as Lloyd Llwyellen Jones has observed, was created by men for male use in the symposium, the locations of Roman wall paintings in such spaces as triclinia intended for immediate viewing by an audience of both sexes indicate that women will be assessing their effects equally with men. With reference to women's clothing in statuary and post-classical ceramic painting, my paper formulates a number of categories based on pose and costume, because in the cases of women, pose determines the way in which clothing is worn. Which is not to claim that this assessment will tell us about the clothes of everyday life. Rather I am considering symbolic value of clothing in relationship with social conduct codes that are primarily Roman.

Consideration within this frame of reference shows instances of clothing and posture both appropriate and inappropriate to the dramatized mythological situations in which costumed subjects appear. Some of the most interesting sartorial instances in painting involve characters dressed inappropriately for their roles. For Medea or Phaedra to appear in the stola the honorific garb of the chaste Roman matron invites judgement of their actions. The pudicitia pose which we know from statuary examples well fits Penelope and Thetis but hardly Venus as bride of Mars in the House of M. Lucretius Fronto. One of the most commonly represented costume elements in painting is the veil. Both Greek and Roman women wear veils, in Greek the *himation*, and the Roman *palla*, a characteristic outdoor modesty covering of matrons. In a paper on the symbolic uses of veiling in Greek literary texts, Douglas Cairns notes a kind of universal language in veiling by which the veiled subject separates itself from others to signify a relationship or refusal of the same. Veiling is multivalent in that its uses can express emotions of anger, grief, shame or embarrassment, but is seen often in situations where these emotions are qualified by ambivalence or indeterminacy. Context determines meaning. Although Cairns' analysis rests entirely on literary manifestations, visual evidence seems corroborative. My examples from Campanian painting present two kinds of situations: those in which veiling is appropriate and those where it is not including two illustrations for *Aeneid* 12. And as we will see men also may assume veils in emotionally charged situations but with a significance much affected by gender conduct codes.

Overall the costumes in Roman mythological painting are no more real than those of Greek vases. They are improbable fantasy costumes, distancing their subjects from everyday life, but often with just enough cultural semiotic to invite a viewer's judgement

or response. A veiled Helen has not yet given up pondering the consequences of her fateful decision, here she is inviting the viewer to participate in making it.

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Figure 1. Venus as Bride of Mars in the House of M. Lucretius Fronto, Pompeii



Figure 2. Thetis at the Forge of Vulcan, House of the Golden Cupids, Pompeii.

Eleanor Winsor Leach
Indiana University, Bloomington
leach@indiana.edu