

CHAPTER 6

THE DISPLAY OF EROTICA AND THE EROTICS OF DISPLAY IN HOUSES

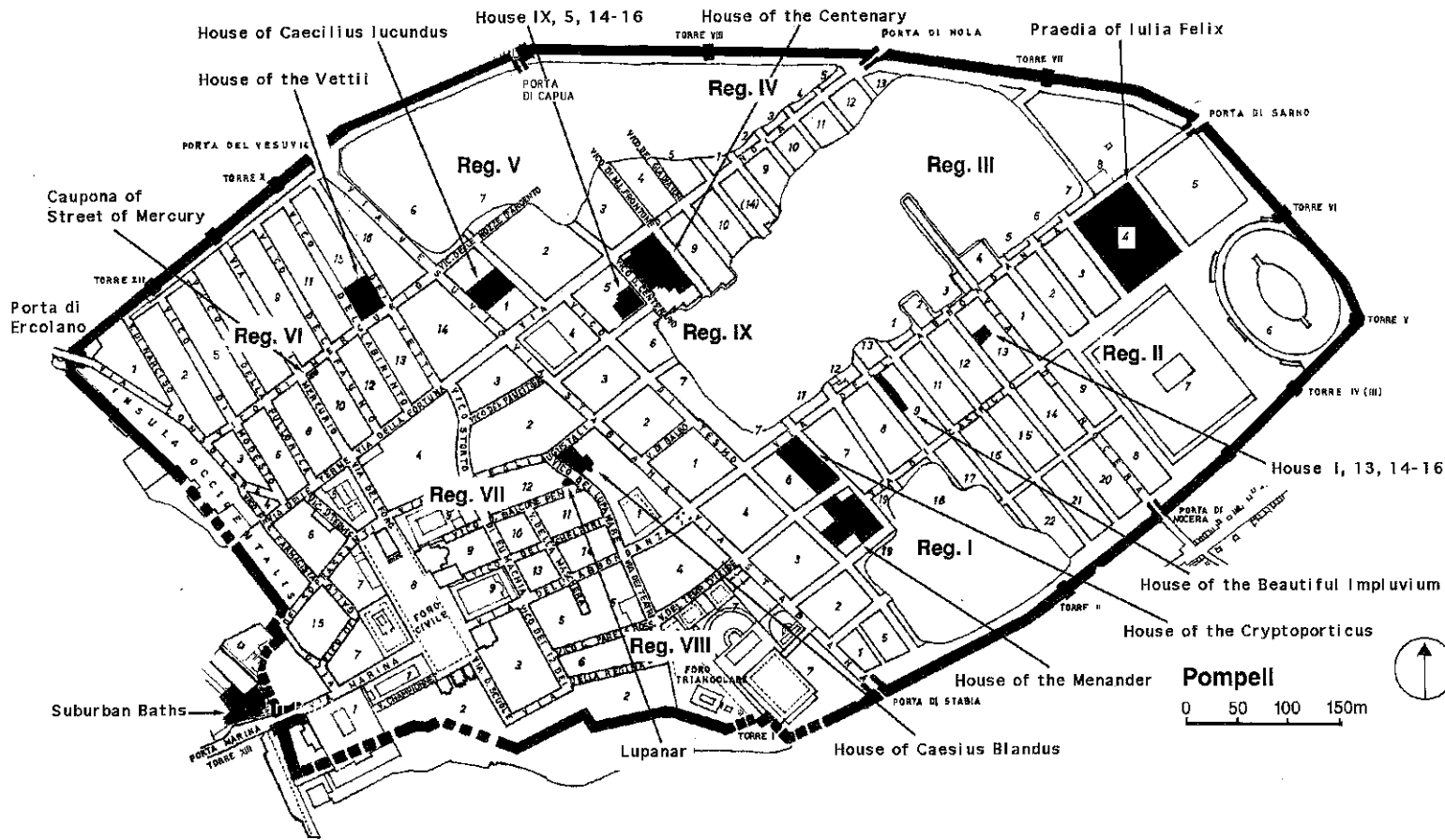
We owe the existence of a variety of houses in Pompeii painted them in fresco technique. The pigments, applied in a final thin layer of plaster, became incorporated into the wall itself



In many fresco paintings artists added details over the fresco when the plaster was partially dry; these areas in *secco* were less durable and deteriorated either during the centuries that the paintings were sealed under volcanic ash or—more usually—after their discovery when they were exposed to the elements. Even so, because excavators found them in their original architectural settings, as integral parts of the fresco decorations of whole rooms, we usually know at least where the so-called erotic paintings were displayed. In this sense the paintings are like those found in the Villa of the Farnesina (discussed in chapter 4).

wall paintings found in a peii to the fact that artists technique. The pigments, of plaster, became incorporated through the process of carbonation.

Because the volcano's ashes preserved a great variety of evidence, in some cases we can name the owner of a house and even determine his or her social class and business. This information, along with analysis of the entire plan of the house—including considerations of size, probable uses of its various spaces, and the position of the room containing the erotic paintings—lets us set out a scenario for the use of those paintings and ask about their meanings for the ancient viewers. Who looked at the paintings? How did they relate to the rest of the decorative and iconographic program? Why did the owner choose to place the erotic painting or paint-



Map 1. Pompeii, plan with buildings discussed in this study indicated.

ings in that spot and no other? Taken together, these circumstances surrounding the creation and function of wall paintings that represent lovemaking define what I call the “erotics of display.”

“Erotics” is a made-up word that helps us isolate ancient Roman sexual formulations from late twentieth-century associations that burden the word “erotic.” If erotics signals cultural constructions of sexuality that rarely overlap with our own, the “erotics of display” builds on the concept of the incongruity of ancient and modern erotics to include the location, patronage, audience, and use of paintings of sexual intercourse found in the houses at Pompeii. When modern archaeologists and writers separate these images from their architectural contexts—by cutting them away from the walls or publishing them without reference to their architectural settings—the paintings become part of our twentieth-century ideas of what is erotic. Conversely, it becomes clear that, considered in their original settings, these same images often elicited responses in the Roman viewer that were very far from our constructions of the erotic.

In considering these paintings, I take into account not only the painting itself but also the patron who paid for it and planned its location in his or her house; it is important to consider the social class of both patron and viewers, for sex meant very different things for different social classes. We must consider both the availability and cost of sexual intercourse for women and men and for each social stratum from the elite to the servile, for like all societies, that of ancient Rome regulated sexual behavior along both class and gender distinctions. As we have seen, particularly in reference to the pygmy and the Ethiopian, ancient Romans had a strong sense of the Other.

Fortunately, we have an excellent standard for establishing the elite use of erotic painting in the painted panels from the cubicula of the Villa under the Farnesina in Rome. The owner of that villa was certainly a member of the elite class, and the representations of little panels that the artists painted on the walls of its cubicula indicate that in the Augustan period paintings of lovemaking *belonged* in the well decorated aristocratic bedroom. The panels do not set out sexual positions and keep company with a host of nonerotic images, illustrating the conceit of the picture gallery, or pinacotheca. In their decorative context the panels in the upper zone of the wall show that images of lovemaking belong in an art collection. Clearly the

patron and the painter—like Ovid—knew that small erotic panels were at home in “proper”—and fashionable—bedroom decor.¹

The houses and public buildings at Pompeii, because they were buried on a single day, offer much more contextual evidence than a building like the Farnesina villa. What modern archaeologists regret is that the excavations at Pompeii began in 1748, when excavators were really treasure hunters, looking for the best statues and most interesting wall paintings for royal collections. They often abandoned or willfully destroyed what did not interest them. On the subject of wall paintings of lovemaking, we note a terrible irony. Anything—sculpture, mosaic, or wall painting—that the excavators judged to be obscene was either destroyed on the spot or removed and locked up in the so-called Cabinet of Obscene Objects in the Naples Archaeological Museum. (Today the museum still keeps this room locked up but calls it the Pornographic Collection or the Erotic Collection.)² Even after scientific excavations began in the 1860s, the practice of removing “obscene” paintings continued. So did the practice of leaving the wall paintings of excavated houses exposed to the elements. Thus quite a few orphaned erotic paintings in the Pornographic Collection are still in good condition while the walls they were cut from have faded beyond recognition.

A PAINTING OF LOVEMAKING IN A THIRD-STYLE JEWEL BOX: THE HOUSE OF THE BEAUTIFUL IMPLUVIUM

The fate of the only picture to survive intact from the House of the Beautiful Impluvium presents the worst-case scenario. It seems to be the last erotic painting to have been removed from its walls. Matteo Della Corte partially excavated the house in 1916. Subsequently someone had the picture photographed before its removal (Figs. 49 and 50). When Maiuri completed the excavation of the house in 1954, he returned the painting to its original place, but without providing for its conservation.³ Today it is nearly illegible. This fact, added to the terrible state of conservation of the entire house, is all the more lamentable because the cubiculum that housed the painting of lovemaking, like the other principal rooms of this tiny house, belongs to a rare phase of wall painting at Pompeii. This is the late Third Style, dated to A.D. 40–45.⁴

The use of this erotic painting as part of a Third-Style decorative ensemble has

significance for both social and cultural history at Pompeii.⁵ It demonstrates that a practice first documented in Rome around 20 B.C. was thriving in Pompeii sixty years later, for when we last saw paintings of lovemaking it was in the little pinakes high up on the walls of cubi \acute{c} ula in the Villa of the Farnesina. The Farnesina was a lavish villa in the capitol that boasted the best in fashionable decoration; the little House of the Beautiful Impluvium, located in an unimportant town near Naples, still reflected that taste. Furthermore, the erotic painting has moved from the upper zone to the center of the wall. The picture in the center of each wall in reception spaces focused the viewer's attention in a way that earlier painting had not. The rest of the wall became an elaborate setting for the gem in the middle: the central picture. What then does it mean when a cubiculum receives a central picture that details aspects of lovemaking? Such was the subject matter of the painting on south wall of cubiculum 11 in the House of the Beautiful Impluvium; the central pictures from the room's other three walls have not survived.

The plan reveals the house's small dimensions and the desire of the owner who remodeled it in A.D. 40–45 to make up for small size with elegant reception spaces (Fig. 51). He ordered precious marble decoration for the impluvium and expanded the *tablinum* (the main reception area, 7) to make it as deep as the atrium. Most important for our inquiry, he commissioned wall painters of no mean skill to decorate the entire house in a fine Third-Style manner that included, for instance, such features as intricate Ionic colonnades bearing shields with portrait heads in the *tablinum*.

A glance at the plan reveals that the location of cubiculum 11 is hardly that of a retreat for lovemaking. The atrium is the most public of the spaces in the Roman house, and cubiculum 11 is at the center of the atrium's left (east) wall. This cubiculum also communicates with the wing of the atrium itself via a door on its south wall. This wall had as its centerpiece the picture representing lovemaking (see Fig. 50).

Although the painter had difficulty in rendering the figures convincingly, his composition is unique. The man, reclining with his arm crooked over his head in erotic repose, welcomes the woman as she kicks off her sandals and climbs up on the bed. She wears the breast band, but her clothes have fallen from her torso to bunch in an arc around the circle of her buttocks. Drapery clings to her dangling left leg. She turns in profile to gaze intently at the man as she supports herself on



Figure 49. Male-female couple on bed, Pompeii, House of the Beautiful Impluvium (I, 9, 1), cubiculum II, south wall, state at time of excavation (A.D. 40-45). By permission of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, N 66009.

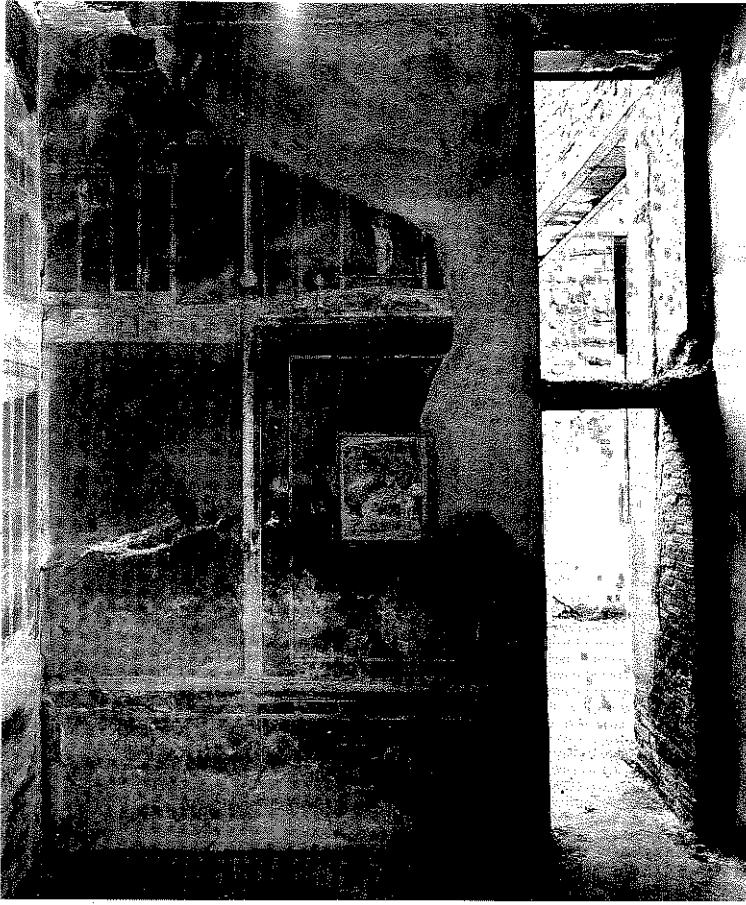


Figure 50. Pompeii, House of the Beautiful Impluvium (I, 9, 1), south wall of cubiculum II (A.D. 40–45). Photo Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione N 34959.

her right arm, slipping her hand around his neck. He grasps her right shoulder with his left hand.

Were the artist more capable, and had the other three central pictures of this cubiculum survived, cubiculum II could shed considerable light on a phase in the artistic representation of lovemaking that is not well documented, the period between the paintings of the Farnesina sixty years before and the paintings of the late Fourth Style of A.D. 62–79 that constitute the bulk of the evidence from Pompeii

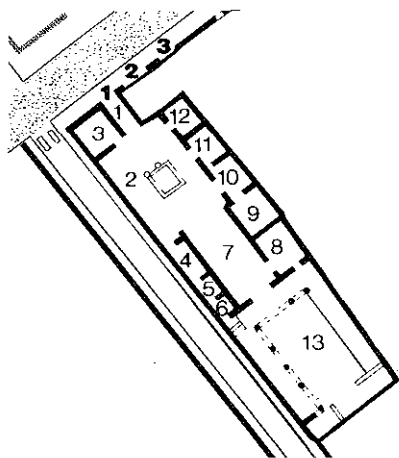


Figure 51. Pompeii, House of the Beautiful Impluvium (I, 9, 1), plan.

and Herculaneum. From what remains, however, we can make several observations. The woman's body does not fit the neo-Attic body type of the Augustan period. She is exaggeratedly tall and slim, with a tiny head, slight chest, and ample hips and buttocks. The artist's use of drapery to frame her buttocks—apparently using a compass to create a section of a circle—points to the female somatotype fashionable during the late Hellenistic period. Comparison with the terra-cotta statuette of two women from Myrina reveals the artist's allegiance to this particular manner of representing the beautiful female body; this body type first achieved widespread popularity in the second and first centuries B.C. (Fig. 52) and gradually regained prominence in representations of lovemaking after the death of Augustus.

In the absence of the other central pictures that the artist incorporated into this cubiculum we cannot determine the meaning that this single surviving painting of lovemaking had for the owner and for his guests. To judge from the refinement of the entire cubiculum's decorative scheme and its easy accessibility to the atrium, it was a room that the owner must have enjoyed using not only for sexual adventures but also for reception of guests who were more important or intimate than the clients he greeted in the tablinum or even those he entertained over a meal in the *triclinium* (dining hall). Its painting of lovemaking dated to the period of the Third Style gives us reason to believe that the fashion for decorating small rooms with pictures of lovemaking continued in the period between 20 B.C. and A.D. 45 in Pompeian houses both large and small. With the later and much more complete House of Caecilius Iucundus we can trace this trend into the period of the Fourth



Figure 52. Two women, one seated on other's lap, terra-cotta figurine from Myrina (1st c. B.C.). Paris, Louvre, inv. MYR 659. © RMN.

Style (A.D. 45–79) and shed more light on what it meant to an owner to display erotic pictures in his or her house.

A TROPHY OF ELITE TASTE IN A FREEDMAN'S HOUSE: THE HOUSE OF CAECILIUS IUCUNDUS

The fine panel from the peristyle of the House of Caecilius Iucundus is still in the Pornographic Collection of Naples Museum (Plate 6).⁶ On the plan the original

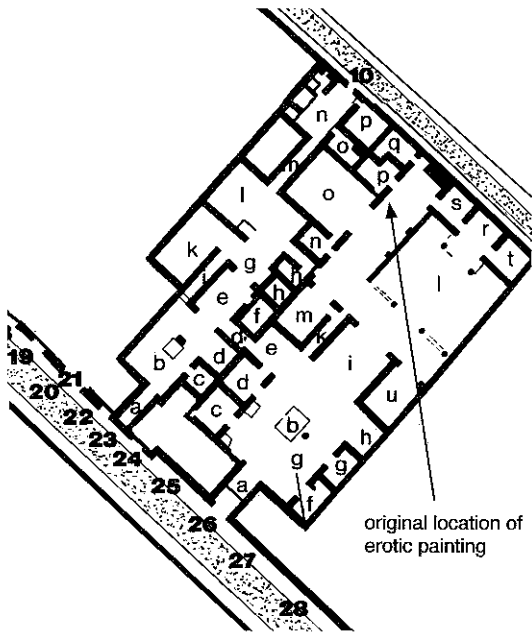


Figure 53. Pompeii, House of Caecilius Iucundus (V, 1, 26), plan.

location of the erotic painting is clearly indicated (Fig. 53). Several spectacular finds in this house permit us to understand the possible context for this painting. Sogliano, who excavated the house in the summer of 1875, found 154 wax tablets recording sums paid by the banker L. Caecilius Iucundus to persons for whom he had sold land, animals, and slaves between the years A.D. 52 and 60. He also collected taxes levied on the colony of Pompeii. Because the transactions involve small sums, scholars conclude that he was a person of average means, certainly a freedman.⁷ Filling out the picture of the Caecilii is a herm portrait found at the left of the tablinum, dedicated by the freedman Felix. The inscription on the herm, “From Felix to our patron Lucius,” indicates that Felix was a freedman whose family inherited the house and the business from a Lucius who lived in the early part of the first century of our era. The L. Caecilius Iucundus who lived in the house—and who presumably carried out the transactions recorded in the wax tablets—was probably a freedman descendant of Felix.⁸ Finally, several marble reliefs adorning the domestic shrine on the north side of the atrium document the earthquake of 5 February A.D. 62. Aside from these rather unusual finds, the excavators found very few objects of value. There is evidence that shortly after ash from Vesuvius covered

the house, treasure hunters carried off the most valuable objects, including the contents of the strongbox in the atrium.⁹

In the Augustan period the owner acquired and annexed the adjoining house at V, I, 23; he then had the two houses redecorated with paintings of the Third Style. Scholars date the celebrated Third-Style frescoes of tablinum *i* to about A.D. 35–45.¹⁰ The acquisition of the adjoining house meant that the owner could dispense with the service door at the back of peristyle *l* and install a symmetrical suite of rooms, *s*, *r*, and *t* to frame the house's visual axis—the sight line common in Roman houses that runs from the entryway passage through the atrium and tablinum to a feature at the back of the peristyle.¹¹ Complementing this group of rooms was another suite consisting of triclinium *o* with cubicula *n* and *p*.¹² Triclinium *o* is the largest of four triclinia resulting from this remodeling. Since it faced south, it would serve for winter entertainment, whereas triclinia *m*, *u*, and *k* (installed in V, I, 23) faced east and would be appropriate for hot weather.¹³

After the earthquake of 62 the owner had the rooms around peristyle *l*—as well as the peristyle itself—redecorated, even though he was able to preserve the fine Third-Style tablinum as a “period” room. He had the doors between triclinium *o* and cubicula *n* and *p* closed. Cubiculum *n* apparently became a service room, since it received only plain plaster walls, whereas the artist concentrated his attention on the paintings in the triclinium and cubiculum *p*—and, in particular, on the erotic painting on the peristyle wall between these two rooms. Although most of the paintings of this suite were legible at the time of excavation, today we rely on the descriptions from 1876 by August Mau to reconstruct the iconographic program.¹⁴ This is true, as well, for the paintings in the group of three rooms at the east of the peristyle and for the elaborate representation of a garden painted on the south wall of the peristyle—all gone today.¹⁵

Triclinium *o* received an unusually refined Fourth-Style scheme that won acclaim at the time of its discovery. In 1880 Presuhn included the arabesque frieze with griffins, centaurs, sphinxes on the right wall in his pattern book for decorative artists,¹⁶ and anonymous artists from the German Archaeological Institute in Rome recorded the life-size roundels with “priestesses” that decorated the walls.¹⁷ The main picture on the rear wall was a Judgment of Paris, illegible today. On the right (east) wall the central picture of Theseus Abandoning Ariadne, now in Naples, is an ambitious and dramatic interpretation of the myth.¹⁸ Mau noted that before

its removal there were clear traces of gilding detailing Ariadne's chain and her anklets.¹⁹

The same artist created the erotic painting in the peristyle. Today a hole in the north wall of peristyle *l* between triclinium *o* and cubiculum *p* records its original placement, since the excavator judged its subject matter to be obscene and had it cut from its wall and placed it in the Pornographic Collection in Naples. There the painting stands out by virtue of the refinement of its execution; it may be the finest erotic painting in the collection.

In its original setting the painting commanded pride of place; it established a pictorial link between the iconographic program of the triclinium and that of the cubiculum. Elements of the painting itself reward close scrutiny (see Plate 6). It is a delicate and nuanced scene of lovemaking in a cubiculum, painted with care and attentive to detail. An elegantly clothed *cubicularius* approaches a couple on a bed. The artist used gold even more lavishly than he had in the picture in the triclinium of Ariadne abandoned by Theseus. He applied gold to delineate the servant's hairnet and armband as well as to define the jewelry that the seated woman wears, including her bracelets, earrings, and hairnet. An elegant yellow cloth covers her legs, it, too, decorated with applied gold. (Unfortunately, all the applied gold, visible at the time of excavation and reported by both Sogliano and Mau, disappeared because of the procedures used to detach the fresco.) The artist paid special attention to color and the opulence of fabrics throughout; the bed, for instance, has a pink coverlet with blue sham.

Models in high art must have inspired the artist, for this composition is complex. Far from being a frank scene of sexual intercourse, the conceit here is one of (male) desire and (female) resistance. The woman holds her hand behind her, whether to conceal her desire to touch the man or to locate him is not clear. He lifts his arm as though in entreaty, but she cannot see this gesture. A nice touch is the way his left hand curves up at the wrist, allowing the artist to show his virtuosity in depicting delicate fingers. The viewer sees these details but the woman does not, allowing the person who looks at this scene of lovemaking to understand the man's entreaty and the woman's hesitation in a way that the woman—and perhaps her lover also—cannot. This is a kind of privileging of the voyeur's perspective that also characterizes the refined representations of the Farnesina panels.

What meanings do the opulence of color and gold detail, coupled with the rep-

resentation of sexual dalliance, have in their setting in the House of Caecilius Iucundus? To begin with, these qualities in the painting relate it to the elevated images of lovemaking that elite patrons favored in their homes. Apparently the patron wished to differentiate this erotic image from those franker and more shabbily painted ones that people saw in humbler settings like the brothel and bath that we examine in chapter 7. The fact that this was probably the only picture within this large peristyle's decorative scheme—and the fact that it is right next to the biggest room off the peristyle—indicates that L. Caecilius Iucundus wanted visitors to stop and look at it.

A glance at the plan confirms that he also wished the room to the right of the picture to be a special kind of cubiculum, with an anteroom and two barrel-vaulted alcoves. The masons made special indentations in the lower parts of the walls to accommodate the couches that stood in each alcove (Fig. 54). Cubicula like this one had begun to be popular in the wealthy villas of late-Republican Italy about a hundred years before, almost always as part of a suite that included a reception-dining space (called either a triclinium or an *oecus*). In the plan of the Villa of Oplontis, spaces 11 and 12 constitute a suite of double-alcoved cubiculum with its accompanying reception or dining room (Fig. 55). In the Villa of the Mysteries there were three double-alcove cubicula (rooms 4, 8, and 16).²⁰ Cubiculum 4 formed a suite with *oecus* 5—the famous Room of the Mysteries; cubiculum 8 with *oecus* 6. The Villa at Settefinestre boasted three double-alcove bedrooms, each connected with an *oecus*, as well as three other suites consisting of two adjoining rooms.²¹ As Wallace-Hadrill shows, these villas set the dominant pattern in proliferation of space for entertainment: “The essence of the Roman suite is that it provides an ample context for a crowded social life, allows guests to pass in astonishment from one fine room to another, and enables the master to hold court wherever the whim of the season or moment takes him.”²² This pattern not only endured through the first century of the common era, it also spread to the smaller, humbler houses in towns like Pompeii. Finding such a suite in the House of Caecilius Iucundus underscores the extent of its diffusion.

The cubiculum in one of these suites was not an ordinary bedchamber but a carefully decorated room that an elite citizen might use as a reception space for a high-ranking guest. The elite regularly used cubicula for meetings with peers or people of slightly lower social standing. The ancient literature includes five instances

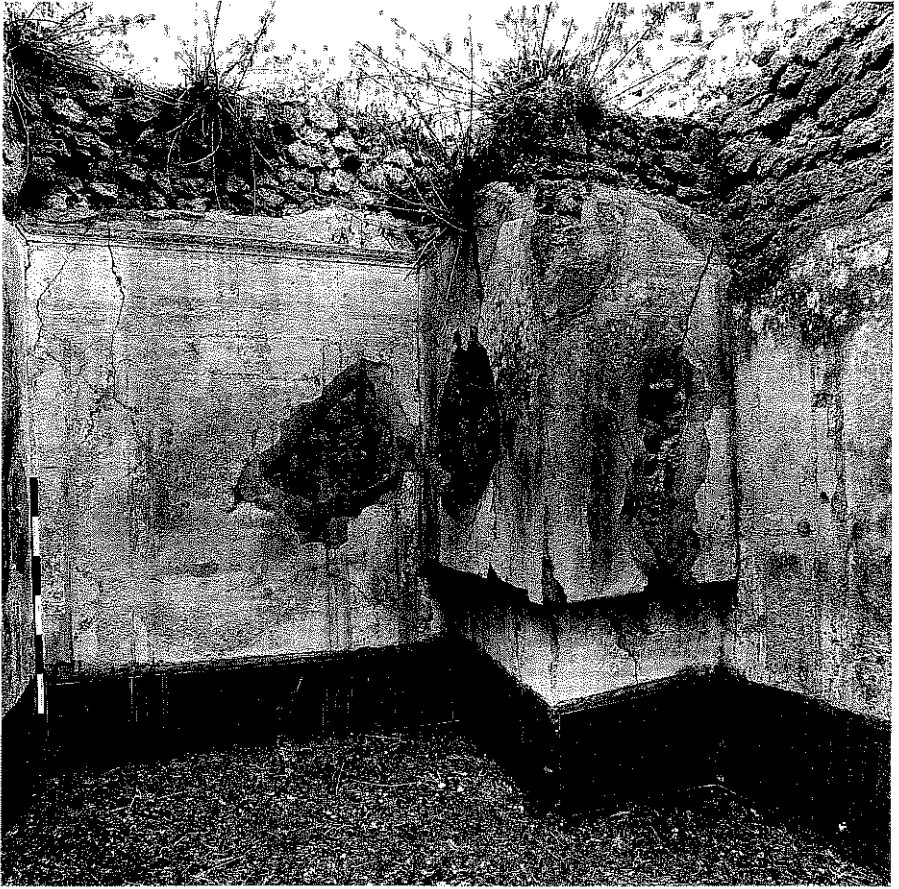


Figure 54. Pompeii, House of Caecilius Iucundus (V, 1, 26), cubiculum *p*, from entrance (A.D. 62–79). Photo Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione N48400.

of Romans receiving friends *in cubiculo*, three instances of their conducting business there, and four of emperors holding trials *intra cubiculum*.²³ What use would L. Caecilius Iucundus make of his double-alcove bedroom?

Someone entering the cubiculum, presumably after studying the fine erotic painting in the peristyle, would see relatively large figures—averaging 25 cm in height—at the center of the walls in front, to the right, and to the left. The room's principal image, at the center of the north wall, was a group of Mars and Venus with a figure of Cupid standing in the panel to the right. Venus' upper body was nude, and she raised her right arm so that her hand was almost above her left shoulder.

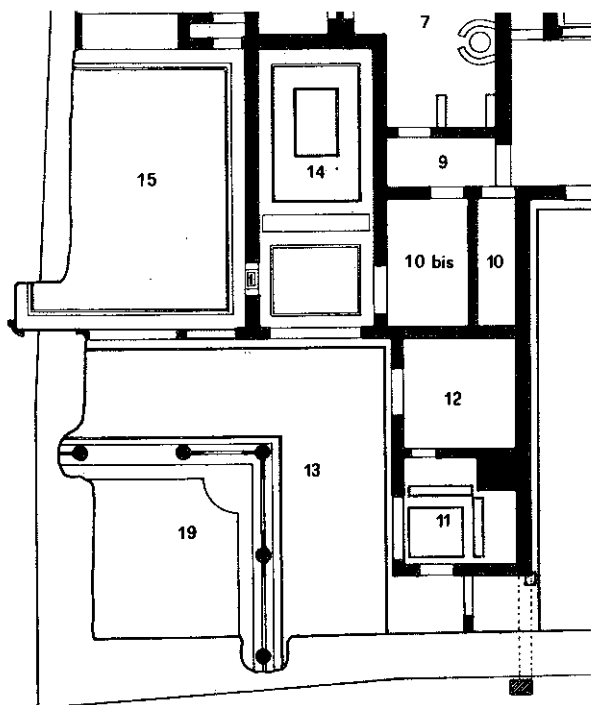


Figure 55. Torre Annunziata, Villa of Oplontis, plan, detail, suite 11–12–14.

In her fingers she held a green ribbon. Helmeted Mars was removing the purple garment that covered Venus' lower parts. Mau notes that its composition was almost the same as the central picture of room *t*, removed from its wall and now in the Naples Museum.²⁴ Bacchus, dressed in a purple chlamys and holding a thyrsus, presided over the east wall. In the upper part of the left wall stood a muse dressed in a long purple chiton, holding a lyre in her left hand with the plectrum in her right.

Even given the fragmentary nature of the evidence, it seems clear that the artist intended to expand the theme of lovemaking from the human to the divine. He did so by associating the vision of elite dalliance in the peristyle panel with an image of passion stirring the quintessential divine lovers, Mars and Venus, in the main panel of the cubiculum. Wine and song, personified by Bacchus and Erato, muse of love poetry, furthered this iconography of amorous pleasures.

But was this a room used for lovemaking?²⁵ The revelry of the dinner party in the triclinium might end with a sexual encounter—certainly not a very private

one—in the cubiculum. But the refinement of the painting representing love-making, its location in the peristyle, the somewhat erudite nature of the program of images in the cubiculum itself, and the close architectural relation between triclinium and cubiculum indicate a different primary intent. We must think of the meanings that the architectural and decorative ensemble might have for the owner and his guests. The elements of this ensemble were mythological paintings in the largest triclinium, erotic painting in the peristyle, and love theme in the double-alcove bedroom.

As a middle-class man of only moderate means living in the Pompeii that was still in ruins in the aftermath of the earthquake of A.D. 62, L. Caecilius Iucundus fits the profile of the former slaves who embellished their houses with features of villas.²⁶ He took care to redecorate the all-important area around the peristyle—most likely damaged by the earthquake—in the style of the time even while carefully retaining the elegant Third-Style tablinum as a status symbol. He ordered up new paintings to emphasize the importance of the unit formed by triclinium *o* and cubiculum *p*, and he had the artist open up the south part of his big peristyle with elaborate paintings of a wild-animal park and fountains in the form of nymphs.²⁷ Seen in the context of the patron's redecorating effort, the purpose of the panel now in Naples seems to be to recall, in slightly pretentious references, the cubacula of the very wealthy that often featured refined representations of lovemaking. These associations become a bit obvious because this picture is literally displaced, displayed in the peristyle rather than within the cubiculum.

We imagine the owner explaining to his guests the unsubtle visual relations among the mythological paintings featuring nude beauties in the triclinium (Venus, Minerva, and Juno in the Judgment of Paris; Ariadne), the lovemaking of the human couple outside the triclinium, and the loves of the gods within the cubiculum. We even have a parallel in Petronius Arbiter's characterization of Trimalchio, the former slave, who now that he has won his freedom and wealth delights in nothing better than explaining imagery to his bored guests. Frescoes greet his guests—a trompe l'oeil painting of a dog (with the legend *CAVE CANEM*—Beware of the Dog) and the story of his life told through allegories of divine intervention (Petronius, *Satyricon* 29). Trimalchio interprets the zodiac in an elaborate dish served to his guests (39); offers a ridiculous iconographic explanation of the imagery in his silver vessels (52); and orders up the iconographic program for his tomb (71).

If Petronius' account of Trimalchio is any gauge of the attitudes of the freedman class toward art, the so-called erotic painting in the House of Caecilius Iucundus is far from our modern conception of a scene of sexual intercourse meant primarily to stimulate the viewer.²⁸ For in addition to its sexual message, the painting also functioned as a kind of trophy—a sign of the owner's elite pretensions and social climbing.

PENDANT DISPLAY OF PAINTINGS OF LOVEMAKING: THE HOUSE OF THE CENTENARY

For the use and viewing of its two paintings of lovemaking, the House of the Centenary provides different contexts. Both are in a secluded room, numbered 43 on the plan (Fig. 56). We associate seclusion and privacy with sexual intercourse. Did the ancient Romans? And does the isolation of the room where the erotic paintings appear in the House of the Centenary make it—as some scholars would have it—a lovemaking chamber—a *camera d'amore*?²⁹ To answer these questions, we need to consider the possible functions of the room in the layout of the whole house. Then we need to ask what "privacy" might mean for the owner of the House of the Centenary. Finally, we need to look at the iconographic and decorative systems that the erotic paintings fit into.

The House of the Centenary is a wealthy one that takes up a whole city block; it is at least three times larger than the House of Caecilius Iucundus. It dates originally to the second century B.C. and underwent a complete remodeling in the period of the mature Third Style of about A.D. 15. At this time the owner put in a private bath with a swimming pool. In the last decades of its existence a redecorating campaign transformed a number of rooms, including a grandiose fountain house, with Fourth-Style decorative schemes.³⁰ The two erotic paintings that form part of the decoration of room 43 belong to this campaign, as does 42, the room that visitor or owner must walk through to get to 43. The painting of room 41, identified as a triclinium, kept most of its Third-Style decoration, even though the owner had new central pictures in the Fourth Style inserted into the centers of the walls.³¹

To get to room 43 a person had to pass through one of the atria. The visitor would proceed down a corridor at 39, through triclinium 41, and through room

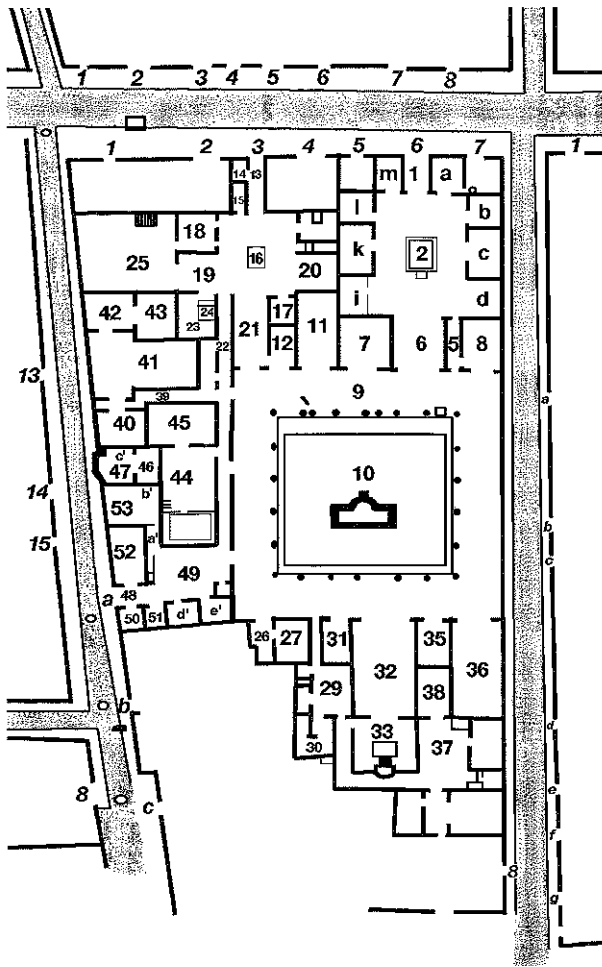


Figure 56. Pompeii,
House of the Centenary
(IX, 8, 6), plan.

42. We can see why to some modern scholars 42 was a room for lovemaking—tucked away, in what seemed to them to be a “private” part of the house. Yet this cubiculum was an integral part of an entertainment suite and in its context, I argue, had an entirely appropriate decorative system.

For one thing, the architectural configuration spells “luxury,” not “lust.” This is a variation on the configuration, discussed above in relation to the House of Caecilius Iucundus, that was prominent in the villas of the very rich during the first century B.C. In the House of the Centenary the owner inserted this kind of suite into his house as a sign of luxury. Seen in this light, it is similar to other features of

the luxury villa that he had constructed, like the big fountain house at 32–33 in the plan.

For another thing, ancient Romans had practically no equivalent to our late twentieth-century conception of privacy. The concept is simply alien to their mentality.³² Whereas the position of the cubiculum reads, to the modern viewer, like an attempt to create a “private” retreat, to the owner and visitors the combination of triclinium with the two adjoining rooms, one serving as an anteroom for the other, meant that its function could be either reception or sleeping. And when Romans used the cubiculum for sleeping or even for lovemaking, there were servants present. As we noted in chapter 4 in reference to the Farnesina paintings, the *cubicularius* was an invisible presence who even slept on a mat at the threshold to the cubiculum. In the picture from the House of Caecilius Iucundus the artist, following paintings like those from the truly aristocratic Farnesina villa, depicted such a servant precisely to add to its elite tone.

When we look at the context displayed in the wall painting of this suite, we find an intermingling of mythological pictures with the scenes of human lovemaking, a blend much like that of the House of Caecilius Iucundus. Interestingly, room 41 of the House of the Centenary is an elegant triclinium painted in the mature Third Style. Just as Caecilius Iucundus preserved his old tablinum, so the owner of the House of the Centenary kept his triclinium as a period room (except for its center pictures of the Fourth Style, inserted later). But he had rooms 42 and 43 painted in the current style. The decorative scheme of room 42 was rich in ornament and decorated with three pictures, all in terrible condition today. At the center of the north wall was Cassandra. Two pictures decorated the west wall on either side of the window: Endymion and Selene, and Venus as a fisherwoman. Venus had two companions: a swimming *amorino* and a fishing *amorino*. Having taken in this hardly salacious program, the visitor would then enter room 43.

In Roman decoration, the wall of a room opposite the entrance always carries the most important picture. Here the viewer would see in front of her—not an image of copulation, but one of Hercules sleeping. Although much damaged today, the hero is still visible, nude, surrounded by *amorini*. The erotic paintings are secondary, occupying the walls to the right and the left.

All three center pictures formed part of an ambitious Fourth-Style decorative system. The system is still partially visible on the right-hand wall (Fig. 57). There is

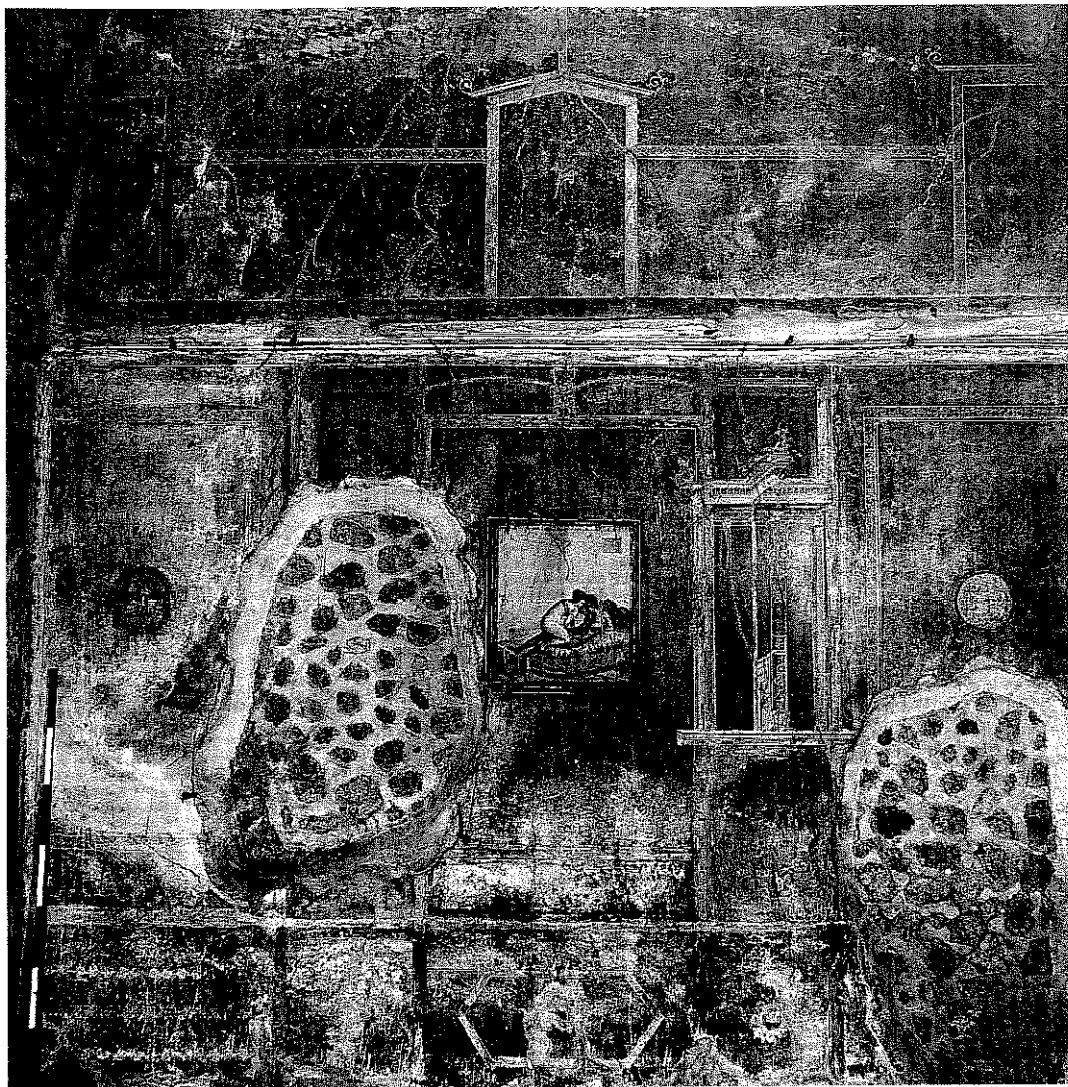


Figure 57. Pompeii, House of the Centenary (IX, 8, 6), room 43, south wall (A.D. 62–79).
Photo Michael Larvey.

a black dado and black middle zone, with tall red panels framing the central picture. Many secondary figures filled these panels, so that the relative isolation of the erotic pictures that we see today is misleading. There was originally much more to look at than the central panels.

The central picture on the left wall is the more damaged of the two, but its subject is still legible (Fig. 58). The artist had the man reclining on a bed; he holds his head and torso up with on his left elbow, while the rest of his body trails off to the left. The woman has her back to the man and places her hands on her knees as she squats down on his penis. The man's right arm passes behind her hips, but paint losses make it impossible to know the position of that hand, whether on her back or around her waist. She is slim and tall—less substantial than the neo-Attic women in the Farnesina panels.

Remains of the underpainting provide a sense of the architecture of the chamber. Three differently colored zones suggest a space that is open to the light of a peristyle in the center. A garland hangs from a point slightly to the right of the top center of the picture, and there is a small, dark square panel on the wall, upper left. The light panel in the background is the artist's attempt to open up the scene to the landscape—or at least to a planted garden. A painting from an unknown house in Pompeii, now in the Pornographic Collection (Fig. 59), offers an interesting parallel: behind the couple on the bed there is a light panel framing a tree. The tree is now leafless, probably because the leaves, added in *secco*, were lost in the process of removing the painting from the wall. The artist represented a view from the love-making chamber to create an aura of upper-class sophistication and gentility: architects often took pains to site cubicula in the villas of the wealthy so that they looked out on special views—either to a planted garden or to special features in the landscape. Statius (ca. A.D. 45–96) and Pliny the Younger (ca. A.D. 61–112) make much of rooms, conceived as pavilions for viewing the landscape.³³ Although the artist merely reflected such elite pretensions in this rather ineptly painted representation, it is significant that he chose to locate the scene of lovemaking not in a closed chamber but in a room open to the pleasant landscape view.

Because the picture on the right wall is better preserved, it shows us more details (Plate 7). The artist used shadows to indicate a strong light coming in from the right. The woman, her hair arranged in a high helmet of curls, wears a breast band, as well as an anklet and an armband. She is astride the man, who leans on his left elbow while holding his right arm crooked around his head in the gesture of erotic repose. The woman's forehead slightly overlaps the top of the man's head as she leans forward. From this crouching position she supports herself with her extended left arm while reaching down with her right hand, most likely to grasp the man's



Figure 58. Male-female couple on bed, Pompeii, House of the Centenary (IX, 8, 6), room 43, north wall, central picture (A.D. 62–79). Photo Michael Larvey.

penis, hidden from view behind her right thigh. Here the background is less clear than in the left-hand picture, although we see a dark rectangle at upper right.

This, and the similar, nearly square shape in the central picture of the wall opposite, are the underpaintings for the *tabellae* mentioned by Ovid. A bronze mirror cover, found on the Palatine, suggests an excellent parallel (Fig. 60). Scholars date it to the Flavian period because of the woman's hairstyle.³⁴ The shuttered panel at the top of the mirror is so well articulated that its imagery is legible. In the paint-



Figure 59. Male-female couple on bed, from Pompeii, unknown location, (A.D. 62–79). Naples, Archaeological Museum, inv. 27684, W. 33 × H. 33 cm. Photo Michael Larvey.

ings from the House of the Centenary losses of the applied secco have reduced what must be similar representations of erotic pinakes to the dark patches visible today.

Identifying the motifs is not enough, of course, if we are to understand the meaning of these paintings as part of the decoration of a secluded room in a private house. Obviously the situation is different from that of the House of Caecilius Iucundus, where the painting's placement in the peristyle probably meant that it would



Figure 60. Male-female couple on bed, bronze mirror cover found on Palatine, Rome (A.D. 69–79). Rome, Antiquarium Comunale, photographic archive of the Antiquarium Comunale. Photo Antonello Idini.

be seen by more visitors than might enter room 43 to look at the two central pictures in the House of the Centenary. Furthermore, the use of gold and the presence of the *cubicularius* are references to the gentility of aristocratic paintings like those of the Farnesina; both scenes in the House of the Centenary represent more ac-

tive lovemaking than the ambiguous scene from the House of Caecilius Iucundus. Yet the triclinium–anteroom–cubiculum configuration of the House of the Centenary closely parallels similar suites in wealthy villas considered above. In reality, it is a more elaborate imitation of such suites than the abbreviated version in the House of Caecilius Iucundus. It follows that the two pictures of lovemaking in room 43 of the House of the Centenary formed part of a decorative scheme that paralleled—even imitated—the display of such *tabellae* in the cubicula of the very wealthy. Their inclusion was correct for a space where the owner might receive and entertain his social peers—but we must not assume that sexual intercourse was the entertainment. As for the notion that this part of the house was set up as a brothel: if the owner were to set up a brothel in part of his house, he would make the path to the rooms as short as possible—and he certainly would *not* route the clients through his (grand)father’s prize Third-Style triclinium!

THE VETTII BROTHERS’ FOLLY: A COOK’S BEDROOM?

One of the most spectacular houses preserved at Pompeii belonged to two freedmen brothers, A. Vettius Restitutus and A. Vettius Conviva (Fig. 61). Its complex programs of elegant Fourth-Style wall painting, complemented by a garden-peristyle adorned with twelve fountains and numerous marble and bronze sculptures, still delight thousands of tourists every day.³⁵ Both their hard-won civic status and the display of the wealth that brought them that status were important to the Vettii. A. Vettius Conviva, who appears as a witness in one of the wax tablets found in the House of Caecilius Iucundus, was an *augustalis*; to become an *augustalis* the former slave had to pay a considerable sum to finance public works.³⁶ In their atrium the Vettii had two money chests attached to the walls. Within the complex and sometimes baffling imagery of their lavishly painted rooms, images of commerce appear alongside themes from classical mythology. For instance, in the largest reception space, oecus 9, the delicate frieze of cupids and psychai illustrates the manufacture and sale of wine, perfume, and flower garlands while the big central pictures presumably there, and in the nearby reception spaces, explore lofty themes of divine and mortal transgression and retribution.³⁷ Similarly, the patrons took pains to include throughout the house the imagery of the two deities who protected

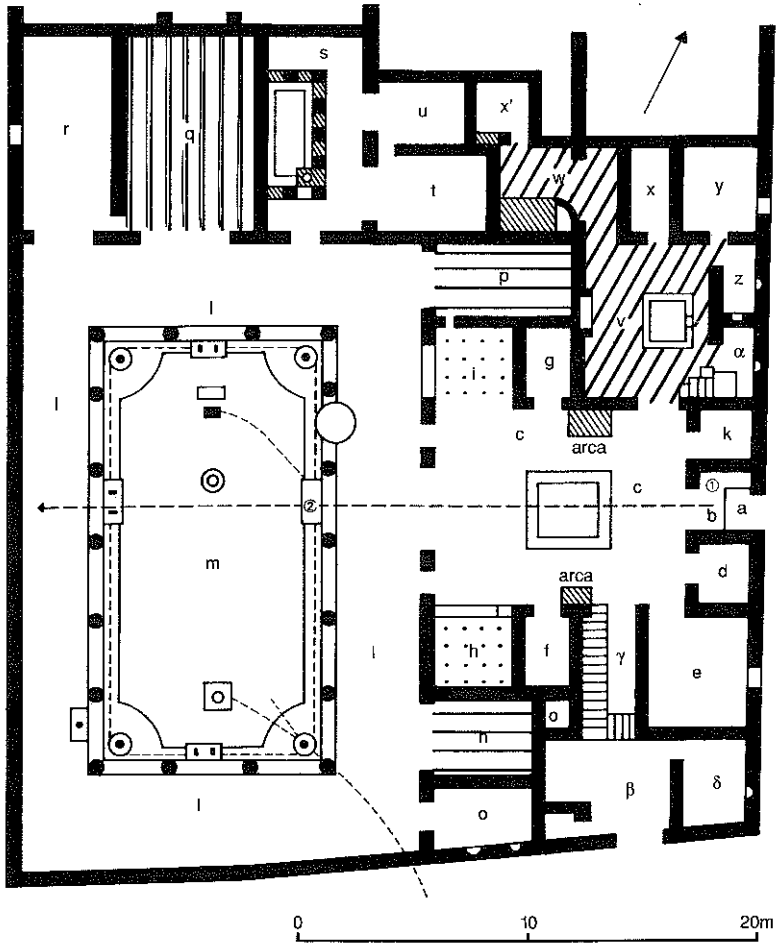


Figure 61. Pompeii, House of the Vettii (VI, 15, 1), plan.

commerce, Fortuna and Mercury. But even given this eccentric eclecticism, in view of both the quality of the house and its decoration, it comes as a surprise that these wealthy patrons commissioned an artist to decorate the ground-floor room next to the kitchen hearth with frank, shoddily painted scenes of couples making love.

The painter probably chose a white-ground scheme for room *x'* both for reasons of economy and to increase the light in the room, since its only source of light is its narrow doorway (Fig. 62). The artist painted its principal decoration—three pictures of male-female couples on beds—rapidly and with a very simple palette

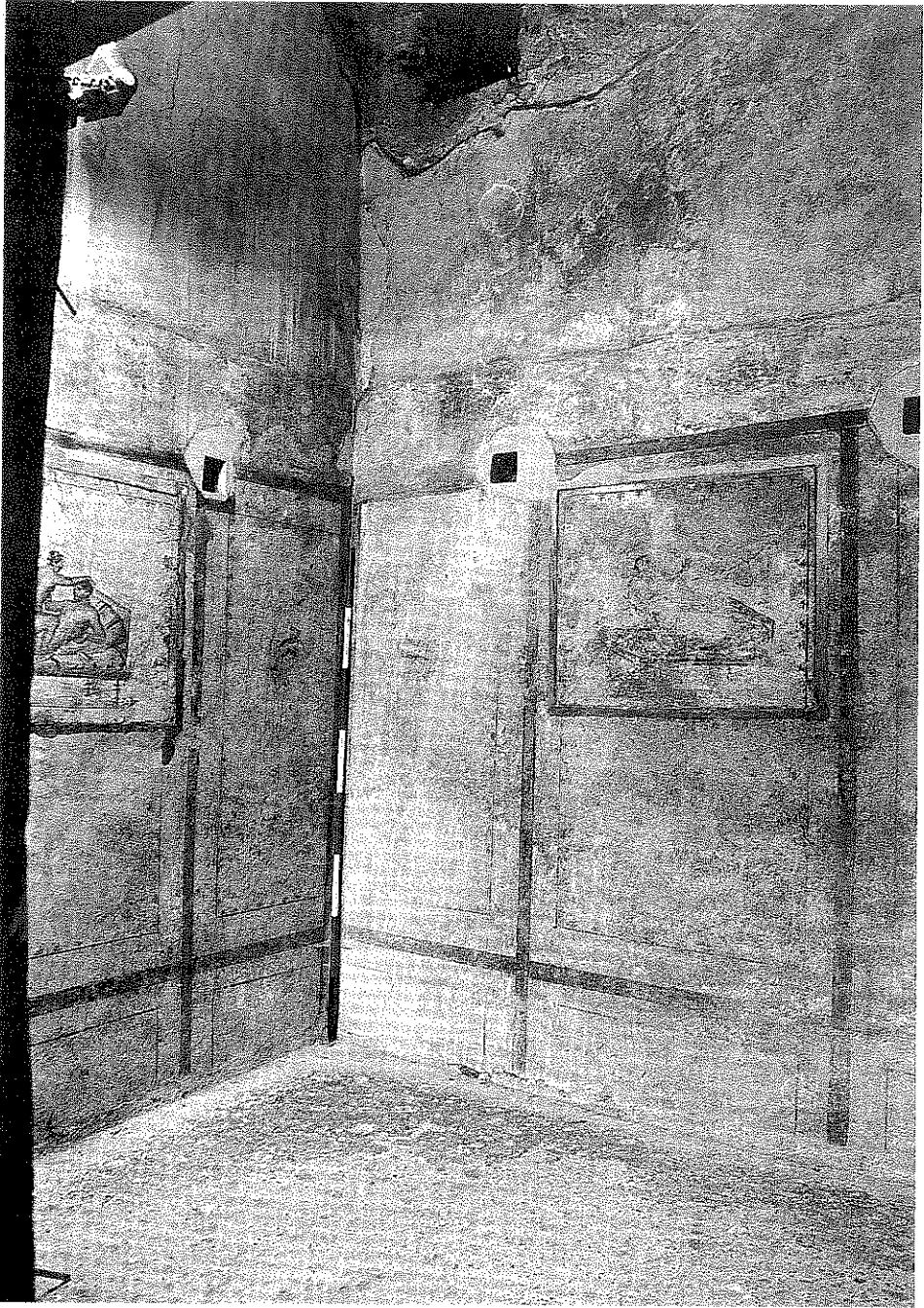


Figure 62. Pompeii, House of the Vettii (VI, 15, 1), room x', view from doorway, north and west walls (A.D. 62-79). Photo Michael Larvey.

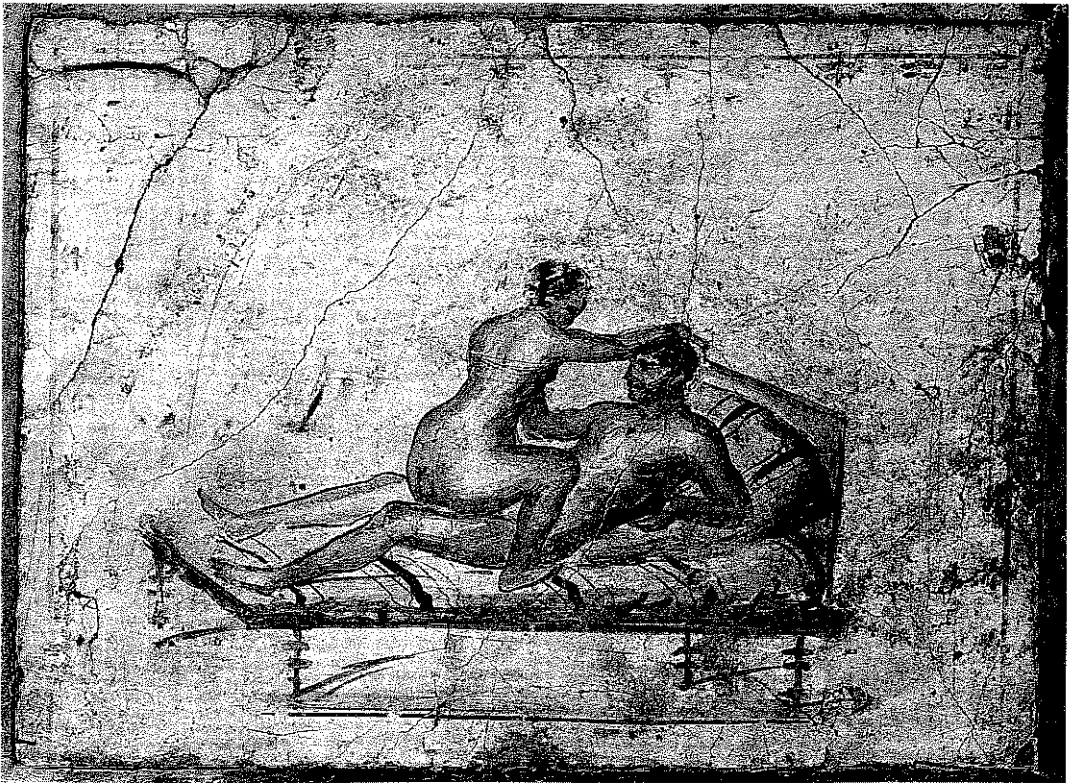


Figure 63. Male-female couple on bed, Pompeii, House of the Vettii (VI, 15, 1), room *x'*, west wall, central picture (A.D. 62–79). Photo Michael Larvey.

consisting of porphyry red, red ocher, and yellow ocher. Wide red bands divide the walls into three horizontal zones and three vertical ones, yet because the ceilings are so low the paintings take up nearly half the area of their panels. (In the photograph the meter marker, 1.60 m [52.4 in.] in height, provides an idea of the cramped nature of the space.) Square holes at the top of the middle-zone rectangles may have held beams to support a lightly constructed mezzanine.

At the center of the left (west) wall a man reclines on his back, resting on a heavy cushion and propped up on his left elbow (Fig. 63). The woman, clad only in a filmy breast band, faces him, her buttocks resting on the man's legs at mid-thigh. She leans forward slightly while resting her right hand on the man's head; the man reaches up to her unseen left shoulder with his right arm. In contrast to the paintings we have seen so far, the artist chose to eliminate all other elements of the set-



Figure 64. Male-female couple on bed, Pompeii, House of the Vettii (VI, 15, 1), room x', east wall, central picture (A.D. 62-79). Photo Michael Larvey.

ting: everything is at its simplest, from the indication of the bed's legs and their shadows to the modeling of the figures themselves.

The central picture on the opposite wall inverts the position of the couple by presenting the woman reclining while the kneeling man faces her (Fig. 64). She stretches her right leg out along the bed but raises her left up over the man's right shoulder as he prepares to enter her. The artist depicted her face in three-quarters view and gave her a calm, even nonchalant expression; because of paint losses only the outlines of the man's profile are clear. Paint losses have nearly completely erased

the painting on room x' 's north wall. A final painted element is that of an owl perched on the short south wall; it probably stands for good fortune in lovemaking.³⁸

Almost from the moment of its discovery scholars hypothesized that room x' was destined for the cook.³⁹ In favor of this supposition is its location, accessible only to someone who walked through the servants' atrium and past the large stove platform in the southwest corner of w . The odors and heat of cooking certainly permeated little room x' . In style, the paintings do not fit the profile of the paintings of lovemaking that adorned either the peristyle of the House of Caecilius Iucundus or the cubiculum of the House of the Centenary; they find their closest parallels in the relatively careless paintings of the brothel, or *lupanar*, at VII, 12, 18–20 (see Figs. 82–84). Yet it is highly unlikely that the Vettii set up a room in their servants' quarters as a brothel. For one thing, it was not a profitable business, considering the low prices commanded by the owners of the prostitutes at Pompeii, generally varying between one and sixteen asses: the usual cost is two asses, the price of a cup of common wine.⁴⁰ For another, wealthy and pretentious freedmen like the Vettii would avoid commerce of any sort within their house; this was precisely the kind of association that would remind people of their servile origins.

Rewarding a servant with a room that would remind him of the rough-and-ready *lupanars* would not be out of character for former slaves like the Vettii. In many ways the overburdened displays of complicated mythological cycles—and even the far-fetched mixtures of gods and demigods—indicate that the Vettii were adventurous and even quirky patrons. Take, for example, the unforgettable experience of entering the house: poised to the right of the door is a big painting of Priapus, god of fertility and abundance, weighing his enormous phallus against a sack of coins (Fig. 65). This bold and humorous image initiated a “Priapus axis” that culminated in the statue of the same deity in the peristyle: there he appeared as a fountain figure who spurted water from his enormous phallus into a basin. The patrons positioned him right on the line of vision established at the entryway: this visual axis went through the atrium and to the left of the jet of water spurting from the fountain-Priapus (Fig. 66; see plan, Fig. 61). Priapus belongs at both doorway and in the garden. At the all-important passageway into the house, Priapus' phallus wards away the Evil Eye. He has much the same apotropaic function as the ithyphallic Ethiopian placed at the entrance to the bath that we discussed in chapter 5. Priapus also belongs in the peristyle, there in his guise as god of fertility and custodian of



Figure 65. Priapus weighing his member against a sack of money, Pompeii, House of the Vettii (VI, 15, 1), fauces *b* (A.D. 62–79). Photo Michael Larvey.

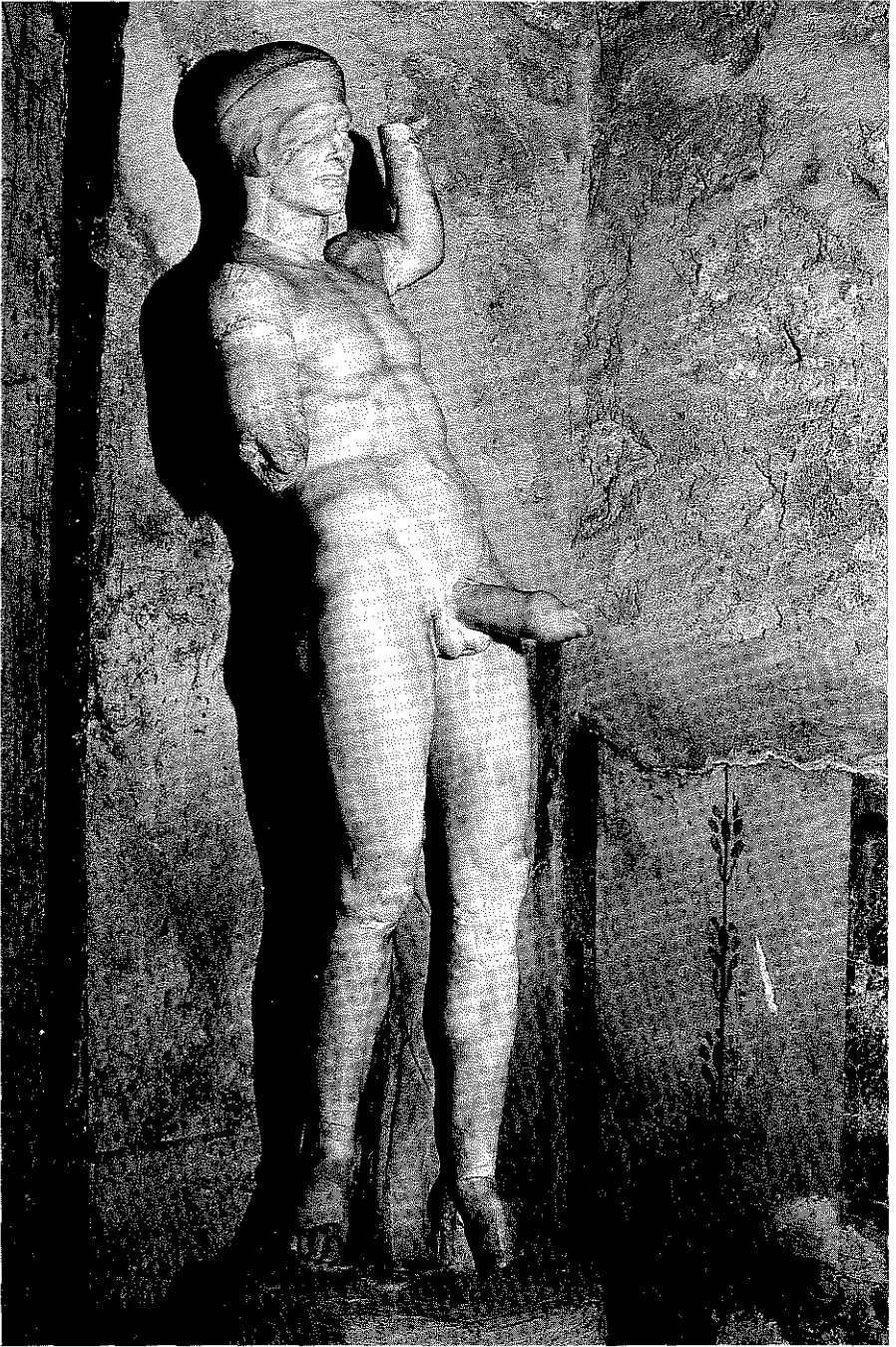


Figure 66. Fountain statue of Priapus, Pompeii, House of the Vettii (VI, 15, 1), from peristyle 1, stored in room *x'* (A.D. 62–79). Photo Michael Larvey.

the fruits of that fertility in the garden. He joins a large Dionysian company, since the Vettii brothers filled the peristyle's garden with statues of Dionysus, Ariadne, maenads, Silenus, and satyrs.

The Vettii showed a fondness for another phallic demigod, Hermaphroditus. As we have seen, artists in the Hellenistic period elaborated many representations of this deity who displayed the sexual characteristics of both male and female. Pollitt suggests that the ancient viewer regarded such representations with a combination of superstitious anxiety and reverence.⁴¹ Rather than a sexual curiosity, Hermaphroditus represented the unification of the two sexes in one deity as well as the dual nature of the individual's sexual psyche: the woman within every man and the man in every woman. In the late first century, the Vettii brothers placed images of Hermaphroditus at key positions near passageway spaces. In the house's principal oecus (*q*) the god appears in a little panel on the south wall, to the right of someone looking out to the garden. Silenus, a god in Dionysus' retinue, approaches her/him from behind; he registers surprise as he sees Hermaphroditus' prominent erection (see Fig. 15).⁴² Another image of Hermaphroditus appears over the southern doorway of oecus *p*; this time it is Pan who discovers him/her.

It is not so much the appearance of Priapus and Hermaphroditus within the iconography of the House of the Vettii—but rather their prominence and emphasis—that strikes a special note. The more we study the iconography of the house, the more we perceive that the Vettii liked emphatic—even overburdened—imagery, and that they wanted to surprise and amuse their guests. How better to achieve this goal than to emphasize the humorous representation of the phallic god, or to insert two vignettes of the ambisexual god in prominent locations? The Vettii (like many other Pompeian house owners and Petronius' Trimalchio) wanted to make the experience of entering their house vivid—even while protecting the house and its occupants from the Evil Eye. Similarly, the images of Hermaphroditus in the major reception spaces could evoke both wonder and surprise in the ancient viewer. Knowing that the Vettii brothers were patrons with a taste for sexually outlandish representations, we see in the erotic paintings in room *x'* another aspect of their unconventional taste. And knowing that they themselves were once slaves, we advance the notion that they outfitted this room as a gift for a favorite slave, most probably the cook. Once again Petronius Arbiter's account of the wealthy freedman Trimalchio offers a useful parallel—this time in his lavish treatment of his slaves.⁴³

A HOUSE-TO-BROTHEL MAKEOVER? THE HOUSE AT IX, 5, 16

If it is relatively easy to dismiss the notion that room *x'* of the House of Vettii saw use as a *cella meretricia*, or room used by a prostitute, it is because so much of the house's decoration survives. The case is much more difficult for the House at IX, 5, 16—precisely because so little survives. Sogliano excavated an entire city block (insula 5), located directly to the west of the House of the Centenary, in a rapid campaign of 1877–1878.⁴⁴ Today all the houses are in a deplorable state of repair. The only thing really left intact is a small room in the House at IX, 5, 16 decorated with pictures of lovemaking, since officials made sure that it received a modern roof and a heavy door to protect the morals of the curious. The few old photographs available concentrate on the much larger part of the house accessible from the doorway at number 14. Descriptions from Sogliano and Mau have to make up for what is today a veritable ruin; and from these descriptions emerges a house that required extensive redecoration after the earthquake of 62. As the plan reveals, there are really two houses here: one was a fairly large atrium house with a peristyle entered at 14 (Fig. 67). The letters *a* through *v* designate its rooms. The other house, accessible through a door at the back of the atrium but with a street entrance at 16, has only six rooms, lettered *a'* through *f'*.

August Mau supposed that this smaller house was a combination *caupona-lupanar*, that is, a tavern-brothel.⁴⁵ Some of his reasons are more convincing than others. He begins with the stove-platform found in the right-hand corner of the atrium near the street entrance, pointing out that it is of the type found in shops that sold heated wine. He notes that the wall with flower planter around the impluvium had scenes of pygmies painted on it. The scene that the viewer would encounter as he or she entered from the street showed a man and woman pygmy making love. This really means very little, when one considers how usual such scenes are: the elaborately painted masonry couches in the garden of the House of the Ephebe—certainly no brothel—present just this kind of scene to incoming guests.⁴⁶

Mau's strongest point is his assertion that the four erotic paintings of room *f'* (a fifth is destroyed) could be put only in a room of a building where sex was for sale. He implies that no decent person would have such pictures in his bedroom. Mau's construction of "decency" for the Pompeian owner and his guests is, of course,

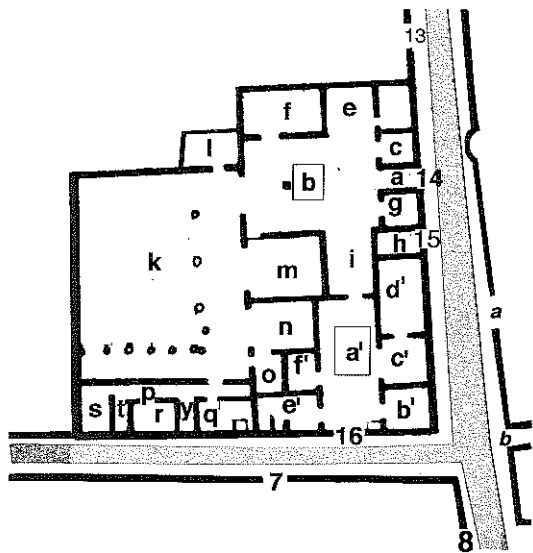


Figure 67. Pompeii, House at IX, 5, 14-16, plan.

highly suspect. As a nineteenth-century Christian gentleman of the Victorian period, Mau was the product of an acculturation with regard to sex that could find even the glimpse of a woman's ankles "indecent."

The room announced both its all-over decorative scheme and the erotic theme of its center pictures to someone entering the room from the atrium (Fig. 68). It is a pared-down version of the elegant Fourth-Style scheme of the House of the Centenary. The artist created his decoration on a white ground, probably for reasons of economy rather than for better light, since the room has both a window and a door opening on to the atrium. There are thin stripes in the socle beneath the uniform red bands that form the simple tripartite division of the median zone. Within the resulting three panels the artist created a second frame using interlaced garlands in the side panels with flying *amorini* at their centers; a carpet border frames the erotic picture at the center of the wall. Over the center of each panel two flowers hang upside down from a nail. The upper zone uses a single pattern, the swastika meander.

The central pictures of *f'*, like those of the House of the Vettii room *x'*, emphasize positions rather than the niceties of bedroom decor. They lack servants, elaborate gilded draperies, or views to the outdoors. They are not without nuance, however. The centerpiece of the wall opposite the door, although badly deterio-



Figure 68. Pompeii, House at IX, 5, 16 room *f*¹, doorway and west wall. Photo Michael Larvey.



Figure 69. Male-female couple, Pompeii, House at IX, 5, 16, room *f*¹, west wall, center picture (A.D. 62–79). Photo Michael Larvey.

rated, clearly attempts to emulate the grace of models that go back at least to Augustan-period Arretine ware (Fig. 69). Within the double frame the artist presented a closeup view of a couple on a bed. The woman reclines in a pose meant to emphasize her gracefulness and beauty. The gesture of her right arm, crooked over her head to frame her face, signifies—as we noted earlier—both repose and composed sexual readiness. The artist gave the woman a neoclassical profile. Her hair, pulled back away from her face and tucked under, has come loose at the back, like that of the woman on the Arretine bowl in Boston discussed above (see Fig. 38). The man



Figure 70. Pompeii, House at IX, 5, 16, room *f'*, north wall (A.D. 62–79). Photo Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione N 53023.

kneels on the bed and parts her legs to enter her. In keeping with the relative restraint of the scene the artist avoided the extreme sexual acrobatics of many similar depictions where the man holds his partner's legs high in the air (see Figs. 2, 40, and 64).

The decorative scheme of the north wall features two lateral panels with scenes of lovemaking that have for their frame the inner garland rather than the double



Figure 71. Male-female couple, Pompeii, House at IX, 5, 16, room *f*¹, north wall, western picture (A.D. 62–79). Photo Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione N 53016.

frame that defines the west-wall panel as a “picture” (Fig. 70). These two panels flank an elaborate candelabrum that marks the center of the wall. In the left-hand image, the man kneels facing right as does the woman, but she is crouching down; she supports her upper torso with her right elbow even while she raises her buttocks to receive the man’s thrusts (Fig. 71). The couple is not unbeautiful, although paint losses unkindly erased the woman’s mouth as well as much of the man’s clas-

sically proportioned head, crowned with ivy and turned in three-quarters view. Another feature worth noting is that the large pillow, the mattress cover, and the sham—all decorated with a pattern of a wide stripe framed between small stripes—reveal the headboard but not the legs of the bed. Was this a platform—like the masonry ones in the lupanar at VII, 12, 18–20 (see Fig. 81)—rather than a wooden bed?

The couple depicted on the right-hand panel raise seemingly unanswerable questions about the meaning of sexual body language to the ancient viewer (Fig. 72). The woman kneels facing the man and straddling him so that her genitals are near his. The artist took some pains to depict her thin and well proportioned body and head in three-quarters view; she leans back away from the man and inclines her head—perhaps coyly, perhaps intimidated by the way the man waves his right hand toward her face. Paint losses make it impossible to understand what the woman is doing with her left hand. She is either grasping the man's penis or touching her own genitals. Similarly, it is unclear what the man's gesture means, since although his right hand seems to say "stop," the rest of his body seems quite relaxed as he leans back against the pillow while propping himself up with his left elbow. Did the artist use this gesture to express, rather, the man's amazement or delight?⁴⁷

There are no images of lovemaking on the entryway wall, since the window (now walled up) and the door itself took up most of the space for wall painting. Only the right-hand panel of the south wall remains (Fig. 73). On another platform bed the woman, in profile, kneels straddling the man's hips as she leans forward to kiss him. He is reclining, his head resting on the pillow as he supports his upper torso with his left elbow. Even though this is the worst preserved of the paintings, it is perhaps the most tender, emphasizing the kiss as either prelude or accompaniment to actual copulation. The artist wanted to make the woman's profile attractive and paid special attention to her coiffure, with the hair pulled back from the forehead and gathered in curls at the back.

It is difficult to agree with Mau solely on the basis of the subject matter of the pictures in this room that this little house became a brothel when these paintings were executed. The strongest piece of evidence against Mau's interpretation is room *x'* of the House of the Vettii (see Fig. 62). Mau did not know this room at the time he decided that the House at IX, 5, 16 was a brothel, since the House of the Vettii was not discovered until 1892. In many ways room *x'* is just as humble as *f'*, if



Figure 72. Male-female couple, Pompeii, House at IX, 5, 16, room *f'*, north wall, eastern picture (A.D. 62–79). Photo Michael Larvey.

not more so. Both rooms are white-ground, with simple scenes of lovemaking painted in a slapdash fashion. Both are small rooms, with the difference that *f'* is highly visible from the atrium.

The House of the Vettii is one of the grandest of the period in Pompeii, yet even the modest House at IX, 5, 16 had large central pictures in its other rooms that looked up to high-art models. The wing *c'* seems to have had a rather ambi-



Figure 73. Male-female couple, Pompeii, House at IX, 5, 16, room *f*, south wall, western picture (A.D. 62–79). Photo Michael Larvey.

tious painting program, to judge from the painting of Medea found on its back wall. Sogliano found it to be of such high quality that he had it cut from the wall and sent to the National Museum in Naples.⁴⁸ Triclinium *d* had a number of pictures: in the center left wall was a seaport with warships. A painting of a sacred tree with a shield and two lances on it graced the center of the right wall. There were also four tiny pictures on each of these long walls.⁴⁹ Even the care taken to decorate the impluvium planter has parallels in the representations of Nilotic scenes in Pompeii's elegant houses.⁵⁰

So is this a house-to-brothel makeover? Unfortunately the answer could rest only on evidence that is no longer there. The wine-heating stove for the shop that Mau identified is a little heap of rubble today; Sogliano, in fact, thought it was a staircase to the upper story.⁵¹ Rubble is all that remains of the pygmy frieze around the impluvium-planter, and the small finds from the house were never published.⁵² There are no graffiti and no evidence for either masonry or other types of beds in room *f*. In the end, I think that House at IX, 5, 16 is simply a house-to-tavern

makeover, with one of the attractions being a room that could be used—among other things—for the occasional tryst by willing (and sometimes paid) partners. This architectural configuration does not spell the kind of production-line sex-for-sale that we will encounter in the narrow rooms of the lupanar at VII, 12, 18–20.

VENUS, PRIAPUS, PHALLUSES, AND LOVEMAKING IN A POOR MAN'S GARDEN: THE SUMMER TRICLINIUM OF THE HOUSE AT I, 13, 16

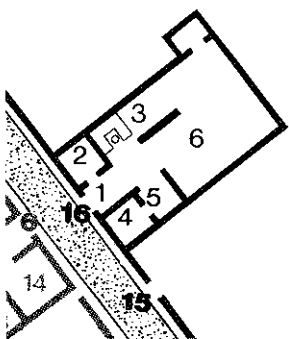
The tiny house at I, 13, 16, excavated in 1953 and published only in 1990, dates to the last period of the city's life (Fig. 74).⁵³ Yet the fact that more than half of its ground-floor area is a garden—and the care evident in outfitting that garden with an elaborate outdoor dining room—signals the importance that the idea of upper-class entertainment had for the owner. The house had only three fully enclosed rooms on the ground floor: two square ones (rooms 2 and 4) to the right and left of the entry, and room 5. The builder used the cheapest possible construction methods as he carved this house's spaces from what had been the back part of another house—the one facing north with its street entrance at number 1. He even used wattle-and-daub—known as *opus craticium* in antiquity—for the walls of room 4;⁵⁴ its Fourth-Style paintings were still not finished in A.D. 79. Room 2 had red plaster floors (*cocciopesto*) with two-tone walls: red plaster with yellow stripes below and white plaster above. Yet this obviously poor owner lavished his attention and meager means on a feature that—in refined form—belonged in the houses and villas of the wealthy: an outdoor dining room, or summer triclinium. It is significant that the imagery of this triclinium combines apotropaic phalluses with pictures of the goddess Venus, the god Priapus, and an erotic picture, for these are the elements that appear in subtler and interwoven pictorial and sculptural schemes in grand houses like that of the Vettii. This little summer triclinium presents late Pompeian attitudes toward sexual representation in their simplest and most transparent form.

Since the house lacks an atrium, the wide entryway from the street, room 1, also functioned as a circulation space. The visitor entered the summer triclinium directly after passing through room 1 and turning left. Although room 3 also opened to the garden at its eastern end, the masonry couches form a U that opens to the room's south door. Their arrangement follows that of the three portable couches

(*klinai*) that gave the triclinium its Greek name. Despite the poor quality of the decoration, both artist and patron put considerable effort into the display. Unfortunately today we must rely on photographs taken at the time of excavation, for the walls are almost illegible today. An excavation photo shows that the artist wanted to create an impressive display for the entering guest, for he loaded the north wall with imagery (Fig. 75). Although he divided the wall into the three vertical panels typical of the Fourth Style (only two are visible), he abandoned all semblance of symmetry in his placement of pictures. The tall vertical picture in the left-hand panel is a naive representation of a statue of Venus on a pedestal (Fig. 76).⁵⁵ She is nude and combs her hair with her right hand while she holds a mirror out with her other. Since she is not actually looking into the mirror, the fact that her face appears in it is all the more remarkable. On the right Priapus stands atop an unusually tall pedestal, his erect phallus half as long as he is tall. In between the two appears a strutting peacock. This picture displaced what was to be the central picture of this panel: a small, summarily painted landscape. The artist improvised his scheme to fit two marble heads—probably from statues ruined in the earthquake of 62—into his bizarre decoration. On this wall he framed the marble head of a bearded man, perhaps a Hercules, with dark red paint; he painted a garland under the head to “support” it. He fit the other reused head, a crowned Dionysus, high up on the left-hand wall—but there for some reason he placed it off center.

In the extreme upper left corner of the back wall the artist painted four phalluses. One is much larger than the others; the red border of the wall rises at this point to make room for it. Beneath are three small phalluses in three different positions: the one on the right mimics the position of the large phallus, while the other two point downwards. Paint traces indicate that these two small phalluses were ejaculating, as was perhaps also the large one.

The final element of this unusual collection on the north wall is a picture of a man and a woman copulating on a bed (Fig. 77). Despite paint losses and the meager talents of the artist, this little picture provides details not seen elsewhere. The setting seems to have been important to the artist and patron, for not only is there a door to the extreme left of the picture, but the artist took pains to represent an elaborate drapery extending along the entire upper edge of the picture. To my knowledge, the only other representation of a door in the lovemaking chamber is the half-open one that a boy walks through on side A of the Warren cup (Plate 1).



Figures 74–75. Pompeii, House at I, 13, 16. Figure 74: plan. Figure 75: Triclinium 3, north and west walls (A.D. 62–79). Photo Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione N 36692.

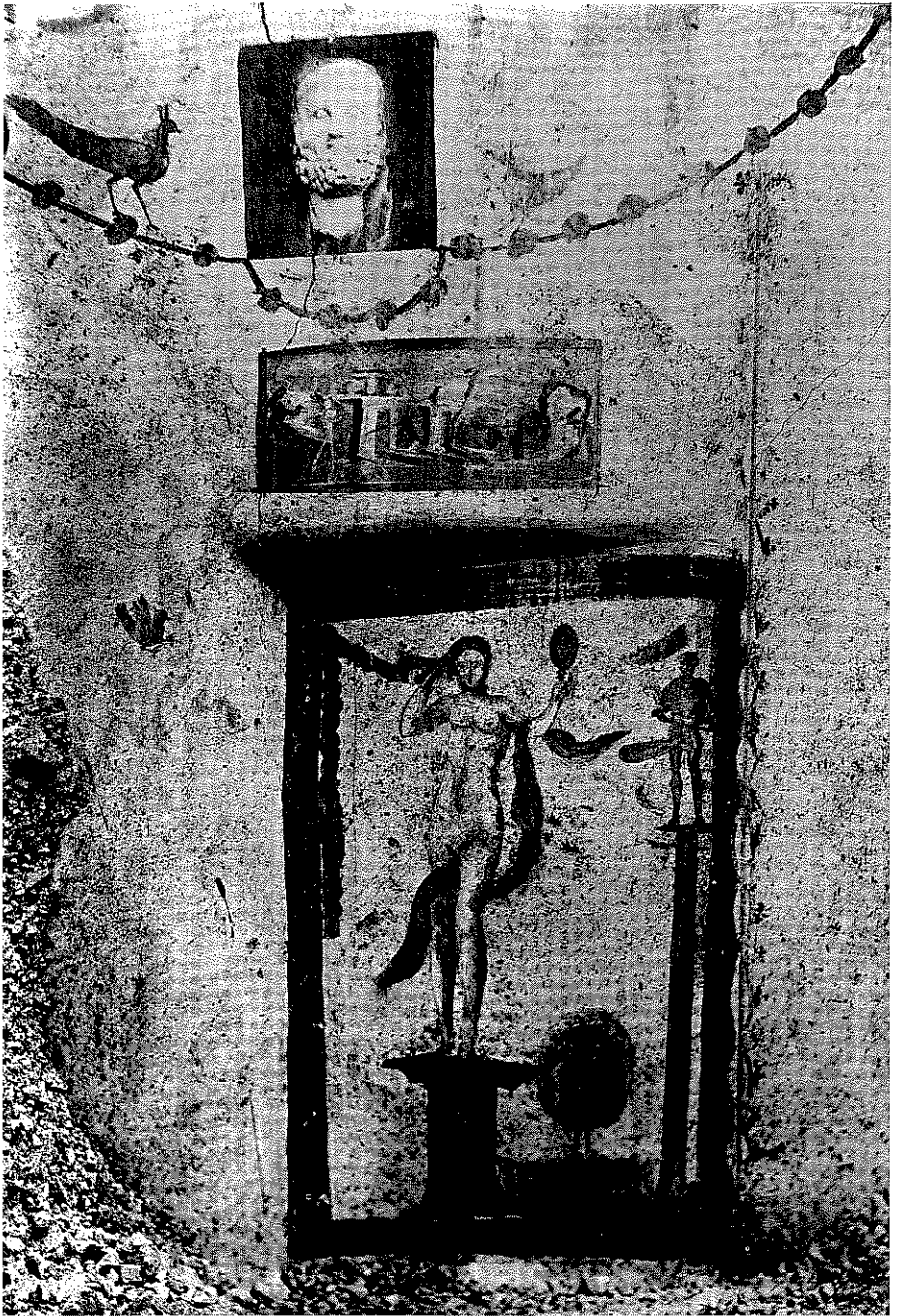


Figure 76. Paintings of Venus and Priapus and of landscape, marble head in niche, Pompeii, House at I, 13, 16, triclinium 3, north wall (A.D. 62-79). Photo Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione E 108843.

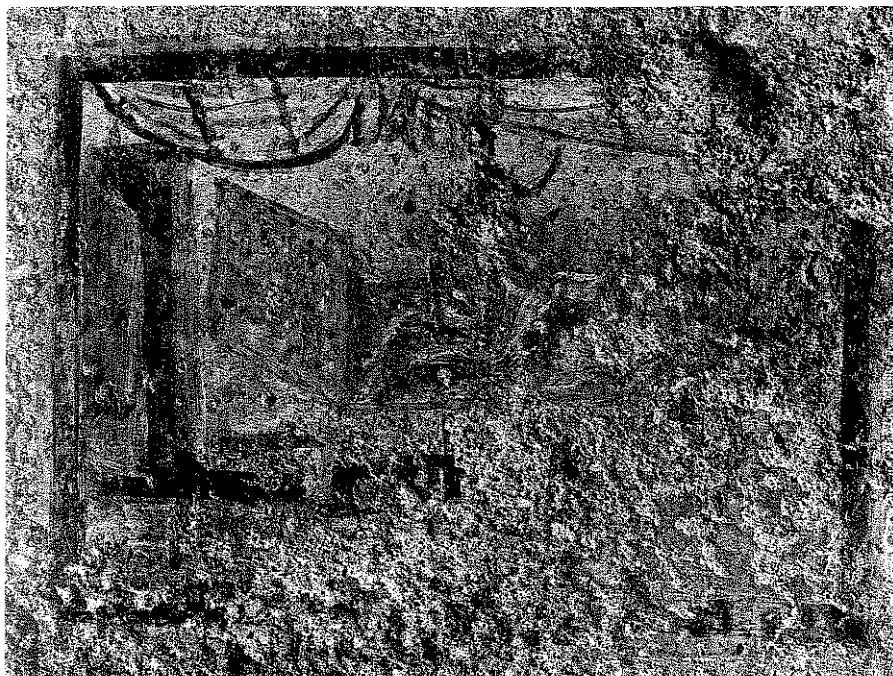


Figure 77. Male-female couple on bed, Pompeii, House at I, 13, 16, triclinium 3, north wall, central part (A.D. 62–79). Photo Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione N 57636.

As for the swagged drapery, there is a parallel in a painting of unknown provenance in the Naples Museum, where the drapery is fuller and gathered at the top center of the panel (Fig. 78). Even the bed is unusual, in that it has an extremely high headboard. Rather than represent one of the pair resting against it, the artist turned both partners around on the bed and had the man kneeling while he enters the prone woman, whose upper body (now missing) must have rested on the foot of the bed. Beneath the picture of copulation—and taking up about as much space—is a vignette of a bird pecking at cherries.

What can this eclectic mixture of imagery tell us about cultural constructions of sexuality? The seating arrangement around the triclinium's couches was highly important to cultured Romans, so that the main image in this room appears, significantly, right at the place where the guest of honor would recline. It is the consular place, to the far left on the couch against the back wall, where the picture of



Figure 78. Male-female couple on bed, from Pompeii, unknown location (A.D. 62–79).
Naples, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 27696, W. 42 × H 46 cm. Photo
Michael Larvey.

Venus and Priapus appears.⁵⁶ From the top corner of the wall four phalluses protect this guest against the Evil Eye. The host would recline immediately to the right of the guest of honor, on the left-hand couch. To imagine the niceties of the elite dinner party with its ironclad etiquette in such a humble setting may seem somewhat ludicrous, but this is precisely the fantasy that its decoration implies. Dining in the Greek fashion separates the cultured from the loutish boors, who as Martial

disparagingly notes, sit at stools to take their meals.⁵⁷ To emphasize his knowledge of the proper etiquette, the patron urged the artist to abandon the canonical symmetry of proper Fourth-Style wall decoration in order to emphasize the hierarchies in the seating arrangement.

The content of these representations reveals another naive reading of upper-class sign systems, for the artist contrived an artless compendium of the elements that belonged in the houses of the wealthy.⁵⁸ Even though this is technically a garden space, the heads inserted into the walls may allude to the portraits of illustrious ancestors that the elite displayed in the atriums of their houses. This coveted privilege, the so-called *ius imaginum*, never extended to the non-elite.⁵⁹ There are also many references to the gardens of the wealthy. Jashemski emphasizes the worship of Venus in gardens, documenting numerous instances at Pompeii.⁶⁰ In our picture she appears with phallic Priapus, who is protector of the garden from thievery as well as guarantor of fertility. The peacock who struts in the painting is the bird of Juno that makes its appearance frequently in the wall decoration of wealthy villas.⁶¹ Two more perch on the garland to either side of the bearded head. The inclusion of multiple phalluses in the upper corner of the room's principal wall might seem excessive but certainly not improper or erotic to the ancient viewer. He or she would see in them a considerate attempt on the part of the host to bless this dining place with good luck even as they warded off the Evil Eye with a quadruple threat.

Finally, the representation of the couple making love on a big bed in a room was a clear reference to similar scenes in well-outfitted interiors that appeared in aristocratic houses and villas. Here the artist displaced this picture—as in the House of Caecilius Iucundus—to mark its importance, for it signaled high culture even in this unusually poor setting.

Consideration of the erotics of display in these six Pompeian houses underscores the dangers of applying modern moral or iconographic judgments to pictures that represent sexual activity. Rather than aid our attempts to understand them, the placement in locked rooms singles them out in such a way as to increase modern misunderstanding of their ancient function and meaning. Dangers of misinterpretation multiply in cases where excavators cut them out of their original architectural contexts.

It is clear that the whole class of pictures that modern excavators considered obscene had little or no such overtones for the ancient patron and viewer. Their at-

titudes toward the display of sex were quite different from ours. Pictures of humans making love could be a sign of upper-class pretensions, an invitation to enjoy a good meal and wine-drinking party, or a play on the sexual proclivities of a cook, depending on where they appeared and for whom they were meant. In the following chapter we see that the circumstances of display were all-important to the meanings of the paintings of sexual activity in public buildings as well.



Plate 6. Male-female couple on bed with attendant, from Pompeii, House of Caecilius Iucundus (V, 1, 26) peristyle *l*, north wall, between triclinium *o* and cubiculum *p* (A.D. 62–79). Naples, Archaeological Museum, inv. 110569, W. 39.5 × H. 46 cm.
Photo Michael Larvey.



Plate 7. Male-female couple on bed, Pompeii, House of the Centenary (IX, 8, 6), room 43, south wall, central picture (A.D. 62-79). Photo Michael Larvey.