

The Reconstruction of the Villa of Serenos Season 2014 – The Art of Copying

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Introduction

After the (near) completion of the decoration of the dome last year, all that remained to finish the elaborate decoration of the Domed Room was the figurative scenes. However, the first week of the season was spent on cleaning the Villa, adding the very last details to the dome pattern, removing the scaffolding, and finally adding the very last details to the Red Room. Then were added the four Putti, who adorn the four corners of the room, holding on to fluffy flower garlands. The rest of the season, exactly four weeks, was dedicated to reconstructing the figurative scenes. My goal was to copy at least everything that was still in situ on the walls of the original fourth century Villa of Serenos when it was first uncovered.

Projecting and Tracing

As tested in previous seasons, the best and most reliable way to transfer the scenes to the walls of the reconstructed Villa was to project the original photographs onto the wall with a projector.



Since the original walls have deteriorated, shifted, and cracked over the course of time, the pictures had to be straightened out and 'restored' (closing cracks, shifting parts of the walls back in position, etc.) before they could be projected. The photographs that worked best for projection were the ones taken in 2006 for photogrammetry, because they provided a scale, were taken as frontally as possible, and were much less distorted than other photographs. The restored versions of the pictures were then projected on the walls and carefully traced with pencil while constantly checking different versions (1979, 2004, 2006) and details using the iPad.

Tracing all the scenes and figures took more or less three working days.

Since the tracings with pencil were quite faint and would have become invisible after only one layer of paint, the next step was to paint the sketches in red. Similar red sketches might have been

the first step of the original paintings, since I noticed underlying red lines on more than one figure. I am still wondering how the original paintings were constructed, since I could detect no signs of a grid or similar auxiliary lines on the originals.

After all the sketches were bright and red on the walls I could start to apply the colours.



Polis and Poseidon already as red sketch, the other gods still drawn in pencil only.

A short note on the colours: the paintings in the original villa might be faded, and some pigments even might have lost their original hue altogether. Green for instance has a habit of changing into a greyish tint. Since it would make little sense to me to reconstruct these magnificent paintings to their former glory using the faded shades, I had to reconstruct the colours as well. The yellow and red ochres (including shades of pink) proved to be quite stable, and I could recreate them by comparing my acrylic colours to original fragments from the figurative scenes. The green I used is mostly based on the still quite green wings of the Putti, which are in fragments stored at the dighouse. The palette of colours used is not that extensive but was extremely well used by the skilful painters of the original Villa.

While working on sketches for the figurative scenes I noticed that the best result, which resembles the originals as closely as possible, could be obtained by working in layers. That means that the foundation for a figure is the darkest shade of the desired colour, for instance a darker pink shade for flesh parts of the body. From there more or less transparent layers are applied, which highlight the folds of a dress or the modelling of a body. White is used only for the final details. As a last step the black outer lines and details such as eyes and mouth are added. This technique is very similar to the traditional technique I use for classical orthodox and Byzantine icons. I have no definite proof yet that the painters really worked in what I call 'icon technique', but the results of my using this method look very convincingly like the originals. Further study, especially of the original and other contemporary paintings, will most probably reveal more.



Four stages of painting Polis.

The four Putti are definitely not painted in this technique. They are very simple, and the original artist did not spend a lot of effort to shade them as well as many of the other figures are done. Moreover, they are painted in a light pink shade, with the sketchy shading applied in a darker shade of pink and a shade of red. In my opinion the Putti were done by a completely different hand, maybe even by the same painter(s) who did the geometrical decoration.

The East Wall



The first scene I worked on is the one on the east wall in the lower register, depicting a wonderful Polis seated on a golden throne. On her left side is a lively group of gods running towards the adjacent scene to witness the adultery of Aphrodite and Ares (Polis only raises her eyebrows). This scene is still more or less intact and was not too difficult to copy and to complete. Mainly the feet of the gods and part of Helios' dress were missing.

The scantily clad gods are identified by their names and their characteristic attributes: Dionysos is adorned with wine leaves, Apollo has a quiver with arrows slung over his shoulder, Hermes (and not Herakles, as Roger Bagnall noticed) is wearing his typical winged cap, Hephaistos bears a pair of pinchers and Helios has sunrays added to his nimbus. Only Poseidon seems to have nothing at all, neither his trident nor a fishy creature. Since it would have been very strange indeed to leave him without attribute, I decided to add a dolphin at his feet. This idea already occurred to Lisa Leahy, and she suggested that the triangle in front of his right foot might be the back fin of a fish (but it worked better as a tail fin). When I had everything in place (including that triangle) there was enough space for a dolphin, and I added it using classical parallels.

While working on the copies I considered various ways of indicating or not indicating what is original and what is reconstruction. In the end I decided to make no differentiation simply because otherwise the result would have looked very bizarre. Furthermore, if people want to know what is original they can always compare the copy to photographs of the original. However, I did not invent images, scenes or figures. I always had at least traces and details to build on. To help further with reconstructions I used parallels, either from the Villa or from classical art. Nevertheless, if in future my reconstructions prove to be questionable, or an alternative and more plausible solution surfaces, I can always adapt and correct the copy.



The partly destroyed scene with Aphrodite. And Ares?

Some scenes proved to be difficult if not impossible to reconstruct and complete. The right part of the Aphrodite scene turned out to be such a case. In the original, especially the lower part is badly damaged with no traces left of painting. All that remains of Aphrodite is her bust and her hands, which hold a brightly coloured veil, billowing around her head. Thus, to be able to complete the whole figure (half an Aphrodite would have simply looked awful) I had to look into parallels again. In Pompeii there are plenty of females sitting on beds, but translating Pompeii style into Serenos style proved to be quite a challenge. Why sitting? Simply because there is no space for a standing figure, or else her legs would have ended up in the geometrical pattern.



The same applies to the male figure on her right side. Lisa Leahy describes him as 'Ares moving towards the damaged red and black objects on the far right'. Firstly I have doubts that he is Ares at all, since the inscription 'Ares' is not above him but more to the left. Secondly he cannot move but has to sit just as Aphrodite does - because there is no space for a standing or walking figure. Thirdly he has no nimbus - as a god he certainly should have one (or not?). Considering this I went back to the original photos of the scene and could detect parts of the naked thighs of that male figure, definitely in a sitting position. However hard I tried, I could find no parallels for the 'damaged red and black objects' on the far right. The red object (painted over the column) resembles a wing but I have no idea what the other traces could be part of. So I could not reconstruct them at all. One hopes that a suitable parallel will turn up in the future which will enable me to complete this scene.

All that is left of the next scene in the register, separated from the Aphrodite scene by a thick black register line, are two parts of men in tunics and Phrygian caps. Again I had no parallels at hand. I have no idea what exactly is depicted here and I did not complete the scene any further than adding the head (copied from original Serenos fragments) to the far right figure.



The figurative scenes on the east wall as seen in 1979 (photograph by Peter Sheldrick) and in 2004.

After more or less completing the lower figurative register on the east wall I moved on to the second, upper, register. When the villa was first uncovered in 1979 the paintings in this register were still readily visible, as far as they were preserved. In 2004 the paintings had deteriorated badly and only few traces were left. Thus I could not use the 2004 and 2006 photographs to copy

and reconstruct these paintings but had to work with the few (and faded) colour slides taken back in 1979.

At least I could reconstruct the scene as far as possible. The whole setting is clearly outdoors, indicated by tufts of green and wavy lines. The pink columns do suggest some type of architectural setting. On the left there are two figures on thrones. Of the one farthest left only the pedestal remains, and I did not reconstruct this one. The next one (a seated female) is preserved up to her thighs and using figurative fragments from the original villa I was able to complete her. Next to her is a standing figure on a baseline and she could be completed as well, using parallels from figurative fragments. To the right of her is a rearing horse (compared to other horses on fragments from the villa clearly a horse, not a bull as suggested by Lisa Leahy), which was still fairly complete in 1979. All I had to add was a head, and therefore I had enough examples from the original villa.

In the centre of the scene a young man is depicted daintily running to the right. While in 2004 only his feet remained, in 1979 he was still complete up to his naked hips. He is wearing a dark red billowing cloak, and even the stick he is holding in his hands was still visible on the 1979 slides. To the right there are at least three more thrones with seated figures. Two are fairly complete, but with the armrests of the one furthest to the right the scene breaks off. Thus this last one was not reconstructed, but that could be done in the future since there are more fragments of figures on thrones among the figurative fragments.



The finishing touch to the completed copy and reconstruction of the figurative scenes on the east wall. Photograph by Christopher Kleihege.

The North Wall

The next scene I worked on is the one on the eastern part of the north wall, on the right side of the door. It depicts Odysseus coming home, his feet being washed in a basin by Eurykleia, who kneels before him. To the right is Penelope, sitting on a folding chair. Both women are facing Odysseus.



The Odysseus scene freshly discovered in 1979 (photograph by Peter Sheldrick) and in 2004

This is another scene that faded and deteriorated after the first discovery. On the 1979 slides the heads of Eurykleia and Penelope are still well visible while on the 2004 photographs they are quite damaged.

I faithfully copied the two ladies and the lower part of Odysseus, but due to a lack of usable parallels so far I was not yet able to make a plausible reconstruction of Odysseus. One hopes he will be completed in future, since it is a sad sight to have only half of the hero.



The (not yet completely reconstructed) copy of the Odysseus scene. The gaudy flowers seem to be a later addition, possibly contemporary with the elaborate geometrical pattern below this scene. Photograph by Christopher Kleihege.



The western part of the north wall in 2004. Perseus, the sea monster, Andromeda and the additional scenes. Slightly wrinkled but still beautiful.



The reconstructed scenes in the north-west corner. Photograph by Christopher Kleihege.

The scene on the left side of the door could be completely reconstructed. The main scene on that part of the wall shows Perseus, who dynamically steps right through the register line, saving Andromeda from the adorably fierce sea monster. Andromeda stands in front of a rock to which she is supposed to be chained. Perseus is holding a sword in his right hand (still visible on the original wall) and the head of Medusa in his left.

Luckily, this scene was extremely popular in Antiquity (no surprise), and I had plenty of parallels by which to complete the hero and the princess. The best examples, though not contemporary, proved to be from Pompeii.

The two additional scenes, obviously later additions (judged by the completely different style and use of colour), were fairly easy to copy. The left one depicts a standing figure in a garden-like setting guarding amphorae. The right one is a pretty, fairly Byzantine winged figure, clearly painted over earlier flowers.

The West Wall



The scenes still in situ on the west wall, as seen in 2004.

All that is left of the figurative decoration of the west wall is situated in the southwest corner. The rest is collapsed and fragmented.

The beautiful banquet scene in the southwest corner of the Domed Room proved to be not too difficult to copy. When freshly excavated in 2004 the painting was still more or less undamaged and working from these pictures I could produce a reliable copy. I love the pretty musician who plays the double aulos (make some noise!), an instrument very popular in Antiquity. Before him stands a servant, holding a ladle (to ladle wine from the amphora) – thus I completed him (or her) holding a glass which is going to be served to one of the guests at the table.

The scene to the right of the banquet is more difficult, since the original seems to be overpainted and fairly damaged. Thus I was unable to make a full reconstruction of that one.



The reconstructed scenes on the west wall. Photograph by Christopher Kleihege.

The scene above the banquet, showing a couple playing a game of Senet (or another board game) still provided enough remaining details to complete it. All that is left of the lady, for instance, is the seam of her long red dress (hence a lady) and her hand moving a game piece. The only trace of the cat is the tail – maybe there wasn't a cat after all, but in this one case I could not resist making a guess.

The South Wall



All that is left of the figurative scenes on the south wall: the head of a horse and a graceful figure.

Since the dome collapsed in the southeast corner of the Domed Room and buried the walls underneath a thick layer of rubble, crushing the painted plaster, the only figurative decoration on the south wall is located in the southwest corner.

However, what is left is exciting: the stunning head of a horse and an extremely graceful figure, clad in exotic clothing. Very white skin, eyes closed – maybe dead or at least dying? Slain by whatever comes on horseback (the colour traces to the left of the horse head indicate another figure)? Until matching parallels are found, I'm not able to complete this scene any further.



The different layers and stages of the graceful figure in the south west corner.

The style in this corner of the room (the southwest corner) is distinctively different from the style observed in the scenes on the north wall and the east wall. The artist who painted the southwest corner, the one who painted the banquet, the game scene and the 'reclining figure' scene added details in yellow ochre in a last step. The style is swifter than in the other paintings, but his work is very skilful. Still, the technique of working in layers, as illustrated here with the graceful figure, seems to be the same as used in other parts of the decoration of the Domed Room.

As a last step to complete the decoration of the Domed Room the dado (the lowest part on the wall) was painted green and the doorjambs of the central entrance door to the room were decorated.

This could be done thanks to Peter Sheldrick, who helped painting in the Villa on the two last days. He is a long-standing member of the Dakhleh Oasis Project and was present in 1979 when the original Villa of Serenos was discovered so it was very pleasant to have him around. His and Helen Withehouse's slides proved to be extremely helpful with this reconstruction.





Working with the iPad



Photograph by Christopher Kleihege

While planning the work I was considering my methods for copying the figurative scenes. The geometrical patterns could be painted with only a couple of pictures and a construction sketch for each pattern ready at hand. The figurative scenes are a completely different matter. Working with printed pictures would have meant hundreds of reasonable quality colour prints – and of course while working I would always discover that the one detail I really needed right then wasn't in the stack. Therefore the iPad worked miracles. With the complete documentation ready and well organized (!) in one place, the problem was solved, and elegantly so. High resolution photographs brilliantly displayed on the retina display worked extremely well. I could compare all different versions constantly, zoom into details when needed and even consult the written documentation, which proved to be very helpful at times.

Moreover the iPad Air proves to be so light that I can hold it in my hand together with the palette all day long, day after day, without getting a lame arm.

Last but not least, it was great to be able to show all the visitors the pictures of the original paintings. To be honest, I have no idea how I could have done the work without my iPad.

Experimental Archaeology

Copying the paintings can provide us with a lot of information about the originals. One interesting question is how long it would have taken the masters of the Villa to decorate the Domed Room.

I still have to make an estimate for the complete 'wallpapers' (the geometrical patterns), but it probably took no more than six weeks for two painters.

The Dome itself took Tamer and me exactly four weeks of hard work.

The figurative scenes that are still in situ were copied in four weeks, working nine to ten hours on six days a week. This gives us a nice estimate of how long the originals would have taken to complete. However, keep in mind that copying and reconstructing always takes considerably more time and effort than painting the originals in the first place. Thus, if I can decorate more than half of the available space for the figurative scenes in four weeks, and if we assume that the Domed Room was completely decorated, the original job certainly could have been done in two months' time, especially when there was a team involved.



Plans for the Future

Even though the decoration of the Domed Room is completed as far as it was preserved, and the Villa can be opened for visitors, there still remains some work which is not strictly necessary but would certainly be a great addition.



There are still a great many fragments of the original Villa stored in the fragment room, some of which depict larger parts of figures or even scenes. Since we know more or less where these fragments were found, it might be possible to reconstruct their original position on the walls. The more so, now that we have a full scale overview of the paintings in situ. Orpheus (at least the magnificent head that is on the fragment) playing his lyre to the animals definitely should be added in the north corner of the west wall. A scene with chariots and horses could be added. After more research and 'puzzling' maybe even more can be reconstructed.

Another room that remains to be decorated is the 'Purple Room'. This is mainly purple (hence the name) with a couple of figurative 'sketches'.

Last but not least Nicholas Warner designed an 'Educational Room', the one opposite the Domed Room. Here he shows different stages of finishing of the walls, different layers of plaster etcetera. It would be great to illustrate right on the wall different stages of a geometrical pattern (starting from the grid) and of a figure (Polis for instance). To add to the experience this painting could be done using original pigments and binders instead of modern acrylics.

Furthermore, as said, some scenes are still awaiting reconstruction and one hopes that they can be completed in the near future, adding more to the stunning decoration of the Villa.

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