

In the Guise of the Popular: the Deceptive Image of the *asàrotos òikos* Mosaics

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Abstract. The Roman *asàrotos òikos* (“Unswept Floor/Room”) mosaics, which were discovered in Italy and in Tunisia, and date from the end of the first to the sixth century AD, showcase a seemingly popular theme: scraps of food that had fallen (or were thrown) under the table during the banquet, colourfully displayed, appealing and appetising to the eyes. These mosaics are, in fact, Roman variations on a famous prototype created by Sosus in Hellenistic Pergamon, which was never discovered. The Roman mosaics reveal a unique tension between the display of impersonal, mundane reality in an illusory manner and the use of irony and disguised symbolism. The depiction of everyday life and elements that carry various symbolic meanings in *trompe-l’œil* prompts an interpretive reading of the artwork. The use of visual deception not only forms the ground for contemplative thought, but also enriches the reading by adding more layers of veiled meanings that need to be recognised and decoded by the viewers. This particular combination of aesthetics and iconography forms complex allegorical content. This article focuses on the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics which were discovered in Italy, and their particular combination of a popular theme, symbolism and illusionism.

Keywords: *asàrotos òikos*; Unswept Floor; Heraklitos Mosaic; Realism; Illusionism; Roman Theories of Vision.

[es] Bajo la apariencia de lo popular: la imagen engañosa de los mosaicos *asàrotos òikos*

Resumen. Los mosaicos romanos *asàrotos òikos* (“Piso/habitación sin barrer”), que fueron descubiertos en Italia y en Túnez, y que datan entre finales del siglo I y el VI d.C., muestran un tema aparentemente popular: restos de comida que habían caído (o fueron arrojados) debajo de la mesa durante el banquete, exhibidos con colores, atractivos y apetitosos a la vista. Estos mosaicos son, de hecho, variaciones romanas de un famoso prototipo creado por Sosus en el Pérgamo helenístico, que nunca fue descubierto. Los mosaicos romanos revelan una tensión única entre la exhibición de la realidad mundana e impersonal de manera ilusoria y el uso de la ironía y el simbolismo disfrazado. La representación de la vida cotidiana y los elementos que tienen varios significados simbólicos en *trampantojo* impulsa una lectura interpretativa de la obra de arte. El uso del engaño visual no solo forma la base para el pensamiento contemplativo, sino que también enriquece la lectura al agregar más capas de significados velados que deben ser reconocidos y decodificados por los espectadores. Esta particular combinación de estética e iconografía forma un complejo contenido alegórico. Este artículo se centra en los mosaicos *asàrotos òikos* descubiertos en Italia y su particular combinación de un tema popular, simbolismo e ilusionismo.

Palabras clave: *asàrotos òikos*; Piso sin barrer; Mosaico de Heraklitos; Realismo; Ilusionismo; Teorías romanas de la visión.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. The Roman *asàrotos òikos* mosaics. 3. The development of “disguised symbolism” in Roman art. 4. The arrangement of the rooms. 5. The decorative programmes of the Italian *asàrotos òikos* mosaics. 6. The depicted foodstuffs in the Heraklitos mosaic and their implications. 7. The tension between the real and the illusionary. 8. The artistic simulation as a desire to overpower reality. 9. Conclusions. 10. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

The Roman variations on the Hellenistic *asàrotos òikos* theme reveal a unique interconnection between the representation of popular, impersonal, and mundane reality and the construction of symbolic meaning. The mosaics pretend to be an illusory representation of a real occur-

rence, depicting the scraps of food which fell or were thrown on the floor during the proceedings of a luxurious banquet. Seemingly no narrative exists, and the image is meant solely as a parody or for ironic amusement. However, the aesthetic qualities remove the scraps of food from their original context, and prompt a contemplative reading of the visual text. The illusory depiction

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of scraps of food gives pause for erudite viewers to think about art's ability to deceive, encourages them to consider the brevity of life, and refers them to household cult practices². These allegorical meanings elevate the image from the depiction of humble subject matter (*humilia*)³ to a representation of reflective thought⁴. This article focuses on the mosaics that were discovered in Italy, and examines the aesthetic devices through which the allegorical meanings are created, namely the conjoining of certain elements and themes by the decorative programmes, the symbolic attributes of the depicted objects, and the deceptively naturalistic manner in which the objects are represented. The article begins by exploring the appearance of disguised symbolism in Roman art, it moves on to discuss the arrangement of the rooms and the conceptual connection between the different components of the decorative programmes, later it explains the sociocultural aspects of the depicted foodstuffs, and finally it examines the ways in which the visual deception furthers the construction of symbolic meanings⁵.

2. The Roman *asàrotos òikos* mosaics

The prototype of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics was laid by Sosos in Pergamon. It won lasting recognition due to its extraordinary illusory effects⁶. This mosaic was never discovered and therefore will not be discussed here⁷. Instead, this article explores the two Italian variations on the *asàrotos òikos* theme, and mostly focuses on the Heraklitos mosaic, as it best demonstrates how the theme was used by the Romans for the introduction of complex meanings. The Heraklitos mosaic was discovered in Rome in 1833 (Fig. 1). It decorated the floor of a *domus* located in *Vigna Lupi*, south of the Aventine Hill and in front of the Aurelian walls. This mosaic dates to the beginning of the second century AD. It consists of a border mirroring the structure of the roof, three friezes depicting scraps of food, one frieze depicting theatre mask and bearing the signature of the artist Heraklitos in Greek (ΗΡΑΚΛΙΤΟΣ ΗΡΓΑΣΑΤΟ), and inner friezes that depict a nocturnal Nilotic scene. It measures 4.10x4.05m, but was originally part of a much larger room, nearly 11m long, the rest of the floor was decorated using *opus sectile*, and the walls were lined

in marble⁸. It is housed today at the Gregoriano Profano Museum in the Vatican.



Figure 1. The Heraklitos *asàrotos òikos* mosaic, second century AD, discovered in Rome, now in Gregoriano Profano Museum, Vatican, dimensions: 4.10x4.05m. Source: artwork in public domain; photo by Alex Ripp.

A second *asàrotos òikos* mosaic was discovered in the ancient Roman city of Aquileia in 1859 (Fig. 2)⁹. It decorated the floor of a *domus* situated northwest of the basilica and southeast of the forum (the precise location of which was never marked). This mosaic dates to the second half of the first century AD, and measures 2.49x2.33m. It is displayed today in Aquileia's Archaeological Museum. The mosaic was stored in nine separate panels until reassembled in 1919-1922. Upon discovery, the central *emblema* had already been extracted, leaving only two fragments: the wings of a bird in the upper right corner, and the paw of a feline in the lower left corner¹⁰.

Apart from the two Italian variations, three more decorative programmes that include the *asàrotos òikos* motif were discovered in Tunisia¹¹. One mosaic was discovered in "Salonius House" in Oudna (Roman Uthina). According to Paul Gauckler, who excavated the site, the decorative scheme included the reuse of six (or less)¹²

² Ehud Fathy, "The *asàrotos òikos* Mosaics as an Elite Status Symbol", *Potestas: Estudios del Mundo Clásico e Historia del Arte* 10 (2017): 18-26; Ehud Fathy, "Cultic Allusions in the Heraklitos Mosaic", *Potestas: Estudios del Mundo Clásico e Historia del Arte* 14 (2019): 13-28.

³ Plin. *HN*, 35.37.

⁴ Kristen Seaman, *Rhetoric and Innovation in Hellenistic Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 30, 128-131.

⁵ For the use of ancient rhetoric (Greek and Latin) in the research of classical iconography and particularly of ancient mosaics see: Jaś Elsner and Michel Meyer, eds., *Art and Rhetoric in Roman Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁶ Plin. *HN*, 36.60.25.; Stat. *Silv.* 1.3.55.

⁷ For a detailed discussion on the use of *ekphrasis* in Sosos's Pergamene *asàrotos òikos* mosaic see: Seaman, *Rhetoric and Innovation in Hellenistic Art*, 110-131.

⁸ Karl Parlasca, "Das pergamenische Taubenmosaik und der sogenannte Nestor-Becher", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 78 (1963): 277; Michael Donderer, "Die antiken Pavimenttypen und ihre Benennungen" *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 102 (1987): 365-377; Klaus Werner, *Mosaiken aus Rom: Polychrome Mosaikpavimente und Emblemata aus Rom und Umgebung* (Würzburg, 1994), 122; Klaus E. Werner, *Die Sammlungen antiker Mosaiken in den Vatikanischen Museen* (Vatican City: Monumenti Musei e Gallerie Pontificie, 1998), 260f; Emil A. Ribi, "Asàrotos òikos-von der Kunst, die sich verbirgt", en *Zona Archeologica: Festschrift für Hans Peter Isler zum 60. Geburtstag*, eds. S. Buzzi, D. Käch, E. Kistler et al. (Bonn, 2001), 364.

⁹ In the first centuries AD Aquileia was a large and important city. At the beginning of the second century its population stood at around 100,000, and the city was characterised by religious cosmopolitanism. For a description of Aquileia during Roman times see: Strabo, *Geographica*, 5.1.8; also see: Robert McEachnie, *Chromatius of Aquileia and the Making of a Christian City* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 2, 19, 23-24.

¹⁰ Paola Perpignani and Cesare Fiori, *Il mosaico 'non spazzato'. Studio e restauro dell'asaroton di Aquileia* (Ravenna: Edizioni del Girasole, 2012), 20-22, 24, 31-36.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion regarding the perception and use of the theme in North Africa see: Ehud Fathy, "From Earthly to Divine: The Transition of the *asàrotos òikos* Motif into Late Antiquity and Early Christian Art", *Humanitas* 75 (2020): 93-120.

¹² The total number of *asàrotos òikos emblemata* is not entirely clear from the literary descriptions. In a publication from 1896, Paul Gauckler, who excavated the site, describes the following layout: at the periphery, a broad vine band and an olive serrated line; in the cen-

earlier *asàrotos òikos emblemata*, which were probably manufactured in Italy at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century AD¹³. Out of the entire decorative programme only two *emblemata* survive today. They depict scraps of food against a black background. The dimensions of each are 59.4x71.4cm, and they are housed today at the Bardo National Museum (Fig. 3).



Figure 2. *Asàrotos òikos* mosaic, second half of the first century to the beginning of the second century AD, discovered in a private house in Aquileia, now in the National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia, dimensions: 2.33x2.49m. Source: YukioSanjo, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30863754>

A second mosaic was discovered in the “House of the Months” in El Djem (Roman Thysdrus), now in Sousse Archaeological Museum (Fig. 4). This mosaic, which dates to 210-235 AD, includes a narrow frieze depicting scraps of food, which was inserted between the T and U shaped parts of the design (typical layout of a *triclinium*)¹⁴.

tre, on a white background, a reddish-brown Greek frame surrounds nine *emblemata* which are arranged “*en quinconce*.” The three medallions of the middle row are “*en mosaïque ordinaire*,” and depict birds in “a left handed and heavy drawing.” The other six medallions are extremely delicate. The middle one represents a pheasant frolicking (“*ébattant*”) on copper pots; while the other [5?] represent the *asàrotos òikos* motif, executed with extraordinary attention to detail (“*minutie*”), and therefore seem to be of Italian manufacture, see: Paul Gauckler, “Le domaine des Laberii à Uthina”, en *Monuments et mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot* 3 (1896): 213-214. In 1910 he repeats the same description, see: Paul Gauckler, *Inventaire des Mosaïques de la Gaule et de l’Afrique*, volume II: *Afrique Proconsulaire (Tunisie)* (Paris: Académie des inscriptions & belles-lettres, 1910), 132n388.3. However, in 1904 he mentions the discovery of six *asàrotos òikos emblemata*, see: “Musivum opus”, en *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines d’après les textes et les monuments* III/2, eds. Ch. Daremberg, E. Saglio, and E. Potier (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1904), 2099n5. In 1961 Louis Foucher mentions five *asàrotos òikos emblemata*, see: Louis Foucher, “Une mosaïque de triclinium trouvée à Thysdrus”, en *Latomus* 20 (1961): 297n4, pl. XVIII. However, in 1963 Karl Parlasca discusses only three, see: Parlasca, “Das pergamenische Taubenmosaik und der sogenannte Nestor-Becher”, 280.

¹³ Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27.

¹⁴ Louis Foucher, *Découvertes Archeologiques à Thysdrus en 1961* (Tunis: Impr. du Secrétariat d’État aux Affaires culturelles et à l’Information, 1961), 50; Foucher, “Une mosaïque de triclinium



Figure 3. *Asàrotos òikos emblemata*, the end of the first or the beginning of the second century AD, discovered in “Salonius House” of the third century AD at Oudna (Uthina), now in the Bardo National Museum, Tunisia, dimensions: 59.4x71.4x7.6cms. Source: Pascal Radigue, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3130621>

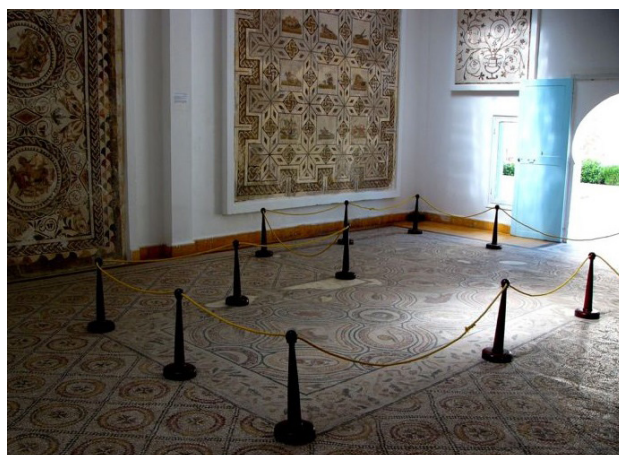


Figure 4. *Asàrotos òikos* frieze, 210-235 AD, discovered in the “House of the Months” at El Djem (Thysdrus), now in Sousse Archaeological Museum, Tunisia.

Source: artwork in public domain; photo by Reinhard Hirth, <http://www.pascua.de/tunesien-web/09-sousse-museum/mosaik.htm>

The third *asàrotos òikos* mosaic was discovered in a Byzantine basilica in Sidi Abiche. The basilica was probably constructed during the sixth century AD, or even slightly later than that¹⁵. The decorative programme included a U-shaped frieze depicting scraps of food that surrounded the nave¹⁶. Paul Gauckler, who ex-

trouvée à Thysdrus”, 293-297; Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), 260ne; Margherita Carucci, *The Romano-African Domus: Studies in Space, Decoration, and Function* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), 38-39.

¹⁵ Noël Duval, “Plan de la leçon sur les mosaïques funéraires de l’Enfida et la chronologie des mosaïques funéraires de Tunisie”, en *Corso di cultura sull’Arte Ravennate e Bizantina* 19 (1972): 118.

¹⁶ Marcel Renard, “Plin l’Ancien et le motif de l’asàrotos òikos,” en *Hommages à Max Niedermann, Collection Latomus* 23 (1956): 310;

cavated this site as well, describes the frieze as a “late and clumsy replica” (*réplique tardive et maladroit*) of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaic laid by Sosus in Pergamon¹⁷. Upon discovery, the epitaphs and some of the nave mosaics were extracted and transported to the Enfidha Museum. During this process the *asàrotos òikos* mosaic was evidently completely destroyed. Gauckler mentions a watercolour sketch of the decorative programme of the floor¹⁸. The sketch did not survive, but is documented by a black and white photo (Fig. 5)¹⁹.

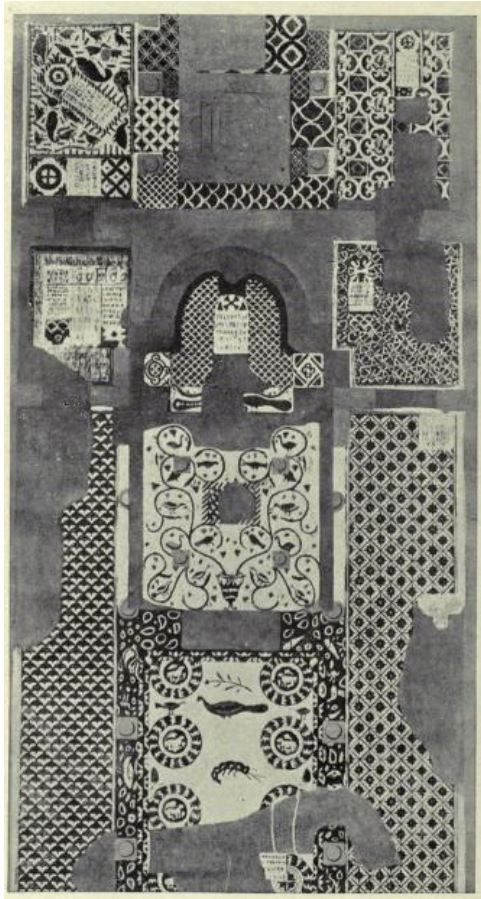


Figure 52 the floor of the Byzantine basilica excavated in Sidi Abiche, Tunisia, Watercolour sketch by M. Demont. Photo: Rev. Canon Raoul. Source: artwork in public domain, <https://archive.org/details/cellaetrichorae00fresrich/page/296/mode/2up>

3. The development of “disguised symbolism” in Roman art

“Disguised symbolism” is an idea introduced by Erwin Panofsky to explain how apparently realistic representations of everyday objects and motifs, such as flowers and

foodstuffs, could take on symbolic significance²⁰. Eddy de Jongh expended on this idea by claiming that artworks are vehicles of meaning. Their content can be explained by placing them in their original historical and cultural context, e.g. the rhetorical tropes and moralising ideas characteristic of that period’s literature²¹. Artworks which use disguising, veiling, allegory and ambiguity contain only “seeming realism” (*schijnrealisme*): semblance or the mere appearance of realism²². Although their outward appearance may offer a reflection of an everyday scene, the artworks contain hidden meanings, which the viewer must seek to decode by interpreting their symbolic or allegorical content. Similar allegorical representations can be found in Roman art. Familiar examples for seemingly decorative motifs that also carry symbolic meanings are geometric floor mosaics that represent the labyrinth²³. Pliny the Elder believes this practice was introduced to Rome from Egypt, Crete and Lemnos²⁴. He dates the first use of geometric floor designs to around the commencement of the Third Punic War (149 BC), and adds that it had come into common use before the Cimbric War (113 BC)²⁵. During the Late Republican and Early Imperial age, independent depictions of objects that carry symbolic meaning began to appear on public buildings, in private houses and in funerary art. One example is a frieze, which apparently belonged to a building in the Porticus Octaviae. The original complex, built by Augustus in Rome after 27 BC, is mentioned by Pliny²⁶. The frieze alludes to the four principal priesthoods to which Augustus belonged²⁷. Parts of ships are scattered in between: a bow, a stern, a steering wheel and an anchor. The frieze manifests the belief that the naval victory in Actium was due to Octavian’s respect for the gods, and the idea that *pietas* and virtues are the pil-

²⁰ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Paintings: its Origins and Character* (1953), reprint (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1971), 140.

²¹ Eddy de Jongh, “The Iconological Approach to Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting”, en F. Grijzenhout and H. van Veen (eds.), *The Golden Age of Dutch Painting in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 200.

²² Eddy de Jongh, “Realism and Seeming Realism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting”, en W. Franits (ed.), *Looking at Dutch Seventeenth-Century Art: Realism Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 21.

²³ For example, a mosaic from the *cubiculum* (room 20) of *Casa del Labirinto* in Pompeii depicts Theseus and the Minotaur surrounded by a geometric design that represents the labyrinth. See: Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, 11. Another example is a mosaic floor from Paphos, Cyprus, of the 3rd century AD, that depicts Theseus killing the Minotaur. The centre of the composition is surrounded by a decorative motif that represents the labyrinth. See: Zoja Bojic, *Roman Art and Art Historiography: Definitions* (Belgrade: Central Institute for Conservation, 2012), 45. For a discussion regarding the different symbolic attributes of the labyrinth, see: Rebecca Molholt, “Roman Labyrinth Mosaics and the Experience of Motion”, en *The Art Bulletin* 93, no. 3 (2011): 288.

²⁴ Plin. *HN*, 36.19.

²⁵ Plin. *HN*, 36.61.

²⁶ Plin. *HN*, 34.31; 35.114, 139; 36.15, 22, 24, 28, 34, 35; see also: Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 123-125, fig. 18b.

²⁷ It includes the *apex* of the *flamines*, the *simpvium* of the *pontifices*, the *lituus* of the *augures*, an *acerra* and a libation jug with laurel branches – which were the attributes of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*, and a *phiale/patera* of the *septemviri epulonum*, as well as an axe, a knife and a whip. In the centre appears a candelabrum framed on both sides by decorated *bucrania*.

Michele Blanchard-Lemée et al., *Mosaics of Roman Africa: Floor Mosaics from Tunisia* (New York: G. Braziller, 1996), 73-78.

¹⁷ Gauckler, *Inventaire des Mosaïques de la Gaule et de l’Afrique*, volume II: *Afrique Proconsulaire (Tunisie)*, 84n248, 84nA4.

¹⁸ Gauckler, *Inventaire des Mosaïques...*, 85.

¹⁹ Edwin Hanson Freshfield, *Cellae Trichorae and other Christian Antiquities in the Byzantine Provinces of Sicily with Calabria and North Africa, Including Sardinia II* (London: Rixon & Arnold, 1913-18), 145-146, fig. 39.

lars of the renewing Republic²⁸. More complex examples of allegorical visual representations can be found in naturalistic animal depictions, which appear in Late Republican and Early Imperial frescoes and mosaics²⁹. In some Campanian coastal town villas, the conceptual connection between the various paintings was the visual development of literary analogies, and not an explicit representation of the myths. Understanding the analogical meaning of the artistic programme was dependant on an extensive knowledge of Greek mythology and the lives of its heroes. The various paintings that make up the decorative programme were linked by a metaphor, which gave rise to a specific central theme³⁰. The interplay between the paintings was that of a rhetorical nature, e.g. “connection” (metonymy or synecdoche), “resemblance” (metaphor), and “contrast” (irony)³¹. These rhetorical tropes were put into use in order to move the feelings, give special distinction to things, and place them vividly before the eye³².

Pliny mentions a painter named Piraeicus who attained high reputation despite painting popular humble subjects, such as: barber shops, cobbler stalls, jackasses and eatables. To these he was indebted for his epithet of *rhyparographos* (“painter of sordid subjects”). Pliny notes that the paintings were exquisitely pleasing, and have sold at higher prices than much larger works of many masters³³. The rep-

resentation of mundane subjects in an “over-the-top” style is typical of the Hellenistic aesthetic, and is sometimes referred to as “Hellenistic Baroque”³⁴. Roman paintings also demonstrate great interest in realistic subjects, such as landscape painting and *humilia*: the depiction of common and ordinary objects. These so-called “humble” depictions could be divided into three main categories: the depiction of animals (*aselli*), representations of food (*obsonia*), and “gifts of hospitality” (*xenia*). The latter were food offerings made by affluent homeowners to their guests, a Greek tradition which was revived in Rome, and carried religious significance³⁵. According to Homer, it was driven by the fear the gods themselves (especially Zeus) would take on nomad form in order to put the hosts to the test³⁶. According to Vitruvius, *xenia* was the term used by artists to describe paintings which represented gifts of food delivered to the guests³⁷. The relationship between guest and host parallels the relationship between mankind and nature, in which nature provides mankind with gifts in abundance³⁸. *Xenia* depictions can conjure thoughts of Zeus, the patron of hospitality³⁹, as well as reflections on Dionysus, the god of wine who is also associated with the banquet and its sociality⁴⁰. In Roman culture and aesthetics, *xenia* does not only evoke thoughts of hospitality, but also of *vita voluptaria*: a form of living that is entirely devoted to enjoyment and lust⁴¹.

Xenia paintings also represent the agricultural abundance of the time in which they were made⁴². The agricultural abundance serves as an indication of the political and economic power of the Roman Empire at the height of its power. In the first century AD, many types of fruit were imported from Asia, including cherries, peaches, apricots, plums and quinces. While in the second century BC only fifteen varieties of apples and pears existed in Rome, in the first century AD Pliny names more than 101 varieties⁴³. *Xenia* paintings can represent the generosity of the gods, thanks to which this agricultural abundance can exist⁴⁴. Several agricultural holidays were intended to ensure the continued existence of this abundance, such as the festival celebrated every year on August 13th in honour of Pomona and Vertumnus. Some fruits are attributes of specific gods, for example a cluster of grapes evokes thoughts of Dionysus, acorns allude to Zeus, a pomegranate is reminiscent of Persephone, an olive branch of Athena, and an apple is suggestive of Aphrodite. Several North African floor mosaics, dating from the end of the second to the beginning of

²⁸ Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 123-127, fig. 18b. For more examples see: Zanker, *The Power of Images...*, 118-122, fig. 15a-c; 123-125, fig. 18a; 127, fig. 19.

²⁹ Consider, for example, the Nile mosaic from the *Casa del Fauno* in Pompeii: the fighting scene between the mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*) and the viper (*Aspis*) refers to ancient stories about the mongooses being legendary snake fighters, known for their fondness of fighting and eating poisonous snakes, such as vipers or cobras. See: Hdt. II.67; Arist. *Gen. an.* 612a16f; Plut. *Mor.* 966d, 980e; *Ael. NA*, III.22, 6.38. It can also refer to the ancient Egyptian myth about Horus of Letopolis (the mongoose) fighting Apep/ Apophis (the viper). The meaning of such a representation is allegorical: the victory of magnanimity (*magnanimitas*), represented by the mongoose, over the forces of darkness, represented by the viper. See: Antero Tammisto, *Birds in Mosaics: A Study on the Representation of Birds in Hellenistic and Romano-Campanian Tessellated Mosaics* (Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 1997), 67. The same is true regarding the seemingly realistic scene of the crocodile fighting the hippopotamus: the crocodile god Sobek, known to the Greeks as Souchos, subdues the forces of darkness represented by the hippopotamus in the Egyptian faith (*ibid.*, 63). Fighting roosters also carry symbolic meanings, for example a mosaic that was discovered in the *cubiculum* of the *Casa del Labirinto*, which depicts a cockfight with the personifications of victory and defeat in the background (kept today in Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 9982). When a cockfighting scene appears without human figures, alongside personifications and/or still life images, it serves as an allegory for victory and defeat. When the scene appears in the context of a burial art, the allegorical meaning is a struggle for survival. When it appears in the context of the gymnasium, the emphasis is on masculinity and virility. In all of these different examples one central theme prevails: victory achieved through determination, struggle and great effort (*ibid.*, 30-31). A different example is a mosaic depicting a rooster fighting a tortoise from the *Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta* in Aquileia. The church was built on the foundations of an Augustan *domus*, from which only the mosaic floor, which may have held gnostic cosmological symbolism, remains today. See image at: <https://www.basilicadiquileia.it/code/14979/foto#gallery-14>.

³⁰ Richard Brilliant, *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art* (Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 66-73.

³¹ Richard Brilliant, *Visual Narratives...*, 73-79.

³² Quint. *Inst.* 8.6.19.

³³ Plin. *HN*, 35.37.

³⁴ Roger Ling, *Roman Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 154; Michael Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 364.

³⁵ Vitruvius, *De arch.* 6.7.4; see also: Sarah H. Blake, *Writing Materials: Things in the Literature of Flavian Rome* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2008), 167.

³⁶ Hom. *Od.* 7.171-179, 14.386-389, 17.419-424.

³⁷ Vitruvius, *De arch.* 6.7.4.

³⁸ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 24.

³⁹ Philostr. *Imag.* 1.31; 2.26.

⁴⁰ Philostr. *Imag.* 1.31.

⁴¹ Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 52.

⁴² Stefano de Caro, *Still Lifes from Pompeii-Guide to the Exhibition* (Naples: Electa Napoli, 1999), 46.

⁴³ Plin. *HN*, 15.14-16.

⁴⁴ For example, consider the kidnapping of Persephone: *Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 2.

the third century AD, connect the representation of the seasons (*Horai*) with the depiction of certain plants, animals and deities⁴⁵. More specific examples of “autonomous” depictions of objects that carry symbolic significance can be found in two Pompeiian frescoes (Figs. 6, and 7). These frescoes depict dried dates and coins, which were typical New Year gifts given by patrons to their plebeian clients⁴⁶. They also include a half full glass of red wine, dried figs and what are possibly Kersting’s groundnut pods (*Macrotyloma geocarpum*)⁴⁷. The dried fruit indicate that the season is winter⁴⁸, while the overall scene refers the viewer to the typical gifts that were given to each member of the ebony and ivory workers association of Rome at their annual New Year’s meal, which included cakes, dates, Carian figs, pears, and five *denarii*⁴⁹.



Figure 6. A silver tray, dried dates in which coins are inserted, dried figs, Kersting’s groundnut pods(?), and a half full glass of wine, fresco, 45-79 AD, from the *Casa dei Cervi* (“House of the Deer”) in Herculaneum, today at the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, inventory number 8645. Source: Carole Raddato from Frankfurt, Germany, CC BY-SA, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/48/Fresco_showing_a_silver_tray_containing_prunes%2C_dried_figs_and_dates%2C_and_a_glass_cup_with_red_wine%2C_from_the_Casa_dei_Cervi_%28House_of_the_Deer%29_at_Herculaneum%2C_Naples_National_Archaeological_Museum_%2814845636045%29.jpg

⁴⁵ Certain animals and plants were associate with each different season, for example spring was depicted using a goat, hound, swallow, peacock, pheasant and rose, summer using a lion, partridge, parrot and wheat, autumn using a panther, purple gallinule, hoopoe and grapes, while winter was depicted using a boar, duck and olive. Some deities were also associated with the seasons, for example Dionysus was associated with the harvesting of grapes in autumn. For more specific examples see: Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, 158-161; David Parrish, *Season Mosaics of Roman North Africa* (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1984), chap. II.B-III.A; Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 418.

⁴⁶ De Caro, *Still Lifes from Pompeii*, 50.

⁴⁷ Originating in West Africa (Benin or Togo), fresh unshelled Kersting’s groundnut pods are sometimes boiled with salt and eaten as snacks. See: Martin Brink and G.M. Belay, eds., *Plant Resources of Tropical Africa 1: Cereals and Pulses* (Wageningen: PROTA Foundation, 2006), 99-102. <https://edepot.wur.nl/417516>

⁴⁸ *Ov. Fast.* 1.145 ff.

⁴⁹ John F. Donahue, *The Roman Community at the Table During the Principate* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 20-21.



Figure 7. [on the left hand side] dried dates, dried figs, a Kersting’s groundnut pod(?), in the back a small bag containing silver coins, fresco, 45-79 AD, *Villa di Diomede* (“The Villa of Diomedes”) in Pompeii, 27×97.5 cm, today at the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, inventory number 8643. Source: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn www.pompeiiinpictures.com (reprinted with permission).

This dialectic, between the depiction of common, popular and ordinary subjects and the symbolic expression of complex ideas, seems to be particularly characteristic of still life imagery. The representation of objects and foodstuffs, which is inherently devoid of any textual narrative, serves as “food for thought.” The objects are being subordinated to aesthetic scrutiny, which promotes introspection and quiet contemplation. By freeing the viewers from their physical appetite for the ephemeral consumables depicted, still life images reveal a truth which life itself cannot⁵⁰. In the case of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics, the theme and the decorative programmes in which it appears represent the Roman discourses about food and substance, and the intersection between moralising discussions about food and visual illusionism⁵¹.

4. The arrangement of the rooms

The size and arrangement of the rooms in which the Italian *asàrotos òikos* mosaics were discovered also raise questions about the purpose of the decoration. The design does not indicate how the furniture was arranged. During the Late Republican and Early Imperial age the arrangement of the dining room consisted of three wide reclining couches. Three guests reclined on each couch, leaning on their left elbows with their heads facing a central table. The new reclining couches were wider than the ones used by the Romans until then, as the guests would recline to the width rather than to length of them⁵². The conventional width of the new reclining couches ranged from 1.5 to 2 meters, as is evidenced by the stone couches discovered in Pompeii. For this purpose, existing dining rooms were sometimes expanded, for example the *triclini-*

⁵⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Idea* 1, trad. R. B. Halldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1909), 261-263, 275, 285; Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 358n2.

⁵¹ Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 359-360.

⁵² John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D.* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003), 226; Matthew B. Roller, *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 15-16, 45-49.

um in the *Casa del Criptoportico* in Pompeii⁵³. The dimensions of the Heraklitos mosaic are 4.10x4.05m. As the mosaic dates to the Imperial period, it is likely that the reclining couches were of the wider variety. If we assume that the theatre masks frieze was the one facing the entrance of the room, as the direction of the signature suggests, then when the couches were placed directly on the mosaic they would completely cover the food scraps frieze, and most of the Nilotic scene as well. The area left after the couches were placed in the room would be too small to contain dancers and acrobats, or the many servants carrying out specific tasks⁵⁴. A *triclinium* the size of the Heraklitos mosaic, where guests gather in close proximity around a main dining table, encouraged the formation of a single discourse that all guests would take part in, which could be held without distraction and without diverting the attention of other diners⁵⁵. The dimensions of the Aquileia mosaic are 2.33x2.49m, making it too small to accommodate nine guests reclining on three wide couches. It could have been used for a banquet entertaining a smaller number of guests, for which fewer or narrower couches (each accommodating no more than two diners) were sufficient. This more modestly sized dining room could have also served as a less pretentious “second *triclinium*,” intended for family meals, or for less formal gatherings of a limited group of close friends⁵⁶. The width of the reclining couches in relation to the dimensions of these *asàrotos òikos* mosaics indicates that during the banquet the food scraps friezes were likely not visible. This strengthens the assumption that the depiction was chosen mainly due to its symbolic significance, rather than as an amusing background to the meal.

5. The decorative programmes of the Italian *asàrotos òikos* mosaics

The artworks of Imperial Rome expressed complex ideas, religious beliefs and socio-political worldviews. At a time when the Roman Imperial institution sought to revive the cultural tradition of the Hellenistic kingdoms, the commissioning of a variation on the *asàrotos òikos* mosaic was a calculated act with a specific purpose. The mosaics were intended as far more than mere decoration. They were a visual expression of a variety of symbolic meanings, which were chosen after careful consideration and planning. In the absence of sufficient archaeological evidence, the identity of the homeowners in which the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics were discovered cannot be determined. However, the high artistic quality of the *tesserae* setting, the Imperial artistic style, and the complex iconography of these mosaics indicate that the houses belonged to members of the Roman upper

class, who were well versed in the rules and principles of rhetoric⁵⁷.

The decorative programmes discovered in Pompeii, on the walls of the *triclinia* and in some cases across several rooms, are sometimes linked by a single programmatic plan. This should also be taken into consideration when discussing the Italian *asàrotos òikos* mosaics. The Heraklitos mosaic includes several different themes, side by side. The friezes that depict the scraps of food circle the perimeter of the room, seemingly representing the aftermath of a luxurious banquet. They are the largest and most dominant ones, and therefore probably the most important ones in the programme. In keeping with the intellectual fashions of the time, they could be a part of the visual representation of the *carpe diem* theme. This theme was associated with banqueting in Roman literature and poetry, as well as in the rituals of the banquet itself. It urged the banquet’s participants to enjoy the food, wine, luxury and general hedonistic atmosphere of the event while they lasted⁵⁸. They may also allude to the Roman household worship of hero-ancestors⁵⁹. The illusionism of the depiction indirectly refers to the ancient scholarly discourse regarding the tension between tangible reality and artistic artifice⁶⁰. The other friezes relate to this central theme, and enrich it with their own symbolic meanings. They allude to cult practices which prevailed in Rome at that time: the domestic rituals of the Dionysiac Mystery (inspired by Greek drama)⁶¹, and the Roman cult of Isis and Osiris (inspired by Plutarch and Apuleius)⁶².

The Aquileia mosaic is not as complex or as extravagant as the one discovered in Rome. Its decorative programme is much simpler: it includes two colourful frames, food scraps and a ladle (*simpulum*)⁶³, a rooster sitting on a palm branch next to a large vine branch, and a central *emblema*, now missing. The two fragments that remain from the central *emblema* indicate that it depicted a cat preying on a bird, possibly a chicken. This theme is not of Pergamene heritage, and probably origi-

⁵³ By contrast, in Herculaneum more single reclining couches were discovered than the wider variety. See: Carucci, *The Romano-African Domus*, 49n109-110.

⁵⁴ Sen. *Ep.* 47.5-9.

⁵⁵ Carucci, *The Romano-African Domus*, 49.

⁵⁶ Carucci, *The Romano-African Domus*, 51.

⁵⁷ Fathy, “The *asàrotos òikos* Mosaics as an Elite Status Symbol”, 6, 17.

⁵⁸ Petron. *Sat.*, 34; see also: Katherine M.D. Dunbabin: “‘Sic erimus cuncti...’ The Skeleton in Greco-Roman Art”, *Jahrbuch des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 101 (1986): 196-203, 212-213, 224-228; Peter Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 60-61; Paul Zanker, *Roman Art* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010), 27-32; Fathy, “The *asàrotos òikos* Mosaics as an Elite Status Symbol”, 18-26.

⁵⁹ George Wicker Elderkin, “Sosos and Aristophanes”, en *Classical Philology* 32, no. 1 (1937): 75.

⁶⁰ Pl. *Resp.* 10.601a-603b; Vitruvius. *De arch.* 7.5.3-4; see also: John R. Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration* (Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 49-50.

⁶¹ Elizabeth de Grummond, “Bacchic Imagery and Cult Practice in Roman Italy”, en Elaine K. Gazda (ed.): *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii: Ancient Ritual, Modern Muse* (Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology and the University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2000), 75-78; Fathy, “Cultic Allusions in the Heraklitos Mosaic”, 13-20.

⁶² Plut. *Mor. De Is. et Os.* 351c-384c; Apul. *Met.* 11.24-30; see also: Fathy, “Cultic Allusions in the Heraklitos Mosaic”, 20-28.

⁶³ Petron. *Sat.*, 34; see also: Fathy, “Cultic Allusions in the Heraklitos Mosaic”, 12.

nated in Alexandria⁶⁴. The battle between feline and bird could be interpreted as an allegory of *psychomachia*⁶⁵. However, its proximity to the *asàrotos òikos* theme indicates that it was more likely intended as an allegory of the brevity of life and its cessation.

This reading of the decorative programmes as a whole, helps to demonstrate the ways in which the Italian *asàrotos òikos* mosaics utilise the four master tropes of rhetoric: the depiction of still life serves as a metaphor of the transient nature of all material things, the food scraps function as a metonymy of the luxurious banquet, the *asàrotos òikos* theme can be seen as a synecdoche of the Hellenistic kingdoms, and the irony originates from the act of depicting food waste in lavish colours, in highly detailed mosaics that costed a fortune, and which will have outlived their subjects (and patrons) by thousands of years⁶⁶.

6. The depicted foodstuffs in the Heraklitos mosaic and their implications

The foodstuffs depicted in the Heraklitos mosaic do not conform to the Roman sumptuary laws, or to the traditional Roman code of conduct known as *mores maiorum* (“ancestral customs”). On the contrary, they represent an extreme version of abundant living, hedonism, refined tastes, connoisseurship and *luxuria*. Many are seafood scraps, such as: lobsters, sea urchins, oysters, and squid (Figs. 8, 9). Also depicted are shells of Mediterranean predatory sea snails, which include the jagged shells of *Bolinus brandaris* (“purple dye murex”), the stripy shells of the *Hexaplex trunculus* (“banded dye murex”), and *Stramonita haemastoma* (“red-mouthed rock shell”), all of which were used by the ancients to produce the Tyrian purple fabric dye for the royal robes⁶⁷. Other items that can be identified are dates and date seeds, which were imported from the Middle East, as well as black mulberry (*Morus nigra*) and cherries, which were brought to Rome from Western Asia⁶⁸. Ginger (*Zingiberi*) is also depicted. According to Dioscorides, ginger was preserved and imported from India to Italy in ceramic jars, and was eaten together with its pickling juices to aid digestion⁶⁹. The mosaic also depicts the rhizome of the pink lotus flower (*Nelumbo nucifera*), native to East-

ern India. According to Athanasius, lotus rhizomes were boiled and served in banquets as early as the second century BC⁷⁰. Dioscorides notes that pink lotus rhizomes (*Kuamos Aiguptios*) are good for the stomach and aid digestion⁷¹.



Figure 8. Parts of lobster, halved sea urchin, oysters, squid, rib, *Bolinus brandaris* (“purple dye murex”) and *Stramonita haemastoma* (“red-mouthed rock shell”), nuts, almonds, acorns, a fig, a date and a date seed, cherries, a fish skeleton, a bone, olives, slices of yellow apple and melon(?), pomegranate seeds and two types of green leaves. Detail from the Heraklitos mosaic (fig.1). Source: artwork in public domain; photo by Alex Ripp.



Figure 9. Parts of lobster, halved sea urchin, oysters, squid, *Hexaplex trunculus* (“banded dye murex”), *Bolinus brandaris* (“purple dye murex”) and *Stramonita haemastoma* (“red-mouthed rock shell”), nuts, almonds, acorns, black mulberry (*Morus nigra*), ginger (*Zingiberi*), the rhizome of the pink lotus flower (*Nelumbo nucifera*), a fish skeleton, bones, green grapes, pomegranate seeds, broken branches and torn leaves. Detail from the Heraklitos mosaic (Fig.1). Source: artwork in public domain; photo by Alex Ripp.

Less exotic and expensive items are also depicted, such as fish, poultry, nuts, almonds, acorns, a small pinecone, figs, green and red grapes, olives, pomegranate seeds, and yellow slices of apple and possibly melon. Interestingly, the depiction represents crops that bloom and ripen at different seasons side by side. Almonds

⁶⁴ Tammisto, *Birds in Mosaics*, 75-76.

⁶⁵ Henning Wrede, “Monumente der antikaiserlich-philosophischen Opposition”, *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 102 (1987): 384-390; Tammisto, *Birds in Mosaics*, 91, 302-303n641.

⁶⁶ In the Tunisian mosaics, the *asàrotos òikos* theme plays a much less prominent role in the larger decorative scheme, suggesting that the motif was mostly used for its decorative elements, was probably associated with the changing of the seasons and the abundance of the land, and represented a nostalgic yearning for a previous age of enlightenment and prosperity. See: Fathy, “From Earthly to Divine: The Transition of the *asàrotos òikos* Motif into Late Antiquity and Early Christian Art”, 108-110.

⁶⁷ Verg. *Aen.* 4.462; Hor. *Carm.* 2.16.36; Tib. *Tibylli aliorvmque carminvm libri tres*, 2.4.28; Sulpicia, *Elegiarum*, 11.13; see also: Meyer Reinhold, *History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity* (Bruxelles: Latomus, 1970), 29, 50-53.

⁶⁸ A cultivated cherry is recorded as having been brought to Rome by Lucius Licinius Lucullus from north-eastern Anatolia, also known as the Pontus region, in 72 BC. See: Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 38.2-41.6.

⁶⁹ Dioscorides, *De materia medica*, 2.190.

⁷⁰ Ath. 3.72b-73b.

⁷¹ Dioscorides, *De materia medica*, 2.128.

bloom in early spring, but their fruit ripens in early autumn. Pomegranate and grapes ripen in early autumn too, whereas nuts ripen at the end of autumn. Cherries and mulberries ripen in late spring. Apples ripen at the beginning of summer, and the main ripening period of the figs is at the height of summer. The ripening of dates begins in the end of the summer and ends in late autumn. Hence, the Heraklitos mosaic does not represent a specific time of year, but an abundance of agricultural produce consumed throughout the year.

Broken branches and torn leaves are scattered among the items. Some of the leaves are depicted as large, long and widening; they are green and have white midribs. These are probably lettuce or mangold leaves⁷². Lettuce was brought to Rome from Cappadocia, and can therefore be considered part of the foreign items imported from the colonies⁷³. The rest of the leaves are thin, pointy, and show signs of withering. Those still attached to the branch resemble bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) leaves, and therefore could be remnants of the laurel wreaths that adorned the heads of guests during the banquet. The few pointy leaves that are scattered among the food scraps were previously identified as fish skins⁷⁴. Yet, the detailed depiction offers no evidence of fish scales, and this claim cannot explain the brown stains at their pointed edges.

Food that appears in Roman literature is sometimes loaded with additional meanings. Roman writers appear to have a wide repertoire, and the connotations depend on the context⁷⁵. The visual representation of food in the Heraklitos mosaic also holds symbolic meanings. The foodstuffs are expensive, they do not represent the traditional Roman cuisine, and some are imported from faraway places. The multiplicity of seafood has a specific connotation with luxury. Seneca uses expensive seafood as a metaphor in a reproach he made against intolerance, greed, and the blurring of moral boundaries in Rome⁷⁶. The representation of expensive and exotic foodstuffs on the banquet's floor seems fitting for a patron who resided on the Aventine Hill, which was a favourite lo-

cation for wealthy foreign traders⁷⁷. The items depicted in the Heraklitos mosaic, which were brought to Rome from faraway places, could also be considered a political statement about the power of Imperial Rome⁷⁸. Suetonius delivers a gastronomic description of a dish named "Minerva's Shield," which consists of hake livers, pheasant and peacock brains, flamingo tongues, and lamprey testicles, all brought by Roman warships captains from across the empire: from Parthia in the east to the Spanish Straits in the west⁷⁹. This dish represents in miniature the Imperial conquest of the ancient world⁸⁰. In a similar fashion, the Heraklitos mosaic could represent the patron's ability to import culinary delicacies from the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire.

7. The tension between the real and the illusionary

The original *asàrotos òikos* mosaic, laid by Sosus in Pergamon, won recognition and esteem due to the highly illusory depiction of realistic objects⁸¹. The Roman variations on the theme, which were manufactured in workshops in Italy during the first and second centuries AD, also gained reputation for their minute attention to detail, high level of naturalism, lavishness, and deceptive optical effects. However, while the subject matter may be realistic, the depiction itself does not match the literary descriptions of the appearance of the *triclinium* floor during and after the banquet. Quintilian cites a lost essay by Cicero (*pro Gallio*) that described a luxurious feast (*convivium luxuriosum*), in which people were reeling under the influence of wine, or still hungover from yesterday's drinking. The floor was foul with wine-smears, covered with half-withered wreaths and littered with fish bones⁸². Lucian criticises lavish dining venues, where the floors are sprinkled with wine, saffron and spices, and the guests smother themselves in roses during midwinter, and put the garlands under their nostrils, so that they could snuff up the smell to their hearts' content⁸³. Many times, for its protection, the *triclinium* mosaic floor was covered with sawdust on which red flowers were scattered⁸⁴. Horace notes that although the price of brooms, sawdust and napkins is marginal, it would be a grave mistake to forget them, and as a result to later have to clean the precious floor mosaics with a dirty broom⁸⁵. The red flowers may be related to the Dionysian theme of the banquet, since although vine and ivy are the com-

⁷² Ribi, "Asàrotos òikos-von der Kunst, die sich verbirgt", 365; Werner, *Mosaiken aus Rom*, 122.

⁷³ Mart. 10.48; Hor. *Sat.* 2.8; see also: Patrick Faas, *Around the Roman Table: Food and Feasting in Ancient Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 27.

⁷⁴ Bernard Andreae, *Antike Bildmosaiken* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 2003), 51 cf. Mona Hornik, *Asarota und Xenia*, PhD Diss. (Marburg: Philipps-Universität, 2015), 96n29.

⁷⁵ For example, Athenaeus claims that figs signify flattery, and that salty fish signifies lewd sexual acts (Ath. 8.342c). According to Artemidorus, figs that appear in a dream indicate deception, while meat and salted fish are seen as procrastination and a waste of time (Artem. *Oneirocritica*, 73.71). See also: Emily Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 32-36.

⁷⁶ Sen. *Ep.* 95.26-29. Real life conduct, however, did not always coincide with such moral rhetoric, as suggested by one of Horace's satires. Davus, a free speaking slave, charges the author with inconsistency, professing contentment with a modest dinner of plain garden fare at home, but eagerly rushing upon receiving a last minute summon to a luxurious dinner from Maecenas, and secretly preferring a feast of endless indulgences (*epulae sine fine petita*) over a light snack (*tenuis victus*). See: Hor. *Sat.* 2.6.1, 4; 2.7.29-32, 107.

⁷⁷ During the Imperial Era, the Aventine Hill became more affluent and home to some important people, e.g. future Emperor Trajan and his close friend the senator Lucius Licinius Sura. See: Garrett G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 113-114.

⁷⁸ Other parallels for foreign and expensive goods constituting a political statement about the power of Rome can be drawn, in particular Pliny the Elder's protest about the increasing use of expensive marble in private dwellings. See: Plin. *HN*, 35.1.

⁷⁹ Suet. *Vit.* 13

⁸⁰ Gowers, *The Loaded Table*, 36.

⁸¹ Plin. *HN*, 36.60; Stat. *Silv.* 1.3.55.

⁸² Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 8.3.66.

⁸³ Luc. *Nigr.* 31-32.

⁸⁴ Donahue, *The Roman Community at the Table During the Principate*, 132.

⁸⁵ Hor. *Sat.* 2.4.70-95.

mon plant attributes of Dionysus, violets and roses are also associated with the god⁸⁶. In Trimalchio's banquet, when the slaves prepare the *triclinium* for the next dish, they sprinkle sawdust coloured with saffron and vermilion. To the amazement of the narrator, they also sprinkled powdered talc, probably made from a precious stone⁸⁷. According to Macrobius, when the quaestors invited Metellus to a banquet, saffron was scattered on the floor along with other ornaments typical of the temple⁸⁸. By contrast, the floors of the Italian *asàrotos òikos* mosaics are shining in their cleanness, while the individual food scraps are arranged on the floor separately, and at regular intervals. Completely absent from the depictions are the stains of spilt wine, the saffron coloured sawdust and the scattered flowers, making it difficult to argue that the mosaics accurately mimic the realistic look of the *triclinium* floor during or after a luxurious banquet⁸⁹. The harmonious composition, the careful arrangement of the objects, and the sterility of the depiction contradict the apparent realism. A fresco from the *triclinium* of *Casa di Bacco* in Pompeii (completed after the earthquake of 62 AD), which depicts the last stages of a banquet, offers an interesting comparison (Fig. 10). The portrayal differs from the idealistic depictions of the Greek-style banquet, favoured by patrons and painters of the first century AD. The ideal couples and stereotypical scenes are replaced with scenes of real people and the realistic ways in which they celebrated⁹⁰. Small objects are scattered on the floor, but these are red petals and not food scraps. This strengthens the assumption that the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics did not aim to create a "realistic" representation of the floor, but to engage guests in conversations about the representations, commenting about the effectiveness of the trompe-l'œil rendering, or attempting to identify the foodstuffs.

The Italian manufactured *asàrotos òikos* mosaics depict each individual item accurately and in great detail. In this respect alone can the mimicking of reality be discussed. Philostratus emphasises the importance of illusionism, yet warns his students not to praise an insignificant feature of the painting that has solely to do with imitation. Instead, he argues, one should praise its cleverness or appropriateness. These, he believes, are the most important elements of art⁹¹. The admiration of

a painting should be mainly related to the ideas it can raise in the thought streams of the reflective observers. The flux of thought should not be idiosyncratic or based on subjective associations. Instead, the reading should be done in accordance with the public codes of identification⁹². Philostratus describes an active way of viewing art: first the viewers notice the different objects and are impressed by their verisimilitude, later their stream of consciousness moves away from the image in favour of reflections on Dionysus, the process of turning grapes into wine, the collecting of honey, the making of cheese, the effects of the food on the body, and the effects of the passing of time on the food (as a possible metaphor for the passing of youth?). Finally their thoughts turn to culinary connoisseurship and to the physical pleasures of consuming these foods⁹³. Not only the foodstuffs, but also the inclusion of theatre masks in the Heraklitos mosaic refers to Dionysus, who in addition to being the patron of the theatre is also the god who oversees changes in consciousness, recognition and perception. It seems that the representation of objects was only the starting point in an intellectual journey of varied associations and reflections.



Figure 10. "End of the Banquet", fresco, before 62 AD, west wall of the *triclinium* (room 15), *Casa di Bacco*, Pompeii, today at the National Museum of Archaeology, Naples, inventory number 120029. Source: artwork in public domain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_ancient_Rome#/media/File:Pompeii_family_feast_painting_Naples.jpg

One prominent feature of the Roman approach to floor mosaic design is the desire to create uncertainty in the viewer about the perception of spatial depth⁹⁴. The designs challenge the perception of the floor as opaque and solid, and create a lack of spatial clarity. The dualistic effect on perception is stronger than in frescoes, as the viewers are in direct physical contact with the sur-

⁸⁶ For example, a song in honour of Dionysus (*dithyrambos*) by Pindar (Pind. *Ol. Pyth.* "frg. 75 SnM") describes the celebrations held in honour of Semele, mother of Dionysus. At the opening of the chamber of the *Horai*, lovely tresses of violets are flung on the immortal earth, and roses are entwined in the hair. See: John Sandys, *The Odes of Pindar* (London: William Heinemann, New York: The McMillan Co., 1915), 552, 555; Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1965, 159; Xavier Riu, *Dionysism and Comedy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 108n58.

⁸⁷ Petron. *Sat.* 68; see also: François Mazois, *Le Palais de Scourus, ou Description d'une maison romaine, fragment d'un voyage fait à Rome, vers la fin de la République, par Mérovir, prince des Suèves* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1819, reprint 1859), 256.

⁸⁸ Macrobius. *Sat.* 3.13.7-8.

⁸⁹ Eric M. Moormann, "La bellezza dell'immondezza: Raffigurazioni di rifiuti nell'arte ellenistica e romana", en *Sordes Urbis: La eliminación de residuos en la ciudad romana*, eds. X. Dupré Raventós and J. A. Remolà Vallverdu (Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2000), 89.

⁹⁰ Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 245.

⁹¹ Philostr. *Imag.* 0, 1.9.

⁹² Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 21.

⁹³ Philostr. *Imag.* 1.31; 2.26.

⁹⁴ Richard Brilliant, *Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine* (London: Phaidon, 1974), 136-138.

face on which the illusory space is depicted, walking on it or standing inside of it⁹⁵. The virtuosic deception of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaic was so well known throughout antiquity that “*asàrotos òikos*” became a general term for describing any mosaic that was superbly refined or of a particularly high quality. At the end of the first century AD, when Statius wants to express his astonishment at a mosaic floor so outstanding in its quality, he describes it as being superior to the *asàrotos òikos* mosaic, adding that awe filled him as he stepped on the floor⁹⁶. The use of trompe-l’œil was an important feature in ancient Greek still life depictions, as evident in some of Pliny’s tales, most notably the painting competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius⁹⁷. According to the story, the illusory painting does more than just imitate reality. It trespasses the distinctive thresholds which separate the real from the illusionary⁹⁸. It is a reflection upon the gap that exists in illusory painting between the tangible and the imagined, between the actual object and the object built by the subject’s gaze⁹⁹. The seductive powers of such deceptive depictions worried philosophers, who feared their influence on morality. Plato viewed imitation as an exploitation of the confusion that exists in our souls, which falls nothing short of witchcraft¹⁰⁰. At the same time, the virtuosity in imitating reality was also considered a measure of the artists’ ability, and contributed to their commercial success and to the publicity of their artworks¹⁰¹. In addition, the use of illusionism is more typical of the Roman Imperial Style, which had come to be associated with cultivation, urbanism and artificiality (Greek *luxuria*), while the art of ordinary Romans, which utilised a kind of explicit, non-illusionistic, even pragmatic realism, came to be associated with a more rural and natural state of living (*mores maiorum*)¹⁰². Thus, in the Italian *asàrotos òikos* mosaics not only the choice of expensive foodstuffs but also the choice of aesthetics, and in particular the extensive use of trompe-l’œil, manifested a particular moral stance: a reluctance to obey Roman sumptuary laws (aimed at outlawing excessive banqueting and clothing), to bow to the opinions of moralists, or to continue living in the rustic tradition and in the way of the ancestors. Instead, the representation aimed at devising a fantastic atmosphere of Hellen-

ic splendour, hedonism, abundance and superfluity; far beyond what ever truly existed in Greece.

8. The artistic simulation as a desire to overpower reality

Rome’s economy during the Imperial period was characterised by a vast and unrestrained accumulation of wealth, followed by unprecedented, exaggerate, even megalomaniac consumption. The power relations between the classes were often based on violence. For example, Trimalchio brutally punishes his slaves, in front of his guests’ eyes, for various trifles. The violence is also manifested by the misery of the banquet’s guests, who are on the verge of bankruptcy while Trimalchio ponders the idea of acquiring Sicily. The dinner table conversation revolves around various violent topics, such as gladiator wars, or Caesar, who without hesitation executed a glass blower who claimed he knew the secret of creating unbreakable glass¹⁰³. The connection between nutrition and violent control also appears in the anecdotes about Elagabalus. It is said that the Emperor frequently served his “parasites” with food made of wax, wood or ivory, pottery, and sometimes even marble or stone. All the dishes Elagabalus ate were also served to his guests, except made from a material that could only be observed. Throughout the meal, with every dish, the guests would drink and wash their hands, as if they were actually eating¹⁰⁴. It is said that Elagabalus served his courtiers with glass-made meals, or would sometimes send to their tables only napkins embroidered in the delicacies served to him. In other cases, paintings were presented to the courtiers instead of real food, so that the entire meal was served to them, as it were, via artistic representation only, while they were constantly tormented by their hunger (*fame macerarentur*)¹⁰⁵. These anecdotes, although probably not true, demonstrate that power is expressed in the ability to control reality by transferring it, through representation, to a pure simulation. It is a process of violently cultivating nature, which takes place through the exchange of the real with the imaginary.

In the realm of artistic representation, power emerges as the ability to control the process of simulation¹⁰⁶. One extreme example is a portrait that Nero commissioned, which measured 36 meters in height¹⁰⁷. A different example can be found in the frescoes of the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor (discovered in Boscoreale), in which a natural cave is viewed in simulation alongside a window overlooking real landscape (Fig. 11). The same approach appears, in a more minor way, in artworks that depict foodstuffs. The first century sculptor Possis created apples and grapes so convincingly that the viewer could not distinguish them from the real thing¹⁰⁸. Possis’s period of work parallels the second style of Pompeian wall painting, which used per-

⁹⁵ Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 33-34.

⁹⁶ Stat. *Silv.* 1.3.55.

⁹⁷ Zeuxis painted grapes painted so naturally that the birds flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited. Parrhasius, on the other hand, exhibited a curtain, drawn with such singular truthfulness, that Zeuxis haughtily demanded that the curtain should be drawn aside to let the picture be seen. Upon finding his mistake, Zeuxis acknowledged his defeat, for that whereas he himself had only deceived the birds; Parrhasius had deceived him, a fellow artist. See: Plin. *HN*, 35.36.

⁹⁸ Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 31-32.

⁹⁹ Jaś Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 89-90.

¹⁰⁰ Pl. *Resp.* 10.601a-603b.

¹⁰¹ Plin. *HN*, 35.37.

¹⁰² Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, *Rome: The Late Empire, Roman Art A.D. 200-400*, trad. Peter Green (New York: George Braziller, 1971); Paul Zanker, “Grabreliefs römischer Freigelassener”, en *Jahrbuch des deutschen archäologischen Instituts* 90 (1975): 267-315; Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 2-4, 7-10.

¹⁰³ Petron. *Sat.* 51.

¹⁰⁴ Aelius Lampridius, *Hist. Aug. Heliogab.* 25.9.

¹⁰⁵ Aelius Lampridius, *Hist. Aug. Heliogab.* 27.3-5.

¹⁰⁶ Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 55.

¹⁰⁷ Plin. *HN*, 34.45.

¹⁰⁸ Plin. *HN*, 35.155.

spective to illusively incorporate still life depictions into the rooms' architecture (Figs. 11, 12)¹⁰⁹. The narrator in *Satyricon* claims that he saw “imaginary meals” (*imagines cenarum*) made of pottery served during the Saturnalia celebrations in Rome. The banquet served by Trimalchio to his guests also misleads its viewers, as the exterior appearance of the food does not correspond with the real material from which it is made¹¹⁰. Food depictions are particularly suitable for the purpose of trompe-l'œil, as their outward appearance refers to the tangible and sensory reality, but at the same time they draw attention to fact that they are actually artistic fabrications, leaving the potential viewer “tormented by hunger”¹¹¹. This leads to the philosophical question of whether viewers should trust their eyes. Seneca claims they should not, and uses the distorted appearance of objects through glass bowls or water as evidence of the weak power of human vision¹¹². Whether it is fruit poised in a glass bowl, an oar viewed through water, a distorted reflection on a silver vessel (Fig. 13), or a portico that recedes into spatial depth; human vision is deceived by its usual weakness¹¹³.



Figure 11. Painting of a natural cave, and a glass bowl full of fruit, next to a real window overlooking real landscape, fresco, ca. 50-40 BC, *cubiculum* (“bedroom”) from the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor, discovered in Boscoreale, room dimensions: 265.4x334x583.9cm, today at the MET, accession number: 03.14.13a-g. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247017>



Figure 12. At the top of the wall a glass bowl full of pomegranates stands on a cornice, in the alcove below it a fruit basket covered with a transparent veil is placed, fresco, 90-25 BC, north wall of room 23, *Villa di Poppea*, Oplontis, Torre Annunziata. Source: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn www.pompeiiinpictures.com (reprinted with permission).



Figure 13. A silver kalathos with a silver spoon, a plate full of eggs and a bronze/silver *oinochoe* placed on a shelf, quails and a towel hang on the wall, fresco, 50-79 AD, detail from the south wall of the *tablinum* (room II.4.10), *Praedia di Giulia Felice* (“House of Julia Felix”), discovered in Pompeii, today at the National Museum of Archaeology, Naples, inventory number 8598. Source: CC BY-SA 2.0, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Fresco_with_eggs%2C_birds_and_bronze_dishes%2C_from_the_Praedia_of_Julia_Felix_in_Pompeii%2C_Naples_National_Archaeological_Museum_%2814865525153%29.jpg

¹⁰⁹ On the broader phenomenon of mimetic arts in the early Roman Empire, trompe-l'œil techniques in Pompeian Second Style wall painting, and imitation marble frescoes and mosaics, see: Lynley McAlpine, *Marble, Memory, and Meaning in the Four Pompeian Styles of Wall Painting*, PhD Diss. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2014), 173-183; Philip Stinson, “Perspective Systems in Roman Second Style Wall Painting”, en *American Journal of Archaeology* 115, no. 3 (July 2011): 411-416; Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 393n92.

¹¹⁰ Petron. *Sat.* 69-70.

¹¹¹ Aelius Lampridius, *Hist. Aug. Heliogab.* 27.3-5.

¹¹² “*Quia infirma uis oculorum non potest perrumpere ne sibi quidem proximum aera sed resiliit*”: Sen. *QNat.* 1.3.7.

¹¹³ “*solita imbecillitas*”: Sen. *QNat.* 1.2.3.

When discussing the social function of the decorations, what seem to matter most are not the visual games played, but the associations evoked by the decoration¹¹⁴. However, classical literature discusses the ways in which the imitation of reality evokes thoughts about the true essence of the tangible object. Already mentioned are Plato's discussion of the *kline* (κλίνη) and Pliny's anecdotes regarding the reaction of animals to artistic representations¹¹⁵. Illusionism carries a meaning in its own right. When it challenges the process of realistic viewing itself, it undermines not only natural reality but also the social one. Illusionism contrives a transgressive world, which seems to question the very world it imitates, and to deconstruct the rules of reality¹¹⁶. In the *Anthologia Palatina* the narrator is deceived by the appearance of colours and tries to "grasp" (κατέσχον) the painted grapes, meaning both to grab and to comprehend¹¹⁷. Another example would be the image of a bird pecking fruit (Fig. 14). While this motif may reflect naturalism and an acute observation of nature, it also frames the image within the aforementioned discourses regarding realism, illusionism, and simulation. The illusory depiction of the bird pecking fruit draws attention to its own artifice, while paradoxically suggesting the capacity of that artifice to convincingly stand in for the real. The painted fruit supposedly persuades the bird, hence hinting at the image's ability to persuade the viewers¹¹⁸. Similarly, one of the food scraps friezes of the Heraklitos mosaic includes a trompe-l'œil depiction of a mouse sniffing a walnut, hinting at the mosaic's ability to successfully deceive its viewers (Fig. 15).



Figure 14. A sparrow pecking at figs, fresco, before 79 AD, centre of north wall of room 81, Villa di Poppea, Oplontis, Torre Annunziata. Source: Jebulon, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fresco_bird_figs_Villa_Poppaea_Oplontis_Italy.jpg

Illusory still life depictions can stimulate a discourse on art's ability to imitate, match, or even surpass reality¹¹⁹. Vitruvius prefers the "way of the ancestors" (*mores maiorum*) over what he considers to be an inferior

present, "corrupt ways" (*iniqui mores*) and "madness" (*amentia*). He is in favour of realistic art, because he believes that art should not portray things that do not exist, cannot exist, or are part of an imagined past. He claims that the eye does not always provide the true impression (*verso effectus*) of things, and that it often leads to the formation of false judgments (*fallitur saepius iudicio ab e omens*), and so what is "real" (*vera*) looks "fake" (*falsa*), while some things look different from what they truly are (*aliter quam sunt*)¹²⁰. He adds that the public, delighted with these falsehoods, does not pause to consider their existence. Their minds, misled by improper judgements, do not discern reason and the rules of propriety¹²¹. Seneca, on the other hand, quotes Papirius Fabianus, who looked negatively on realist art, and wonders how one who is aware of the real can derive pleasure from consuming a lowly imitation¹²². It appears that visual games were crucial to the Romans in the construction of social meaning. Therefore the question of allusion is impossible to separate from the status of that allusion as a fantasy, rather than a reality¹²³.



Figure 15. A mouse sniffing a walnut. Detail from the Heraklitos mosaic (fig.1). Source: artwork in public domain; photo by Alex Ripp.

Imitation prompts us not to appreciate the real, but to enjoy the skill of the artifice itself, all the while knowing that it is not identical to the real. It focuses our attention on our own contradictory impressions¹²⁴. The *asàrotos òikos* mosaics bring the illusion and deception into the space of the room, as they mimic and replicate objects that have been seemingly placed on their horizontal surfaces. They draw the eye to the floor beneath the spectators' feet, expressing the Romans' delight in the contradictions inherent in perception¹²⁵. The Romans believed that vision is both haptic and optic: the eyes release rays, which travel to the object, touch it and then return back to the eyes¹²⁶. In illusory floor mosaics, the "touch" of sight, which strikes the surface and returns from it, com-

¹²⁰ Vitruvius, *De arch.* 6.2.2.

¹²¹ Vitruvius, *De arch.* 7.5.

¹²² Seneca, *Controv.* 2.1.

¹²³ Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 74-75.

¹²⁴ Caroline Levine, "Seductive Reflexivity: Ruskin's Dreaded Trompe l'oeil", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 4 (1998): 365-367.

¹²⁵ Brilliant, *Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine*, 136ff; Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 33-34.

¹²⁶ Rebecca Molholt, *On Stepping Stones: The Historical Experience of Roman Mosaics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008),

¹¹⁴ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25.

¹¹⁵ Pliny, *Resp.* 10.601a-603b; Pliny, *HN*, 35.65-66.

¹¹⁶ Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 74.

¹¹⁷ *Anth. Pal.* 9.761.2.

¹¹⁸ Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 388-389.

¹¹⁹ Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 389-390.

petes with the contact of the viewers' feet, which actually step on the mosaic. Since scientific research in ancient times was primarily based on observation, this contradiction casts doubt over the viewers' ability to explore and fully understand their surroundings¹²⁷.

Although the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics present the viewers with deceptive imitations of tangible objects, this does not necessarily mean that they are realistic representations of the physical world. Realism can be defined as an attempt to reflect how one experiences the world of nature and humanity, without a mediating idea of an ideal or perfect form. It is the portrayal of the seemingly random fluctuations and variations of the commonplace and everyday experience, an interest in the broad scope and diversity of the human experience, and not only in its essence¹²⁸. The *asàrotos òikos* mosaics are sometimes called realistic, meaning that they show an interest in *rhyparographia*: the depiction of popular subject matters which are trivial, common, or even lowly and inappropriate¹²⁹. Despite the apparent innovation in subject matter, the manner of representation is *uniform* (ideal) rather than *diverse* (realistic). The scraps of food are arranged in equal, non-random and more or less regular intervals. They are not arranged in piles, as they would have been had they naturally fallen between the table and the couches. In addition, the viewpoint keeps changing, the scale (relative size) of some of the food scraps seems distorted in comparison to others, and the shadows are often casted in several different directions, even in neighbouring objects¹³⁰. Even in the iconographical sense, the depiction cannot be deemed realistic, as it represents agricultural produce that ripens at different times of the year side by side. Furthermore, the scraps of food are essentially garbage, yet they do not repel or disgust as a faithful portrayal of reality would have, and to a large extent they still look edible.

The depiction of the objects uses colour and *skia-graphia* ("shadow painting") for the creation of a compelling optical illusion of three-dimensionality. Yet, being a mosaic it is made of *tesserae*, and therefore cannot fully represent a faithful mimicry of reality. The viewer may respond enthusiastically to the virtuosity of the artists, the dedication and the hard work. The delight at the artists' high technical ability advances the suspension of disbelief and the embracing of the deception. However, the desire for a high degree of naturalistic accuracy in the depiction can sometimes undermine the overall sense of realism¹³¹. The naturalistic attention to detail is not intended to help identify the objects, but rather expresses the tendency to represent the objects in the

most perfect and ideal form. The detailed naturalistic representation of common objects and daily scenes celebrates the mundane. Even the simplest and most modest things, such as the depicted food scraps, appear magical and enigmatic. As a result, the viewers may look on the world with new eyes. All things are endowed with a deeper meaning, and reveal "interior" mysteries, which threaten the secure tranquillity of the simple and ingenious things¹³².

9. Conclusions

The Italian *asàrotos òikos* mosaics provided the perfect illusionistic setting for the consumption of hedonistic Epicurean pleasures in an idealised surrounding. Greek literature and education played an important role in the selection process of this decoration, since an integral part of the original idea of *otium* ("leisure time") was spending time within the atmosphere of Greek culture¹³³. During the banquet, members of the Roman elite chose to imagine themselves as artists and literati, as if they were Greeks in the company of Greeks¹³⁴. This escape to an imagined and fictitious Greek world sometimes also included wearing period costumes: according to Cicero, for the sake of luxury and pleasure, Roman men, born in the highest rank, wore *himation* and Greek sandals¹³⁵. The banquet held in these rooms was an intimate feast and a pleasurable retreat. Isolated from the hassle of *negotium* ("the business and public life"), the banquet could offer a temporary haven of peace and enjoyment. For the Roman upper class such pleasures were deemed natural and necessary, they were easily attained, and correspond with Epicurus's teachings. The Italian *asàrotos òikos* mosaics provided the appropriate surroundings for this temporary escape from the mundanity of everyday life into a world of leisurely elitist activities. The *asàrotos òikos* theme does not only reflect the cultural fashions of the time, but also testifies to the consumption patterns of its patrons, the very same patterns that prompted the commissioning of such a large scale illusionistic mosaic in the first place. While the mosaics depict the remains of the feast, they do so in such an eye-catching manner that the viewers find themselves eagerly drawn into the illusion. But the seduction of illusionism is only the starting point on a voyage of contemplation and erudite conversation. The subject matter is far removed from the traditional themes of morality, mythology, and classic history, which adorned many domestic spheres in the Campanian coastal towns. It seemingly celebrates a commonplace occurrence and everyday life. All the while, the naturalistic, yet much staged depiction, lends itself to a reflection on the very nature of reality, the limits of human vision and knowledge, the deceptive powers of artistic artifice, and all that could possibly lie beyond outward appearances.

80n185-186; Molholt, "Roman Labyrinth Mosaics and the Experience of Motion", 288.

¹²⁷ John Losee, *Philosophy of Science: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6-9, 29-44; Hugh G. Gauch, *Scientific Method in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 44-49.

¹²⁸ Jerome J. Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 141.

¹²⁹ Plin. *HN*, 35.37.112.

¹³⁰ This could possibly be the result of the reassembly of the Heraklitos mosaic in the Vatican Museum. See: Werner, *Die Sammlungen antiker Mosaiken in den Vatikanischen Museen*, 261.

¹³¹ Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age*, 141.

¹³² Franz Roh, *Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism*, 1925 cf. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds., *Magical Realism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 15-32.

¹³³ Zanker, *Roman Art*, 127-128.

¹³⁴ Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 28-29.

¹³⁵ Cic. *Rab. Post.* 26-27.

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