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Mixed-Media Domestic Ensembles in Roman Sicily: The House of Leda at Soluntum

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Received: 28 February 2019; Accepted: 26 April 2019; Published: 14 May 2019



Abstract: Built in the second to early-first century BCE, the House of Leda at Soluntum, a city on the northwest coast of Sicily, was renovated in the first century CE. The most prominent change to the residence was the inclusion of figural Fourth-Style wall paintings in its dining room. The fresco ensemble reveals a particular interest in the painted depiction of stone, such as an image of Leda and the swan as a marble statue and *trompe l'oeil* blocks of colored marble and granite from around the Mediterranean. The house renovation was not wholesale since the owner also chose to preserve a number of decorative elements from the earlier, Hellenistic-era phase of the residence, including two sculptures, cut-limestone pavements, and an intricate mosaic of an astronomical instrument. In this article I argue that the tension created between the medium of paint, and its use to mimic marble and stone, resulted in a unified, mixed-media domestic ensemble. The viewer was encouraged to compare and contrast the faux marble and stone in the dining room's Fourth-Style frescoes with the Hellenistic-era marble and stone artworks throughout the rest of the house. This juxtaposition of older and newer decorative elements reveals that the owner of the House of Leda positioned himself as both a member of the Roman provincial elite as well as a local benefactor and custodian of Sicily's rich Hellenistic culture.

Keywords: Roman art; wall painting; fresco; Sicily

1. Introduction

In the mid-first century CE the owner of the House of Leda at Soluntum (Sicily) renovated his house to include Fourth-Style frescoes in the dining room (*triclinium* g), a painting style imported from the Italian mainland. Two key components of the fresco program are depictions of well-known image types, such as Leda and the swan, and *trompe l'oeil* paintings of exotic, colored marble and stone. However, the renovation did not remove all traces of the residence's earlier phases from when it was originally built in the second to early-first century BCE. Late-Hellenistic stone sculptures and floor pavements remained on display elsewhere within the house, despite the owner's choice to update the wall painting in the dining room. The House of Leda, one of the most well-preserved residences in Sicily, provides a rare opportunity to consider how décor comprising multiple different media (frescoes, sculptures, and mosaics) from a variety of time periods (Hellenistic through Roman Imperial) worked together as an ensemble to shape a viewer's experience of the space. How did the decision to incorporate Fourth-Style frescoes into the dining room impact the viewer's perception of the domestic ensemble as a whole, and what does it reveal about the owner? More broadly, what does this renovation suggest about domestic décor in first-century CE Roman Sicily?

To answer these questions I begin with an overview of Soluntum's history and the House of Leda's excavation. I then consider the decorative ensemble from the perspective of a first-century CE viewer, one who is moving through the residence after the Fourth-Style frescoes were added to the dining room. One unifying feature within *triclinium* g is the tension between the medium of paint and its use to mimic stone such as marble. The image of Leda and the swan points to a popular marble

statue type, while the dado consists of *trompe l'oeil* colored marble and stone blocks. These illusionistic elements within the room asked the viewer to contemplate both fresco and stone at the same time. I argue that the newly-added Fourth-Style frescoes in the dining room acted as a conceptual framework for the older, Hellenistic-era statues and mosaics within the house, which were composed of marble and stone. In other words, the medium of stone, and its depiction in paint, united the newer and older parts of the domestic ensemble. This allowed, and encouraged, the viewer to consider the Fourth-Style frescoes as complementary to the *actual* stone decorative elements from the Hellenistic period.

The House of Leda's owner made the decision to modernize the dining room with a fresco style from the Italian mainland while simultaneously preserving the rest of the older, Hellenistic-era décor. This allowed the owner to emphasize Sicily's rich artistic heritage, of which his house was a part. He presented himself to guests and visitors as a collector who constantly negotiated between his global and local roles: as a member of the Roman provincial elite, as well as a wealthy patron of his native city, Soluntum. The renovation of the House of Leda created a polysemic domestic ensemble that drew upon Sicily's Hellenistic-influenced past, as well as its Roman present, through images and décor that positioned the residence's owner as a participant in both worlds.

2. Soluntum's History and Excavation

The House of Leda is located in Soluntum, a Sicilian city on the island's north coast that was founded as a Punic colony in the eighth century BCE. After a series of conflicts between the empire of Carthage and Syracusan tyrants such as Dionysius I (c. 432–367 BCE) and Agathocles (361–289 BCE), the city became a home for Greek soldiers at the end of the fourth century BCE.¹ In the midst of the First Punic War (264–241 BCE) Soluntum surrendered itself to Roman forces.² Even though it belonged to the territories of the growing Roman Republic, Soluntum remained decidedly Punic and Greek in its cultural practices.³ During its heyday at the end of the second century BCE, the city monumentalized its *agora* to resemble those in other Hellenistic cities of Sicily, such as Morgantina and Monte Iato.⁴ This flurry of building activity in the second and early-first centuries BCE coincided with the renovation of elite residences such as the House of Leda, which were altered as the city became a thriving Hellenistic town. The houses of this period were similar to those elsewhere in the Late-Hellenistic Mediterranean, with rooms that were arranged around a central, colonnaded peristyle and decorated with frescoes, elaborate mosaics, and marble sculptures.⁵

After the second century BCE Soluntum appears in the accounts of several Roman authors. Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero mentions Soluntum in his first-century BCE prosecution speech against the former governor of Sicily, Gaius Verres. Cicero claims that Soluntum was one of the cities that endured hardships under Verres' tenure.⁶ Pliny the Elder, a Roman author writing in the first century CE, lists Soluntum as an *oppidum* (small town) in his *Natural History*.⁷ An inscription dedicated by the *res publica* of Soluntum to Fulvia Plautilla (185/189–212 CE), wife of the Emperor Caracalla (r. 198–217 CE), along with a few coins dating to the reign of Commodus (r. 180–192 CE),

¹ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, 14.48 and 20.69. Soluntum was intended as a "retirement" settlement for Agathocles' soldiers, who had been fighting in North Africa against Carthaginian forces. The Greek soldiers would have been transported directly from North Africa to the northern Sicilian coast.

² Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, 23.1 and 23.18.

³ It is hypothesized by excavator Vincenzo Tusa that the two Punic sanctuaries of Soluntum were in use through the second century CE, suggesting that even in the Roman period the city's residents were worshipping Punic deities. See (Tusa 1972, p. 41).

⁴ For more on the *agora* of Soluntum, see (Wolf 2013) and (Wilson 2012) for those on Sicily more generally.

⁵ Elisa Chiara Portale has written extensively on Sicilian houses, especially those from Soluntum. See (Portale 1997, 2001, 2006, 2007a).

⁶ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Against Verres*, 2.3.103. This is an example of rhetorical exaggeration on the part of Cicero, given Soluntum's occupation well into the Roman Imperial period.

⁷ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 3.14 (8). Pliny the Elder's description of Soluntum as a smaller city or town seems to be accurate as, unlike the larger cities of Tyndaris and Agrigento, it was not deemed important enough to be given the status of colony during the Roman Empire.

are the latest archaeological materials found at Soluntum. Overall the evidence suggests that, after its Hellenistic heyday, Soluntum went into a gradual decline at the end of the first century CE and was fully abandoned by the third century CE.⁸

The Dominican priest Tommaso Fazello identified the site of Soluntum in the middle of the 16th century and wrote that it was a “città antichissima oggi totalmente in rovina.”⁹ Other than a few scattered textual references, throughout the next three centuries there is little mention of Soluntum in modern sources. Sporadic excavation seasons punctuated the 19th century, during which Giuseppi Patricolo discovered the House of the Masks, which contains the most sophisticated Second-Style paintings yet to be found in Sicily.¹⁰ Ettore Gabrici began the next round of excavations nearly 50 years later in 1920, but little was published from this campaign. The mid-twentieth century brought about the most significant excavations at Soluntum, as well as the discovery of the House of Leda. Those conducted between 1951 and 1958 by Vincenzo Tusa and the Soprintendenza per la Sicilia Occidentale uncovered most of what is now visible at the site, including numerous houses, the theater, the *odeon/bouleuterion*, the bath complex, and the *agora*.¹¹ In 1951 Tusa began his campaign at the northernmost part of Soluntum, the edge of Mount Catalfano. The excavation of many of Soluntum’s houses, including the House of Leda in 1963, continued in the 1960s under Luciana Natoli di Cristina but these campaigns have been only sporadically published.¹²

3. A Walk through the House of Leda

The House of Leda took its current form, with rooms situated around a central peristyle, in the second to early-first century BCE (Figure 1). Originally it was decorated with mosaic floors and First-Style frescoes that date to this same period.¹³ The most significant change to the house occurred nearly two centuries later when the residence was renovated and Fourth-Style frescoes were added to the dining room.¹⁴ A visitor to the house after its renovation in the mid-first century CE would have experienced side-by-side these recently-added frescoes and the house’s original décor.¹⁵ The latter includes two Hellenistic-era sculptures, two cut-limestone floor inlays, and a tessellated mosaic, all of which I discuss in tandem with the Fourth-Style frescoes later in this article.¹⁶ The décor of a house was a means of self-representation for the homeowner and I therefore consider the target or “model” viewer

⁸ For more on the gradual abandonment of Soluntum, see (Pfuntner 2019, pp. 62–66).

⁹ “... a most ancient city today totally in ruins.” Fazello’s recognition of the site came from Soluntum’s fortification walls on the western edge of the city that still remain on the cliffs of Mount Catalfano. The most complete history of the excavations at Soluntum can be found in (Fresina 2014, pp. 9–12).

¹⁰ Further excavations occurred under Francesco Paolo Perez in 1863, Professor Giuseppe Patricolo in 1868 and 1869 when the frescoes from the House of the Masks were discovered, and in 1875 under Francesco Cavallieri, the director of the Commissione di Antichità e Belle Arti di Sicilia (Fresina 2014, pp. 9–12).

¹¹ During this excavation three integral points of information about Soluntum came to light—that it had a strong Punic presence through most of the city’s life, that it was laid out according to a Hippodamian grid plan, and that it had relationships with other cities both near and far around the Mediterranean (Tusa Cutroni 1994, pp. 15–16).

¹² See, for example, (Di Christina 1966).

¹³ (De Vos 1975, p. 200). Layers of First-Style painting can be found below those that are currently visible, including in dining room g, revealing the house went through numerous phases of renovation from the Hellenistic period onwards, a phenomenon documented throughout Soluntum.

¹⁴ Marietta de Vos first proposed that these paintings date to the mid-to-late first century CE based on their similarity to Fourth-Style compositions elsewhere in the Mediterranean (De Vos 1975, p. 202). Elisa Chiara Portale provides a further justification for this dating given the multiple layers of fresco below those currently visible in the House of Leda (Portale 2007b, especially p. 304). For more on wall painting in Sicily in general, see (Mura 2013).

¹⁵ When the distinct phases of a house are visible in the archaeological record, they are often described by scholars as separate entities, or “slices” of time, which seemingly developed without human intervention. However, the framework of renovation, as it is used in this article, allows us to think diachronically about continually occupied spaces such as the houses of Roman-era Sicily. The primary benefit of this approach is that it restores the human element to the architectural evidence, such as viewers who would have experienced the older and newer parts of a domestic ensemble, including those of different media, simultaneously.

¹⁶ Of course, most elite houses in the Roman world would have been “mixed-media” with ensembles that contained mosaics, wall paintings, and more portable artworks or furniture in bronze, woven cloth, etc. The House of Leda is unique because it still preserves many of these decorative elements into the modern day.

as someone the owner was trying to make a positive impression on, most likely his peers or clients.¹⁷ I describe the architecture and decoration of the House of Leda that was visible after its renovation in order that the reader adopt the perspective of a first-century CE viewer. This walkthrough lays the groundwork for the following analysis and allows us to consider how the Fourth-Style frescoes in the dining room impacted a viewer's experience of the space.

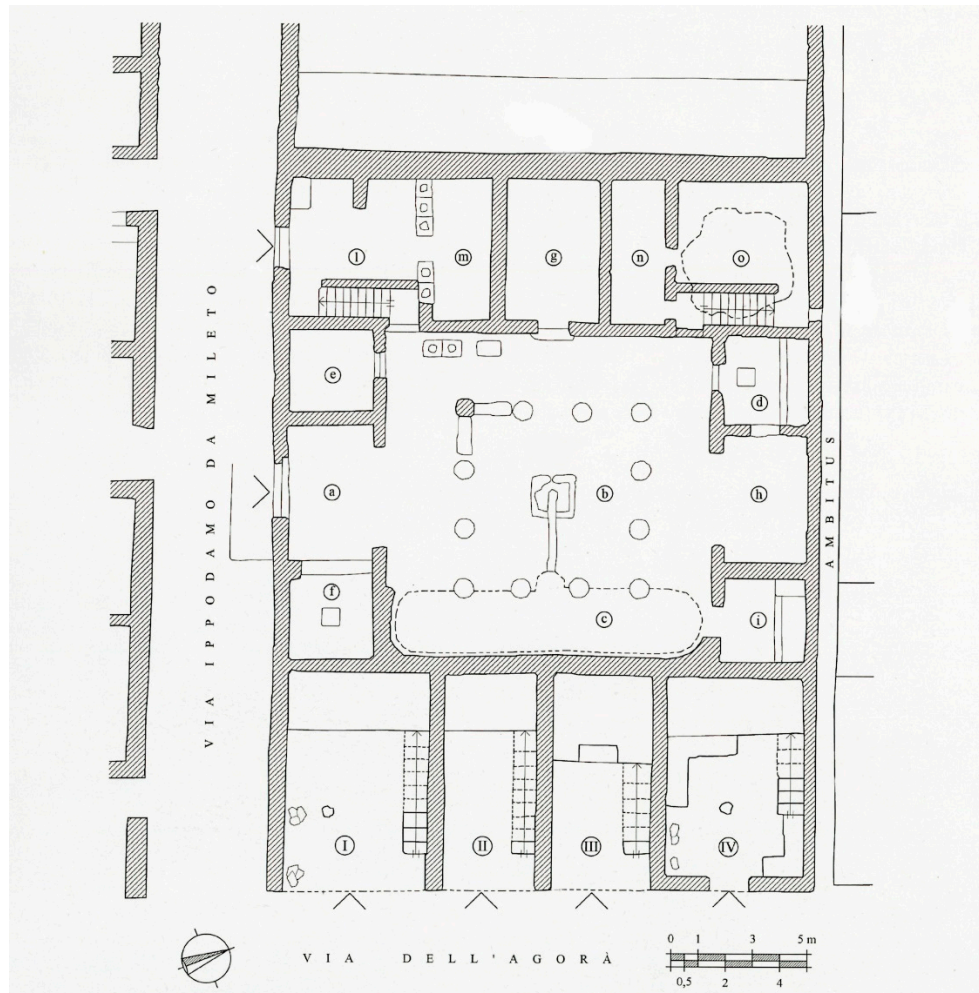


Figure 1. Plan of the House of Leda at Soluntum (after [Sposito 2014](#), p. 164, Figure 2).

The House of Leda is located at the corner of Via dell'Agora, or Soluntum's main thoroughfare, and Via Ippodamo da Mileto, a small side street that divided one block from another. The house was constructed on three terraces—with four shops on the first terrace, the main living quarters on the second terrace, and a service area on the third (and highest) terrace. Although all three terraces had a different function, from street level the House of Leda would have appeared as a unified and imposing three-story building ([Aberle 2012](#), p. 216). The entrance to the main residential quarters is on Via Ippodamo da Mileto, uphill from Via dell'Agora. Due to the centralized plan of the residence,

¹⁷ For the "model" viewer, see ([Valladares 2005](#)). The ideal viewer, for the sake of this article, had the social status and educational background to identify and appreciate Greek and Roman mythological figures, popular statue or iconographic types, and different mosaic and wall painting styles. Although I cannot account for the perspective of *every* person who would have visited the House of Leda, I aim to capture the majority of them.

from the entryway (labeled as room “a” on the plan) one could see directly into the two-story peristyle, which served as the main circulation space for the entire living quarters.¹⁸



Figure 2. Soluntum, House of Leda, peristyle (photo by the author).

Upon entering into the peristyle, a viewer stepped onto a floor paved with white limestone tesserae (Figure 2). At the center of the space is a subterranean *impluvium* for collecting rainwater surrounded by a stylized mosaic border of white and black waves.¹⁹ From within the peristyle a viewer could appreciate its immense size, which was accentuated by twelve limestone columns. The first level of columns was Doric in style, while a second level of columns, resting directly atop these, was Ionic and enclosed by a limestone latticework balustrade.²⁰ The walls of the peristyle were decorated with Fourth-Style frescoes that are now poorly preserved, composed of a dado and individual panels that surrounded a garland motif.

In the peristyle the viewer most likely encountered two nearly life-size stone sculptures that excavators discovered in the House of Leda, ones that are in dialogue with the paintings of marble and stone in the dining room’s fresco ensemble.²¹ The first sculpture, carved from local limestone, dates to the second century BCE (Figure 3). It depicts a standing female in a tunic and draped mantel and is

¹⁸ All rooms will be referred to by their letter as seen on the plan in Figure 1.

¹⁹ For a comparable border from Morgantina, see (Tsakirgis 1989), especially room 1 of the House of Ganymede, room 12 of the House of the Arched Cistern, and room 10 of the House of the Tuscan Capital. See p. 409 for a discussion of this pattern more generally. Morgantina provides some of the best houses for comparison to those from Soluntum since many of them were constructed or redecorated in the second and early-first centuries BCE.

²⁰ Preserved fragments of both the columns and the balustrade have allowed for this reconstruction. A similar arrangement was found in the so-called “Gymnasium” house and is illustrated in (Wolf 2003, p. 39).

²¹ The precise find spots of the statues are not recorded. This suggestion about the placement of the sculptures in the House of Leda is based on the fact that when Hellenistic-era statues have been found *in situ*, it is almost always in the most visible or public spaces of a house, such as porticoes, peristyles, and gardens. As an example, see (Neve 2011).

comparable to early versions of the Small Herculaneum Woman statue type.²² The second sculpture is carved from a fine-grained white marble (Figure 4).²³ The drapery and body position of the statue date it to the late-second or early-first century BCE. Based on comparable evidence, the statue once held a scroll in its left hand, which identifies it as Clio, the Muse of history.

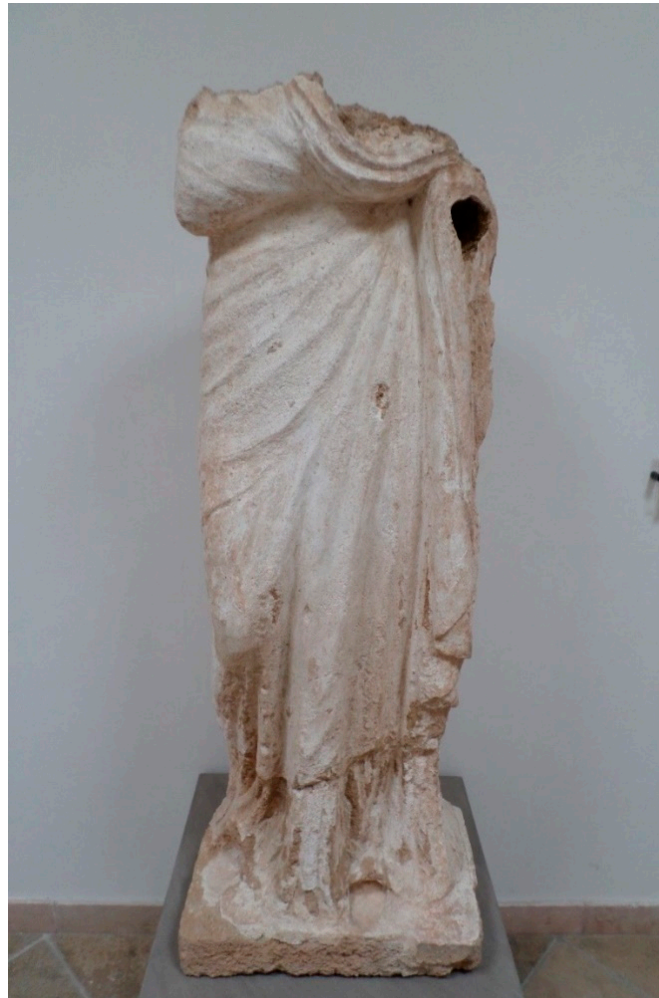


Figure 3. Soluntum, House of Leda, Limestone sculpture of a draped woman, now in the Soluntum Archaeological Museum (photo by the author).

²² Two Hellenistic-era examples of this statue type have been found at Delos. While one of the Delian examples has an unknown provenance, the other comes from the House of the Lake, a Hellenistic courtyard house (Trimble 1999, p. 22).

²³ Sicily had very limited sources for marble and thus much of it was likely imported from elsewhere then carved at workshops on the island (Marconi 2013, p. 159).



Figure 4. Soluntum, House of Leda, Marble sculpture of Clio, the Muse of History, now in the Soluntum Archaeological Museum (photo by the author).

All seven rooms of the second, or residential terrace, are situated around the peristyle, including the dining room (g) with figural Fourth-Style frescoes. The rooms on the eastern side of the house no longer exist. Two small spaces, rooms f and e, flank the vestibule that connects the peristyle to the street on the southern side of the house. Room f contains one of the best-preserved, Hellenistic-era mosaics from Sicily. At the center of its floor was an *opus vermiculatum* (miniscule tesserae) mosaic panel that depicts a small, red globe surrounded by grey rings (Figure 5).²⁴ The mosaic dates to the second century BCE and perhaps was imported directly from Alexandria.²⁵ Room e on the western side of the vestibule is a square space that may have served as a *cubiculum* (bedroom) given its small size and narrow doorway.

²⁴ The original is now housed at the Soluntum Archaeological Museum and a replica stands within room f.

²⁵ For more on the mosaic, see (Von Boeselager 1983, p. 57; Wilson 1990, p. 120; Tusa Cutroni 1994, pp. 62–63). The date of the mosaic and its origin have sparked much debate about the overall chronology of the House of Leda. Caterina Greco argues that the dating of the house has always been based on the assumption that the mosaic was imported from Alexandria in the second century BCE, even though we do not have definitive proof. See (Greco 1997, pp. 45–47) as well as (Greco 2011).

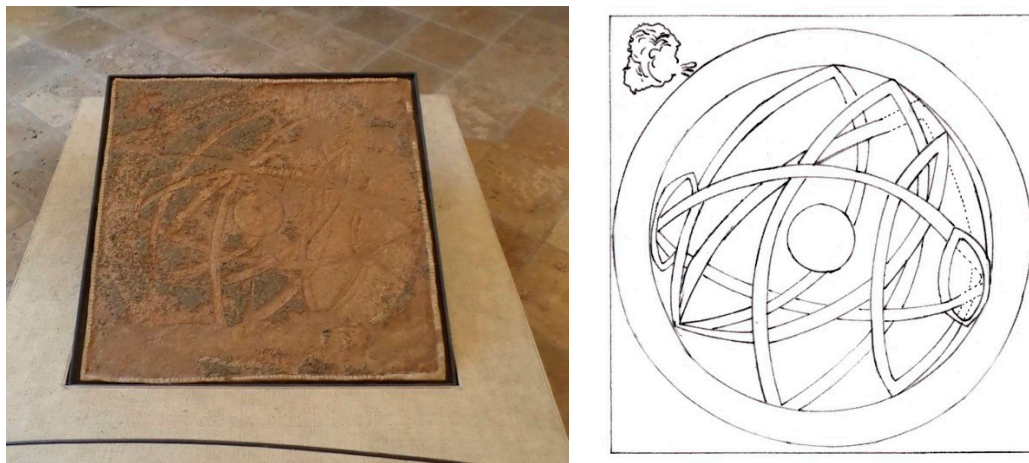


Figure 5. Soluntum, House of Leda, room f's original mosaic panel, now in the Soluntum Archaeological Museum (Left, photo by author) and schematic drawing (Right, after [De Vos 1975](#), p. 214).

Three rooms line the northern side of the peristyle. A large room with a wide doorway (h), one of the primary reception spaces within the house, is situated directly across from the vestibule. This room, and the two that flank it (d and i), are paved with simple white mosaic floors of limestone tesserae. There is evidence of two fresco layers above the original First-Style wall painting in all three rooms. The second fresco layer was likely in the Second Style, while the final layer is contemporary with the Fourth-Style frescoes in dining room g.²⁶ Rooms d and i may have served as bedrooms or places for intimate gatherings. Both of these *cubicula* (d and i) have Hellenistic-era thresholds to mark where a couch or bed would have been placed at the back of the space. The thresholds are composed of cut, colored pieces of limestone that are arranged in the form of illusionistic cubes, a technique sometimes referred to as *opus scutulatum* or *opus sectile* (Figure 6).²⁷



Figure 6. Soluntum, House of Leda, room d's limestone threshold (photo by the author).

²⁶ The Fourth-Style frescoes in dining room g are the only ones that were figural in nature. Those elsewhere in the house were in a palette of red and white, sometimes with a decorative garland, but not as intricate as the ones in room g.

²⁷ That these rooms may have served as *cubicula* (or bedrooms in English, though they were used for more than just sleeping and could operate as small spaces for intimate gatherings) is indicated by the *opus sectile* thresholds.

Only a single room occupies the western side of the living quarters, the dining room (g) with Fourth-Style paintings.²⁸ Raised borders on the room's floor indicate where the couches for banqueting would have been placed (De Vos 1975, p. 201). The walls are divided into painted panels by the frescoes—three on the western or rear wall, four on the two sidewalls (to the north and south), and two on either side of the doorway. Each panel consists of a faux marble or stone dado set below a frame of thick red bands and foliate patterns. The primary color palette for the “blocks” in the dado, as well as in the room overall, consists of red and yellow hues on a white ground. The painted blocks in the dining room are intended to simulate Numidian yellow marble, Carystian green marble from Greece, and granite from Egypt.²⁹

Each panel formerly contained a painted figure, only four of which now remain. On the north wall one finds the Dioscouri (Castor and Pollux) in one panel (Figures 7 and 8). Castor and Pollux are shown as a pair, sporting tunics and each positioned in front of a prancing horse. Their divine mother Leda is in the adjacent panel.³⁰ Leda is depicted with Zeus as a swan on her right side, both on a pedestal, suggesting that the image is referring to a statue group (Figure 9). On the western wall there is a poorly-preserved, seated male. He is flanked on either side by panels with depictions of male figures with wings, standing on bases, and holding torches—perhaps the Hymenoi or geniuses of marriage. As we will see, the Fourth-Style wall paintings in the dining room of the House of Leda had a profound impact upon the domestic ensemble as a whole.

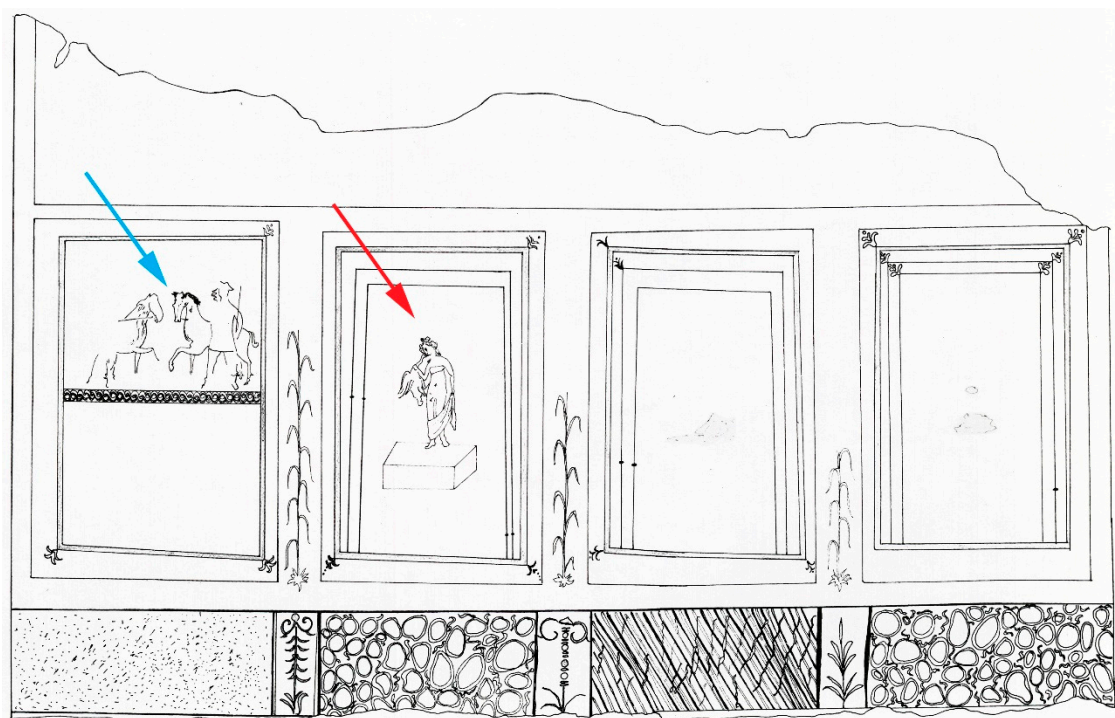


Figure 7. Soluntum, House of Leda, northern wall of *triclinium g*, Castor and Pollux (blue) and Leda and the Swan (red), schematic drawing (after De Vos 1975, p. 217).

²⁸ Under the Fourth-Style frescoes there is evidence of First-Style wall painting (De Vos 1975, p. 201).

²⁹ Ibid. For more on replicative media as it relates to *trompe l'oeil* marble panels like those in the House of Leda, see (McAlpine 2014; Platt 2018b, especially pp. 258–73). More generally, see (Barry 2017, especially pp. 30–35). For the interplay between media in the Roman house see, (Bergmann 2002a, 2002b).

³⁰ According to one version of the myth, Zeus seduced Leda in the guise of a swan on the same night that she lay with her husband Tyndareus. Leda then gave birth to her twin sons who have different fathers—Castor is the son of Zeus and thusly divine, whereas Pollux, as the son of Tyndareus, is mortal.



Figure 8. Soluntum, House of Leda, northern wall of *triclinium g* depicting the Dioscouri (left) and Leda with the Swan (center) (photo by the author).



Figure 9. Soluntum, House of Leda, *triclinium g*, detail of Leda panel (photo by the author).

4. Cross-Media Dialogue in Stone and Marble

Two distinctive parts of the House of Leda's Fourth-Style fresco program are the image of Leda and the swan upon a pedestal and the room's painted dado that emphasizes faux blocks of yellow Numidian marble and other stones. Both aspects of the painted walls were likely identifiable for a first-century CE viewer. Given the context for these depictions within a dining room, a social space intended for lively conversations, the image of Leda and the representation of exotic stones may have even prompted discussion and debate amongst banqueters. Both elements of the wall-painting program also have in common their shared experience of material continuity. Leda and the swan alludes to a marble statue, as the pair has been rendered atop a pedestal, while the painted dado imitates exotic, colored stones from around the Roman Empire.

As painted images replicating the medium of stone, Leda and the *trompe l'oeil* blocks challenge one's perception of reality versus fiction. The viewer oscillates between the simulated stone objects, either a statue or carved blocks, and their real, material counterparts elsewhere within the house. The newer, Roman-style frescoes and Hellenistic-era decorative elements within the House of Leda created a dialogue with one another through their shared materiality. For example, a viewer might consider the Leda and the swan "statue" as a painted counterpart, or pendant, to the two Hellenistic-era stone sculptures discovered within the house. In addition, the illusionism of the faux stone dado responds to the cut-limestone pavements in rooms d and i. These are just two of many possible cross-media references that a viewer may have experienced. The Fourth-Style frescoes worked alongside the Hellenistic-era artworks, resulting in a domestic ensemble that spoke to Soluntum's Hellenistic past as well as its participation in the first-century CE Roman world.

4.1. A "Statue" of Leda and the Swan

The image of the Spartan Queen Leda fending off Zeus disguised as a swan was a focal point of room g's fresco program. Leda and swan occupy the entire frame of the panel and demand the viewer's attention. The pair is shown on a pedestal, set upon a white background, with a block of faux Numidian yellow marble in the dado below (See Figure 9). Leda places her weight upon her right leg while her left leg is relaxed to form a pseudo-*contrapposto* pose. She wears a yellow breast band and in her left arm holds a red mantle that wraps around the lower half of her body. Leda and Zeus, although on a pedestal, appear to be floating in mid-air without a ground line or landscape to supply spatial context for the scene.³¹ This enigmatic image slips between an illustration of a well-known myth, a sculptural depiction of that myth, and its material status as a fresco.³² Peter Stewart notes the unusual and complicated nature of Roman paintings of sculptures as representations of a representation. The creator of such pictures had to capture the statue's subject, be it mythological or otherwise, while at the same time reproducing the three-dimensional artwork *qua* artwork (Stewart 2003, p. 41). This careful balancing act often left the precise status of the fresco ambiguous for the viewer.³³ Such depictions simultaneously brought to mind the statue's subject (in this case, Leda and the swan), as well as the physicality and materiality of the marble sculpture. In addition, the viewer had to grapple with the medium of the image as painted fresco.

Leda and the swan was a well-known and versatile image type across the Roman world in the first century CE. Countless ancient representations of the pair in different media are extant, including numerous Fourth-Style paintings contemporary with the renovation of the House of Leda. In Campania alone there are sixteen fresco depictions of Leda at Pompeii, two at Herculaneum, and one at Stabiae

³¹ For the idea of the "floating figure" in Roman wall painting, see (Valladares 2014).

³² See (Marconi 2011) for more on "ambiguous" figures who oscillate between a character from Greek myth and a sculpture or representation of said person. For "ambiguous" sculptures see (Squire 2013). Ambiguously living sculptures are also explored in ancient literature, most explicitly in the story of Pygmalion in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which Jas Elsner explores in his book chapter "Viewing and Creativity: Ovid's Pygmalion as Viewer" (Elsner 2007, pp. 113–31).

³³ The depiction of statues in Roman wall painting has been discussed extensively by (Eric Moormann 1988, 2008).

(De Vos 1975, p. 202). Of these, the largest group (eight in total) portrays Leda standing while the swan is climbing up her side, as we see at Soluntum.³⁴ In many Fourth-Style examples the Spartan Queen is removed from any scenery or context. We can thus reasonably expect that a viewer to the House of Leda might be familiar with a version of the mythological narrative.³⁵ In addition, over twenty marble and bronze sculptures of Leda and the swan are preserved, which suggests that it was also a widely-reproduced statue type (Figure 10).³⁶ Collectively this evidence indicates that an educated first-century CE viewer would have had little trouble identifying the fresco at the House of Leda as Leda and the swan, and may have even recognized it as a reference to the popular statue type. Statues of Leda and the swan, in the mind of the viewer, would have highlighted the tension embodied in a painted representation of the mythological pairing upon a pedestal.



Figure 10. *Statue of Leda and the Swan*, 1st century CE, Marble. 70.AA.110. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California. (Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program).

The polyvalence of Leda in dining room g, as both a mythological figure and a “statue,” allowed a viewer to connect it to the older, Hellenistic-era decorative elements within the house. If a viewer considered the image of Leda and the swan as a painted allusion to a statue, it became a two-dimensional pendant to the Hellenistic-era female stone sculptures in the peristyle outside the dining room's door.

³⁴ (Kahil and De Bellefonds 1992, p. 238). The House of the Gilded Cupids (VI.16.7) at Pompeii, where Leda and the swan are painted in two separate rooms (C and R), exemplifies the popularity and particular interest in the myth. Jessica Powers argues that this double depiction within a single residence was intentional and encouraged a viewer to compare the different representations of Leda (Powers 2006, pp. 131–41).

³⁵ For a recent analysis of the Dioscouri in Greek and Roman art, see (Platt 2018a).

³⁶ On the replication of sculpture types in the Roman period, see (Bartman 1988, p. 222).

In other words, the image of Leda invited comparison between it and its two material counterparts.³⁷ The discovery of more than one statue within a domestic context in Sicily is a rare occurrence. The two statues from the House of Leda, now preserved in Soluntum's archaeological museum, are thus distinct. The first sculpture represents a woman wearing a tunic with a draped mantle and dates to the second century BCE (see Figure 3). It finds its closest parallels in the Small Herculaneum Woman sculptural type, named after the town in which excavators uncovered the first and best-known version of this statue.³⁸ The second sculpture, roughly contemporary with the first, depicts a Muse and is carved from white marble that was imported into Sicily from the Greek islands, most likely Paros (see Figure 4) (Marconi 2013, p. 159). Greek marble was an expensive commodity, and owning a large sculpture of this material was a statement of wealth in and of itself. The Muse stands with her weight on her right foot and the left leg slightly bent at the knee as revealed by the drapery. Her left elbow rests on a plinth or column with the arm bent outwards and her hand enclosed around a now-missing object, which would have been a scroll, the primary attribute of Clio (the Muse of history).³⁹

Even though the sculptures from the House of Leda were created in the Hellenistic period, the Small Herculaneum Woman sculpture type and images of the Muses were both fairly widespread in the first century CE, much like depictions of Leda and the swan. This means the two stone female statues may have been familiar to the House of Leda's Roman-era viewer, allowing him or her to draw comparisons between them and the painted "statue" of Leda in the dining room. In the early years of the Roman Empire, the Small Herculaneum Woman sculptural type began to appear in contexts outside the private sphere. They were incorporated into sculptural groups of the Emperor Augustus and his family that were displayed in public spaces—two were found on the Italian mainland at the Augusteum of Lucus Feroniae and the Shrine of the Augustales at Misenum. These two examples from smaller cities outside of Rome reveal that, in the first century CE, the Small Herculaneum Woman type was "closely linked to representations of the imperial regime and its ideas (Trimble 1999, p. 41)." They provided a way for local patrons outside of the capital to "participate in and transmit imperial ideology (Trimble 1999, p. 42)." Thus, in the case of the House of Leda, the Small Herculaneum Woman sculpture served as a historical relic from the Hellenistic period, but one that would have resonated in an Imperial context on Roman Sicily.

With respect to the Muses, Janine (Lancha 1994, p. 1027) notes that a crystallization of each goddess and her attributes occurred in the second half of the first century CE, in images which often drew upon Hellenistic precedents. This is best exemplified by the Fourth-Style paintings from a *cubiculum* in the *Praedia* or House of Julia Felix at Pompeii (Figure 11). Now at the Louvre, these frescoes represent Apollo surrounded by the nine Muses, as outlined in Hesiod's *Theogony*.⁴⁰ Clio is shown reading a scroll with Greek letters written upon it. A box next to her holds additional scrolls, an attribute that identifies her as the Muse of history. A label in Greek appears below each figure that records their individual names, suggesting that by the first century CE each Muse had a distinct place within the Roman pantheon. Much like the Small Herculaneum Woman sculpture, the Muses were an image type that originated in the Hellenistic era but remained popular through the early-Imperial period, indicating that the sculpture of Clio from the House of Leda would have been readily identifiable for the first-century CE viewer.

³⁷ There could have been more than two sculptures in the house but only these two survive.

³⁸ The limestone sculpture from the House of Leda also finds parallels in the "Arm-Sling" type, which is related to the Small Herculaneum Woman type in its body position. This type takes its name from the way the right arm is bent across the chest and supported by the mantle, appearing to look like a sling (Dillon 2012, p. 91).

³⁹ Two examples from the second century BCE confirm that the sculpture from Soluntum likely depicts Clio and reveal the popularity of the sculptural type. One is the second-century BCE Apotheosis of Homer Relief, signed by Archelaos of Priene, which depicts the so-called "Muse with a Scroll" i.e., Clio. The other is the Halikarnassos Base, now at the British Museum, dated to 130–120 BCE, which also depicts a "Muse with a Scroll." For the muses in Greco-Roman sculpture more broadly see, (Marvin 2008).

⁴⁰ See (Burlet and Roger 2012). The Muses here are in the same order as in Hesiod's text, suggesting the viewer was meant to connect the images to their mythological origin story.



Figure 11. Pompeii, *Praedia* of Julia Felix (II.4.3), fresco of Clio, the Muse of History, now at the Louvre (photo by the author).

Both the Small Herculaneum Woman statue type and the figure of the Muse Clio were well established by the first century CE, much like images of Leda and the swan. How might a viewer have thought about this group consisting of two sculptures and a painted allusion to another? Elizabeth Bartman (1988) has ascertained that sculptures within the Roman house were often arranged to appear as a single, unified ensemble that encouraged the viewer to compare and contrast their various features. She draws upon an exemplary group of four sculptures from a house in Rome that vary considerably in their age and subject matter—they are united through their shared architectural space. While Bartman's ensemble includes only three-dimensional examples, I argue that in the House of Leda we can consider the two-dimensional, fresco "statue" of Leda and the swan from dining room g as part of the residence's sculptural collection. To put it another way, the painted "statue" of Leda and the swan acted as a counterpart or pendant to the three-dimensional sculptures in the peristyle. This grouping encouraged the viewer to think about the relationship between the three sculptural or statuesque renderings in terms of their style, theme, and material. For instance, a viewer could connect the image of Leda and the swan to that of Clio in a discussion of Greek myth or contemplate the transformation of one medium (stone/marble) into another (fresco). Overall the shared medium of stone (and marble) allows us to consider the first-century CE fresco of Leda and the swan in tandem with the two Hellenistic-era female sculptures, creating a bridge across both time and space in the House of Leda.

4.2. Faux Marble Blocks, Decorative Stone Floors

In addition to the image of Leda and the swan, dining room g also features a painted dado that depicts colored marble and stone blocks from sources around the Mediterranean. Below each individual panel, in the lower register of the room, the artist painted faux stone rectangular slabs. Three geometric patterns in a color palette of white, red, and yellow replicate different types of marble and granite. The yellow and red diagonal striations imitate Carystian marble (*marmor carystium* or

cipollino) from southern Greece, and the speckled pattern represents granite, which was often imported from Egypt.⁴¹ A third pattern, featuring yellow ovals outlined in red on a white ground, appears more frequently than the other two. For example, on the northern and western walls *trompe l'oeil* panels of yellow marble alternate with panels of either Carystian marble or Egyptian granite. Marietta De Vos (1975, p. 201) has identified this ovular pattern as *marmor Numidicum*, also known as *giallo antico*, a popular marble type imported from Numidia throughout the Roman period.

The faux stone blocks in the dining room served an important purpose—they formed the lower register, thus giving structure to the painted wall and situating the viewer in space. However, much like the “statue” of Leda and the swan, they too encouraged the viewer to contemplate their design and make an identification. Numidian marble’s distinctive color and pattern, a yellow ground with deep red inclusions, made it easily translatable into other media such as wall painting.⁴² The depictions of Numidian yellow marble in the House of Leda are highly stylized—simple yellow ovals are outlined in red (Figure 12). Comparisons from Pompeii make it clear that this was a standardized way of portraying the marble. In fact, Pliny the Elder says that during Nero’s reign painters imitated Numidian marble simply with “variegation” and “ovals.”⁴³ Its frequent presence throughout the Mediterranean, both as a decorative marble and in painted representations, meant that viewers would likely identify the painted blocks in the House of Leda as Numidian yellow and, more specifically, as a costly imported material.⁴⁴



Figure 12. Soluntum, House of Leda, *triclinium g*, detail of faux Numidian yellow marble block from the dado (photo by the author).

⁴¹ (De Vos 1975, p. 201). The pattern of the Carystian marble closely resembles “zebra stripe” patterns that are well-documented in Roman painted ensembles. The “zebra pattern” frescoes have resulted in a number of interpretations from earlier scholars asserting that such a “simple” pattern must be indicative of slave quarters in a house to more recent explanations that the pattern served to mark public reception and circulation spaces. See (Wallace-Hadrill 1994, pp. 39–45) for the former. For the latter, see (Goulet 2001; Laken 2003).

⁴² For more on the dialogue between marble and its faux painted equivalents, see (McAlpine 2014). For this phenomenon as related to Second-Style frescoes in the Roman Republic, see (Mulliez 2014).

⁴³ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 35.1(3). This is reaffirmed by McAlpine who says “A few streaks or loops of red on yellow could easily be recognized as Numidian marble (McAlpine 2014, p. 198).”

⁴⁴ Numidian yellow marble may have been particularly appealing to audiences in Sicily given the island’s close proximity to Africa, and Numidia more specifically. Wilson notes that in the first century CE “readily identifiable” marble from all over the Mediterranean, including Numidian yellow, was imported to the island as paneling for floors and walls (less so for larger architectural elements such as columns). See (Wilson 1990, p. 241) for a complete list of marble types found on Sicily in the first century CE.

The ubiquity of Numidian yellow marble in wall-painting ensembles, especially those of the Fourth Style, undoubtedly stems from its frequent use in Imperial architecture. Clayton Fant contends that Numidian yellow was often imitated in fresco because the Julio-Claudian court favored it.⁴⁵ Although the Roman use of colored marble was fairly limited until the first century CE, by the reign of Augustus it was imported into the Italian mainland at a record pace.⁴⁶ First-century CE authors often remark that Numidian yellow marble decorated luxurious buildings from both the public and private sectors.⁴⁷ As Mark Bradley convincingly argues, colored marbles, an expensive and luxurious commodity, became part of discussions by dinner guests who were inspired by a residence's décor.⁴⁸ A reception space with faux marble, such as *triclinium* g in the House of Leda, may have prompted such a discussion—the identification of the yellow and red ovals on the wall as *marmor Numidicum* opened up a dialogue not just about the fashions of the Roman court, but topics such as the stone's place of origin.⁴⁹ This is echoed in contemporary written sources—in a section of the *Natural History* that describes geographic regions of the world, Pliny writes that the marble (*marmor Numidicum*) and wild beasts are the only things remarkable about Numidia.⁵⁰ Martial, writing a few decades later, compares (yellow) Numidian marble and the yellow color of the lions that also originate from this region.⁵¹ As the written sources reveal, the faux stone in *triclinium* g created an opportunity for guests to display their knowledge on any number of topics, such as the history and geography of a specific type of exotic stone.⁵²

As with the Hellenistic statues in the House of Leda, the Fourth-Style frescoes activated an older part of the domestic ensemble through the medium of stone, in particular the cut-limestone pavements within rooms d and i. I would suggest that the dialogue prompted by the *trompe l'oeil* frescoes of marble and granite in the dining room may have expanded to include colored stones elsewhere within the house, creating material continuity within the residence. In rooms d and i, on the northern side of the peristyle, colored limestone is featured prominently in the second to early-first century BCE pavement. Within each small room there is a long strip of cut limestone (*opus sectile*) that demarcated where a couch or bed would have been placed. These thresholds separated the circulation area in the front of the space from that used for reclining (see Figure 6). Local limestone in shades of white, grey, and green were arranged within each threshold to form three-dimensional cubes, a motif popular on Sicily beginning in the third century BCE.⁵³ The cut-limestone thresholds were functional but also

⁴⁵ (Fant 2007, specifically p. 341). Pliny the Elder records that Numidian yellow marble first arrived in Rome in 78 BCE, when the consul M. Lepidus constructed the lintels of his house from this material (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 35.8). This practice of using exotic marbles in one's house was initially criticized by many Roman authors at the end of the Late Republic as explored by Marden Nichols (2017).

⁴⁶ Colored marbles were not as widely known before Augustus' conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE, after which they became more prominent on the Italian mainland. For the use of colored marble under Augustus, see (Bradley 2006, especially pp. 4–5), as well as (McAlpine 2014, especially chapter six, "Imperial Marble in Pompeian Wall Painting," pp. 184–203).

⁴⁷ For example, see Horace, *Odes*, 2.18.5 for African marble columns; Seneca the Younger on the use of luxurious marbles including Numidian yellow in public baths (*Letters*, 86.6–7); Martial on the baths of the freedman Etruscus (*Epigrams*, 6.42); Statius on the villa of Pollio (*Silvae*, 2.2.36–106). McAlpine (2014, p. 76) observes that Numidian yellow was especially prevalent in Augustan-era Rome where it made up a column erected at Caesar's funeral pyre, the paneling in the portico of the Danaids at the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, and the paving in the Forum of Augustus.

⁴⁸ Roman authors from the end of the first century CE, such as Statius and Martial, included descriptions of the origin and physical characteristics of colored marble into their writings. Marble "offered contemporary *literati* a rich opportunity to demonstrate authority and knowledge, and to participate in erudite debate on the aesthetics of empire and the character of Roman imperial culture (Bradley 2006, p. 8)."

⁴⁹ Although one might question how cognizant the provincial elite might have been about trends on the Italian mainland, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (2010, p. 437) explains that "By the end of Augustus' reign, the new rhythms that characterize the Empire are set. Appetites that have grown in Italy become the hallmark of Roman living, however far from home: already under Augustus, the elite of south Gaul [. . .] decorate their houses with the "third style" fashion of the day . . . " In other words, in the first century CE decorative trends were exported from Italy to the provinces where local workshops created their own luxury goods from loosely Roman models.

⁵⁰ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 5.2 ("Numidia").

⁵¹ Martial, *Epigrams*, 6.42.

⁵² For more on how fresco colors and their pigments were associated with elite luxury, see (Nichols 2016).

⁵³ For an example from Morgantina, see (Tsakirgis 1989, pp. 403–4).

used illusionism to trick the eye, much like the *trompe l'oeil* painted stone blocks in dining room g. Simple squares form the pattern, but as the viewer moves over each threshold the squares appear as three-dimensional cubes, challenging the viewer's perception of the floor as a flat plane. Although the limestone comes from local Sicilian sources, its variegated color created a material interplay between rooms d and i and the frescoes in dining room g.

5. The Owner of the House of Leda

The shared medium (or representation) of stone resulted, for the viewer, in a unified ensemble between the newer and older decorative elements at the House of Leda. The homeowner intentionally left part of the house's Hellenistic-era décor in place while simultaneously updating the dining room (among others) with Fourth-Style wall paintings. Why did he choose to renovate some aspects of his house but preserve others? One pavement within the House of Leda, an armillary sphere mosaic from room f, offers insight into this phenomenon (see Figure 5). The mosaic dates to the original construction of the house in the second to early-first century BCE. It depicts a red sphere with grey rings, and at one corner there is the small face of a young boy, said to be the personification of a Wind (De Vos 1975, p. 198). The mosaic represents an armillary sphere, an instrument used to calculate the distance between celestial bodies.⁵⁴ This device is most thoroughly described by the writer, scholar, and astronomer Ptolemy, who lived in Egypt in the second century CE. In his *Geography*, Ptolemy attributes the invention of the armillary sphere to the Greek astronomer Hipparchus of Nicaea, who lived in the second century BCE. In the Hellenistic period astronomy enjoyed great prestige as a subject of study. Astronomical instruments and models were found in the major Hellenistic cities of the Mediterranean, including Syracuse, the center of Sicilian culture in the second century BCE (ibid.).

The importance of the mosaic stems not only from its subject matter, but also the technique used for its construction, known as *opus vermiculatum*, the pinnacle of Hellenistic pavement production. This costly and time-consuming technique is defined by the miniscule fragments of stone that are used to create a painterly, *trompe l'oeil* composition for the viewer. The best and earliest examples of *opus vermiculatum* mosaics date between the third and second century BCE and have a royal pedigree—they are found in the palaces of Hellenistic-era kingdoms such as those at Alexandria or Pergamon. Significantly, some of the earliest examples of this technique can also be found in Hellenistic-era elite residences throughout Sicily. One such example is a mosaic from the House of Ganymede at Morgantina that dates to the third century BCE.⁵⁵ This mosaic shows Ganymede being abducted by Zeus in the form of an eagle and foreshadows how such figural panels would be arranged in the later Hellenistic period. The Morgantina mosaic reveals that Sicily was an early adaptor of, and participant in, the production of luxurious Hellenistic pavements.⁵⁶ In her book on Sicilian mosaics, Dela Von Boeselager (1983) cites nearly fourteen cities from around Sicily whose houses retain Hellenistic-era mosaics. Undoubtedly this is only a fraction of what was originally in place. If Morgantina and Soluntum are any indication, as two of the best-preserved towns from the Hellenistic period, then many elite houses were decorated with *opus vermiculatum* mosaics.

The high-quality Hellenistic mosaics that were preserved into the Roman period functioned as status symbols for their owner. This is the case at House B in Tyndaris, a residence that suggests Sicilian homeowners not only were aware of their island's long history of mosaic production, but also that they valued such pavements as part of their domestic ensemble. House B was originally built in the second to late-first century BCE, then renovated around 50 CE. The owner, living in the Roman Imperial era, re-paved the entire house in black and white mosaics that were on trend with those found

⁵⁴ According to De Vos (1975, p. 200), this is one of the only representations of such an instrument anywhere in the ancient world aside from a first-century BCE fresco at Stabiae.

⁵⁵ For the mosaics from the House of Ganymede, see (Bell 2011, pp. 105–23).

⁵⁶ S. Rebecca Martin (2017, pp. 52–56, 61–66) has shown that Sicily (among other locales, like Delos and Pergamon) played a key role in the development of Hellenistic picture mosaics.

on the Italian mainland. However, he also chose to preserve the stunning Hellenistic mosaic in a main reception room of House B, which dates to a century and a half earlier (c. 100 BCE) than the renovation (Figure 13). This is parallel to Soluntum where the owner of the House of Leda decided to preserve the armillary sphere mosaic that dates to the second century BCE. It, and the contemporaneous Hellenistic sculptures also in the House of Leda, allowed the owner to present himself as a well-educated art collector in the Roman period. The pavements at Tyndaris and Soluntum acted as an authentic and local reminder of Sicily's rich Hellenistic history and artistic heritage.

That such Sicilian artworks still had meaning for a viewer in the first century CE is suggested by Ovid, who writes in his *Fasti* that "There [in the Hall of Vesta] stands a globe hung by Syracusan art in closed air, a small image of the vast vault of heaven, and the Earth is equally distant from the top and bottom. That is brought about by its round shape."⁵⁷ At the end of the Second Punic War in 212 BCE, the Roman general Marcus Claudius Marcellus sacked the city of Syracuse and brought a celestial sphere made by the Sicilian mathematician Archimedes to Rome, where he deposited it in the Temple of Honor and Virtue. It remained on view in Rome for the next two centuries until at least 8 CE, when Ovid described it in his *Fasti*. Ovid's account of the instrument closely resembles that depicted on the House of Leda's armillary sphere mosaic. By the Roman Imperial period, Ovid did not feel the need to mention Archimedes' name in reference to the celestial sphere, but instead described it as "hung by Syracusan art." He emphasized the Sicilian provenance of the object rather than its creator. This suggests that not only had the celestial sphere become a well-known fixture of Rome's opulent public displays of plundered art, but also that it still carried prestige in having come from Sicily. Because of Sicily's long-standing Hellenistic tradition, its artworks were considered as valuable as those from other regions in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as Asia Minor or Egypt. It also was significantly closer to Rome than either of those places.



Figure 13. Tyndaris, House B, Hellenistic-era mosaic of room seven (photo by the author).

⁵⁷ Ovid, *Fasti*, VI. 277–279.

Ovid's description of the Syracusan globe in Rome reveals that Hellenistic-era Sicilian artworks held cachet well into the first century CE. The House of Leda was a virtual treasure trove of such objects, including the armillary sphere mosaic, Small Herculaneum Woman sculpture, the statue of a Muse, and the illusionistic cut-limestone thresholds, which all date to the first phase of the residence. Given their creation in the second to early-first century BCE, these artworks were at least a century old, if not more, when the owner installed the Fourth-Style frescoes in room g. The use and re-use of antique decorative elements within Roman ensembles was fairly common and added prestige to a collection.⁵⁸ They exhibited the owner's willingness and ability to preserve luxury goods or "heirlooms" over a long period of time. In the case of the House of Leda, such objects communicated the owner's longstanding connection to a specific place—not just to Sicily, and its artistic heritage, but to Soluntum in particular. At the House of Leda a unified domestic ensemble was achieved through the juxtaposition of Roman-era decorative trends and Hellenistic-era artworks native to the island.

The first-century CE viewer would have experienced the House of Leda's Hellenistic and Roman-era artworks within the same residence. The renovation of the house was a way for the owner to selectively participate in emerging and popular Roman decorative trends. The dining room functioned as an "object" of display because the painting style was a direct import from the Italian mainland. As we've discussed, the inclusion of Fourth-Style frescoes, and their allusion to expensive commodities such as colored marble and stone, created a heterogeneous yet unified domestic ensemble in the House of Leda. This case study fits with the Mediterranean-wide trend of elite patrons curating eclectic and diverse collections in the first century CE. The House of Leda's renovation reveals the owner's desire to present himself as both an elite citizen of the Roman provinces, through the Fourth-Style frescoes, and as a local magnate who had the ability to preserve and display his Hellenistic artworks, which served as symbols of the island's artistic heritage. When juxtaposed, the older and newer elements of the decorative program represent the owner's position in each of these worlds, creating continuity between past and present.

Funding: This research was conducted with funding provided by the Department of the History of Art and the Charles Singleton Center for the Study of Pre-Modern Art, both at Johns Hopkins University.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Lucrezia Fricano, the staff of the Parco Archeologico di Solunto, and the Soprintendenza di Palermo, for their kind assistance and permission to conduct research on the houses of Soluntum. I also extend my gratitude to Marian Feldman, Hérica Valladares, and Jennifer Stager for their guidance and support for bringing this project and article to fruition.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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⁵⁸ For more on how artworks and household décor gained value with age, as well as the preservation of older artworks as "heirlooms," see ([McAlpine 2016](#), pp. 176–77; [Powers 2011](#)).

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