

OVERMANTEL IN THE MURDOCK-PIERCE HOUSE, NORWICH, VERMONT
This idyllic landscape vista can be compared favorably with a mural from Pompeii (Fig. 3) where a similar dream villa also appears. Note in addition the presence of a small sailing vessel at the lower right of each composition.

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Pompeii and New England; the Archaeology of Early American Murals

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IT is well known that the instinct to enlarge and enrich our daily lives with works of art is a universal human phenomenon. Even the most primitive of mankind has sought to transform and embellish his environment with painted and sculptural decorations. For many periods of prehistory, art is the major surviving document of a culture or civilization.

In this vital role of enhancing life, the arts and their allied crafts have always been closely associated with the home, whether palace or cave. Yet, in the full range of human history only two peoples are known to have applied painted decorations deliberately and consistently to the walls of their ordinary dwellings: *The ancient Romans and New Englanders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.* Though widely separated by place and time, only these two cultures developed and practiced a wide-spread and popular mural art, which insofar as history pro-

vides abundant examples, is unique in the art of mankind.

This is not to claim that mural decorations do not occur at other times and places. The history of western art abounds with the names of pharaohs, popes and princes who have fostered this particular branch of painting. Among the countless wonders of ancient Egypt, medieval Europe and Renaissance-Baroque Italy are acres of painted walls and ceilings. These murals, however, appear in temples, churches and palaces and not in the common dwellings of private individuals. As in all recent societies, mural decoration was a public rather than a domestic art form and, perforce, the spokesman for religious or political institutions rather than ordinary men.

It is clearly apparent that for the two exceptions cited, the average Roman citizen as well as the New Englander, was often attempting through his use of wall painting to ape the style and accouter-

ments of more patrician ways of life. At base, however, the art brought to the service of these aspirations was popular in nature and often reveals—beneath its pretensions—a thriving democratic spirit. The mural art of the ancient Romans—like that of New England—was in large measure an art of the people, or as is commonly called a “folk art.”¹ Domestic wall painting therefore belongs generally to that category of “nonverbal folklore” which survives at a level beneath “high” or official culture and often provides insights into human nature and society which the more formal aspects of a culture disguise, idealize or ignore.

In order to achieve meaningful comparisons between Roman and early American mural decoration, one is not obliged to search far beyond the obvious similarity of function to uncover analogous features of style, technique and content. This is, moreover, hardly a matter of chance. Historians and observers beginning with Jefferson have always held a strong penchant for detecting similar patterns of taste and aspiration between the two societies. As the near exclusive domain of the ancient Roman and the early Yankee, domestic wall painting was therefore not surprisingly bent to the service of common human and societal needs.

States dedicated to instilling qualities of independence and self-respect in its citizenry, the republics of ancient Rome and early America emerge in history as closely allied in purpose and outlook. “To him,” writes an eminent historian of the Roman character, “the knowledge born of experience is worth more than speculative theory. His virtues are honesty and thrift, forethought and patience, work and endurance and courage, self-reliance, simplicity and humility in the face of what is

greater than himself.”² With a few adjustments to suit the early American point of view, this panegyric is equally suitable to describe the reputed qualities of the Yankee.

By way of further analogy, the states of ancient Rome and early America were both societies with a strong basis in rural life. Closely attached to the natural environment, the Roman farmer-citizen, like his Yankee counterpart, was deeply conservative in his outlook on the world. His strong reliance upon nature, however, did not preclude a fundamentally romantic view of it. As a powerful force invested with transcendental values, the natural world provided the material and spiritual focus of his existence. It was at once a reflection of divine law and the proper setting for human enterprise.

Among the more important achievements of the Roman and early American social and political systems was the emergence of numerous individual property owners. Relatively free and self-contained, the citizen-farmer looked to his family as the basic sociological unit (rather than the polis, tribe or ruler) with the consequence that private art forms were given unparalleled scope for development. The center for this activity was that unique product of Roman and early American society; the large, single family home belonging to a prosperous rural middle-class (i.e., rich farmers).

Taken in combination these factors made possible the rise of art forms independent of the patronage and control of the church and state. Consequently, it is scarcely a matter of chance that many significant points of contact and convergence arise both in form and content between the popular art of Roman Antiquity and early Republican America.

On the other hand, it is a curious fact

that we know more today about the wall paintings of the ancient Romans than about the domestic mural art of early America. Pompeiology, the science and study of the great cycles of wall paintings excavated from the ruins of Pompeii, Stabiae and Herculaneum, has been an active and distinguished scholarly and critical discipline for well over a century. These vital artistic products of a past civilization, miraculously preserved by the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79, have been the subject of innumerable scholarly monographs as well as a pile of lavish color facsimiles and other forms of coffee-table literature aimed at broad appeal and general consumption. First brought into vogue by the classical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the mural art of Pompeii still retains a powerful grasp on the scholarly as well as popular consciousness.

In direct contrast, almost nothing until very recently was known about the wall paintings still to be found in large numbers in the rural, colonial houses of New England. The exclusive province of a few scholars and antiquarians, early American wall paintings enjoy little of the high standards of care, study and appreciation given to its ancient counterpart. Even within the broader area of American painting, including the currently fashionable subject of folk art, early mural decoration has received only scant attention.

In view of these circumstances, it is less than paradoxical that scholars can inform us more thoroughly about the meaning and purpose of Pompeian frescoes of the first century A.D. than about the far more recent murals of New England. It is far more likely, to cite only one example, that historians are closer to deciphering the enigmatic frescoes in the Villa of the Mys-

teries at Pompeii than this writer is to uncovering the historical facts that lie behind the painting of a strange overmantel in Londonderry, Vermont.

Similarly, large sums are expended to preserve and restore the painted treasures of Campania while, with few exceptions, little thought or effort is given to safeguarding the murals found in our own New England homes.³ At this moment many homes containing wall paintings (which in most other countries would be classified historic monuments) are neglected and uncared for, or worse yet, have fallen victim to renovation or demolition.

It is this egregious disparity in contemporary attitudes towards Roman and early American wall painting that first suggested the need for a comparative critical approach to these fundamentally kindred art forms. Hopefully, if only a small measure of the justifiable esteem accorded to Pompeian painting could be appropriated for the native school, the method might not appear entirely capricious or arbitrary.

At the outset, study of the ancient Roman murals revealed similarities in style, technique and subject to those of early New England that could scarcely have been anticipated, even by one disposed to distort history to his purposes. To be sure, wall painting in both places was closely associated with daily life and therefore could have been expected to provide a reflection of like aspects of these thriving commercial and agrarian societies. Similar views of towns and countryside might also have been foreseen, but not the discovery of nearly parallel representations of such subjects as genre and still life.⁴ Further common interests include a surprisingly mutual affection for the polychrome effects of imitation mar-

ble,⁵ illusionistic architectural perspectives⁶ and an entirely human love of enchanted gardens and fairy-tale palaces.⁷

In addition to these shared interests, the Roman as well as the early American wall painter also delighted in the depic-

pear upon ancient as well as the more recent walls of early New England. In short, the full scope of human experience together with the real or imagined beauties of the natural world provided the *representata* for these murals.

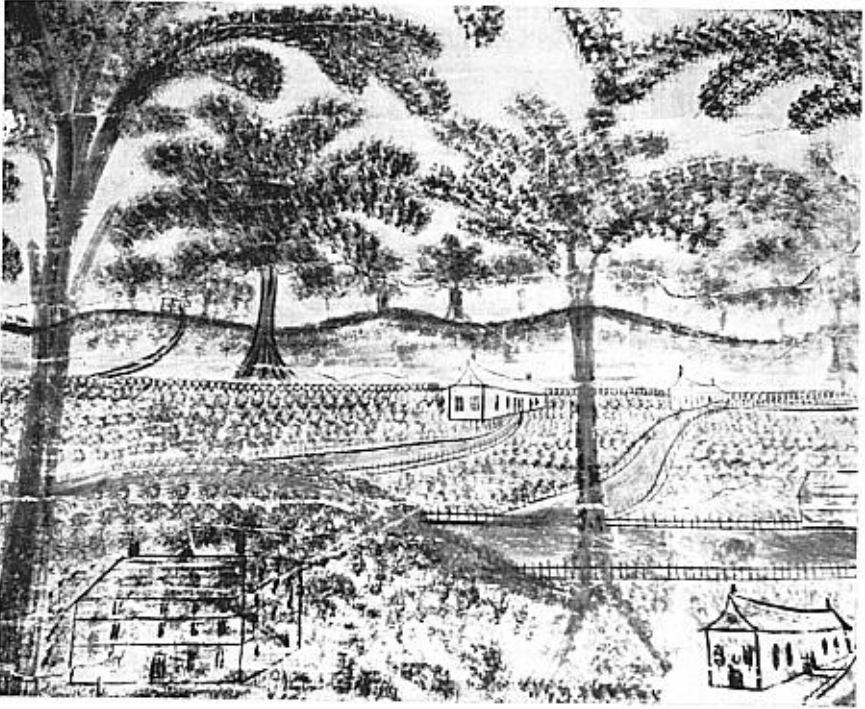


FIG. I. MURAL IN THE CAPTAIN DAN MATHER HOUSE, MARLBORO, VERMONT. COMPARE THE TREATMENT OF THE TREES AND SHRUBS WITH THE GARDEN SCENE IN FIG. 4. IN BOTH INSTANCES THE MURALIST HAS SUBSTITUTED A BARRIER OF FOLIAGE FOR THE ACTUAL STRUCTURE OF THE WALL, THUS CREATING A SECOND WALL OF GREENERY WHICH INVITES THE SPECTATOR'S VIEW AND IMMERSSES HIM IN AN IDEALIZED WORLD OF NATURE

tion of plant and animal life⁸, scenes of hunting and fishing⁹, and a variety of exotic subjects and events, ranging from tropical landscapes to smoking volcanoes.¹⁰ On occasion, portraits of the owner and his family or relatives also ap-

It can further be argued that for Roman, as well as American Society, domestic wall painting served as a means of enlarging the daily lives of average citizens. Not surprisingly, man's natural environment, appropriately embellished by imag-

ination, was among the foremost subjects for artistic concern. Pure landscape, never overburdened by human occupants, was conceived as a means of freeing the imagination in order to permit the spectator to pass from a real to an ideal world within the confines of his own home. In this poetic, beneficent world of nature, it is always summer, mid-day or twilight, and the sky is never darkened by clouds. At

vironment painted away, a Roman or Yankee farmer possessed a vantage from which he could "survey the ideal property of his dreams."¹² (Frontispiece & Fig. 3.)

In these two active maritime societies, views of sea, ship and harbor also figure prominently on the walls of common dwellings.¹³ (Fig. 4.) Due to their inherent decorative appeal these scenes also permitted the muralist a unique degree

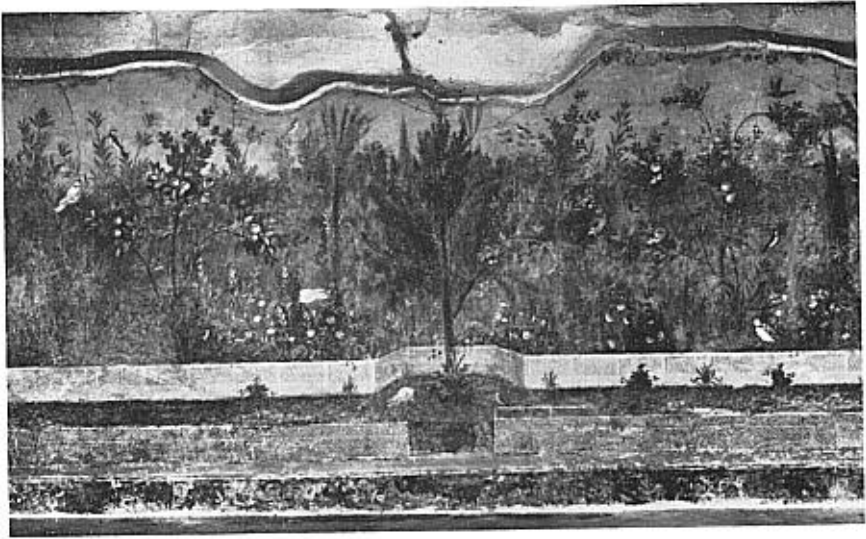


FIG. 2. MURAL FROM THE VILLA OF LIVIA AT PRIMAPORTA. ROME, MUSEO DELLE TERME

times, these bucolic idylls are further enlivened by a roseate sunset. (Figs. 1 & 2.)

In these poetic circumstances images tend to arise directly from the artist's imagination, unfettered by the necessity to imitate nature directly.¹¹ Similarly, when architecture is included, it too is constructed according to the designs of fantasy. By such pictorial means the owner of a rustic country villa could be provided with an endless summer and a luxurious estate far greater than his own. In effect, with the walls of his real en-

vironment painted away, a Roman or Yankee farmer possessed a vantage from which he could "survey the ideal property of his dreams."¹² (Frontispiece & Fig. 3.)

of independence from the demands for narrative content or topographic accuracy. "Because marine painting was less bound to precedent than other genres for subject or manners of painting," John Wilmerding has observed, "it often permitted experimental and fresh expressions."¹⁴

In this connection still lifes, garden and flower scenes, the depiction of wild and domestic fauna also provided the Roman and American muralist with the opportunity to investigate formal as opposed to

narrative problems of art. For these reasons, as well as its popular nature, domestic wall painting was freer and less reliant upon tradition and custom than academic painting. Formal and stylistic innovations, therefore, often occur in murals long be-

too severe a strain on the comparative method. One further discerns from a comparative study of ancient and early American mural decoration that "foreign" influences—after having played a major role in the formation of the respec-

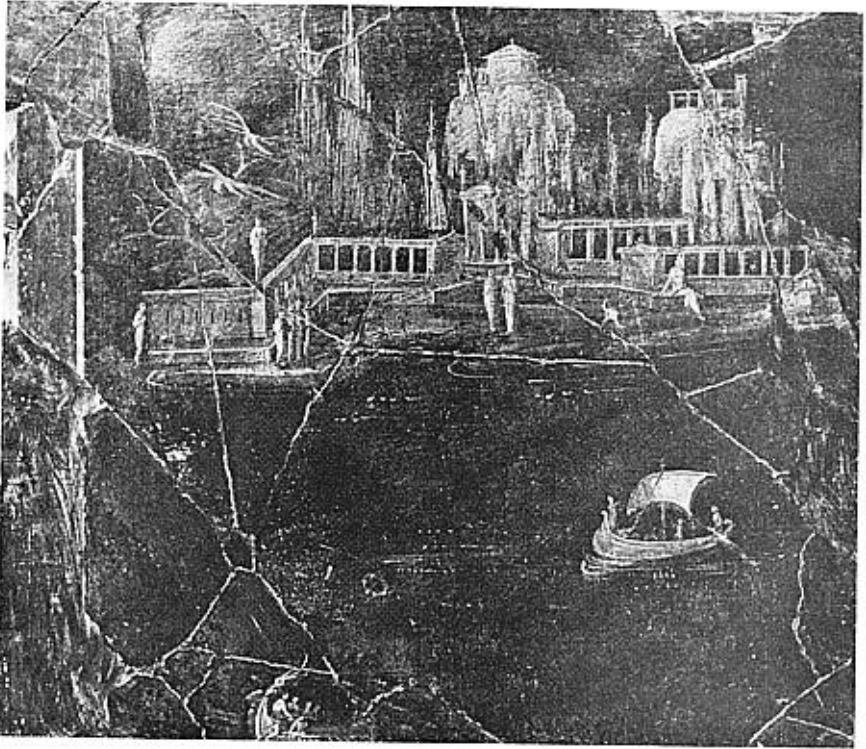


FIG. 3. "VILLA RUSTICA" FROM POMPEII. NAPLES, MUSEIO NAZIONALE

fore their more noteworthy appearance in official art.

Even the area of gods, myths, heroes and sacred rites offer grounds for meaningful comparison with the subjects of New England wall painting, entailing little more than the substitution of Moses or Abraham for Theseus and Zeus.¹⁵ It is, alas, in the realm of *erotica* that the Yankee muralist falls short of his Roman counterpart but only the most stringent critic could view this omission as impos-

ing. Early styles—gradually gave way to indigenous artistic concerns. This was equally true at Pompeii, where Greek influences and artists were eventually replaced by local Campanian painters, and in early America, where initial European influences were gradually overcome by styles and techniques developed to suit native tastes.¹⁶

Historians of Roman painting have been able to discover surprisingly little concerning the ancient muralists. There

are only a few names and none are famous. Similarly, the itinerant American limner of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries retains for the most part his

of bizarre legends connected with the early Yankee muralists are not substantially changed from those found in Pliny and other classical sources concerning an-

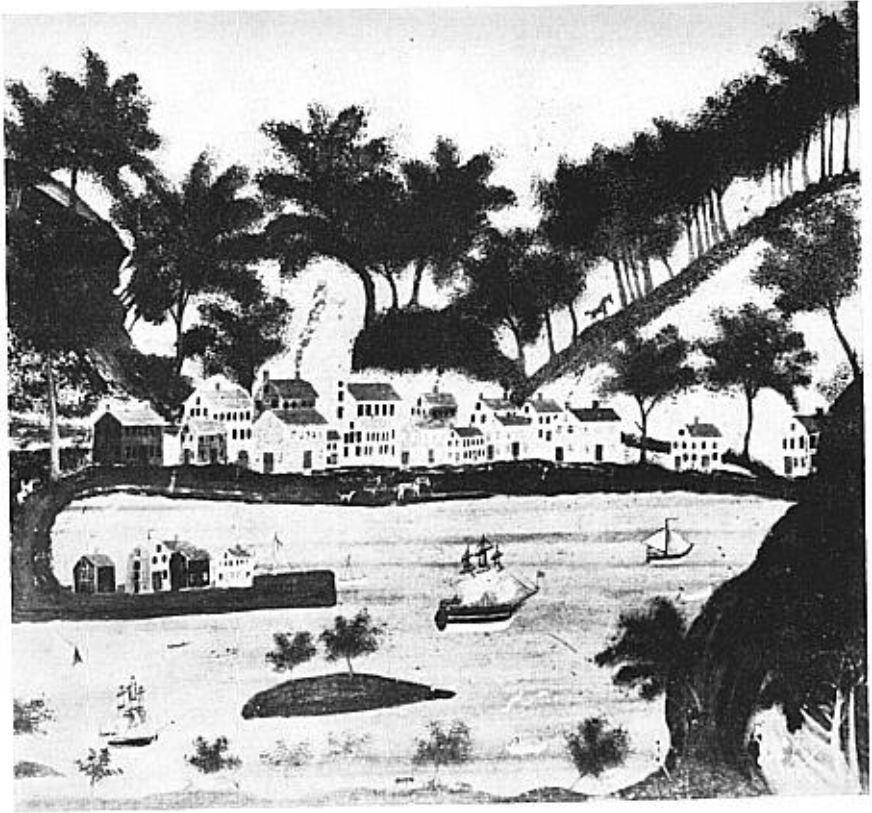


FIG. 4. OVERMANTEL FROM THE TYLER-HARRISON HOUSE, NORTH-FIELD, CONNECTICUT. NOTE THE AMAZING SIMILARITY OF THE COMPOSITION OF THIS PAINTING TO THE HARBOR SCENE FROM STABIAE. (FIG. 8) IN BOTH WORKS A HIGH HORIZON LINE IS EMPLOYED TO CREATE A VERTICAL PERSPECTIVE WHICH EMPHASIZES THE DECORATED SURFACE RATHER THAN SPATIAL OR ILLUSIONISTIC VALUES

Photograph courtesy of Nina Fletcher Little.

anonymity. As wall paintings were seldom signed, the task of reconstructing individual artist personalities is much the same for Antiquity as for the more recent period. Furthermore, the great number

of ancient painters. Invariably set forth as fact, they doubtless tell us more about the way in which the public viewed these odd bohemians than about the artists themselves.

In the matter of technique, the American wall painter worked in a manner not radically altered from the practice of the ancient muralist. Dry pigments were mixed with glue and water in order to produce the substance known as tempera which was then applied directly to the dry plaster wall.¹⁷ This fast-drying medium (which is not to be confused with the true *al fresco* technique of the Renaissance muralists) obliged the painter to rely upon directness, simplicity and sureness of execution. Consequently, in Pompeian as well as in early American murals, artistic effects are mainly derived from pattern and color rather than draughtsmanship. As such, decorative appeal and the overall harmony of the composition invariably takes precedence over detailed execution and likeness of persons and places.

In summary, the Roman and early American journeyman painters, despite vast differences in training and background, approached their respective artistic tasks along basically similar lines. Their chief goal was to create the illusion of a three-dimensional space on a flat surface and thus permit the enclosed space of the room to merge with that of the external world. On the other hand, these artisan-painters were always mindful of their involvement with the task of architectural decoration and the architectonic as well as pictorial role of murals. Wall decoration was intended to amplify rather than negate the actual structural function of the wall. For this reason, mural decoration was broadly based in both cultures upon an aesthetic of correspondences rather than one of dynamic or calculated imbalances.

There are, to be sure, vast differences in style and conception between the murals of Antiquity and those of early America. Illusionism and plasticity are

more important components of Pompeian art than of the native school. As part of the general humanistic ethos of Antiquity, the frescoes at Pompeii are more centered on man and his achievements (*megalographia*) than is early American painting which generally subordinates human to natural values. In terms of style and design, Roman painting "advanced from purely decorative to spatial (i.e., three-dimensional) composition," whereas the development of early American mural decoration runs the reverse course from open-illusionistic vistas to flat, planar and decorative surfaces.¹⁸ These differences could be multiplied but in view of the vast geographical and chronological gulf separating these two cultures they appear far less striking when viewed against the many similarities outlined above.

To some a comparative approach to Roman and American wall painting will doubtless appear forced or specious. The methods of Pompeiology, however, when applied to New England wall painting have yielded several unexpected results. To cite only one useful method gleaned from the study of ancient murals: recent years have seen several attempts to demonstrate that the content of Pompeian wall painting is not made up of a random sampling of pictorial *disiecta membra* but is often the result of deliberate iconographical programs.¹⁹ Phylis Lehmann, among other leading authorities on Roman painting, maintains that "the walls of Pompeian and Roman houses require interpretation and are not to be brushed aside as a merely decorative assortment of unrelated compositions."²⁰ It is equally clear that New England wall paintings, in addition to their obvious role as decoration, often possess specific historical and narrative content. Indeed, to dismiss

these works as purely ornamental is to fail to apprehend much of their true meaning and to ignore their value as historical and cultural documents.²¹ As the student of ancient painting turns to Livy, Strabo, Seneca or Pliny to gain needed insight, so too must the archaeologist of New England wall paintings resort to the study of records, archives, genealogies and histories to elucidate their full meaning.

The archaeology of early New England wall painting would also profit from an enlightened awareness of the means employed for the care and preservation of ancient painting. The high standards of technology found in the excavations at Pompeii must replace the "do it yourself" mentality that presently characterizes much "restoration" in this country. Directly dependent upon the taste and awareness of private owners, early American wall painting cannot rely upon a catastrophe of Vesuvian dimensions to assure its survival for posterity. Meanwhile, the abuse and effacement of this artistic patrimony shows little sign of abating.

As monuments of great aesthetic value,

and documents of cultural and historical significance, early American wall paintings offer an unique pictorial record of a major period of our early history. Hopefully, these remarks will contribute to the recognition of these facts, as well as provide tentative outlines of a comparative methodology, for their study and wider appreciation.

Finally, the approach employed in this essay was suggested not only by the similarities of style, medium and subject discussed above, but by the writer's own personal quasi-archaeological experiences in discovering many of the murals. Several were concealed beneath wallpaper or paint and had to be "unearthed" with care. A large number had fallen victim to age, fire and vandalism and required trained professional restoration. Rumor, surmise and luck, always useful companions on a "dig," played a role in bringing to light many of these paintings. And, of course, many treasures still remain hidden beneath ancient strata of paint or paper silently awaiting discovery by some future ardent archaeologist of New England murals.

NOTES

¹ A. Maiuri, *Roman Painting*, Geneva, 1953, p. 139 notes, for example, that alongside of "official" Roman painting there was at Pompeii "a whole host of works in which the painter cast off the shackles of tradition and the neo-classical school and set to depicting—daily life."

² R. H. Barrows, *The Romans*, London, 1949, p. 11.

³ Eg. J. Lipman, *Rufus Porter, Yankee Pioneer*, New York, 1968, pp. 154-155 reports that the "fate of almost half of the recorded Porter Murals" has been papering over, re-painting or outright destruction. Porter (1792-1884) is New England's foremost early muralist.

⁴ Compare, for example, the still life from

Herculaneum in the Museo Nazionale at Naples (reproduced in G. E. Rizzo, *La Pittura Ellenistico-Romana*, Milan, 1929, pl. CLIII) or one from the house of Julia Felix at Pompeii (reproduced in A. Maiuri, *op. cit.*, p. 134) with the painting on wooden paneling from a house in Wallingford, Connecticut (reproduced in N. F. Little, *American Decorative Wall Painting, 1700-1850*, New York, 1952, Fig. 13). Among genre, an instructive comparison is provided *inter alia* by the equestrian scene from the house of Julia Felix (A. Maiuri, *op. cit.*, p. 139) and an overmantel from the Elisha Hurlbut house in Scotland, Connecticut, attributed to Winthrop Chandler (N. F. Little, *op. cit.*, Fig. 53).

⁵ Cf. works of the First or "Incrustation Style" at Pompeii (A. Maiuri, *op. cit.*, p. 39)

and the examples of "marbleizing" reproduced in N. F. Little, *op. cit.*, Figs. 2 & 5.

⁶ Cf. the "Second-Style" vista from the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii (A. Maiuri, *op. cit.*, p. 40) and the "deception painting" in the Congregational Church at Grafton, Vermont (reproduced in R. L. Towne, "What's Happening in Grafton, Vermont?" *Yankee Magazine*, November, 1967, p. 36).

⁷ Cf. P. W. Lehmann, *Roman Wall Painting from Boscoreale in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Cambridge, 1953, *passim* for an interpretation of these interesting ancient murals.

⁸ For garden scenes see A. Maiuri, *op. cit.*, p. 124. Compare the birds reproduced in M. Borda, *La Pittura Romana*, Milan, 1958, pp. 99, 113, 120 and the peacocks illustrated in N. F. Little, *op. cit.*, Fig. 36.

⁹ Among the numerous possibilities here compare the dog chasing a deer fresco (M. Borda, *op. cit.*, p. 114) with the works reproduced in N. F. Little, *op. cit.*, Figs. 26 & 28.

¹⁰ Compare, for example, the well-known view of Vesuvius from the house of the Cen-

tenario (G. E. Rizzo, *op. cit.*, pl. CXCIX) with the mural reproduced in N. F. Little, *op. cit.*, Fig. 141.

¹¹ Cf. W. J. T. Peter, *Landscape in Romano-Campanian Mural Painting*, Assen, 1963, p. 193 ff.

¹² P. W. Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹³ Cf. A. Maiuri, *op. cit.*, p. 123 and N. F. Little, *op. cit.*, Fig. 46.

¹⁴ J. Wilmerding, *A History of American Marine Painting*, Boston, 1968, p. xii.

¹⁵ Cf. N. F. Little, *op. cit.*, Fig. 128 and J. Lipman, *op. cit.*, Figs. 91-92.

¹⁶ Cf. A. Maiuri, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁹ Cf. M. L. Thompson, "Programmatic Painting in Antiquity," *Marsyas*, 1961.

²⁰ P. W. Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 35, n. 28.

²¹ Cf. R. L. McGrath, "Rediscovery: Rufus Porter in Vermont," *Art in America*, LVI, 1968, 78 ff.