

Piecing Together a Lost History: Two Roman Stucco Reliefs from the Art Institute of Chicago

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This study considers the history and iconographic significance of two Roman stucco reliefs at the Art Institute of Chicago. The design and composition of these little-known works is intriguing; however, the museum possesses little information regarding their subject matter, medium, function, or provenance and they remain unpublished to date. The goal of this study is both to fill in these gaps and to open a dialogue about the current state of research on these and related images focusing on the ambiguity of representations of women in domestic design and the particular issues of provenance concerning stucco reliefs.

These two Roman stucco relief panels from the Art Institute of Chicago are visually compelling (Figs. 1-2). The stark white figures hover in the abstracted space of the blue background, a format typical to the sacro-idyllic genre. Their subject matter, unfortunately, is far from typical. Since their original findspot is unknown, the museum lacks much of the information which might help one reach a deeper understanding of them as “art works.” The goal of this article is to fill in these gaps by opening a dialogue about the current state of research on these images and situate them within the larger context of maenad imagery in imperial Roman visual culture. Through an exploration of the processes by which objects such as these are torn from their original contexts of display, it further considers both what is lost by and what is gained from displaying objects like these reliefs in a museum setting.

The brief description of these works at the Art Institute reads as follows: “The right panel

depicts a seated woman extending her right arm toward a slender griffin (a mythological creature combining a feline body and an avian head) with raised wings. The left panel shows a winged female figure flanked by two deer and standing on a delicate tendril motif.”¹ The viewer is thus left to interpret the images largely on his or her own. Both images consist of white figural relief designs on a blue background framed by a stucco molding. The similarities in color, style, and molding as well as their joint accession indicate that the two reliefs came from the same building – and likely the same room – where they fit within a larger design scheme of decorative embellishments, perhaps as pendants.

Formal Description

The Deer Relief (Figs. 1, 3) depicts a central female figure presenting an offering to one of the two deer that flank her and face her in a heraldic pair. The body of the woman is



Figure 1: Deer Relief, First century C.E., Roman, stucco relief, 40.2 x 55.0 cm., Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Mrs. Edith Healy Hill, unknown provenance



Figure 2: Griffin Relief, First century C.E., Roman, stucco relief, 37.7 x 55.5 cm., Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Mrs. Edith Healy Hill, unknown provenance

a smooth silhouette, standard in the medium of stucco, with folds of loose drapery flowing behind her. Her hair is gathered back in a bun, and her head is bound with a fillet. The Griffin Relief (Figs. 2, 5) depicts a seated woman facing a griffin. With her right hand she offers a ribbon to the beast. Her body is similarly depicted in a smooth silhouette with folds of drapery visible beneath her chair. She is nude from the waist up and wears her hair in a layered bun at the top of her head with a small tuft of hair flowing in the back. The griffin is winged and the details of his feathers are incised into the stucco. The level of detail has been pared down to a simplified and stylized pattern of incisions. The right paw of the griffin touches the left foot of the woman, which creates a continuous line through the composition that can be traced from the tip of the griffin's wing to the woman's head. While the main figures in both reliefs were molded out of stucco, some details are painted onto the background with a thin coat of stucco rather than modeled. In cases such as the hind legs of the griffin, this

technique is used to lend the illusion of space; however, in the case of the flowing drapery, it is an economic means of adding detail in less time.

Both of the reliefs have been heavily restored. The blue background of the restored areas shows a distinct discrepancy in consistency from the original portions, featuring a slightly lighter overall color with inclusions of darker pigment sporadically mixed in with a slight sheen to the surface. The blue fields in the original fragments display a consistency of color throughout, with the exception of wear marks, and a matte surface. In the Deer Relief, the deer at the left of the composition is intact. However, the woman's legs below her knees as well as the legs, stomach, and haunches of the deer on the right appear to be reconstructed, as illustrated here in a line drawing of the relief (Fig. 4). It is unclear which areas of the frame are restored. In the Griffin Relief, the majority of the figures remain intact, with the exceptions of the top of the griffin's head and

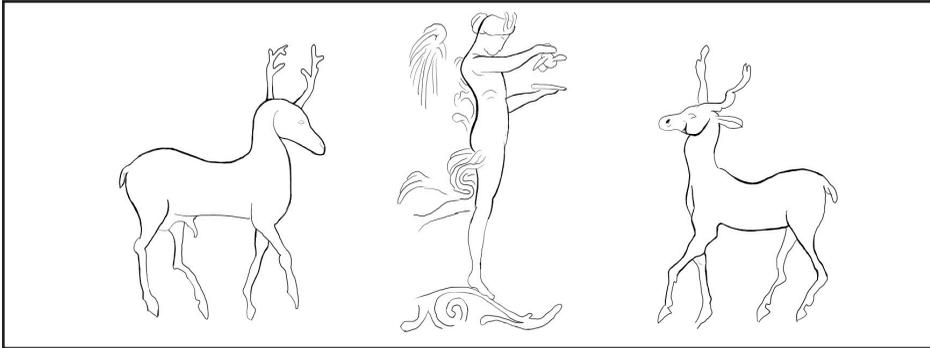


Figure 3: Drawing of Deer Relief as it appears today

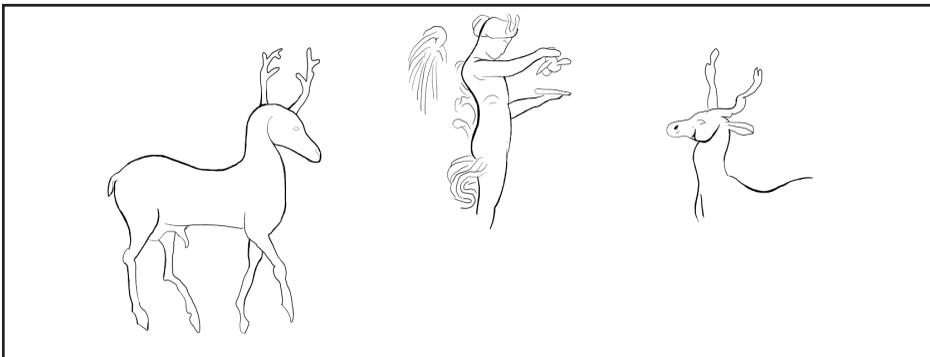


Figure 4: Drawing of Deer Relief indicating what remains of the original composition

wings, and the woman's head and her left arm as well as a portion of her torso (Fig.5). Large cracks extending through the frame section off original fragments including nearly a third of the background to the left of the figural composition and a smaller section of the top right corner (Fig. 6).

Medium

When compared to other extant Roman stucco reliefs, the level of craftsmanship in the Art Institute reliefs appears in many ways simplistic. The modeling of the figures is flat and shallow with little attention to musculature,² the drapery is painted flat on the background to expedite the modeling process,³ the griffin's wings are stylized, and the rectangular shape of the panels is less complex than the patterns which frequently appear in public baths and tombs.⁴

Despite these technical shortcomings, the pigmented background indicates the use of more complex and costly materials. Historically, the use of blue pigment was a status symbol in the ancient world displaying the wealth of the patron due to the precious stones such as lapis lazuli or azurite which were required for its production as noted by Pliny (HN XXXIII.12) and Vitruvius (De arch. VII.5.8).⁵ While a process of creating artificial blue pigment from copper had been developed by the first century CE, the color was likely chosen to convey wealth because of these traditional associations.⁶ Additionally, there appear to be small traces of gold leaf in numerous areas of the reliefs, most notably on the wrist of the Griffin Relief and the hair of the Deer Relief.⁷ If these traces truly are gold leaf, it would have profound implications on the cost of materials and thus on the wealth of the patron, the function, and the location of the works.

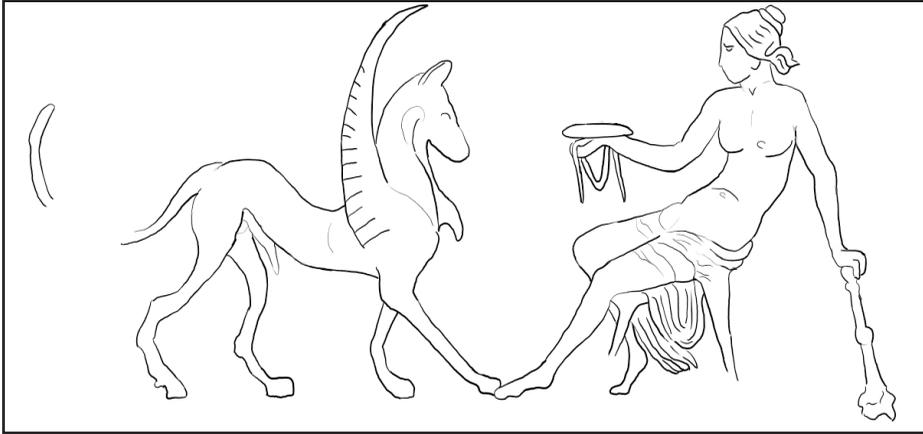


Figure 5: Drawing of Griffin Relief as it appears today

Since the visual impact of many stucco reliefs comes from the pattern of geometric shapes formed by the mouldings, colored backgrounds create a much more dynamic overall effect. The addition of color also complicated the production process. In order to prevent the materials from mixing, the white stucco had to be added after the painted surface dried. Since the artist could not blend the white stucco into the colored background, the figures themselves were typically less complex and often, paint or plaster slip was used to add details which would otherwise have been achieved through modeling or incised lines. Similarly, the application of gold leaf over the reliefs would have rendered intricate detail unnecessary. These production variations may account for some of the perceived technical shortcomings.

Iconography

The imagery of the Art Institute reliefs defies easy categorization. The interaction between the female figures with the griffin and deer, respectively, suggests a larger narrative context. The general function of the images may be votive as both figures appear to be making offerings to the animals. However, they do not conform to any immediately identifiable ritual or narrative tradition.

While the women do extend their arms in the general direction of the animals, their

countenances appear self-contained. Aside from the touching toes of the second relief, the figures do not directly interact with each other, indicating possibly that while they form a unified composition, the figures are intended to be interpreted independently. If the female figures are viewed alone, the pictorial tradition with which they share the most elements is that of maenads, the female followers of Dionysus. The posture of the woman in the Deer Relief bears a striking resemblance to the convention of the floating maenad.⁸ Although the angle and position of her body is more erect, the shape of her silhouette and her flowing dress are familiar attributes. The positioning of her arms resembles images of maenads playing cymbals.⁹ However, the objects in her hands remain unclear. The object in her lower hand could be a platter, but the object that she holds above it – possibly a small bird or a ceramic vessel – has no known parallel within maenadic imagery.¹⁰

The wings identified in the Art Institute's description of the Deer Relief, which are painted on the background of the panel rather than modeled, are less defined than those seen elsewhere in the stucco tradition (Fig. 1).¹¹ Even in the Griffin Relief from the Art Institute, the wing itself is in relief, and the feathers are indicated by a regularly spaced set of incised marks (Fig. 2). In contrast, in both of the Art Institute reliefs, the flowing drapery

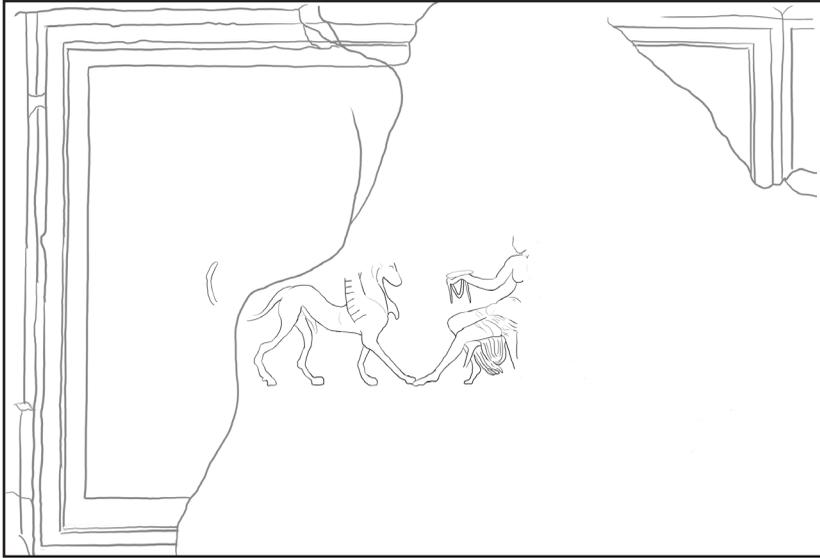


Figure 6: Drawing of Griffin Relief indicating frame damage and what remains of original composition

is painted flat onto the background rather than modeled. Given this context, it seems feasible that these markings in the Deer Relief from the Art Institute represent the billowing fabric that is characteristic of maenadic imagery rather than wings.¹²

The Griffin Relief from the Art Institute contains some iconographic elements that can be tied to the maenadic tradition. Among these elements is the downward turned torch on which the figure reclines. As noted by Livy in the *Annals*, the torch was integrated into Roman Bacchic revelry, and the theme of a maenad depicted with a torch was likewise incorporated into the visual imagery.¹³ Unfortunately, given the color discrepancies, this portion of the relief was likely restored, and therefore was not likely included in the original composition. While the objects in her outstretched right hand remain somewhat obscure, they possibly represent a platter and a sacred garland or ribbon, a combination of objects that are depicted elsewhere in maenadic imagery.¹⁴

Despite these similarities, the figures from the Art Institute display none of the overt attributes of the maenads, such as a thyrsus or tympanum. Additionally, in Roman interior

design schemes, maenads are typically shown either isolated within their frame without any narrative context or interacting with other members of the thiasos of Dionysus. By contrast, the figures in the Art Institute reliefs appear to interact with the animals. Further complicating this matter is the apparent reverence shown by the female figures toward the animals. Although less common in Roman depictions than their Greek precursors, animals do occasionally appear in the tradition of Roman maenadic imagery. In these instances maenads are depicted dominating or dismembering animals as an indication of their savageness.¹⁵ There seems to be no precedent in Roman art for maenads revering or worshipping animals in the manner depicted in the Art Institute reliefs.

One of the difficulties in identifying these figures as maenads lies in the ambiguity of maenads, who are depicted with little consistency in Roman interior design. Their identifiable attributes were stripped away, leaving ambiguous yet stunning figures to decorate the walls and ceilings of homes, public buildings, and graves. This could be due in part to the fact that maenads – along with cupids, nymphs, and Nike – were based upon standard templates that were commonly used as

decorative elements to fit within a larger design scheme.¹⁶ This ambiguity makes it difficult to accurately identify these and similar figures as maenads. The prevalence of maenads depicted in Roman art without concrete attributes makes this identification more likely than other figures. The goddess Diana, for example is often depicted with deer, but is rarely depicted without her bow and arrow. The use of shared templates to represent different types of mythical females raises the issue of the female form as a decorative or ornamental object in a way that was less common with male figures, who are more frequently depicted within narrative scenes or identifiable as specific mythological or historical figures.

In the case of the Art Institute reliefs, this ambiguity is further exacerbated by seemingly contradictory imagery. The motif of the maenad with a griffin could signify the context of the images. In Greco-Roman mythology, the griffin is a guardian animal and is therefore often depicted in funerary art to guard the grave. The convention of animals arranged in a heraldic pair is an apotropaic tradition that is often used to protect whatever they surround – in this case the female figure.¹⁷ Bacchic imagery is often found in funerary art as well, particularly as a popular motif for sarcophagus decoration. It is therefore possible that the figures are not in fact interacting within a narrative but rather reflect a theme associated with funerary imagery. By the same measure, this combination of imagery could signify a decorative motif with no intention of narrative function, as both the griffin and the maenad are often used as decorative ornaments within a design scheme.

Provenance

Since these images were donated from a private collection, the history of the reliefs before their arrival at the museum is unclear. The reliefs were donated by Mrs. Edith Healy Hill in 1922. The only prior article which refers to these reliefs directly was published a year later in the *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago*

and informs us that Mrs. Hill inherited them from her father, the Chicago portrait painter G.P.A. Healy.¹⁸ He is said to have returned with them from Rome, where he resided from 1868-1872.¹⁹ Mr. Healy claimed that they came from the *Domus Aurea*, Nero's golden palace.

As is common with donations from private collections, there was no documentation or authentication of the findspot and no details as to how the reliefs were acquired. Legislation regarding the excavation and export of antiquities in Italy was not yet firmly enforced in this period.²⁰ The Grand Tour, which had been undertaken energetically by Americans and Europeans alike in the post-Civil War era, gave rise to and sustained a thriving tourist market for antiquities dealers. Artists residing in Italy frequently took on many roles in this tourist market, not only producing copies of classical artwork and creating original neoclassical compositions, but also leading amateur excavations and serving as intermediaries with Italian antiquities dealers.²¹ As a member of the artistic community living in Rome, it is possible that Healy himself had social connections with this aspect of the antiquities market. Given the ambiguous provenance of the works, there is always the possibility that the works are forgeries. However due to the presence and extent of restoration, it seems more likely that these images were fragmentary or damaged originals from a Roman source that were highly restored in the Victorian era and therefore bear distinct neo-classical elements.²²

The *Domus Aurea*, the location of origin proposed by Healy, was the first known site from which decorative stucco reliefs were recovered in the Renaissance and became a key inspiration for Renaissance designers. Although the stucco reliefs of Nero's palace were already in disrepair by the 19th century, Renaissance illustrations and engravings of the palace continued to be published and circulated and therefore the site remained the most famous source of stucco decoration. Due to its notoriety and state of disrepair, the likelihood of

two relief panels in reasonably intact condition from the Domus Aurea being legally exported out of Rome and into a private collection is improbable, although not impossible given the permissive attitudes towards antiquities at the time.²³ Generally speaking, the composition of the Art Institute reliefs does resemble that of reliefs from the Domus Aurea, seen in the stark contrast of white figures on a colored background. However, the rectangular format of the panels, their simplicity of composition, and quality of the stucco work, suggest a lower grade of craftsmanship.²⁴ This could indicate that they were commissioned by a private patron who was imitating imperial style within a limited budget or that they were from a less distinguished room or hallway within an imperial or public building.

While the lack of provenance diminishes the contextual information available and often calls into question the authenticity of any ancient artifact, specific complications arise in regard to interior design media such as stucco reliefs, because they were created in situ and intended to be permanent fixtures within a specific design scheme. The removal of a stucco relief from its original context is a destructive process. The rough edges visible in the top right corner of the molding of the Deer Relief indicate that the stucco finish directly surrounding the path of the saw was severely damaged (Fig. 1). Further examination of the moldings indicates that the reliefs were surrounded by other panels. In the top right corner of the second relief panel, we see the intersection of at least three panels, damage to the corner obscures where the fourth panel would have intersected (Fig. 2). This indicates that in order to remove these two panels with their moldings intact, many other panels were potentially destroyed.²⁵ Even if the figural reliefs remained intact, they would have been separated from the molding, leaving even fewer identifying features. Fresco and stucco fragments that are excavated by professional archaeologists are removed in thin layers in order to preserve the wall behind them. In the case of these reliefs, the unfinished edges

reveal that a portion of the wall was removed with the reliefs. Even if these panels were somehow removed with minimal damage to the surrounding panels, they would have left holes in the wall or ceiling from which they were removed. Therefore, if the building was not entirely demolished, at the minimum, the structural integrity was compromised.²⁶

From an iconographic standpoint, the removal of an image from its intended context often renders an image illegible because of the lack of association with other iconographic clues within the room. Even when an image can be understood on its own, the environment for which it was created informs and often dictates its function. Knowledge of this context can indicate the intended audience, whether it was public or private, decorative or functional, secular or religious. In the case of the Art Institute reliefs, this context could have provided crucial clues.

Conclusions

The key problem with the scope of this study is the intersecting layers of ambiguity surrounding the iconography of these specific reliefs, the iconography of maenads, and the context of the Art Institute reliefs. While there are several stylistic and iconographic trends that emerge in the depiction of maenads, the standard attributes developed in the tradition of Greek vase painting were not strictly adhered to in Roman traditions. Stripped of the specific attributes that tied them to the cult of Dionysus, maenads fell into the domain of ornamentation, interchangeable with figures such as Horae or Nikae. To compound this, the fragmentary remains of most surviving stucco reliefs render their interpretation difficult. Many reliefs were removed with little or no record of their location or function within the room. Those sites that do remain intact are in such fragmentary condition that many of the designs are illegible. These are often subterranean and not accessible to the public, which is further exacerbated by the limited publications in the field of stucco reliefs,

making even access to high-quality images difficult.

At the intersection of this uncertain imagery and under-studied medium fall two stucco reliefs from the Art Institute of Chicago (Figs. 1-2). With a perplexing combination of imagery and a lack of contextual clues to work from, the task of identifying and understanding these pieces is a highly problematic one. As an element of architectural design, these images were never intended to be viewed outside of the context in which they were set, and in many cases the key to understanding any narrative function or religious significance associated with such works lies in understanding the design scheme as a whole. Nonetheless, through a thorough comparison to other known artworks and artistic trends, certain facts emerge which contribute to our understanding of these images.

Although we will never fully recover the lost history of the Art Institute reliefs and other similar artifacts, they can still serve as valid examples of Roman stucco decoration. Given the fragmentary nature of much of the surviving body of Roman stucco reliefs, discounting pieces of unknown provenance further decreases the pool of images available for stylistic analysis and comparative studies of theme, style, and subject matter. Additionally, many of the artifacts which came into private collections from undocumented excavations came from private sites.²⁷ While we have access to extraordinary sites, such as the Domus Aurea or the Stabian Baths, stucco reliefs of unknown provenance afford a view of privately commissioned reliefs, affording us an understanding of the full diverse range of the medium.²⁸ While museum patrons do not experience the full effect of stucco reliefs within a design scheme as they were intended when individual panels or pairs are displayed, relief panels such as those at the Art Institute still give patrons a first-hand view of an ancient medium which is often under-represented in the field of art history and not widely available

in print or online. While it would be foolish to deny that there is a loss of knowledge with a loss of provenance, they do not consequently lose all of their scholarly value. As long as scholars are willing to open a dialogue about these gains and losses, we can still use this material to piece together the ambiguous remains of a distant past.

Endnotes:

- 1 Information plaque accompanying the images on display at the Art Institute of Chicago as of January 2013.
- 2 Given the scope of this article, I cannot give a catalog of Roman stucco reliefs, instead where comparisons are needed I will refer to figures in the standard texts of Mielsch (1975) and Wadsworth (1924). For more developed musculature, see Wadsworth (1924, Plate VII), and Mielsch (1975, Figs. K33f, K50 K64d, K88.1).
- 3 For modeled or incised drapery, see Mielsch (1975, Figs. K37.4, K37.8, K50).
- 4 For Complex stucco designs, see Mielsch (1975, Figs. K20, K46c, K51, K54, K68, K115).
- 5 Plin. HN XXXIII.12; Vitruvius. De arch. VII.5.8. Despite the descriptions of these rich pigments by ancient authors and chemical analysis of hundreds of wall paintings and ceramic decorations, evidence for pigments of precious stones is rarely corroborated; see Siddall (2006,28).
- 6 For more on blue pigments, see Siddall (2006, 24-25). For an examination of the significance of color in Roman art, see Bradley (2009). To date there has been no published analysis of the materials of these reliefs, leaving the identity of their chemical and mineral composition unknown.
- 7 The presence of gold leaf is not evident in photographs and remains uncorroborated without an elemental analysis.
- 8 For the convention of the floating maenad, see Mielsch (1975, Figs. K27.6, K37.2, K37.4).
- 9 For the convention of a maenad with cymbals, see Mielsch (1975, Fig. K27.6).
- 10 For the convention of a maenad with a platter, see Mielsch (1975, Figs. K37.4, K50.1).
- 11 For stucco wings see Wadsworth (1924, Plates IV, IX, XLIV).
- 12 For maenads with billowing drapery, see Mielsch (1975, Figs. K27.6, K37.4, K50.1, K50.2).
- 13 In Hespaltia's description of the Bacchic revelry of historic maenads, she recounts, "Matrons in the dress of Bacchantes, with disheveled hair and carrying blazing torches, would run down to the Tiber, and plunging their torches in the water would bring them out still burning." Livy (Annals, XXXIX.8-18).
- 14 For a maenad with a garland and platter, see Mielsch (1975, Fig. K37.4).
- 15 For a maenad with a dismembered animal, see Touchette (1995, Fig. 8a).
- 16 Ling 1991, 220.
- 17 Gardner 2003, 111.
- 18 M.B.W. 1923, 15.
- 19 See DeMare (1954, 242-65), for more on Healey's time in Rome.
- 20 Monari 2012, 1.
- 21 Dyson 2006, 9.

22 While there are numerous documented occurrences of forgers damaging their forgeries to look like antiquities, the discrepancy between the discrete traces of gold leaf and the clear distinction in materials between the fragments and the restored areas suggest to me that the fragments are original. See Dyson (2006, 9). Since the interests of Victorian collectors was primarily aesthetic value and the display of the treasures of antiquity, they were more eager to restore fragments to a completed image even if that meant altering the design.

23 Monari 2008, 2.

24 For extensive images of the remaining stucco reliefs of the Domus Aurea as well as Renaissance illustrations, see Iacopi (2001).

25 Since the provenance is unknown, the extent of damage to other images is likewise unknown. It is also possible that these panels were the damaged fragments left from the removal of other reliefs.

26 The depth of the reliefs is not listed by the museum, so the extent of the wall which was removed with the reliefs is unknown without closer inspection.

27 Strong (1959, 98) notes that excavators of the Necropolis at Pozzuoli in 1925 discovered holes in private tombs where relief panels had already been removed.

28 See also the set of Roman stucco reliefs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art of unknown provenance, whose quality of craftsmanship indicates a non-imperial patron, in Mielsch (1975, K37.1-K37.8).

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