

Woman in Stone: Yearning and Despair at Boscotrecase

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Vesuvian villas were fraught with symbolic art. The Villa of Agrippa Postumus, 11 BCE, featured a sophisticated program of Third Style frescoes.

Four *cubicula* offered privileged visitors glimpses of luxurious cinnabar panels, painted Egyptian *pinakes* honoring Hathor and Anubis, and imperial cranes evoking Apollo, Augustus's patron following victory at Actium. These paintings provided something else as well: a vivid portrait of thwarted feminine agency. Evidence exists to indicate the villa was owned by Julia Augusti, daughter of the emperor. Julia's life was severely constrained, and she was forced to marry for benefit of political alliance. Octavian even took away her sons, newborn Lucius and three-year-old Gaius, and later had his daughter exiled.

Some scholars attribute the decorative program at Boscotrecase to Julia; this project posits she used this art to communicate intense yearning and despair. Andromeda waits in the Mythological Room, eternally chained to the rocks: her lover Perseus has no Medusa to defeat the sea monster Ketos. Polyphemus pines from his island for his beloved Galatea: alas, he cannot swim. The White Room, home to those hopeful cranes, depicts as well a *thymiaterion*, a censer used to purify the pollution of death. Tiny pastoral landscapes beckon the viewer; on closer inspection, they present sacrificial *aedicule* fading into an engulfing darkness. And those *pinakes*? Copies of funerary papyri from the *Book of the Dead*. Finally, in the Black Room, the verticality of the painted architecture suggests a cage, an imperial portrait of Julia locked irretrievably inside, gazed upon by Perseus's missing Gorgoneion; there will be no rescue of Andromeda here.

