

THE PAINTED DECORATIONS OF THE *NYMPHAEUM DOMUS*

Ariadne's room

The frescoes that you can admire in the showcases along the right aisle in San Lorenzo are the result of a re-composition, study and restoration work of hundreds of painted plaster's fragments collected during the archaeological surveys in Marconi Square.

They represent only a small sample of the painted decorations of the most important *domus*, the so-called *nymphaeum* domus. The fresco with the young pygmy (in the first showcase) is the most ancient one (50-40 b.C.) and the gable of a small domestic *lararium* is displayed in the left aisle (II-III century AD).

Between these two chronological points of reference, along the entire visiting path, are displayed the frescoes of the so-called "Ariadne room", a big room (more or less 25 square meters), on the first floor of the private area of the *domus*, with the access from the balcony to the internal courtyard and a window leaning on the garden. Its special decoration, made in the Augustean Age and then fell to the lower floor during the fire of the year 69 a.C., let us identify it as a *cubiculum*, i.e. a bedroom. Divided in a bedchamber (with the bed) and in a waiting room, we can imagine it was furnished with a little table, some chairs and another bed with a function similar to a sofa, which was destined to host few selected guests.

The paintings accompanied and highlighted the different room's functions: in the *alcova* the black background of the boxes on the high part of the wall (enriched by some vegetable branches with small pictures of people and animals like ibis or little "Victories") and the white of the big panels underneath them, had a relaxing effect; the bright red of the cinnabar used in the waiting room – as a background to different decorative patterns (griffons, winged little figures) in the showcases and in the big hanging panels – kept the attention alive and fostered the dialogues with those who were waiting in it. Two wonderful pictures were placed at the center of both the walls and, as it often happened in the Roman world, they must have provided, in different occasions, a topic for the conversation.

The subject's choice was not accidental and the point of view was mainly female, for this reason it is possible to presume that it was the room of the *domina*, i.e. the house's lady. They told the story of two important moments of the Ariadne's myth, when she was left on the beach of Naxos island by Theseus and her meeting with Dionysus.

They are the most ancient copies that we have, even before the Pompeian ones, of Greek masterpieces cited in the ancient sources and lost forever. They were made by a master, the *pictor imaginarius*, who planned and organized the entire room's decoration in which we can recognize the work of other artists who were not as good as him. We do not know anything and we will never know anything about his identity, but these fragments show us he was a high level painter, surely born in Rome for his ability and for the quantity of experiences gained in the big decoration construction sites in the Augustean age, those of the houses of Augustus and Livia on the Palatino and of the Farnesina Villa.

There are several links and similarities with these paintings which only clients near the world of the imperial court could afford to make reference to, as a manifesto of their personal political commitment but also as the expression of a social status to be exhibited towards Cremona's citizens. The showcases only contain a very small part of the survived decoration. The assembling and the study of tens of thousands of fragments led to the implementation of a restoration project which could lead, with the economic public and private support, to the material reconstruction, in the museum, of the entire Ariadne's room as an accessible place to be visited.

A FRAGMENT REPRESENTING DIONYSUS