
INTRODUCTION

Why a book on Roman art is familiar enough by now, in large and elegant picture books. They show paint, ceramic, silver, cameo, and glass—of human beings copulating. What can I say that's new about these images? Isn't human sexuality so familiar, so constant, that its meaning is self-evident? Why belabor the obvious?



“erotic” art? The images published in large and elegant picture books. They show artists’ renditions—in paint, ceramic, silver, cameo, glass, and gems—of human beings copulating. What can I say that’s new about these images? Isn’t human sexuality so familiar, so constant, that its meaning is self-evident? Why belabor the obvious?

What I’ve discovered in trying to understand these images as the ancient Roman viewer did is that almost *nothing* about them fits into our late twentieth-century conceptions about sex. Roman sexual images are not self-evident. What is more, they have the power to reveal a sexual culture that operated under rules completely different from our own. It turns out that such elegant books do us a great disservice. They cut the sexual images off from their original contexts. Seeing these images in glossy photos in a book means *not* seeing them as the ancient Roman did. Imagine drinking from an elegant silver cup with scenes of male-to-male intercourse on it, or holding a fine gemstone in your hand with a scene of lovemaking accompanied by an erotic inscription, or visiting someone’s house and seeing fresco paintings depicting sexual activity on the walls of the best room. Or imagine entering the dressing room of a luxurious public bath and seeing sexual vignettes that showed much more daring sexual acts than the ones you saw in the local bordello. Every one of these experiences engages a whole gamut of sensations that glossy

photos cannot call up. Sexual representations were embedded in specific Roman social practices, from entertainment at a banquet to the daily ritual of bathing. The key to understanding these images of lovemaking is to sweep away our experience of the picture book and try to see them as the ancient Roman did.

Such efforts bring us remarkable new discoveries, both about the artists who created these images and the people who looked at them. Visual artists were much bolder than the Roman poets and satirists who wrote so much about sex. Artists delighted in upsetting the norms of proper sexual relations by showing behavior that broke the codes set by the elite. If, for instance, the Roman writers tell us that an adult male could have sex with a woman or a boy as long as he was the one doing the penetrating, what does it mean when Roman artists represent two adult males having sex with each other? If these same writers tell us of the shame that descends on someone who engages in oral sex, what do images of men and women engaging in both *fellatio* and *cunnilingus* mean? Exploring these code-breaking images in context reveals a variety of attitudes toward sexuality that the writers never account for. Why? Because they are writing for and about the elite. The writers' values are those of the class they belong to. Not so visual representations.

We have, in effect, the standard attitudes presented in the writings and the non-standard ones popping up in the visual art. The repercussions of this disparity are enormous. Study of the visual art expands the scope of ancient Roman sexuality far beyond the elite class. Visual representations of lovemaking had much larger and much more varied audiences than verbal representations. Take the mass-produced ceramics manufactured in Italy or the Rhône Valley and exported throughout the empire. Roman soldiers, and their barbarian allies, drank from them in far-flung outposts and proudly included them in the burial offerings in their tombs. Or the tiny gaming pieces called *spintriae*: their sexual imagery circulated in much the same way as the images of the emperors circulated on coins.

This diffusion of sexual imagery across class boundaries opens up the possibility of seeing new faces—the faces of people who had no part in writing the ancient texts. They are women of every class, non-elite free citizens, slaves, and former slaves. They are also people who were outcasts because of their sexual practices, such as prostitutes of both sexes. By investigating fresco paintings still in their original architectural contexts I reconstruct some of the attitudes that these excluded Romans had toward sex. It is clear that artists who created such images were ad-

dressings these non-elite people in ways that were dear to them. In some cases they placed sexual fantasies in luxury and physical beauty—a kind of “trickle-down” system in which elite representation found its way to the humble house of a freedman or even to a bordello. In other cases artists raucously overturned elite standards: the passive woman becomes dominatrix over the elite man who licks her vagina; two women parody male-female lovemaking; groups of men and women enact all manner of taboo sexual acts in threesomes and foursomes. In these parodies we finally get a glimpse of the non-elite and hear them laughing—at sex.

This book gains much from recent archaeological discoveries. I had the privilege of studying art that remained buried until very recently. Most dramatic of all are the paintings of the Suburban Baths at Pompeii, uncovered in 1986 and first published only in 1995. The Leiden gem, the Ortiz flask, the Warren cup, and the Metropolitan glass dish are all Roman luxury objects of the Augustan period that have only recently come to light: here I give them their first full studies, and they add considerably to the project. Even well-known objects yield surprisingly fresh information. In particular, when I match the paintings of lovemaking—cut from their walls at Pompeii by prudish excavators—to their original architectural settings, they reveal new dimensions of Roman culture.

What emerges, first and foremost, is that—contrary to our expectations—the Romans are not at all like us in their sexuality. The acts that artists depicted are familiar to us, but the meanings that these representations had for the viewers are far from the ones we would like to superimpose on them. Here was a world before Christianity, before the Puritan ethic, before the association of shame and guilt with sexual acts. And it is a world that had many more voices than the ones we hear in the ancient texts that have survived. There is no way that elite attitudes toward sexuality embodied in classical literature can explain these images, created as they were by anonymous artists for the whole spectrum of Roman society. The great surprise of my study is discovering many different Roman sexualities within a society that was anything but homogeneous.

In exploring how the art of the Romans reveals their sexualities, we find that our own concepts of what is pornographic, sinful, or shameful have little or nothing to do with what the Romans thought: they bought and enjoyed objects, or even commissioned paintings for their homes, that frankly represented sexual intercourse in many different forms. We see images of men and women making love, but also

men making love to boys and sometimes to other men, women pleasuring women, and sexual threesomes and foursomes. Artists represented sex in many different ways, not only varying positions but also picturing practices such as fellatio and cunnilingus. In studying these images in context I came to the conclusion that the ancient Romans, rather than consider these images “pornographic” and hide them away, usually associated them with luxury, pleasure, and high status. Looking at these images of lovemaking with the eyes of the ancient Roman allows us to enter a world where sexual pleasure and its representation stood for positive social and cultural values.

My hope is to set up an arena large enough to allow these works of art, from the humblest to the most exalted, to recover meanings that are in some sense *proper* to them. By looking at these images of lovemaking with unbiased eyes, a modern viewer can learn at least some of what they meant to the ancient viewer. I want to make the modern experience of looking come as close as possible to the ancient one. Only in this way can doors open to reveal the values that sexual imagery held for ancient Roman women and men.

In the next chapter I explore in greater detail the problems of methodology inherent in this project and define terms that I use in handling sexual representation throughout the book. The following chapters deal with works of art in specific chronological periods because the visual evidence demonstrates great changes in sexual acculturation over time. Within this chronological framework I look at specific sexual themes and try to give them the fullest possible contextual reading. The second chapter is a review of the centuries of tradition that Roman artists—or Greek artists working for them—had access to. The three chapters that follow focus on art of the Augustan and early Julio-Claudian period, from about 30 B.C. to A.D. 30. Because the era offers such a wealth of material, each chapter takes up a different kind of representation. Chapter 3 examines images of male-to-male lovemaking; chapter 4 looks at male-to-female lovemaking; and chapter 5 considers seemingly sexual representations of the black African.

The following two chapters focus on wall painting from Pompeii dating from about A.D. 30 to the eruption of Vesuvius in 79. Chapter 6 looks at images that decorated private houses, while chapter 7 turns to paintings in public buildings.

The final chapter covers the broadest chronological and geographical range and analyzes diverse objects, from the coinlike *spintriae* of the first century to terracotta vessels produced in the Rhône Valley in the second and third centuries, to a painted room in third-century Ostia Antica.