INTRODUCTION

In the late sixties, when I first began to study Roman art, no one took the art of ordinary Romans seriously. The privileged monuments—the ones worthy of serious art-historical investigation—were great architectural ensembles like the Forum of Trajan; historical reliefs like those on the Ara Pacis or the Arch of Constantine; the portraits of emperors and empresses. All of them, whether commissioned by the emperor, the Roman senate, or private individuals, exalted imperial ideals. Wall paintings and mosaics were minor arts—especially when they decorated houses at Pompeii—and belonged in books on everyday life, not in proper art history. Real Roman art was the art of the elite.

All this has changed now, and we have many different methodologies and disciplines to thank. Social art history—the study of the conditions surrounding the making and consuming of art—broke the ice and got scholars to ask about the other 98 percent of Roman society: the freeborn working poor, slaves, former slaves, and foreigners. Whether with a Marxist, feminist, or anthropological bent, social art history broadened our knowledge of the use and reception of visual representation in ancient Roman society. Parallel to these art-historical approaches was groundbreaking work on ancient literature. Classical texts, of course, reflect elite attitudes toward the non-elite. This is not surprising, considering that elite males wrote these texts or commissioned them. You will find no woman, freedman, slave, or foreigner speaking for her- or himself.[1] Elite authors put words in their mouths.

What is surprising is how much information lies just beyond Virgil, Ovid, Livy, and Tacitus—in anonymous poetry, legal texts, tomb inscriptions, captions on wall paintings, soldiers' diplomas, papyri, and graffiti. Thanks to new study of nonliterary texts, we know more about the questions that the literature passes over: the condition of women of different classes, relations between masters and slaves or former slaves, and Roman attitudes toward everything from commerce to same-sex relationships. Still, rarely does a textual scholar venture to interpret the much more ample evidence of Roman visual representation.

This book is about how ordinary people living in Roman Italy understood and used visual art. What part did art play in their lives? To answer this question, we have to consider both who paid for the art (the patron) and just who the potential viewers were. We must also ask how a specific visual representation communicated its message to those viewers. Analysis of the process of viewing art in its original context can reveal much about the patron and the people who looked at it. Although these points seem obvious, only recently have scholars begun to study Roman non-elite visual representation to explore questions of identity, communication, and cultural practice.

NON-ELITE ART AND THE *STILWANDEL*

When scholars started to explore the art of the non-elite, their focus was not its content but rather its unusual formal characteristics.[2] They focused on its style. They wanted to use formal analysis of non-elite art to explain an anomaly in Roman art: the change, around the year 150, from Hellenistic forms of representation to ones they called Late Antique. How to explain the antinaturalistic traits of Late Antique art? Its preference for frontal presentation of the human figure, hierarchical proportions (the most important figure the largest), axially symmetrical compositions, and the rendering of surface in harsh black-and-white modeling ("optical" chiaroscuro)?

Alois Riegl, in his 1901 study of Late Antique art, was the first to defend this art—until then considered decadent and unworthy of serious study.[3] Although a succession of scholars followed him in their attempts to explain, through careful formal analysis, this momentous shift in modes of visual representation, they favored imperial monuments—rather than non-elite ones—in their efforts to pinpoint the moment when the *Stilwandel,* or Change in Style, began.[4]

In a series of works through 1940, Gerhart Rodenwaldt tried another approach, based on visual analysis—but with a difference. He proposed that Roman art stood between two poles: state art (or "great" art) being one pole and "popular" art the other.[5] His model was, in a sense, the opposite of the traditional "trickle-down" hypothesis. He proposed that all of the formal traits that seemed to be such strange invasions into the Hellenistically based realism of imperial Roman art were, in fact, already present in the art of the non-elite.

In the postwar period Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli developed Rodenwaldt's thesis in

a series of works that culminated in his two-volume history of Roman art published in 1969.[6] What Bianchi Bandinelli added to Rodenwaldt's scheme was a theory of class struggle loosely based on Marx. He, too, wished to explain the Change in Style, and, like Rodenwaldt, he noticed the existence, well before the year 150, of art that looked like Late Antique imperial art. Bianchi Bandinelli added an ethnic and political element by dividing artistic expression into the elite or "patrician" and the non-elite or "plebeian." He explained that the reception of Greek and Hellenistic art in central Italy, beginning in the third century B.C., was uneven. Whereas the patricians embraced Greek forms to legitimize their power, the ordinary Romans, the *plebs,* viewed Greek art with suspicion, basing their own art on native "Italic" models. Bianchi Bandinelli analyzed portraits and grave reliefs from central Italy that ignored the careful modeling, naturalism of proportion, and perspective systems of Hellenistic art. These were works that seemed to anticipate Late Antique art by as much as three centuries. According to Bianchi Bandinelli, when the plebs took political power around A.D. 200, they brought their art forms with them, thus explaining the formal shifts in imperial monuments like the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum.[7]

Although there were many problems with Bianchi Bandinelli's hypothesis, it had the virtue of framing the paradox of formal change (the *Stilwandel*) in terms of class and acculturation.[8] And by calling attention to works of art that did not conform to the style of official monuments of state art, he was suggesting that Roman patrons and viewers demanded and consumed a great variety of styles and forms in their art. Bianchi Bandinelli paved the way for scholars seeking to articulate the social and cultural history of Roman art. Most germane to the questions I pose here and in the following chapters are the contributions of Paul Zanker, whose work stresses how the elites and the emperor built power through cultural programs with strong visual components. Always attuned to questions of audience and reception, Zanker also articulates the ways that specific groups used elite visual forms in their own, often idiosyncratic ways.[9] Zanker represents but one of a new generation of scholars who shy away from the all-encompassing theories of stylistic change that so beguiled the founders of Roman art history.[10]

The new Roman art history seeks to understand how, in specific circumstances, visual representation functioned within a multilayered system of communication. Style and form—the focus of most scholarship on Roman art through 1970—are only parts of that system. There are many other questions that need to be asked. By asking "Who paid for it?" we can find out about the patron. By asking "Who made it?" we get information about the artist. The question, "Who looked at it?" seeks to establish the identity of the intended viewers or consumers. Questioning the circumstances under which people looked at a work of art leads us into the realms of ritual—from legally prescribed religious practice to habitual behaviors, including mundane, everyday activities like visiting people, marketing, promenading, bathing, and dining. The question, "What else does it look like?" takes us back to iconographical models for the work of art and shows how the meanings of such models can change in each new application. Only by asking these and related

questions can I accomplish the aim of this book: to analyze artworks in their original contexts, and thereby to gain a better understanding of the attitudes, belief systems, and cultural practices of ordinary Romans.

"ELITE," "NON-ELITE," AND "ORDINARY": TESTING DEFINITIONS OF STATUS THROUGH VISUAL REPRESENTATION

Rather than trying to define an ancient Roman's status first, and then deciding whether his or her visual art expresses that status, this book begins with analysis of the art. I use art to question the patron's notion of his or her social status or position. Why?

For one thing, no one noun or adjective adequately describes a Roman person's social status. There is considerable literary evidence, mostly from Cicero, for the political system of the late Republic, the earliest period considered in this book (100 B.C.–27 B.C.). Yet even for this period, scholars have contested the terminology to describe men who held office in Rome. Were they the "governing class," the "aristocracy," or the "elite"?[11]

For another thing, who was elite or non-elite—and how art might express that difference—changed over time. In the reign of Augustus (27 B.C.–A.D. 14), the emperor, faced with dramatically diminished elite ranks and the funds that came from them, instituted an exclusive freedman order; wealthy former slaves could become *seviri augustales,* thereby paving the way for the social advancement of their freeborn sons. A century later, the terms *honestiores* and *humiliores* appear in the legal literature to denote two social groups who received different legal treatment. The *honestiores* included senators, equestrians, municipal and provincial decurions, soldiers and veterans, judges, and magistrates; they expected and got privileges, such as exemption from capital punishment and lenient treatment before the courts.[12] Slaves, former slaves (freedmen), and men who, although born free, had neither wealth nor a record of holding prestigious offices, made up the *humiliores*. The situation changed yet again by the late third century, when Diocletian set up a kind of feudal system that tied people to their land and their trades, making social mobility quite difficult.[13]

Most scholars agree on how ancient Romans defined a person who was "elite." Romans had a different conception of human worth from ours. They especially valued men born of free citizen families that had a record of serving the state and the military and that possessed wealth—especially in land holdings.[14] An elite Roman possessed the four prerequisites necessary to belong to the upper strata of society: money, important public appointments, social prestige, and a membership in an *ordo*. (The *ordines* are those of senator, decurion, and equestrian.)[15] The non-elite person lacked one or more of the four prerequisites. Slaves occupied the lowest stratum of the non-elites, followed by the former slaves (freedmen or *libertini*), who although technically free could not hold important public offices. Freedpersons—especially those who worked in the imperial bureaucracy—could gain impressive political power, but the stain of their slave birth separated them from the upper strata. But free birth was only one of the prerequisites for

membership in the upper strata, and we find many freeborn Romans *(ingenui)* in the lower strata.

Even among slaves there was a clear hierarchy of social value. Imperial slaves in close contact with the emperor and his family occupied the most privileged position, followed by well-educated and skilled slaves. Owners of such slaves entrusted them with important work, ranging from educating the owners' children to running their business enterprises. These high-level slaves had a good chance of earning their freedom, unlike the slaves who worked in the fields. Slaves received a regular allowance *(peculium),* and often they were permitted to keep a percentage of the income they brought in for their masters or mistresses. With these earnings a slave might buy his or her freedom. Sometimes a slave received freedom at the death of his owner, through a provision of the owner's will; in other cases a master who was still living might free a slave as a reward for meritorious service.[16]

Once freed, the former slave became a client of his or her former master or mistress. The freedperson—whether born into slavery, abandoned as a baby and brought up as a slave, or enslaved in war—acquired the legal status of a Roman citizen through the process of manumission. Nevertheless, freedpersons occupied a social and legal space fraught with contradictions. Although a former slave had the status of citizen, Roman society designated him or her as a *libertinus* or *libertina*. The former slave carried the stain of having been someone's property, and even though freed, he could not hold prestigious political and religious offices. Wealthy freedpersons tended to spend their resources in paving the way for their children's political careers, since their children were born free and theoretically stainless.

The terms *elite* and *non-elite* differentiate those who were esteemed in Roman society from the people who for various reasons could not win such esteem. There are many ways to conceptualize the relations among elite and non-elite Romans. Géza Alföldy's diagram demonstrates the stratifying effects of Roman social organization by focusing on the strict definitions of the orders (fig. 1). But these social strata were neither static nor rigidly circumscribed. Brent Shaw's diagram elaborates Alföldy's overly neat scheme. In it Shaw attempts to locate definitions of status ("ruling classes," "free classes," and "dependent classes") in a dynamic system where relationships among classes depend on mutual needs (fig. 2).[17]

Given the difficulties of defining status in ancient Roman society through study of the written record, the study of visual representation can at best help to articulate, by means of concrete examples, the dynamic and shifting relationships among the strata. It cannot define status and class once and for all. I make no claim to precision in my use of the terms *elite* and *non-elite*. I only claim to test these terms through analysis of visual representation. When I use the term *non-elite,* I want to emphasize that a person either paying for or looking at a work of art had no access to the upper strata of society. I use the adjective *ordinary* as a synonym for non-elite because (in the English language) it emphasizes a person's identification with the cultural values of the lower strata. We will see

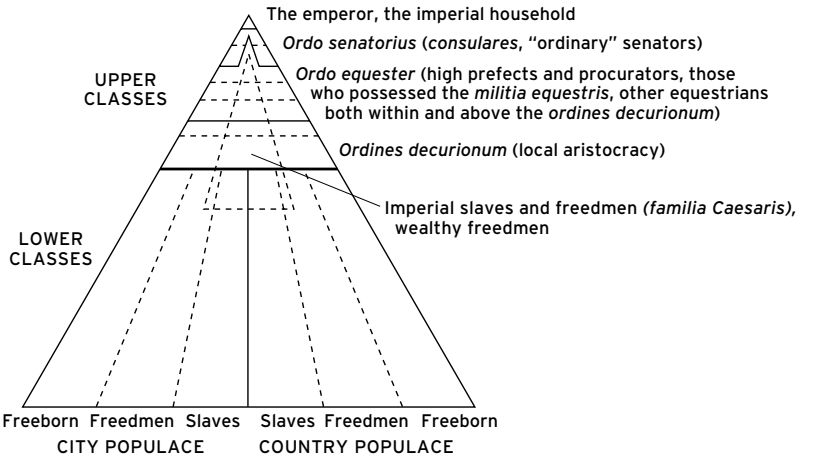

FIGURE 1
The orders-strata structure and its effects.

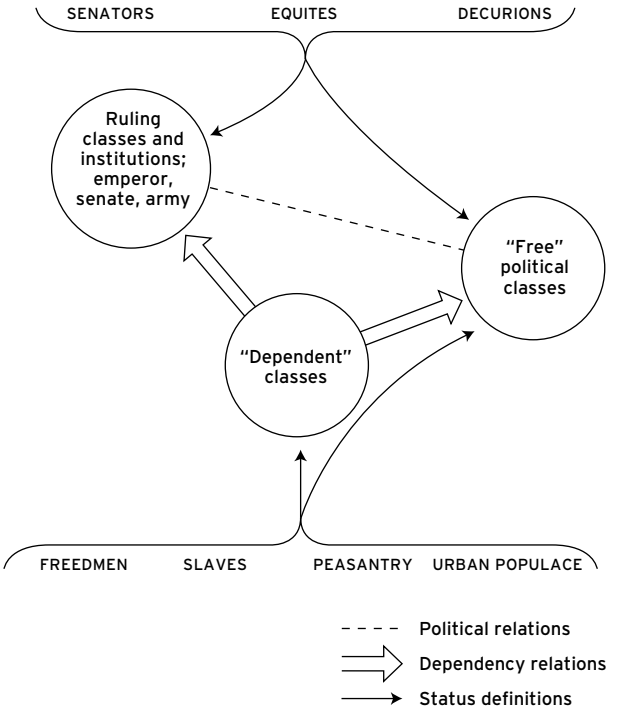

FIGURE 2
Proposed schema of the relationship of social groups to a class model.

that ordinary, or non-elite, Romans tend to esteem activities that the elites of the upper strata do not, and that they express this difference in their art.

Non-elite Romans often choose to represent themselves or others carrying out commonplace activities. When elites represent themselves, they favor images that show them carrying out official, prestigious practices using the visual language of the imperial house. Although non-elites will sometimes do the same, more often they tend to commission art that portrays them in a great variety of ordinary—or at least unofficial—acts: sacrificing to household gods, processing cloth, hauling grain, brawling in the amphitheater, drinking in taverns, defecating, and mourning.

PROBLEMS OF CLASSIFICATION AND THEORIZATION

I admit that neither *non-elite* nor *ordinary* is adequate to the range that the visual representations reveal. For one thing, definitions and expressions of a person's status change over the period considered in this book. In the days of the late Republic, for example, it is relatively easy to identify a person's status by looking at the art he commissions; at that point in time the political elite is more or less identical with the cultural elite.[18] By the mid–first century A.D., the rise of the freedman class blurs this equation. This newly arrived group uses art to impress others with their newly acquired culture. Studies by Paul Zanker,[19] Diana Kleiner,[20] Eve D'Ambra,[21] and others have called attention to possible relationships between the freedman's precarious social status and the art that he or she commissioned. However, recent scholarship has convincingly critiqued the notion of "freedman art" as a special subcategory of Roman art.[22] The notion of freedman art has even entered some surveys of Roman art, generally to explain anomalous visual representations.[23] Although the art of freedmen features frequently in this book, so does that of the freeborn working poor, the foreigner, and the slave. The art that they commission and live with—in all of its variety and originality—reveals the hopes and anxieties of people whose social position is ambiguous. It also helps us to understand the changes in definitions of social status over time.[24]

I have no general theories to offer about non-elite visual representation. I resist the tendency in recent scholarship to use analysis of visual art to generalize about class, gender, and social status. Instead I offer concrete examples through case studies that allow me to explore individual works of art in some depth. These case studies usually begin with the architectural context but then focus on figural representations in the media of painting, sculpture, and mosaics. (The study of what building types non-elite persons chose is too vast for me to give it the attention it deserves here.) I have chosen case studies where I know that the person who paid for the work of art did not qualify for the upper strata. I call this person the patron, and I assume that he or she consciously chose the imagery that the artist made—even though, in the absence of written documents, we cannot be sure that the patron, rather than the artist, made all the choices. (The term "patron" is not to be confused with the Latin term *patronus,* used to designate the man who

agreed to protect another person by making him his client; Roman law clearly defined the patronus-client relationship between a former slaveowner and his freedman.)[25]

I glean information about the patron unevenly, although I insist on having some indication of who he or she was. The form of a person's name in tomb inscriptions often reveals that he or she was a former slave. In other cases, the purpose of the artwork—to publicize the services of a wool-treating plant, for example—points to the patron's non-elite status. Often the visual representation constitutes wishful thinking: for instance, a man and his wife portrayed as scholars but displayed in a bakery.

The "ordinary" people whose art I consider vary considerably among themselves. Sometimes they are clearly slaves or former slaves. But sometimes they are would-be elite, on the borders between elite and non-elite society. To test the blurry borders between the art of the elite and non-elite, I have deliberately included two monuments belonging to persons technically occupying the upper stratum of Pompeian society. One of these is the tomb of Vestorius Priscus—who, when he died at twenty-two, was a minor official (an *aedile*) at Pompeii. Although he was "elite," the poverty of his tomb and its decoration persuades me to consider him among the non-elite. Another case where official status seems to be at odds with visual representation is in the late decoration of the modest house of Lucretius Fronto. Although written evidence suggests that at least some of the Lucretii belonged to Pompeii's elite ranks, the latest phase of painted decoration in the house seems to tell a different story.

In many ways this book employs the methods and continues the work of *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250*. With that book, I demonstrated how visual representation reveals a person's sexual acculturation. Everyone acquires, from his or her upbringing, attitudes that regulate behavior; we call this process acculturation. It is possible to understand a person's acculturation through the study of visual representation. By paying attention to who sees the art, where he or she sees it, and under what circumstances, it is often possible to understand a viewer's attitudes toward what the art represents. The location of a work of art often tells us about the audience and the expectations that the patron had of that audience. For instance, a representation of carpenters at work will convey a different set of meanings depending on its location. As part of a painting on the facade of a shop, it announces a commercial activity, addressing both viewers on the street and customers coming into the shop. On the facade of a tomb the same representation addresses a family member coming to mourn or a passerby who needs to be informed about the dead man's profession. The physical setting reveals both the patron's and the viewer's attitudes toward a specific visual representation.

I am also concerned, of course, with who the viewers are. I have come up with several strategies to investigate this question. Perhaps the most unusual is that of beginning with imperial art in part I, where I look at four important monuments in Rome from the point of view of ordinary viewers. This strategy is admittedly an exercise in historical imagination, but one that emphasizes, in a new way, the non-elites living in Rome. Part I also

employs a chronological framework, taking us from the late first century B.C. to the year A.D. 315, when Constantine dedicated his great triumphal arch. Twelve years later he shifted the capital from Rome to Constantinople.

In part 2 and part 3, where I consider art clearly made for non-elites, I take a thematic rather than chronological approach because the nature of the evidence changes. The eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79 preserved much fragile art that time has erased elsewhere. For instance, at Ostia, a city gradually abandoned as its harbor filled up with silt from the Tiber, there is little left of the street-side painting that must have flourished there as it did at Pompeii and Herculaneum. For similar reasons Pompeii has given us the names of many more people than Ostia has, since the ashes of Vesuvius preserved ephemeral evidence, like election slogans painted on walls. Although you will find many more case studies from Pompeii than from the other cities I consider (Rome, Ostia, Ravenna, and Chieti), by choosing themes rather than chronology as an organizing principle, I try to suggest how the practices of the well-preserved period (100 B.C.–A.D. 79) might have continued and developed in later centuries.

In part 2, I look at art that everybody could see: art in the public sphere. From among the many themes that I could have chosen, I have limited myself to art that tells us about how ordinary people handled visual representation in relation to five themes: religion, work, public spectacle, humor, and burial. I chose these themes because I felt that I had new insights to bring to them, and also because they give the reader a sense of the great variety of visual representation that ordinary Romans produced for the public sphere. In part 3, I shift to art that people invited into a house would have seen, and there I specifically look at how ordinary people used art to picture the pleasures of the banquet and to represent themselves.

ROMAN WAYS OF SEEING

In addition to analyzing who the viewers were by considering the circumstances surrounding each artwork, I have also tried to think how each work might have sent different messages to a range of possible viewers. Recent scholarship has addressed in depth the different ways that a work of art might communicate its message to viewers. John Berger, David Freedberg, Norman Bryson, and others have demonstrated how the same work of art can send different messages depending on who the viewer is.[26] Variables such as gender, class, religion, and literacy complicate the notion of viewership and change the effectiveness of visual communication.[27] These variables apply to both the making and the transmission of images. As Norman Bryson has pointed out in advocating analysis of painting as a sign system, the art-historical project of determining the original context of production must go beyond merely charting the circumstances of patronage or the conditions of original perception: "Original context must be considered to be a much more global affair, consisting of the complex interaction among all the practices which make up the sphere of culture: the scientific, military, medical, intellectual and religious

practices, the legal and political structures, the structures of class, sexuality and economic life in the given society."[28] Bryson's expanded conception of context fits well with my own approach to the interpretation of Roman non-elite visual representation.[29] In my chart I propose that to begin to understand the making and transmission of images, we must ask who the patron, the artist, and the viewer are (fig. 3). In addition to investigating the physical context and the circumstances surrounding the viewing of the imagery, we must also try to take into account in what terms or in what respect each viewer understands the imagery.

Authors like Berger, Freedberg, and Bryson, working with early modern and contemporary art, have the advantage of being able to investigate a wealth of written sources that reveal attitudes toward visual representation. With the ancient Romans written sources on attitudes toward visual culture are scanty for the elite and almost non-existent for the non-elite. One passage from Ovid's *Art of Love,* addressed to elite readers, reminds us how unlike the modern art historian the ancient Roman viewer could be. Ovid advises the young man confronted with the confusing panoply of topographical paintings, allegorical figures, and notable individuals passing by in a triumphal procession simply to concoct interpretations to impress his girlfriend:

> And when some girl inquires the names of the monarchs,
> Or the towns, rivers, and hills portrayed,
> Answer all her questions (and don't draw the line at
> Questions only): pretend
> You know even when you don't. Here comes the Euphrates, tell her,
> With reed-fringed brow; those dark
> Blue tresses belong to Tigris, I fancy; there go Armenians,
> That's Persia, and that, h'r'm, is some
> Upland Achaemenid city. Both those men are generals—
> Give the names if you know them, if not, invent.[30]

What is striking about this passage is that Ovid encourages the viewer to invent what he doesn't know for sure: no one is going to check his historical accuracy.[31] Although Ovid is writing satire to amuse his readers, what he says about making up interpretations pokes fun at the elite practice of *ekphrasis,* or the explanation of paintings. In his *Imagines,* Philostratus provides examples of *ekphrasis* that are as fantastic in their invention as those of Ovid's parade-watcher. Jaš Elsner's analysis of texts that treat the interpretation of visual representation provides further evidence that the elite Romans valued the ability to make fanciful connections between what they saw and what the image could signify.[32] For the elite viewer, the work of art was just a jumping-off point for a virtuoso display of rhetoric and erudition. By exaggerating such free association in explaining the work of art Petronius satirizes the rich but ignorant freedman Trimalchio.[33]

MAKING OF IMAGE		TRANSMISSION OF IMAGES	
WHO IS PATRON?	*WHO IS ARTIST?*	*VIEWER ADDRESS*	*WHO IS VIEWER?*
Patron's social status: Elite Non-elite: freeborn freedman slave foreigner	Training and ability	Location of image: street temple dining room tomb house tavern latrine in moving procession	Viewer's social status: Elite Non-elite: freeborn freedman slave foreigner
Patron's gender role			Viewer's gender role
Patron's motivations: advertisement of goods or services commemoration entertainment mediation—to resolve community tensions appeasing gods or propitiation competition or one-upmanship announcement of status or wealth apotropaic/admonition civic benefaction		Viewing context —seen while: working walking standing praying dining shopping mourning visiting defecating —seen with what other images?	Viewer's past experience —image seen before in: temple forum theater coin house pattern book procession or triumph
		Size and scale of image: close viewing distant viewing	
Patron's understanding of image: knows/does not know model or referent	Has models: understands/does not understand models Has no models: invents from observation invents through pastiche		Viewer's understanding of image: knows/does not know model or referent believes/does not believe image is a god or goddess
		Cost and medium of image	
Literate/illiterate	Literate/illiterate	Writing/no writing on image	Literate/illiterate
Patron's occupation or profession			Viewer's occupation or profession

FIGURE 3
A model for the reception of visual art in ancient Rome. Parallels between the making and transmission of images are shown in boxes.

These literary accounts of how people responded to visual art indicate that interpreting imagery was a common social practice. But the point of such interpretation was to tell a good story that somehow related to what the viewer and his audience could see. Accurate, scientific description was not the principal goal. If contemporary art-historical practice rewards accuracy in visual analysis, it is because interpretation of visual imagery is a highly specialized discipline that aims to discover the "correct" meaning. If elite Romans routinely interpreted visual art in a free-ranging way, perhaps non-elites did so as well. To address this possibility, in the case studies in this book, I try to imagine the reactions of a variety of viewers. Of course, I am going out on a limb, for I am daring to imagine how, say, a woman who was a slave might see an image differently from a free-born man. My method is purposely speculative. At the end of many of the case studies I construct scenarios—"what if" viewing scripts.

I intend these viewing scenarios as a corrective to the only viewer that modern scholarly literature has given us: an upper-class male who knows everything because he has read all of Latin and Greek literature and has the advantage of photo archives and history books. This is not my idea of a typical—and certainly not an ordinary—Roman viewer, whose knowledge of myths, visual models, literary sources, and styles had limits, no matter how learned he or she might have been. No ancient viewer had the advantages of the modern scholar; to see Roman art exclusively from the scholar's point of view is to distort its purposes and meanings for the ancient viewer. To try to correct this modern view, out on a limb I go! Although I have tried to use my historical imagination responsibly in constructing my hypothetical viewers, I am sure that my own conceptions of non-elite Romans have colored my constructions. I invite readers to improve on—or even to discard—my viewer profiles, using their own knowledge of Roman history, art, and society.

Language also shapes visual experience. In my attempt to frame non-elite visual representation in historically and culturally synchronous terms, I consistently use Latin words for the objects and actions depicted. They are always in italics the first time I use them in a chapter, followed by approximate English equivalents. My hope is that language will help—like my viewer scenarios—to make this art seem strange to you, the reader.[34] It is important that we understand how different ancient Roman culture was from that of contemporary Euro-America. Saying that the Romans were "just like us" is really saying nothing at all.

This book attempts to add nuance and substance to the parallels we have always wanted to draw between ancient Romans and ourselves—to make concrete the generalizations that have tended to erase difference. What emerges is a rich—and indeed strange—set of cultural and social structures within which individuals used art to express who they were and what they valued. There is no way of isolating "the" ancient Roman viewer, just as there is no way of defining the "typical" American or Englishwoman.

My hope is that this book will open your eyes to the astounding complexity and cultural diversity of the lower strata of ancient Roman society. You will meet people who found ways to celebrate their differences through the art that they both commissioned

and looked at, and you will see how this art encoded their social status, identity, beliefs, tastes, and values. Only if we consider non-elite art as a system of communication embedded within a specific culture can Roman individuals emerge with any distinction. The certainty of cultural generalization is reassuring but hollow; uncertainty is challenging but rewarding.

Context is everything.