Introduction

Why a Book on Sex in Ancient Rome?

Many of the images are familiar enough—thanks to picture books of the "coffee table" variety. And for the erotic literature, there are good translations of sexually graphic poems like Catullus, Ovid, Martial, and Juvenal. Petronius's provocative novel, the Satyricon, was the basis for a popular film by Federico Fellini. What is there to say that's new?

For one thing, it turns out that the illustrated books ignore ancient Roman attitudes toward sexual imagery. To be sure, they present pictures of Roman "eroticia"—paintings, mosaics, mosaics, and sculpture. But instead of presenting these objects in context—after all, archaeologists found most of them in ancient houses—these books treat them like modern pornographic photos. Because they are pictures of sex, it seems that they need no explanation. The accompanying captions offer little help. Usually, all we find is a scrap of Greek or Latin erotic poetry, or a bit of steamy dialogue from Petronius—all completely unrelated to the image itself. We get no idea of how these "erotic" images might have fit into the everyday lives of ancient Romans. Did they consider them sexually exciting? Did they hide them away from women and children? Did both rich and poor people have erotic art? Did the Romans find some of this art funny, as we do today? These are all questions the existing picture books fail to answer.

Roman erotic literature presents another set of interpretive problems. For one thing, elite men wrote all the erotic literature that has come down to us. You will not hear the voices of women. Nor will you hear the voices of men of the lower classes. For another, Roman sexual writing follows artistic forms quite unfamiliar to the lay reader. We find Catullus pining for his female lover, Lesbia, then heaping scorn on her as he sings the praises of his boy-love, Martial's acid attacks defuse his enemies by accusing them of base sexual acts, using a form called "inventive"—the sort of character assassination that would put a modern author in jail. Petronius's immoral anarchos, Encolpius, spends the whole novel trying to regain his erection, all the while having sexual (mis)adventures with a variety of men, boys, women, and girls. None of this literature fits modern notions of sexual behavior—let alone our practice of separating out "straight," "bi," and "gay" sexuality. The modern reader needs a great deal of background to understand the sexual practices these Roman writers were depicting.

Archaeology and the Creation of Pornography

Perhaps the greatest barrier to our seeing ancient sexuality clearly is one that we ourselves created only a century and a half ago. It is the creation of "pornography." It is hard to believe that it was a German archaeologist, C. O. Müller, who invented the word pornography in 1850. Writing a scientific handbook on archaeology, Müller searched for a word to describe the many objects
found at Pompeii and elsewhere that he and other archaeologists considered "obscene." Like any good academician, he delved into his Greek dictionary and found a likely word, pornographize, meaning "to write about prostitutes." Ancient Greek literature had passed down this term to describe men who wrote about famous porn—highly skilled women who, somewhat like the Japanese geisha, entertained men at drinking parties with music, dance, and sex.

Early social scientists before Müller had, in fact, also borrowed the word "pornography." For them, the word had the same meaning as it did in ancient Greece: writing about prostitutes. But rather than praising accomplished prostitutes, as the ancient Greek authors had done, these French and English gentlemen took it upon themselves to describe and try to regulate whores. For example, in 1766 Nicholas Edme Reatif wrote a treatise called The Pornographer (or Pornographic: A Gentleman's Ideas on a Project for the Regulation of Prostitutes, Suggested to the Prevention of the Misfortunes Caused by the Public Circulation of Women). About a century later, William Aiton published his thorough, scientific treatise, also defined at the time as "pornography"—that is, writing about whores. Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social and Sensible Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities. With Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils. Until 1959, the Oxford English Dictionary still defined the word "pornography" in the old sense: "a description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of public hygiene." So far we have no mention of the word "pornography" in today's sense of the word. We only have men writing about the social phenomenon of women selling sex.

What changes forced G. O. Müller to coin the word "pornography" in today's sense? On the one hand, scientific archaeology, just beginning to take hold around 1850, demanded that obscene objects be preserved. Up until then, the excavators either destroyed them on the spot or locked them up in secret cabinets accessible only to wealthy gentlemen. On the other hand, with the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the middle class came the notion that the public had to be protected from writing and images that might inflame their passions and lead them to sexual depravity. This was especially true for women and the "young person." In 1847, the British Parliament passed the Obscene Publications Act, "intended to apply exclusively to works written for the single purpose of corrupting the morals of youth." Lord Lyndhurst, who opposed the Act, asked a question that still is relevant today: "What is the interpretation that is to be put upon the word 'obscene'?" I can easily see that two men will come to entirely different conclusions as to its meaning.

Our concept of pornography depends on our judgments about what is obscene. It is obvious that notions of the obscene have changed swiftly and unpredictably. Today, the censorship battles over Lady Chatterley's Lover and Troops of Caesar seem quaint, while we barely notice the sexual content that has become stock-in-trade in today's television and movie—content that could never have passed the censors thirty years ago. If for us pornography means representation of actual sexual penetration in some form, remember that the censors of the 1950s tried to sequester Hustler magazine for displaying women's genitals.

The Invention of Sexuality, Heterosexuality, and Homosexuality

Even more recent than our concept of pornography are our concepts of sexuality, heterosexuality, and homosexuality—nations that would have been just as alien to an ancient Roman as space travel or telecommunications. Like the concept of pornography, academicians coined these words to allow them to describe human behaviors. Before 1850, there was no word to describe people who preferred same-sex relationships, not even one to describe people who preferred opposite-sex relationships. Yet today people routinely talk about their "sexuality." Throughout the twentieth century, the study of sexual practices enlarged the public's understanding of various heterosexual and homosexual behaviors. And it was not only Freudian psychoanalysis that put sexuality on the map. Social movements such as feminism, the sexual revolution, and gay liberation all needed these terms to describe gender roles as well as sexual practices.

What a difference a century has made! Just as we have invented "sexuality," "homosexuality," and "heterosexuality," we have invented a new set of attitudes toward sexual representation, and those attitudes center on the words—in fact, they require the words—"pornography" and "obscene."

You may ask how and why I became involved in the study of sex in ancient Rome. My research into Roman ways of seeing sex started over ten years ago. I was fascinated by a beautiful silver cup with two explicit scenes of "gay" lovemaking. It was an "orphaned" art object if there ever was one. Hidden away in a Swiss museum, its owner afraid that it was a fake. Why? Because it was so explicit! The more I probed, the more I found other ancient Roman art objects that museums and archaeological digs had deliberately hidden from the public or just locked up and ignored because they were "dirty."

By the time I completed my research, I had found a large number of Roman erotic objects that the public had never seen. It was an embarrassment of riches. But I didn't want to produce just another picture book. I wanted to peel away modern concepts of the pornographic and the obscene and try to understand the attitudes of ancient Romans. How to see ancient sexual imagery with Roman eyes?

As it turned out, the scholarly book that emerged from my research, Looking at Love-making: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.—A.D. 68, was able to deal with only a small portion of my discoveries. I decided to limit its scope to "case studies."
Ancient Romans would find most of our attitudes toward sex strange, even absurd.

Each concerned with representations of human beings in sexual intercourse. This decision arose from my realization that looking at Lovemaking could only be a first step toward replacing modern notions of pornography with ancient Roman conceptions. I excluded many themes: that of the phallic as a good-luck charm, the images of gods and demigods having sex, and a whole range of imagery found in verbal and visual graffiti.

Yet in that book I did forge a method for investigating "pornographic" paintings, mosaics, and sculptures. For every case study, I asked the same common-sense question: Who paid for the image? Where was it located? Who looked at it? What else did it look like? What purpose did it serve? Asking these questions allowed me to understand the differences between us and the ancient Romans in matters of sex.

Often I was able to find out where the obscene objects, now hidden in museum storerooms, originally came from. In some way, I "saw down" the content or simplified my conclusions. But I have tried to write briefly and to avoid technical language. For readers who want more detailed information, I have provided a list of suggested further readings.

Just Like Us?

What I aimed for here is to bring to life the sexual images and literature that the ancient Romans looked at, read, and lived with. I also emphasise the differences between us and the ancient Romans in matters of sex and sexuality, I demonstrate that the Romans were not "just like us."

There is a valuable lesson to be learned here. Although we moderns, in the wake of the century that began with Freud and ended with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, think we are fully liberated, our notions of sex are highly structured. Every aspect of what we call "our sexuality" rests on a set of assumptions about sexual acts and sexual roles that we are often not even aware of. Although we think we are completely free, we have many taboos and restrictions about what we allow for men as opposed to women, about children's sexuality, about what is sexually acceptable and what is sinful or obscene, about what is heterosexual behavior and what is homosexual, and so on.

Ancient Romans would find most of our attitudes toward sex strange, even absurd. The rules we take for granted—rules that regulate what we do or do not in bed—have nothing in common with the rules the ancient Romans followed.

This book will take you into the Roman mindset about sex. You will find out how Romans thought and felt about what we call straight, gay, and lesbian sex; their attitudes toward such diverse subjects as group sex, penis size, men's versus women's roles in sex, cummings, and fellatio. You will explore their worship of gods and goddesses who conferred the gifts of sexual pleasure.

You will enter a world filled with evil spirits banished by images of erect penises. The sexual attitudes and practices that I describe here were typical of the whole Mediterranean world in the first two centuries A.D.—the same period that saw the emergence of the Christian tradition. I hope that in thinking about these seemingly strange sexual practices you will come to appreciate some of the positive aspects of Roman sexuality. Above all, good sex in whatever form was a much-appreciated gift of the gods. To pursue sex was a good thing—not a shameful thing. Romans standardized many sexual practices that we do. If sex was a blessing of Venus, then why punish people for enjoying that blessing? The guilt that we associate with sexual enjoyment would seem very strange to the Romans. Sex was something to be enjoyed. Sex was fun. Pursuit of love was a favorite sport. In marriage, the Romans believed that you could only conceive healthy children if both partners had great sex.

These are but a few of the differences between us and the ancient Romans in matters of sex. I hope that you will read this book and look at the images with the same avid curiosity about sex, love, and social relations that an ancient Roman might.
First Impressions

Now the women must leave," the guard said, as he nodded to us men (I was just twenty-three at the time). With a flourish he took out a key. The women retreated to another part of the ancient house, and we men entered the cramped, windowless room. As our eyes got accustomed to the darkness, we realized why women were not admitted. In the middle of each wall was a picture of a man having sex with a woman, each in a different position (fig. 1). What is more, tucked away in a niche in the corner was a three-foot-high statue of a man with an enormous erection (fig. 2). I could see that the statue's uncircumcised penis was drilled so that water could splatter out of it. Surely it didn't belong here, in this little room with its steel security door. It must have come from the garden, where it served as a fountain.

"There is more," and with a conspiratorial leer our guard ushered us out of the X-rated room, locked the door, and took out another key. This time—again making sure there were no women present—his key unlocked a small shuttered door covering a portion of the wall in the vestibule of the house to reveal another figure with an enormous erection (fig. 3). Even the grumpiest man in the group began to laugh at this genital figure. His enormous erect member rested on one pan of a balance-scale; the counterweight in the other pan was a bag filled with crotos. Would his big penis win out? Heavier—and more valuable—than gold? As the laughter subsided and the women and girls, curious to know why we were laughing, approached, our guard snapped closed the little door and gave his explanation: "You see, this was a bordello—how you say—a whorehouse." Grateful to have this secret information—and to have seen something more hardcore than Playboy—we discreetly slipped him some lire.

Little did I know back then in 1968, that I would spend many years of my life studying that very house in Pompeii, and that I would come to be an authority on sex in ancient Rome.
Flashy forward another decade, and I am in Pompeii again—this time with three younger friends: two beautiful women (one blonde, the other brunette) and their handsome boyfriend. They are art history graduate students and I am a fledgling professor. Back at the House of the Vetti, the little door and its frame are gone. The color of the image of Priapus wearing his member is in full view. There are hordes of tourists. The "back room" still has its steel door, but women (not children) are allowed in. Sexual liberation has hit Italy, so it seems.

A guide picks up on our interest and suggests that we can show us more. Sure, we're game—we're here to see it all. He takes us to a house closed to the public on a silent street devoid of tourists. We thread our way through its enormous columned space, down a narrow passage to an elegant suite of rooms. Again, a locked door. But this time it is a well-lit, colorfully frescoed room (fig. 4). In the middle of the left and right walls are beautifully painted, full-color pictures, each depicting a man and woman having sex (figs. 5 and 6). The details are amazing—a far cry from the crude pictures in the "back room" of the House of the Vetti. My blonde friend presses the guide for an explanation. Biting a little in her perfect Italian.

"So why can't everyone see these paintings, they're very beautiful?"

"You are a tourist, a scholar, but these tourists—they would just laugh. They don't understand that our ancestors thought love-making was a gift, a blessing."

"But why," she insists, "are these pictures here in this private part of the house? Didn't you say that they turned this house into a harem, a bordello?"

"They didn't want anyone to see. They wanted the, uh, business to be hidden."

My third lasting impression of Roman sexual imagery followed a couple of days later, when our friends were lucky enough to be admitted to the Pornographic Cabinet in the Naples Archaeological Museum. Once again, it was the blonde charmer who got the guard to find the key to the heavy wrought-iron door with its steel hooking. "You will earn the
4. The House of the Centenary, Pompeii. This was one of the largest and most lavishly decorated houses in the city. When excavators found two erotic paintings in this house, they concluded it was used as a brothel. Analysis of the paintings' context tells a different story.

5. The center picture on the south wall. The artist used shadows to indicate a strong light coming in from the right. The woman is astride the man, who leans on his left elbow while holding his right arm crossed around his head in the gesture of "erotic repose." She rests her body against the man's penis, hidden behind her right thigh.

6. The center picture on the north wall. Although damaged, remains of the painting reveal the architecture of the chamber. The light panel in the background is the artist's attempt to open up the space to a landscape garden. The woman has her back to the man and places her hands on her knees as she squats down on her perineum.

"The man said, "but they were photographing." We could see nothing until the guard unbarred the solid shutters on the window and the hot July light streamed in. Scattered over the floor and leaning against the wall were thick squares and rectangles of plaster in wooden frames, obviously removed from their wall mounts for the photographers. Dust covered everything. As we looked, our astonishment grew. These were frescoes cut from walls of ancient Roman buildings buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79—not only Pompeii, but the town of Heraclea in Stabia, and the villas that once dotted the Bay of Naples. When excavators found a wall
painting they considered obscene, they either destroyed it on the spot or cut it out and sent it to this chamber. The room had been filling up for nearly 150 years. "For twenty years in the silos," our guard informed us, "the door to this room was sealed with a wall of mortar and bricks. Sealed by the Minister of Morality."

There were two sticky wooden cabinets chock full of pottery and small bronze. There was a box full of lamps with sex women on them; another with lamps in the shape of an enormous phallic wind-chimes in the shape of a penis covered with bells, and much more (fig. 7). The guard rustled us, worried that he would be missed from his station in the "normal" part of the museum. On our way out we saw a beautiful marble statue of a leering Pan penetrating an unusually human-looking she-goat (fig. 8).
The most famous object in the Pergamena Collection is the sculpture of Pan and the Stag-Goat. Found in the excavations of the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum in 1792, it immediately caused a furor. Although the sculptor Luigi Vanvitelli judged it to be "lustreous but beautiful," King Charles (at the advice of his confessor) judged it "worthy to be ground to a powder." Instead, he had it closed up in the royal palace at Portici with orders to show it to no one without special permission. Not even the great Johann Winckelmann was ever permitted to see it.
Why Erotic Pictures Belong in an Upper-Class Roman House

Flash forward twenty years. We three—1, my photographer friend Michael, and my Ph.D. student Margaret—are back in the Pornographic Cabinet. We are completing photographs, with permission of the Ministry of Culture, for my book-in-press. The room is, if possible, in worse condition; the paintings are literally—as well as figuratively—dirty, covered with decades of grime. When the guard looks away, Margaret attempts to dust the pictures with a soft cloth. With view camera and strobes (there’s still no light in here) Michael shoots one after another, as I measure, take down inventory numbers, and make final notes. My book, Looking at Lovemaking, will be the first scholarly account of ancient Roman sexual imagery. Many coffee-table books have come out over the past twenty years, and famous photographers have illustrated the objects in the Pornographic Collection. (Finally, in 2000, the Pornographic Collection, dusted off and remounted, was opened to the public.) But my project is different. I will show where the pictures came from and what they meant in their original placement: mostly in houses in Pompeii. I will rescue them from the charge of obscenity.

What I have found in my research is that these objects, miserably treated today, took pride of place in ancient homes. I have come to this conclusion in two ways. I have read all the surviving references in ancient Latin and Greek texts, and I have charted the original locations of most of the paintings that ended up in Naples. The ancient authors reveal that the wealthy prized erotic paintings. Here, for example, is the poet Ovid addressing the emperor Augustus himself, around AD 10:

Even in your house, just as figures of great men of old, alike—yes somewhere a small picture depicts the various forms of copulation and the sexual positions. Telamonian Ajax sulks in rage, barbarian Medea gapes infanticide, but there’s Venus as well—wringing her dripping hair dry with her hands and barely covered by the waters that have her. (P. 3, 376–378)

Ovid is describing what had by then become a standard feature of the wealthy Roman house: a picture gallery. He mentions mythological paintings of Ajax and Medea, but also reminds the emperor that his picture collection—if it was a worthy one—included paintings showing a variety of sex acts. There were Kama Sutra-like paintings detailing all the sexual positions, and at least one painting of Venus, the goddess of love, beautiful—and stark naked.

The historian Suetonius has the emperor Tiberius, Augustus’ successor, placing a painting by the famous Greek artist Pseudaxis in his bedroom. Its subject? It showed Actaeon feasting Melpomene. In the same passage he goes on to say that Tiberius had pictures illustrating sexual positions placed throughout bedrooms used for copulation. “He deco-

rated rooms located in different places with images and statues reproducing the most licentious paintings and sculpture, and he furnished them with the sex manuals of Ephraenis, so that no position he might order would fail to be represented.” (Tib. 4.4) The written descriptions or instructions of Ephraenis’ sex manuals were not enough—quite perhaps as blameworthy in Suetonius’ judgment—as the painted images and sculpture that illustrated the sexual acts.

Both Ovid’s apology for paintings that illustrated sexual positions and Suetonius’ indictment of Tiberius for using them show how an ancient Roman might display and use erotic art. Ovid puts the erotic picture into the picture gallery, where the context is that of the man of taste looking at high art. Suetonius has the evil Tiberius using erotic paintings and sculptures as part of an obese project to fulfill his immediate lust. Both authors reveal the widespread existence of eroticism and its use both as high art and as practical sexual aids.

Unfortunately, we don’t have any of the famous paintings by the great masters from ancient Greece and Rome. Painted on wood or canvas, they all perished in the great fires that swept Rome. What we do have are paint-

ings made by incorporating pigments in wet plaster applied directly to the wall. These frescoes have survived burial in the volcanic debris of Vesuvius or in the mud of the overflowing Tiber River in Rome. Even when frescoes are found in fragments, careful work can put the pieces of plaster together like a puzzle. And, amazingly, we find frescoed versions of the very picture galleries Ovid was describing—recreating the erotic pictures.
Erotic Pictures in the Picture Gallery

The finest examples come from Rome itself. The original owners were probably none other than the emperor Augustus’ daughter Julia and her son-in-law Agrippa. Fortunately for us, they built their lavish villa too close to the Tiber, and had to abandon it soon after its construction when a flood filled it with mud. And so it remained until 1938, when construction crews building embankments along the Tiber happened upon it. At the moment they were cutting through the gardens of the Renaissance Villa Farnesina, archaeologists dubbed their discovery the Villa under the Farnesina. They were able to rescue four rooms and two corridors, all beautifully frescoed. Two rooms re-created, in fresco, versions of the picture galleries Ovid describes, complete with sets of erotic pictures (fig. 9). Each picture is in a different style: resting on a podium and framed by elaborately columned and large, white-ground paintings (now faded) in the upper zone are little square pictures with black backgrounds; the erotic pictures are about twice as large as these and painted in a full color range.

Let us examine these two pictures. The one on the left depicts a serious moment between the couple on the bed. Not only is the woman fully clothed from head to foot while the man is nude, but she is wearing a veil, her head demurely bowed (fig. 10). The picture on the right is as hot as the one on the left and is cold (fig. 11). The woman
The artist builds erotic tension by turning the woman's back to us (and her partner) as she reaches back to grasp his hand. We see her gesture and imagine the next move.

stretches out her body on the bed, nude to the waist, as she reaches her arm around the man's neck to pull his head toward her. It seems that she wants to kiss him, but her mouth is at the bridge of his nose. The man, nude to the waist, has his right arm around the woman's neck and shoulder; his fingers are just visible on her right shoulder. His left hand makes an ambiguous gesture. Has he just dissected the woman or is he about to touch her breasts? The artist contrasts the woman's expressive gesture with the man's wooden posture. The eye follows the sweep of her body from her toes, resting on the bed, through her voluminous yellow robe, to her gesture of reaching around the man's neck. She seems disengaged, or perhaps stunned by the woman's passion.

Because the woman appears restrained, one scholar decided that she is a prostitute. This is unlikely. The two pictures pair up opposite each other on the wall, and there is a story between them. In one we see the chaste bride, in the other we see the same bride transformed by passion into an eager sex partner. Why did the artist put these two representations of sex—one chaste and tentative, the other passionate and explicit—in juxtaposition? If the paintings portray an upper-class bride, society required her to have sex with only one man (her husband) for the purpose of producing legitimate heirs. Many Roman writers emphasize that proper married women were supposed to take an erotic interest in their husbands.

There is another clue that the sexy woman is an upper-class bride, not a prostitute: her clothing. Prostitutes did not wear voluminous clothing, nor did they wear veils. By last they were tops or they dressed for quick sex under the arches of the city. The poet Catullus has them wearing clothing that allows them to "blush" potential clients.

One more thing, before we leave this painting: The couple is not alone. A nude boy servant gazes directly at you. Else Romans had many slaves, including many who served them exclusively in the bedroom. Including slaves in sex scenes was a way of signaling your wealth and sophistication.

Here the boy servant has another function. Although he is serving the couple—he has poured water into the large gilded basin and holds a wine vessel—he seems to be aware of you, the viewer, looking at both him and the couple. The boy's gaze is an artistic device designed to heighten your awareness that you are a voyeur.

looking in on the couple's sexual intimacies. The servant belongs there, but you, the viewer, do not. Behind the bed to the left are traces of another figure, who, like all the others in the Farnesina paintings, goes about his business without paying attention to either his owners or the viewer.

The two paintings were meant to be read together. Together they tell the story of how the modest bride became the most modest lover. It is a perfect male fantasy. The slave who looks directly at you brings you in on the second act of the story. We shall see that many sex scenes, like these two paintings, come in contrasting pairs or even in series.

What this miraculously preserved painted room demonstrates is how erotic pictures fit into a proper picture collection. What is more, they show how erotic paintings taught lessons about sex. Roman women, both unmarried and married, would have looked at them. One thing in certain, these paintings were not hidden away under lock and key.

A Brothel: A Middle-Class Banker's House at Pompeii

The excavations on the bank of the Tiber recovered only a small part of what was a very large and luxurious villa. What about the houses of poorer folk living in Pompeii? Did they have erotic pictures too? I was lucky enough to be able to answer this question very recently through a bit of detective work. The best picture in the Pornographic Cabinet in Naples, I had discovered, came from the house of a businessman named Gaius Cassius laconicus at Pompeii. When the excavator, Antonio Sugliano, uncovered the house in the summer of 1875, he found 154 wax tablets recording Cassius' relatively modest business dealings. Sugliano also found a very beautiful sex picture (fig. 12). A fraud that it would offend, he ordered it cut from the wall and packed off to the
exceptions; there is a picture surrounding a garden on all four sides, and several suites of rooms suitable for entertaining. The sex picture now in Naples was on the wall between two beautifully decorated entertainment rooms. The larger room created a sensation at the time of its discovery; the frieze with griffins, centaurs, and sphinxes was immediately published in a pattern book for decorative artists, and the German Archaeological Institute in Rome sent artists to Pompeii to do drawings of the paintings of priestesses found there. There were big mythological pictures as well, today unrecognizable. (The only picture to survive, other than the erotic painting, was one of Moses Abandoning Arianne—out of the wall and sent to the Naples Museum.)

Cecilius spared no expense on the frescoes in this room; the artist even applied gold leaf to the frescoes to depict jewelry.

The smaller room had equally fine painted decoration. It has two alcoves for couches set at right angles to each other. The combination of the two rooms, a large room for big parties with a smaller, two-allowed room next to it, is a feature commonly found in luxury villas. Romans would have called the smaller room a cubicle. Recently, scholars have established that the cubicle was used for a variety of purposes; it was not just a "bedroom." For instance, it was there that the master of the house would stage business meetings with people above his social level; it was also the proper place to receive friends. Emperors even held trials in the cubicle. It seems that Cecilius—who probably had no need of a proper cubicle—was imitating his social betters.

To call attention to his suite of entertainment hall and cubicleum, Cecilius located the erotic painting in the peristyle between the two rooms. In this setting it commanded pride of place and established a pictorial link between the two rooms.

Let us look at the picture more closely. It is a delicate scene of love-making painted with even more care than the Farnesina paintings we just looked at. An elegantly clothed bedroom servant approaches a couple on a bed. The artist used gold-ill-suited procedures used to detach the fresco.) The artist paid special attention to color and the opulence of fabrics throughout the bed, for instance, has a pink coverlet with blue sham.

Models in high art must have inspired the artist, for this composition is complex. Far from being a frank scene of sexual intercourse, the conceit here is one of the man's desire and the woman's resistance. She holds her hand behind her. Perhaps she is reaching for his penis. He lifts his arm as though in thought, but she cannot see his gesture. A nice touch is the way the man's left hand curves up at the wrist, allowing the artist to show how good he is at depicting gestures. You, the viewer- voyeur, see these details but the woman does not. You understand the man's entreaty and the woman's hesitation in a way that the woman—and perhaps her lover also—cannot. As a viewer- voyeur, you have the same advantages as in the Farnesina pictures.

What did this splendid picture mean for Cecilius and his guest? For one thing, it showed that Cecilius knew that rich people's collections had erotic pictures in them. He wanted to imitate them. For another, he wanted his guests to see this expensive picture up close, where it would show them in. After looking at it, they would go on to the admire the other fine pictures in the rooms on either side of it.

Strictly speaking, Cecilius' sex picture is out of place—an aristocrat would never have put it up front. But even if he did not follow the rules for displaying the picture, Cecilius did understand how important it was to have a fancy sex picture in his house. Every home had to have one.
Conclusion

Sex Before Regulation

 Until the Emperor Constantine paved the way for Christianity to become the state religion, Roman attitudes toward sex remained relatively stable. Most people saw sex as a wonderful pleasure to be pursued. Ecstatic sex with a beautiful partner—whether male or female, adolescent or adult—was a gift of the gods, one of life’s most important moments. Although it is true that some philosophies and religions stressed sexual abstinence, the pervasive attitude toward sexual pleasure, as expressed in both the law and in art, was highly positive. We read of the Stoic philosophers like the Emperor Marcus Aurelius himself practicing self-denial, or the male devotees of the goddess Isis even emasculating themselves, but most Romans saw such sexual practices as unnatural and even perverse.

The Romans regulated sex only to the degree that it threatened elite institutions. For example, among elites, bastard children threatened the rights of legitimate children to the family’s property. Hence the rule that you do not have adulterous sex with those of your own class. Yet sex with non-elite individuals, including forced sex with your slaves and former slaves, was a standard—and guilt-free—practice. A similar framework underlies the regulation of what Romans considered to be taboo sexual acts: cummingsus, fellatio, and receptive anal sex. Since elite prestige rested on family reputation, elites employed prostitutes of both sexes, or used their slaves, to perform sexual acts that could bring potentially damaging accusations of oral impurity or passive homosexuality.

But the elites constituted only about 2 percent of the population. In Rome, a city of over a million people in the period between Augustus and Constantine (27 B.C.–A.D. 350), these elite sexual rules were not what you saw on the street or in homes. The great majority experienced no legal or moral restrictions on sex. Institutions that we take for granted today, such as the necessity of legal marriage for all classes, were simply not relevant for Roman non-elites (the free-born working poor, former slaves, slaves, and foreigners). Although many of these ordinary Romans could marry, procreate, and leave inheritances to their children, just as many (slaves, for example) could not, because of their financial or legal status.
A few inscriptions from tombs give us a glimpse of the free invention of sexual and marital bonds that go far beyond our concepts of love, sex, and marriage. A stone coffin from Ostia, Rome’s busy port city, shows two men at work in a shoe shop on one side, and the same two men sedately dancing together on the other side. The inscription reads: “We, Lucius Attius Artemas and Claudia Aphasia, dedicate this sarcophagus to Titus Flavius Trophimias, incomparable and trusted friend, who always lived with us. We have given him a body to be buried together with us, so that he will always be remembered and will find rest from his sufferings. The straightforward one, the eunuch, every art, the Ephebian, sleeps here in eternal repose.” The implication is that Lucius, Claudia, and Artemas were a sexual threesome. Much more explicit is the epitaph of Allia, the owner (patroness) of Allia Potestas, a slave whom he shared sexually with another man. Allia writes: “She while she lived so managed her two lovers/That they became like the model of Pytho and Orestes./One home contained them and there was one spirit between them.” The inscription goes on to recount how after Allia’s death her two men no longer got along with each other if we have a hard time imagining our society permitting us to memorialize sexual arrangements like this, in public tomb inscriptions, it is because—despite our sexual liberation—we see the open acknowledgment of sexual threesomes as something shameful or just plain wrong. No matter how sexually “open” individuals or groups in contemporary Western society might be, the major religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are highly prescriptive about sexual practices, sanctifying monogamous marriage, straight sex, and sex for procreation—even while condemning the opposite.

Ancient Romans would find such obsession about the regulation of sex absurd. In their view, when Capid’s arrow stung you, there was nothing you could do but hold on for dear life. It was foolish to resist the power of sexual desire—no matter what the object of that desire. If your passion found fulfillment—and no one got hurt—you thanked Capid and Venus and considered yourself blessed. If not, cursed. As simple as that.

Sex Before the Invention of Pornography

If this exploration of Roman erotic art reveals anything, it is that we cannot apply our own concepts of what is pornographic, sinful, or shameful to the Romans. They bought and enjoyed objects, or even commissioned paintings for their homes, that frankly represented sexual intercourse in many different forms. We have seen images of men and women making love, but also men making love to boys and sometimes other men, women pleasuring women, and sexual threesomes and foursomes. Artists represented sex in many different ways, varying not only sexual positions but also picturing apparently taboo practices such as fellatio and cunnilingus. By looking at these images—not in museums or in books—but in their original settings, we learn that the ancient Romans, rather than considering these images “pornographic” and hiding them away, usually associated them with luxury, pleasure, and high status. Looking at these images of lovemaking with the eyes of the ancient Romans allows us to enter a world where sexual pleasure and its representation stood for positive social and cultural values.

Today’s society is obsessed with sex as transgression. This is the framework for nearly every kind of sexual representation, whether in high art or low popular culture. Whether it is the “deviants” on the Jerry Springer Show or the guilt-ridden secret lovers on stage and screen, our pleasure in watching them comes from our own attitudes toward sexual right and wrong.

Add to this our huge pornography industry, and you have a good idea of the attitudes we have developed toward what is—after all—an essential and natural part of being human. What thrills us is sexual transgression—“doing the dirty,” as we say. In her study of pornography over the ages, Isabel Tang asks whether pornography would still be transgressive if it became an everyday event, and if not, would it still be pornography? She concludes: “If pornography does change, however (and already the new technologies are reconfiguring its contours), one thing remains certain: whatever pornography we get will be the pornography we deserve.”


In the Introduction, I explained how pornography—and the linked concept of the obscene—came to be. The Romans had no concept of pornography, but rather they represented sex—whether in writing or in images—for the sheer pleasure of it. Romantic or ribald, beautiful or laughable, sexual imagery was integral to their lives, and sex was sport, fun, the blessing of Venus and Priapus. If our society sees ancient Roman images as pornographic, it is because we have made a fetish out of sexual representation.

Even our institution of marriage parties in the creation and maintenance of sexual hypocrisy. Marriage is supposed to safeguard sexual fidelity. Yet, with an estimated divorce rate in the United States of 50 percent, it is hard to see contemporary marriage as anything other than a sex license, bought with the promise of fidelity and lost through infidelity and (cradly) divorce. Look at the pages of any popular magazine and read about the loves of the celebrities, and you begin to understand our national preoccupation with the sex lives of others. Call it voyeurism or vicarious pleasure—it is the way many of us liberated modern frame sex and romance—through the glamorous and sexually transgressive lives of the stars.

In contrast, the ancient Romans looked upon and talked about sex openly, even to the point of proudly displaying paintings, silver, and even humble terra-cotta vessels with all the varieties of sexual play that we have looked at. They worshiped gods and goddesses of sexual love. If they were just as obsessed with love and sexual desire as we are, it is also true that the average person had open access to a much greater variety of sexual experience than we moderns do—legally and without fear of recrimination.

Not “Just Like Us”

The single most startling conclusion that I came to after studying sexuality in the Roman world is that the Romans were not at all like us in their attitudes toward sex. In my quest to recontextualize how ancient Romans handled sex over the course of three and a half centuries, it became clear that I could not look at their images of sex in art and literature with my twenty-first-century eyes. My own attitudes toward sex were a product of my culture, and as liberated as I thought I was in sexual matters, I was blind to Roman concepts of sex.

In the end, I came to the conclusion that these marked differences between contemporary and Roman models of sexuality...
stemmed from religious, legal, and social structures. It was not only the association of guilt with extramarital sex in many prevailing religions today that kept me from understanding Roman sex. It was also the sexual attitudes represented in our laws, institutions, and communications media. Our most extreme stances about sex—still prevalent in many communities today—allow people to practice sex only if married and for purposes of procreation. Stigmas like these serve sexual acts in secrecy and associate sex with guilt, sin, and punishment. They make what is a guilt-free and ubiquitous human pleasure in other societies into a risky thing.

The artworks that we have examined tell a story that is different from ours and demonstrate that the ancient Romans, rather than hiding sexual images, enjoyed seeing them—primarily because they associated sex with pleasure rather than sin. True, it was sex conceived in terms of male dominance, but Roman people of both sexes and of all classes delighted in looking at love-making. And they could look at a wide range of sex acts that included the outrageous behavior of sexual specialists like the prostitute and passive male homosexual as well as comic phallic representations that protected the viewer from the Evil Eye. All these representations kept sex in plain sight of all.

Paintings, sculptures, vases, and lamps pictured sexual intercourse in a great variety of ways, from the tastefully elegant to the outrageously burlesque. On the one hand, you had images of "perfect" sex—until this was not just sex but just for procreation. Procreation was a duty, but sex with a great variety of possible partners who would not bear legitimate offspring (or any offspring at all) was the sex that artists portrayed, sex with the most beautiful male and female prostitutes, slaves, freedwomen, and foreigners. On the other hand, these same Roman viewers also enjoyed looking at images of outrageous sex acts—the sort of thing that no freeborn person would admit to enjoying: running, falling, being penetrated analy, taking part in group sex. The coexistence of both kinds of images, to my mind, proves that sex was for fun and enjoyment, and there were no holds barred.

Did Roman parents shield children—or even adult women—from sexual imagery? The fact that objects of everyday household use, such as ceramic lamps and vases, bore sexual imagery argues against the notion that their owners kept them hidden away (as our own museums have done until recently). These same objects often turn up as burial offerings. It would be a mistake to assume that our Western prohibitions obtained in ancient Rome. The poet Ovid's statement that erotic poetry never corrupted a person of pure heart should be taken as characteristic of elite attitudes of the time. And today, few scholars take the emperor Augustus's moral legislation at face value, they see it as a reaction to the liberal sexuality of the time. In general, the ancient Romans had no fear that representing sex in art would corrupt morals.

The wall paintings we have studied were not only permanent features in the house but were also meant to be seen by guests, whether in fancy reception rooms or in the peristyle. Nearly all of them are a sign of luxury—not an indication that the space was intended for sexual intercourse. To understand such paintings in private houses, we have to remember that wherever they were displayed, they carried the cachet of the elite picture collection, since erotic pictures were an important part of the wealthy person's collection. Works of art that seem to the modern viewer to be erotic—designed to stimulate the viewer sexually—often had as their primary purpose the evocation of the life of culture and luxury.

Examination of sex paintings in public buildings underlines the frequently repeated assertion that they "advertised" sex for sale. They actually served a variety of purposes to present fantasies of enslaved erotic encounters in the brothel, where the environment was anything but relaxed, to create a mood of coevality in the tavern by recalling the fun of sex-shows in the theater, to make men or women who disrobed in the bath laugh and dispel the Evil Eye.

Visual art tells us what Roman literature does not. For one thing, the art is much more democratic than the texts. We have everything from the extreme luxury of the Otricoli perfume bottle and the Warren Cup to the mass-produced Arretine and Rhone Valley ceramics. Wall paintings cover a similarly broad range of quality. The fact that patrons commissioned artists to paint not only scenes of ideal lovemaking between beautiful couples, but also acts that only infamous persons would perform, reveals how far visual artists were willing to stray from the ideal to please their patrons.

The Liberated Roman Woman

If we consider Roman sex from a feminist perspective, it is clear that the ancient Roman viewer who looked at sex was not just the elite male subject whom we find in ancient literature. Women of all classes also saw the lamps, vases, and wall paintings that we have considered in this book. The best test case is the dressing room of the Suburban Baths, a space frequented by both sexes. There, the artists deliberately created sex pictures that had different messages for the female and male viewers. Knowing that the Roman woman of the first century A.D. enjoyed a greater degree of emancipation than her predecessors, it is no surprise to find erotic art that specifically addresses the woman's role in lovemaking—whether it is in a woman planning another woman through nude drawings or women taking part in drunken and foursomes that include men.

In the absence of documentation, we can only guess that women's sexual liberation did not continue beyond the mid-third century, when warfare, political instability, and economic hardship brought about repeated reforms that extended into the realm of sexuality. In the century that followed, Christianity took hold. On the one hand, it accepted all classes—including slaves and foreigners—and gave women important roles to play on the other hand. It reestablished the ancient Roman rules for every woman's behavior: she was to remain a virgin before marriage, chaste in marriage, and married unto death. Gone were the sexual choices open to the women of the early empire.

Sex and Humor

Our investigation of visual representations of sex puts a new face on ancient Roman humor. Although sexual satire abounds in Roman literature, it takes considerable effort to understand sexual humor in art—particularly since its audience is much broader than the audience for elite texts. The unusual difficulties we encountered in interpreting sexual humor in art underscore how culture-bound it is. Many of the images in the Suburban Baths or on the Rhone Valley ceramics haffle us because our culture, still deeply tied to a Christian and Puritan ethic, tends to frame sex as such a serious matter that Roman visual jokes are lost on us. What is more, art that represents outrageous sexual acts in public places
Glossary

apsectate
adj. referring to an apsectate, as in "apsectate gesture" or "apsectate power"

apsectate
n. an object or action believed to ward off evil spirits, especially the Evil Eye

apsectism
n. literally "since the day," from Roman, apsed

apsectism
n. a room designated for use by prostitutes, located either in a waterfront shop or in a tenement

apsectus
n. the passive partner in male-male intercourse, from Greek kosmidos. The kosmidos suffered the status of inferior (see below, inferior)

apsectus
n. a small room in the Roman house, furnished with one or two beds and used for sleeping, for business meetings with peers, and for sex

apsectus
n. a person who performs kosmidos

apsectus linking a woman’s genitals

Evil Eye
n. Romans (and many people in the modern Mediterranean area) believed that someone could emit particles from his or her eye (the Evil Eye) that entered the body of the person he or she coveted or desired and cause him harm, even death

apotheosis
n. from the word "apotheosis," a symbol of fertility and prosperity that could also ward off evil spirits. It usually took the form of the erect and huge penis, usually made of phallos

apotheosis
n. sucking a man’s penis

apotheosis
n. someone who sucks a man’s penis

apotheosis
n. forced fellatio

apotheosis
n. sex or immolation

apotheosis
n. a woman, a former slave, and therefore either, with certain errors, disabilities. Most also retained certain legal obligations to their former owners

apotheosis
n. female companion, a sex-entertainer, a mistress in ancient Greek and Roman cultures

apotheosis
n. a medical condition that causes enlargement of the testicles

apotheosis
n. the legal status, suffered by prostitutes, passive male homosexuals (kisses), pederasts, and others. He or she could not vote and had restricted access to the court system

apotheosis
n. setting that makes accusations against one’s enemies, especially defiled sexual practices

apotheosis
n. to force someone to fellate a person

apotheosis
n. forced fellatio

apotheosis
n. phallos, a word for a sexual act on one side and a noun on the other

apotheosis
n. sexual debauchery of a freewoman person, a, n. (ill sex), including male-female sex between unmarried persons

apotheosis
n. the original cause of a former slave

apotheosis
n. a hanging object, usually a phallos (sex fantastic), furnished with bells and designed to keep evil spirits at bay

apotheosis
n. a male femme equipped with a dildo, "dyke"