



Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C. - A.D. 250

By John R. Clarke

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What did sex mean to the ancient Romans? In this lavishly illustrated study, John R. Clarke investigates a rich assortment of Roman erotic art to answer this question—and along the way, he reveals a society quite different from our own. Clarke reevaluates our understanding of Roman art and society in a study informed by recent gender and cultural studies, and focusing for the first time on attitudes toward the erotic among both the Roman non-elite and women. This splendid volume is the first study of erotic art and sexuality to set these works—many newly discovered and previously unpublished—in their ancient context and the first to define the differences between modern and ancient concepts of sexuality using clear visual evidence.

Roman artists pictured a great range of human sexual activities—far beyond those mentioned in classical literature—including sex between men and women, men and men, women and women, men and boys, threesomes, foursomes, and more. Roman citizens paid artists to decorate expensive objects, such as silver and cameo glass, with scenes of lovemaking. Erotic works were created for and sold to a broad range of consumers, from the elite to the very poor, during a period spanning the first century B.C. through the mid-third century of our era. This erotic art was not hidden away, but was displayed proudly in homes as signs of wealth and luxury. In public spaces, artists often depicted outrageous sexual acrobatics to make people laugh.

Looking at Lovemaking depicts a sophisticated, pre-Christian society that placed a high value on sexual pleasure and the art that represented it. Clarke shows how this culture evolved within religious, social, and legal frameworks that were vastly different from our own and contributes an original and controversial chapter to the history of human sexuality.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Clarke's exegesis of wall paintings from the so-called Suburban Baths, a Roman unisex locker room, is worth the price of the book alone."--"Lingua Franca

From the Inside Flap

"Clarke teaches us to think about how this art was understood and felt by those who lived with it in their daily lives and he speculates that it might even reflect what the Romans actually did. This is the first genuinely contextual and theoretically informed study we have of a vast panoply of classical art about sex. It will be an illuminating book for classicists, historians, and anybody else who finds lovemaking interesting."—Thomas Laqueur, author of *Making Sex*

"There are few scholars as able to take on this material, as well versed in theories of sexuality, and as comfortable dealing with both heterosexual and homoerotic content as Clarke. The topic is timely and the execution is professional."—Natalie Kampen, Barnard College

"This book should attract not only classicists, but also scholars of sexuality in any field. Clarke succeeds both in introducing little-known material and in defamiliarizing the familiar examples of erotic art."—Anthony Corbeill, University of Kansas

"*Looking at Lovemaking* proves that the ancients were very different from you and me—that they saw sex not primarily as procreation and never as sin but rather as sport, art, and pleasure, an activity full of humor, tenderness and above all variety. John R. Clarke, by looking at Roman artifacts from several centuries destined to be used by different social classes, reveals that the erotic *visual* record is far more varied, open-minded and playful than are *written* moral strictures, which were narrowly formulated by the élite and for the élite. This book is at once discreet and bold—discreetly respectful of nuance and context, boldly clear in drawing the widest possible conclusions about the malleability of human behavior. Clarke has, with meticulous scholarship and a fresh approach, vindicated Foucault's revolutionary claims for the social construction of sexuality."—Edmund White, author of *The Beautiful Room is Empty*

From the Back Cover

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