

BOOK REVIEW

Sex on Show: Seeing the Erotic in Greece and Rome. By CAROLINE VOUT. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013. Pp. 272. Hardcover, \$34.95. ISBN 978-0-520-28020-5.

Sex on Show: Seeing the Erotic in Greece and Rome is an alluring visual feast. This book presents the richest and most varied collection of ancient erotic art to date, with the added benefit of a very reasonable price, unlike many earlier books in this subfield. It also summarizes current existing scholarship across a variety of subfields, although it does not offer any particularly revolutionary new arguments about the purpose or audience of these works of art.

Drawing largely from the extensive collections of the British Museum, as well as some highlights from Naples, Pompeii, and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, Vout presents 195 full-color images of erotic sculpture, vases, paintings, drawings, mosaics, and *instrumenta domestica*. Unlike its predecessors, most prominently John Clarke's *Looking at Lovemaking* (UC Press, 1998) or Catherine Johns' *Sex or Symbol?* (Taylor and Francis, 1982), *Sex on Show* has pictures on virtually every page of the book. This enables the reader to have the great luxury of directly examining the work of art in question while reading Vout's commentary, rather than repeatedly flipping to a middle section or trying to make out the details in a small black-and-white version. In a few cases, the relevant piece is somewhat confusingly separated from the commentary by a few pages, but for the most part the connections are easy to follow.

The photography and lighting of most images are beautifully done, bringing out details like the Latin letters "Felicis" on a pottery applique medallion (9) or the snarling marble teeth of Actaeon's hounds (54). There are only a few problematic images, most caused by the unavoidable difficulties of taking two-dimensional photographs of three-dimensional objects. For instance, it is unfortunate that the famous servant peeking from behind the door on the Warren Cup here bears a strong resemblance to Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (42). The few pictures *in situ* are particularly impressive; I have never seen such a well-lit shot of one of the rooms in the most famous Pompeii brothel.

Vout provides an excellent summation of the current scholarship on ancient erotic art, although she does not significantly advance the discourse herself. This weakness may result from the wide range in the book of what might be considered “erotic,” ranging from scenes of human lovemaking (Chapter 1) to representations of nudity (Chapter 2), prostitution and “sexhibitionism” (Chapter 3), sexual encounters with divine and supernatural figures (Chapter 4), eroticized violence and sexual assault (Chapter 5), and the stories and motivations of the 18th-20th century collectors of ancient erotic art (Chapter 6). These eclectic chapters, united mainly by their depictions of genitalia and a wide variety of sexual positions, are never really drawn together into an overarching argument.

With regard to the most well-known and controversial pieces, such as the young romanticized heterosexual couple on the Shuvalov Painter’s *oinochoe* (96), the locker room of Pompeii’s Suburban Baths (12–13), or the Warren Cup (82–83), Vout briefly discusses current dominant theories without fully developing a detailed analysis or placing these pieces in a larger cultural context. In some cases, this leads to oversimplification, most notably in her analysis of the representation of oral sex in Roman art, which does not address Holt Parker’s well-established theories about the strong distinctions made between male-female and female-male oral sex in Latin literature (Holt Parker, “The Teratogenic Grid,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. by Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton, 1997)). Perhaps the strongest chapter is the last one, which explores how modern private collectors challenged public moral codes by invoking the authority of the classical canon to support their unorthodox sexual tastes.

The intended audience of *Sex on Show* is somewhat unclear. The press, use of technical terminology, and careful citations would seem to indicate a scholarly audience. However, Vout frequently uses highly colloquial and informal language, some of which is both strongly British in inflection and may date poorly, such as the terms “kerb-crawling” and “beer goggles,” as well as unattributed references to Lady Gaga and David Beckham. While the casual vocabulary may succeed in drawing a larger audience, it may also confuse both older American scholars now and future scholars of all regions. This book seems to dwell uneasily between the genres of coffee-table books and scholarly monographs.

In addition, Vout’s frequent use of the first-person plural to describe “our reactions” to these pieces of art and what “we learn” from them is disconcerting. Even more than with other works of art, the assumption of a homogenous audience for all works of ancient erotica seems highly problematic. Surely, as Vout herself indirectly implies in Chapter 6, the response of a late 19th century closeted

gay man to the Warren Cup may be quite distinct from that of a 21st century heterosexual married woman; the reaction of an atheist to the startling Ravenna mosaic of a nude Jesus (166) might vary from that of a Roman Catholic nun.

This book would be suitable as a general introduction to ancient erotic art, most particularly due to its unparalleled collection of high-quality images. Too often scholars have discussed these pieces in isolation and on the basis of grainy, blurred small photographs. Vout here does the field a great service by offering new audiences the ability to compare these works directly and to enjoy (or be shocked by) the tremendous variety and imagination present in classical representations of sexuality and the human body.

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