

INTRODUCTION: THE ROMAN FREEDMAN, “FREEDMAN ART,” AND TRIMALCHIO



The historian’s task is to complicate not to clarify.

(Jonathan Z. Smith)¹

There is more than a little of Trimalchio in Aulus Umbricius Scaurus.

(Robert I. Curtis)²

Having endured humiliation and degradation as a slave, then having been enfranchised as a citizen, a Roman freedman or freedwoman lived in a world that must have seemed filled with complexities, ambiguities, and paradoxes – not to mention opportunities. Those privileges included, but were not limited to, the right to marry legally, to produce a legitimate Roman family, to vote, and to acquire wealth. Yet behind every new advantage, a reminiscence of one’s servile past could potentially tarnish the brilliance of that opportunity, a circumstance that distinguished ex-slaves (*libertini*) from freeborn citizens (*ingenui*). Although they were permitted to participate in the political process by voting, *libertini* could not stand for prestigious elected office.³ Although able to accumulate property, a freed slave might have had to hand over a portion of his estate upon death to the former master (*patronus*). And as slave owners themselves, many freed people were at the same time tied by bonds of obligations (*obsequium*, *officium*, and *operae*) to their own former owners.⁴ As the very designation *libertinus* makes explicit, an ex-slave’s past clung to his or her legal and social identity at least as much as the newly acquired citizen status. Nonetheless, to the extent that freed people could accumulate wealth, they could also be prodigious patrons of art and architecture. Designing and purchasing a variety of visual art forms – from domestic interiors to funerary monuments and beyond – many *libertini* partook of the cultural privileges made possible with citizenship and freedom.

This project began as one devoted to the art of ancient Roman ex-slaves. Early on, the intent was to offer ways of reading the complex social identities of *libertini* as inscribed on their funerary monuments and within artistic commissions

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in both the domestic and public spheres. A case-study approach seemed promising; it could give nuance to the various unheard voices of Rome’s past – traditionally dominated by the ruling elite – while assembling a range of material not hitherto examined together. The unifying thread was the artistic patronage of *libertini*. This book, however, could not simply be about freedmen and their art – a “freedman art” as it has been characterized in scholarly literature. As will become clear, this social category of art is highly problematic, based as it is primarily on stereotypes drawn from ancient writings, and has received little rigorous questioning in art historical scholarship. Much of what follows is an attempt to strip away layers of assumptions about freedmen and “freedman art.” Yet this study still seeks to enrich our understanding of ancient Rome, not by isolating and categorizing ex-slaves and their artistic commissions, but by contextualizing, within cultural and visual landscapes, acts of artistic patronage among freed slaves, and those we believe to have been *libertini*, placing presumed freedmen’s commissions side by side with those of other Romans, ordinary and elite alike.⁵

HOW WE READ HISTORY: PIECES OF EVIDENCE

Throughout the course of this book, we will encounter a number of stereotypes, both ancient and modern. I begin with some stereotypes concerning work as a way to foreground methodological issues that this study will address. Slaves (*servi*), as we know, were intimately bound to work, and it was through work that many slaves acquired property, a *peculium*, to use toward the purchase of their freedom.⁶ As former slaves, *libertini* could experience the advantages of accumulated wealth, which more often than not derived from work. Those advantages included the ability to purchase slaves, throw dinner parties, and participate in acts of munificence, as well as to commission a tomb and decorate a house. Put another way, for *libertini*, work was a means to generate wealth and gain social, and sometimes political, distinction. Herein lies a bit of a paradox. As Sandra Joshel neatly articulates, “Ironically, work, so fundamental to the existence of the natively alienated slave, becomes the means to achieve the necessary resources of a high-ranking insider.”⁷ Conversely, although work may have been the means for some social achievement, it could also, as we shall see, be used as an index for indelibly marking an individual with nonelite status, whether freeborn, freed slave, or slave.

To tease out this paradox, I begin with the simple point that voices from the past derive from two primary sources – the written (textual) word and the material (archaeological) record – yet each offers only a partial glimpse into Rome’s history. Take, for instance, two hauntingly austere epitaphs, both from the columbarium of the Statilii in Rome. Each belongs to a slave (slaves had only one name, whereas citizens had three, the *tria nomina*) and simply states name and job title, implying

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that name and work were what made the slave, a statement that is not surprising in and of itself given the very institution of slavery:

Zena
cocus

Zena, cook.

Felix
topiarius

Felix, ornamental gardener.⁸

We cannot know from the evidence as it exists whether Zena or Felix chose to be commemorated by their respective job titles or whether someone else made that decision. Nonetheless, these slaves, among others, were represented by the work they did in life for perpetuity. The same could be said for some freedmen, who may have experienced lives not wholly different from their lives as slaves. Just as a former slave's ties (obligations really) to his or her former master (or master's family) persisted, so could the nature of work carried out as a slave – once a shopkeeper always a shopkeeper – but now with the distinction and benefits of Roman citizenship. Job titles could continue to function as important indices of identity, as two more direct examples from the tomb of the Statilii reveal:

Menander l(ibertinus)
ostarius ab amphitheatr [*sic*]

Menander, *libertinus*, doorkeeper at the amphitheater.

T(itus) Statilius
T(iti) l(ibertus) Hilarus
C(orvini) vest(iarius)

Titus Statilius Hilarus, *libertus* of Titus, tailor of Corvinus.⁹

This is not to suggest that only slaves and former slaves claimed work as a primary means of identity. To be sure, many *ingenui*, along with a host of other individuals about whom we know little concerning their legal status (*incerti*), worked for a living and identified themselves by the work they did.¹⁰ It is precisely because we know so little about the specific circumstances of the vast number of Roman citizens outside elite circles, however, that historians tend to extrapolate from the better-known individuals, from both the archaeological and written records, in forming ideas about social categories.

Perhaps the best-known Roman freedman is not a historical figure at all but a literary character, Trimalchio, an outrageous protagonist in one chapter of Petronius's famous novel the *Satyricon*. This character, a fabulously rich but boorish ex-slave, throws an over-the-top dinner party, featured in the episode "Cena Trimalchionis." Despite his newfound citizen status and immense wealth, Trimalchio cannot seem to shake off his past, evident in the way Petronius, a

writer in the court of Nero (r. 54–68), deftly draws connections between work and servile status, as well as between work, wealth, and libertine status. For example, the narrator of the story arrives at Trimalchio's house in advance of the event and soon becomes absorbed with a series of frescoes that recounts Trimalchio's career as a slave and his eventual freedom.

First came a panel showing a slave market. . . . There stood Trimalchio as a young man, his hair long and curly in slave fashion. . . . In the next panel he appeared as an apprentice accountant, then as a paymaster – each step in his career portrayed in great detail and everything scrupulously labeled. At the end of the portico you came to the climax of the series: a picture of Mercury grasping Trimalchio by the chin and hoisting him up to the lofty eminence of the official's tribunal. Beside the dais stood the goddess Fortuna . . . (29)¹¹

Here with the help of Mercury and Fortuna, Trimalchio became a *libertinus*, whereupon he became active in lucrative business ventures, including banking, the skills for which he must have acquired as a slave.¹² Throughout the course of the dinner party, readers are gradually introduced to the guests, all ex-slaves, many of whom are quite wealthy. Some are identified by their work, such as the undertaker, rag seller, and mason. The links between ex-slaves, work, and wealth become most explicit toward the end of the evening, when Trimalchio's servants bring in a statuette of Priapus, the rural god of abundance, in advance of the household gods – Fat Profit (*Cerdo*), Good Luck (*Felicio*), and Large Income (*Lucrío*) (60). These deities were not the traditional domestic deities, but those that Petronius associates emphatically, if playfully, with work. In particular, *Cerdo*, literally translated as workman and laborer, the basest types of workers, occurs in literature as a slave name, but also derives from *kerdos*, meaning gain or profit.¹³ Petronius's skillful elision between slaves, base work, and profit making via a deity named Cerdo is telling: work could make an individual wealthy, but it could not suffice as a traditional means to achieving elite status.

Plainly, these written testimonies – epitaphs and elite-authored social satire – produce two diverging points of view about work's importance for slaves and freedmen. In the case of the epitaphs, and many others like them, work and the claiming of a job title could be a legitimate means of (self-)representation among workers. In contrast, Petronius, from an ultra-elite position, derides work (and wealth derived from work) with all of its connotations of servitude. Although it is undeniable that these texts do give voices to the past, too often historians have privileged elite-authored testimony when reading archaeological remains, resulting in biased views of freedmen and by extension, of “freedman art.” This book problematizes these categories in detail, but the following example illustrates how elite-authored testimony has (unintentionally) guided historians through the archaeological record.

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As perhaps the most famous house to survive Pompeii's destruction, the House of the Vettii (VI.15.1) has welcomed hoards of tourists desiring to experience a "typical" Roman dwelling.¹⁴ Part of the attraction of this house is its connection to the prosperous Vettii brothers, believed to have been ex-slaves, who rose up only to perish in the prime of their lives. To modern eyes, here is a house owned by former slaves, who, with hard work, became self-made men capable of relishing some of life's luxuries.¹⁵ The domus is connected specifically to A. Vettius Restitutus and A. Vettius Conviva based on the find of two bronze seals within the atrium near the strongbox (*arca*).¹⁶ The near-universal presumption that the Vettii brothers were former slaves stems from two factors. On the one hand, Conviva was an *Augustalis*, a type of lower-level magistrate that scholars have linked exclusively, until recently, to *libertini*. On the other hand, both individuals share the same *praenomen* and *nomen*, suggesting that both were enslaved under the same master (an ex-slave generally took the *praenomen* and *nomen* of his former master while retaining his slave name as his *cognomen*). The argument may be compelling, but lacking any explicit mention of these individuals as *libertini* elsewhere in the archaeological record, we can only regard these individuals as probable freedmen (*incerti* really).¹⁷

Despite the relative uncertainty of the Vettii brothers' legal status, their presumed identities as former slaves persists, and several features within the House of the Vettii have stood as illustrations, if not confirmations, of the brothers' servile pasts. Executed in the first century, excellent examples of Fourth-Style wall decoration adorn the interior (rooms *d*, *e*, *p*, *n*, *q*, and *t*),¹⁸ and together with the display of statuary in the garden, the house has been characterized as "overburdened," a term that is rife with connotations of Trimalchio's over-the-top dinner party (Fig. 1).¹⁹ One such point of comparison appears within the house's entrance; no visitor to the House of the Vettii, in ancient times as well as modern, could miss, let alone forget, the painted image of Priapus greeting each guest as he weighs his "overburdened" phallus against a sack of gold (Fig. 2). It would seem that this bawdy image of a fertility deity who is, quite literally, "worth his weight in gold," sets the stage for reading the Vettii brothers' financial success and desire to show off that wealth and new citizen status in relation to Trimalchio's behavior.²⁰ In all likelihood, the Vettii brothers were abundantly rich, and scholars have been eager to determine the sources of that wealth – namely, the work the Vettii brothers did. A small-scale frieze in the house's largest reception room (*q*) has sufficed as evidence and has received undue scholarly attention (Figs. 3 and 4). The frieze depicts miniature Cupids and Psyche busy at work – making perfume and flower garlands, fulling, working gold, and winemaking – and at play (throwing darts and drinking in revelry). In an inexplicable leap, the Vettii brothers have been identified as wine merchants, perfume producers, and so on, based on the commercial activities depicted in this band of mythological fancy and in light of their presumed former-slave status.²¹ Notwithstanding the small scale and position of the frieze in the walls – it is best seen close up,

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1. House of the Vettii, room *p*, Pompeii, first century. Photo: Stephen Petersen (su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali – Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei).

perhaps while reclining on a banqueting couch – the underlying assumption is that imagery commissioned by ex-slaves is necessarily nothing more than biographical, as with Trimalchio’s “biographical” frescoes. This interpretation also overlooks the fact that such miniaturized, mythological fancies in painted friezes were not uncommon in reception spaces at Pompeii and may represent a desired type of decoration among the well-to-do.²² Furthermore, given the relative uncertainty of the Vettii’s legal status, circularity in argument abounds. All of the readings of the house depend on one thing: the libertine status of the Vettii brothers, which in turn is “affirmed” by the readings of the house’s imagery. Is a freedman identity all that we can extract from this house and its decoration? More to the point, however, why do we hold firm to a perceived universal freedman mentality and approach to art that we then claim to see in archaeological remains?

THE LITERARY TRADITION AND TRIMALCHIO VISION

History repeats its mythologies. To anyone with more than a passing interest in Roman history, mention of the word “freedman” brings to mind the fictional

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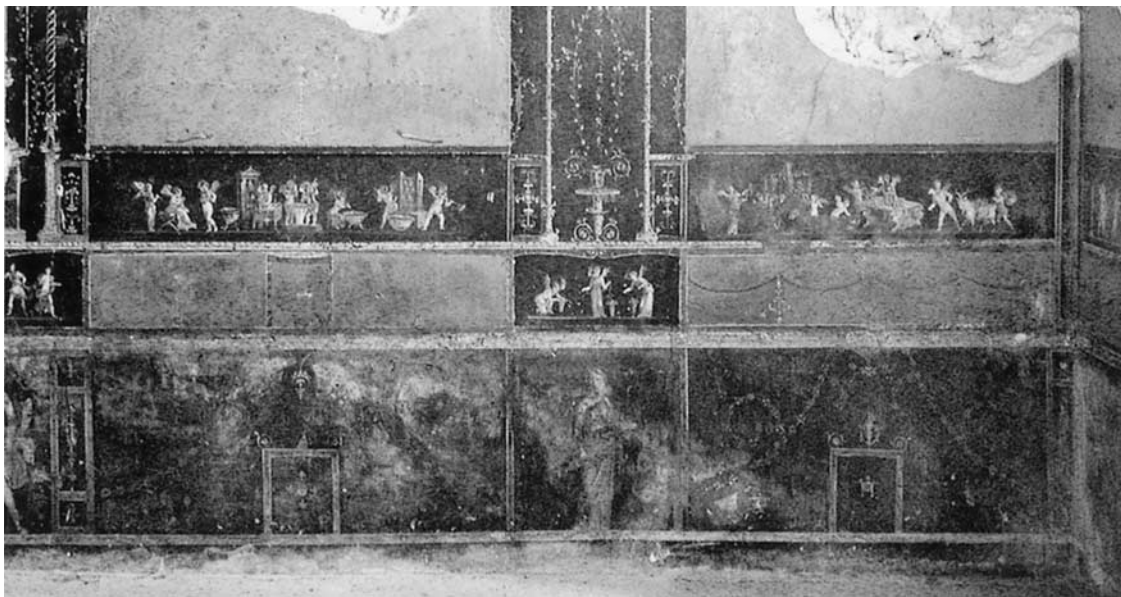


2. House of the Vettii, painting at the *fauces* showing Priapus weighing his phallus, Pompeii, first century. Photo: Fototeca Unione, AAR, 2575.

figure Trimalchio. An unforgettably humorous character, Trimalchio represents the stereotypical wealthy freedman, seen through the eyes of Rome's aristocracy, who enthusiastically tries to persuade others that he can behave just like, or that he has already achieved the status of, an elite Roman, notwithstanding the hard reality of his servile past. Indeed, the narrator and Petronius's readers are all too aware that Trimalchio's pretense is a charade, in part because Trimalchio and *libertini* alike, no matter how rich, could not claim a freeborn standing or an illustrious family lineage, requisites for elected office and, hence, for noble standing.

Because we lack written testimony by former slaves themselves, with the notable exception of epitaphs, scholars have traditionally invoked Trimalchio as a means of understanding the attitudes of historical ex-slaves. For example, Nicholas Purcell, in his analysis of the development of the street of tombs in Roman Italy, opens his article with the fictional tomb commission by Trimalchio that appears

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3. House of the Vettii, frieze of Cupids and Pysches at work making and selling perfume and garlands, room *q*, Pompeii, first century. Photo: Stephen Petersen (su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali – Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei).

at the end of the “Cena Trimalchionis” and highlights the character’s ostentations. Purcell justifies his use of this passage by claiming:

It is not wholly inappropriate to begin this discussion with the example of a tomb which never existed; because to understand properly the patterns of evolution and development in Roman – or indeed any – funerary architecture and practice, we must go beyond the physical remains. After a certain point these can only be mute, and they must be given voice by other evidence for the thought-world of the builders and occupants. Petronius is pursuing an image for Trimalchio which is at once vulgar, laughable, modish and recognizable; and much of the social setting of the Roman street of tombs is revealed here.²³

Purcell’s statement gets at the heart of the methodological issue that we too often disregard. Because archaeological evidence provides us with only so much information, we rely on literary sources. Ancient texts thus become a means to interpret the visual remains, and, given the fragmentary material evidence, this method certainly has many benefits; to compare texts only with texts, or monuments only with monuments, may impoverish the study of both. Although texts as much as monuments are cultural constructs and therefore deeply comparable on a structural level, scholars have tended to overuse the Petronian text as a historical

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4. House of the Vettii, room *q*, Pompeii, first century. Photo: Stephen Petersen (su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali – Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei).

template for analyzing monuments. Taken to its logical conclusion, this strategy produces elitist, if not reductive, ways of looking at material remains belonging to a tremendously heterogeneous society (not to mention chronologically confused comparisons between actual monuments of freed slaves and Petronius's fiction). If we permit Petronius to speak for all other Romans, as is so often done, his attitudes risk becoming erroneously equated with the attitudes of historical ex-slaves, collapsing Petronius, Trimalchio, and historical freedmen into a single, monolithic "thought-world" (to use Purcell's term for intentions, motivations, or attitudes).

We cannot be entirely certain who or what Trimalchio represents, however. Some historians, albeit a relative minority, view the "Cena Trimalchionis" as alluding to elite situations. Nero's debaucheries and social transgressions are well known, and scholars have suggested that Trimalchio – ostentations, self-aggrandizing statements, and all – is no more than a mini-Nero, that is, a parody of the emperor himself.²⁴ Yet due to Petronius's use of what historians deem "undiluted realism" and his great attention to detail, the story of Trimalchio and his dinner party has seemed to provide a fairly convincing framework with which to understand the attitudes of historical ex-slaves.²⁵ Indeed, the lives of ex-slaves were particularly challenging ones, the concerns of which could be conceived as similar to those of Trimalchio: how to re-create oneself and one's identity while

assimilating into Roman society as one of its newest citizens. So convincing is the upwardly mobile figure of Trimalchio that nearly every study that examines historical freedmen makes some type of reference to Petronius's character, as if his *fictional* life inevitably represented the *historical* lives of former slaves.²⁶ Such a connection overlooks the fact that this text is a satire produced in the imperial court. Thus, when historians talk about Trimalchio as if he were a historical individual rather than a literary construct, they risk perpetuating ancient elite, pejorative attitudes about ex-slaves, rather than getting closer to revealing the multifaceted and diverse intentions of historical ex-slaves. This tendency to see Roman ex-slaves from the elite perspective, so heavily dependent on the fictional figure of Trimalchio, I have called "Trimalchio Vision."²⁷ Trimalchio Vision tacitly permits belittling or reductive comments about those outside elite circles and, as we shall see, can severely limit our appreciation of Rome's complex past. This book is dedicated to liberating the Roman freed slave from Trimalchio's grip.

SOCIAL HISTORIES OF ROMAN ART AND THE EMERGENCE OF "FREEDMAN ART"

Perhaps the most decisive distinction that one could draw in Roman society was between the free (mostly citizens, but also foreigners) and the enslaved. Among the free, the category of citizen was the largest, comprising both freeborn citizens (*ingenui*) and those who were freed slaves (*libertini*). Freeborn citizens included elite individuals, the small fraction of nobility and wealthy families who ruled Rome and governed municipalities, and those who were born with citizen status but were not office-holding individuals (not because they could not legally hold office, but because they did not have the family standing and wealth to do so). These freeborn nonelite individuals, who made up a significant portion of Roman society, typically worked for a living, and they constituted a tremendously diverse group. In this group were wealthy merchants, manufacturers, tavern owners, and so on, as well as working individuals who could barely make ends meet. Freedmen generally belonged to the nonelite realm as well. Taken as a whole, the category of nonelite included almost all of Rome's people – freeborn citizens, freed slaves, and foreigners (not to mention slaves) – making it a highly complex group of individuals who seem to defy easy categorization beyond the label "nonelite."²⁸

Traditionally, the history of Roman art was told primarily from the perspective of elite culture, a narrow yet visible segment of society. Books on Roman art have been filled with images of imperial Rome, with relatively little attention paid to art outside elite circles. More recent examinations have focused much-needed attention on Rome's nonelite individuals, however; the last twenty years in particular have witnessed a flourish of scholarly attempts to recover Rome's multifaceted histories by engaging issues such as social status, visibility, and motivations