INTRODUCTION

ON ROMAN TENDERNESS

The subject of this book, the representation of amatory tenderness in Roman painting and poetry of the early imperial period, may strike the reader as perplexing and surprising. Indeed, the collocation “Roman tenderness” might even seem something of a contradiction in terms. After all, tenderness is not a notion commonly associated with Romulus’ descendants, whose mythical origin was attributed not to gallant courtship but to brutal rape. Yet, as I shall argue, beginning in the mid-to-late first century BCE, Roman poets, artists, and their audience became increasingly interested in describing, depicting, and visualizing the more sentimental aspects of erotic experience. During this period, we see both the crystallization of Latin love elegy as a poetic genre and the emergence of a new style in Roman wall painting. While Catullus and later Cornelius Gallus, Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid developed a highly subjective form of expression, centered on the joys and tribulations of a life of love, Roman wall painting underwent a contemporaneous – and equally radical – change. Instead of the skillful imitation of colored marbles popular in the third and second centuries BCE (Fig. I.1) and the trompe l’oeil fantasies of the first half of the first century BCE (Figs. 1.2 and I.3), Roman frescoes now featured clearly defined, “framed” narrative panels, which were displayed as if in a painting gallery (Figs. 1.4 and Plate 1), or pinacotheca. Amatory subjects, mostly drawn from myth, are among the most frequently represented within these frames (Figs. 2.3, 2.5, and 2.6). And, as in elegy, the painted lovers on the walls of Roman houses appear in scenes that,
while powerfully evocative, stop short of depicting the sexual act. Such images focus instead on metonymic signs of desire and affection: the touching of hands, the couple’s interlocked gaze, lips that part and are (almost) joined (e.g. Plates 2–6; Fig. 1.19). Why, then, did Roman poets, painters, and their audience become so interested in matters of love at the dawn of the empire? And why, once this new poetic and pictorial discourse on tenderness took shape, did it become so pervasive throughout Roman art, literature, and culture?

But before we proceed any further, I should make clear what I mean by “tenderness.” The Latin language offers no precise equivalent to our English term, which itself encompasses a wide array of physical and emotional
characteristics. A compelling model for the phenomenon of Roman tenderness as I understand it is to be found, however, in the work of Roland Barthes. In his lyrical, whimsical analysis of the Western amatory imagination, Barthes lists tenderness (tendresse) among the key figures of a lover’s discourse. For him, tenderness is a gesture that communicates an ambiguous message: “The tender gesture says: ask me anything that can put your body to sleep, but also do not forget that I desire you – a little, lightly, without trying to seize anything right away.” Thus, between the rapacity of sexual desire and the lovers’ covenant “to mother each other reciprocally,” tenderness intervenes, presaging erotic pleasure while simultaneously delaying and translating it into a series of signs. “Sexual pleasure,” Barthes writes, “is not metonymic: once taken, it is cut off: it was the Feast, always terminated and instituted only by a temporary, supervised lifting of the prohibition. Tenderness, on the contrary, is nothing but an infinite, insatiable metonymy.” It is this notion of tenderness as an infinite metonymy that is particularly helpful in understanding Roman amatory representations, where the erotic becomes suffused with sentiment. In the images and texts that constitute the core of this book’s inquiry, tenderness may
then be described as a representational mode that transforms sex into romance, giving form to the ineffable through a series of metaphorical displacements. In this process, gestures, words, and objects become tokens of the amatory experience, allowing love to be represented, recognized, learned, remembered, and recounted. Tenderness is thus also part of a code that dictates and propagates ideas of what love ought to be, feel, and look like. Although all amatory codes may seem familiar to us, they are, in fact, historically and culturally determined. And indeed, one of the goals of this book is to delineate the characteristics of a Roman ideal of romantic tenderness, which grows out of and in response to certain social, political, and cultural changes.

In the last half-century, Roman erotic art has drawn considerable scholarly attention. Otto Brendel’s seminal 1970 article, “The Scope and Temperament of Erotic Art in the Greco-Roman World,” set the tone for subsequent studies of this subject. Brendel limited his inquiry to two types of artistic representation: works of art that depicted either sexual acts or “situations clearly preparatory to such acts.” Although he recognized that Greek and Roman art dealing with themes of love, especially the loves of gods and heroes, might also be termed “erotic,” Brendel focused exclusively on images that portrayed what he
considered a human, socially conditioned reality (Figs. I.5 and I.6). His aim was to investigate why we see the emergence of a secular form of erotic art destined primarily for private consumption in the Greco-Roman world. Through a provocative survey of objects ranging in date from the late archaic period in Greece (late sixth century BCE) to the high Roman empire (second and third century CE), Brendel delineated a succinct history of the development of erotic art in these two foundational Western cultures. For him, the essential difference between Greco-Roman erotic art and the sexual representations of earlier Mediterranean cultures was the former’s absolute lack of religious significance. According to him, ancient Greece and Rome were the first societies to produce sexual images that were devoid of sacred symbolism and presented sex as a fundamental human experience. He attributed this shift toward a more mundane style of erotic representation to the appearance, first, of an aristocratic audience interested in depictions of everyday life – especially their own way of living – and, later, a prosperous urban bourgeoisie, whose taste favored images of comfort and pleasure.

In many ways, Brendel’s study was very much a product of its time. First presented as a paper at a conference on erotic art sponsored by the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University, founded by Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, his essay on Greek and Roman erotic representations unabashedly addressed what were then undoubtedly perceived as the most challenging and shocking images
in classical art. Even though some of his choices now appear somewhat
tendentious, Brendel bequeathed an important model to later generations of
scholars – one that combined rigorous iconographic analysis with a broader
crloical approach. A similar emphasis on the sensual, secular nature of
erotic art informs John Clarke’s more recent study, *Looking at Lovemaking:*
*Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 BC–AD 250* (1998). Like Brendel,
Clarke concentrates solely on factual portrayals of sexual situations. But as the book’s title makes amply clear, Clarke’s method is also influenced by the work of Michel Foucault. Having embraced the notion of sexuality as a cultural construct, Clarke approaches Roman erotic art as a visual discourse that reflects otherwise unstated attitudes toward sex, gender, and status. In his eyes, Roman visual artists were code breakers who delighted in “upsetting the norms” by depicting sexual behavior that went against the rules of propriety dictated by the elite. Thus, according to Clarke, Roman artists differed significantly from contemporary Roman authors who wrote on sex but tended to reflect and reiterate an elite, moralizing point of view. Although the notion that Roman erotic art might represent deviant, non-elite behaviors and attitudes toward sexuality is intriguing, Clarke’s premise draws an artificial divide between texts and images, and between different social classes living under the Roman empire. After all, as the literary and archaeological records show, members of the Roman elite were also avid consumers of erotic art. And, as far as we can
tell from the extant evidence, erotic art produced for elite and non-elite customers varied greatly in quality, but not as much in content. Moreover, Latin love poets were themselves code breakers. Yet it was what they had to say not about sex but about love that proved to be a truly radical innovation— one whose impact was felt far beyond the capital and the court.

My choice to focus on Roman representations of amatory tenderness stems, then, from a desire to offer a more nuanced account of early imperial erotic art and literature, which thus far have tended to be treated separately. By considering Roman wall painting together with Latin love poetry, especially elegy, I explore different facets of Roman erotic imagery that are often obscured in standard treatments of this subject. After all, Greece and Rome were not only the first cultures in the West to produce nonreligious, matter-of-fact images of sex. They were also among the earliest to articulate a widespread, lasting romantic ideal that fused sex with notions of privacy and affection. But it was specifically at Rome that an essentially heterosexual romantic ideal, which combined erotic pleasure with notions of conjugal happiness and domesticity, first flourished. More than 2,000 years later, the idea that love ought to be a fundamental prerequisite for marriage and an indispensable requirement for marital felicity seems so self-evident as to be mistaken for a universal, timeless concept. But this concept, too, has a history that begins in late republican and early imperial Rome. Even more surprising, however, is the realization that what we now perceive as a conventional paradigm of romantic fulfillment emerged as a powerful rejection of the state’s attempt to control various aspects of its citizens’ private lives. One of the stories this book tells is how this countercultural notion of a freely chosen, mutual, all-consuming love that defied traditional definitions of marriage became an integral part of Roman familial ideology. In this process, I also consider how the absorption and diffusion of that new romantic ideal is reflected by the presence of tender amatory images in Roman houses.

The development of a new pictorial style in Rome in the late first century BCE, featuring elegant *pinakes* (i.e. framed “panel paintings”) that depict scenes of daily life, often of a sensual nature, has traditionally been interpreted as indicative of a growing taste for Alexandrian sophistication among the Roman elite. Giulio Emanuele Rizzo, for instance, saw in these erotic idylls an evocation of the lighthearted sensuality of Alexandrian erotic epigrams and the mythological romances that characterize the work of poets such as Callimachus, Theocritus, Moscus, Bion, and Herodas. The profound impact of Hellenistic art and literature on Roman culture is, of course, undeniable. But, as I shall argue throughout this book, this intense new interest in amatory subjects on the part of a Roman audience is also linked with events taking place closer to home. While the paintings’ style and iconography might be Hellenistic, the concerns and expectations expressed by these images are
deeply Roman. In order to understand the cultural context from which Roman representations of erotic tenderness emerge, we must first, however, take a step backward in time and consider both the Hellenization of Rome after the Third Punic War (149–146 BCE) and the development of Latin love poetry in the second half of the first century BCE.

Although most of this book concerns itself with the visual representation of amatory tenderness in Roman wall painting and the relationship between these images and Latin love elegy, this Introduction will focus primarily on literary sources. Before we can engage in an in-depth analysis of the pictorial and poetic representations of tenderness in the early imperial period, we must first consider the historical and intellectual contexts from which Latin elegy and Roman paintings of tender erotic idylls emerged. While tender images of lovers do not appear in Roman painting before the 30s BCE, a tender romantic ideal begins to take shape in the work of the neoteric poets, especially that of Catullus, a generation earlier. The development of a Roman poetic discourse on amatory tenderness in the mid-first century BCE implies that, when depictions of tender love scenes began to appear on the walls of Augustan houses, they were already, from the very start, in dialogue with an existing Roman literary phenomenon. What follows, then, is a brief history of the origins of Latin elegy and the rise of a new romantic ideal in the final years of the republic and the first decades of the empire. It is, by nature, a selective history that focuses on certain key events and the literary responses they triggered. My goal here is to identify important concepts and terms in the Roman discourse on amatory tenderness that will become an integral part of the semantic framework informing the production and reception of tender images of lovers in the imperial period. Having sketched the general structure of the Roman discourse on amatory tenderness, I will then turn to more specific case studies concerning the representation of tenderness in Roman painting and poetry in the book’s three central chapters. But, for now, we must turn our attention to the beginnings of Roman tenderness and the question of how and why it came into being.

LOVE BEFORE ELEGY: PREFIGURATIONS OF TENDERNESS IN REPUBLICAN ROME

As others have argued before me, Latin love elegy may be considered an invention of the Augustan period. Its roots, however, lay firmly in the ethical and aesthetic transformations that followed the great Roman conquests of the third and second centuries BCE. At this time, Greek culture became present in Rome on an unprecedented scale, not least through the dedication of plundered works of art in public spaces. Plutarch’s oft-cited statement that Rome, which had been full of bloody, terrifying spoils, became a veritable museum of
Greek art in the years following Marcus Claudius Marcellus’ sack of Syracuse in 212 BCE reflects the ancients’ own sense of how the city was thoroughly transformed in this period. New marble temples built in a Greek style now housed well-known paintings and sculptures looted from numerous Mediterranean sites, while libraries were erected to hold the numerous volumes brought back by triumphant generals. The impact of such monuments on a nascent empire is difficult to overstate. Yet the assimilation of Greek culture by the Romans was never a straightforward process. While it was embraced and promoted by some, it was forcefully opposed by others.

Cato the Elder, the best-known and most fervent spokesman for nativist resistance to Hellenization, viewed the Greek works of art that were now part of Rome’s urban fabric as a potential threat. For him, their presence marked the end of a traditional Roman way of life, built around such homespun virtues as austerity, self-sacrifice, and respect for the gods. Cato was also adamantly opposed to his peers’ exploitation of Greek works of art for individual enrichment and political advancement – an attitude that reveals the extent to which Rome’s elite had become Hellenized by the second century BCE. In fact, the Hellenizing tendencies of Roman aristocrats such as Aemilius Paullus, Scipio Aemilianus, and the literary figures associated with them ultimately led to a recalibration of age-old beliefs. As the works of Ennius and Lucilius (both members of the so-called Scipionic circle) demonstrate, their poetry sought not only to recreate Greek models in Latin but also to combine Roman values with Greek culture. In both poets, we also find a new emphasis on the individual. For instance, in Ennius’ Annales, Roman history is celebrated not just as the collective conquests of a people but as the result of heroic deeds accomplished by noble leaders. Lucilius’ satires likewise present us with a strong personal voice through which the poet articulates his desire to retire from a world rife with ambition, venality, and vulgarity.

This turn toward individuality and privacy is also reflected in a contemporary Hellenization of Roman domestic spaces. The aristocrats’ taste for Greek cultural and artistic refinement transformed the appearance of Roman houses. In Rome, residences became increasingly ornate: Columns of solid marble and walls adorned with marble revetments were now incorporated into the decoration of private spaces which, like temples and other public buildings, also housed impressive collections of Greek works of art. But it was away from the capital that this new taste for a Hellenized lifestyle was most fully expressed. The elegant villas built in the first century BCE on the Bay of Naples, a Greek-speaking region with strong ties to its Hellenic origins, were self-conscious recreations of Hellenistic palaces that featured colonnaded gardens, hunting parks, fish pools, art galleries, libraries, and gymnasia. Thus, they were the ideal setting for the pursuit of otium. More than just a retreat from civic and political obligations (i.e. negotium), otium for the Romans implied active