



**LOOKING AT LAUGHTER: HUMOR, POWER, AND TRANSGRESSION
IN ROMAN VISUAL CULTURE, 100 B.C.-A.D. 250
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J.R. CLARKE

University of Texas, Department of Art and Art History, College of Fine Arts
1 University Station D1300
Austin, TX 78712 (USA)
tel. +1 512 232 2355
j.clarke@mail.utexas.edu

The ancient Romans, much like us moderns, valued humor, whether as a social safety valve, an oratorical tool, or just for the fun of it. Yet because humor is so rooted in its specific culture, most Roman comic visual representations remain opaque to the modern viewer. *Looking at Laughter* explores the question: "What made Romans laugh? by examining a heterogeneous corpus of visual material, from the crudely obscene to the exquisitely sophisticated and from the playful to the deadly serious—everything from street humor to erudite paintings parodying the emperor.

Nine chapters analyze a wide range of visual art, including wall painting, sculpture, mosaics, and ceramics—always emphasizing the dual context of the built environment and the social status of viewers.

Part I, "Visual Humor," distinguishes between textual and visual humor as seen in public spectacle (e.g., the triumph; the amphitheater); in the masking traditions of theater; and in trompe l'oeil representations (e.g., *asarotos oikos*).

Part II, "Social Humor," uses a Bakhtinian model to see how humor intersects with class consciousness in "othering" the pygmy, in parodies of Augustan heroes, and in the social inversions of tavern painting.

Part III, "Sexual Humor," considers images of the gods in sexual embarrassment (e.g., Hercules and Omphale; Venus and Hephaestus) as well as human sexual folly (e.g., Rhone Valley ceramics).

Archaeological sites, as well as a range of ancient texts, inscriptions, and graffiti, provide the background for understanding the how and why of humorous imagery.

In addition to shedding new light on neglected works of art, *Looking at Laughter* provides insights into the mentality of Roman patrons and viewers who enjoyed laughing at the gods, the powers-that-be, and themselves.

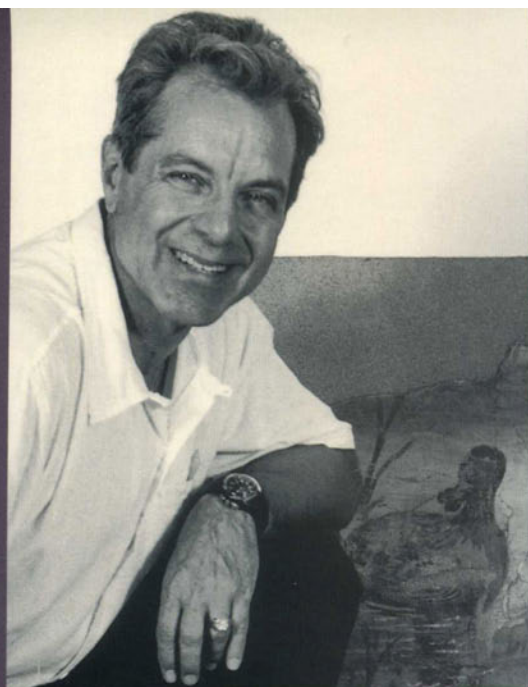


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JOHN R. CLARKE



MICHAEL LARVEY

JOHN R. CLARKE is Annie Laurie Howard Regents Professor of History of Art at the University of Texas, Austin. He is the author of *Roman Life: 100 B.C.–A.D. 200* (2007), *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans* (UC Press, 2003), *Roman Sex* (2003), *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (UC Press, 1998), and *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration* (UC Press, 1991).

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*Jacket design: Claudia Smelser
Jacket illustration: Pompeii, House of the Sculptor (VII, 7, 24), first peristyle, wall B, dancing pygmies on boat. Photo Michael Larvey (su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali—Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei).*