

Outside Elite Perspective: the Subaltern in Ancient Art

Representations of non-elite subjects or marginalized peoples abound within the visual culture of the ancient Greco-Roman world, from entertainers at Greek symposia depicted in vase painting, to gladiators in the arena represented in mosaics, to slave representations in Pompeian murals. Traditional scholarly approaches to this imagery in the fields of Classics, Art History, and Visual Studies privilege issues of style, chronology, and iconography. Progressive approaches to this material tend to explore issues of cultural contact and hegemony; or they interrogate gender power dynamics within ancient social systems. Traditional and progressive methodologies bear a common trait: they emphasize and reinforce the significance of elite cultural production and viewership, leaving questions of non-elite viewership and reception unanswered, ultimately leading to a skewed understanding of the social function of visual culture.

This panel session invites scholars in all disciplines to consider the possible roles of the non-elite, marginalized viewer within the visual dynamics of ancient societies in the Greco-Roman world. By shifting attention from issues of authorship or elite viewership to the role of non-elite viewership, for instance, is it possible to interpret certain representations as enforcing or reproducing social hierarchies, delimiting social boundaries, naturalizing structures of hegemony, or dictating social norms? Furthermore, what insights may gender theory provide to better elucidate such visual dynamics, especially in the representations of women and the cultural “Other”? Scholars are invited to discuss specific objects, visual cultures, or to examine the state of the literature or methodological problems pertaining to non-elite representation and viewership.