pornography
the secret history of civilization

ISABEL TANG
Introduction by Fenton Bailey
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FENTON BAILEY, C4 series executive producer.
The Road to Ruin
[ Chapter One: Antiquity ]

...know it when I see it,' said US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in 1964. We all know it when we see it. Whatever slipperiness pornography acquires in the courtroom or in obscure academic journals, at the end of the day it is recognizable and indisputable. Pornography may be fuzzy at the edges - fuzzy in the art gallery, fuzzy in the courtroom - but surely it is clear at the centre. People can dispute the cut-off point between the mainstream teenage magazine 19 and the niche adult magazine Anal Teens, but surely only the obscene or the perverse would claim that 19 was pornographic and that Anal Teens was not.

There is something stubborn and irreducible about pornography that commands instant recognition. Irreducible because it has already been reduced to its limit: the body as sexual parts, sex as mechanics and hydraulics. It is in all senses stripped bare, to the core - stripped, in fact, to the hard core. For it is when sexual representation, whether in literature, photography, film or video, is deemed devoid of artistic or cultural or educational value, that it risks being judged 'obscene' in the eyes of the law.¹

It is this idea that pornography stands as a hard, fixed, uncontestable, instantly recognizable thing that seduces us into thinking it is somehow outside culture. It is as though, occupying the very margins of culture, in fact the point at which culture stops, pornography could drop off the edge altogether (and good riddance, for many) and leave everything else as is.

This is precisely the notion that is disputed here, because, far from standing outside culture, independent of it, pornography is in fact a cultural construct. And while seeming to occupy the margins of culture, it is constructed at its centre - constructed at the intersections of sexuality, religion, politics, art and law. As the anthropologist

¹ In the 1959 Obscene Publications Act, something is 'obscene' if, taken as a whole, it has the tendency to 'deprave and corrupt' those who are likely to come across it. There is a defence: one of public good, on the grounds that it is 'in the interests of science, literature, art or learning, or of other objects of general concern.'
Bernard Arcand has said, ‘The history of pornography is the history of society, and nothing that happens in society can be completely left out.’

Not only is pornography a cultural construct, it is a modern construct. It took the modern world with its industrializations, its technologies, and its concepts of privacy and the sanctity of the family to transform the merely sexually explicit into the new problematic category ‘pornography’. Moreover, in one of pornography’s many ironies, it was in the Victorian era, the period we most associate with sexual prudery, that pornography came into its own. Not just because it was then that the technology of mechanical reproduction first gave rise to the kind of material (including the photographic) that we would recognize today as pornography; not just because it was then that pornography was first produced on a scale that made it a mass phenomenon; and not just because it was then that the regulatory framework surrounding obscenity turned pornography into an industry of transgression; rather, because it was then and only then that the category of pornography itself was invented.

Despite its apparently ancient etymology – from the Greek *pornographos*, ‘writing of prostitutes’ the word ‘pornography’ was not in use before 1857. Indeed, rather than being a word used by the ancient Greeks, it was virtually unknown in the classical world. There seems to be only one short passage in an ancient text where ‘pornographer’ makes a fleeting appearance: the Deipnosophistae by Athenaeus, as *pornographos*.

(‘whoresplainers’).

So it would seem to have been a relatively new word, dressed up in the garb of the old. But if it was all dressed up, did it have anywhere to go? Why the sudden need for a new word without which civilization had done perfectly well for hundreds, indeed thousands, of years?

The story starts in the first century AD when the water sources in the area around the Bay of Naples began to fail. Quite mysteriously, the springs and fountains had run dry, as if some deity had been displeased. It was indeed an ominous sign, but not a sign from the gods. Beneath the surface, water was evaporating into steam in the intensity of the furnace deep below. Few could have guessed what was coming next.

...a portentous crash was heard, as if the mountains were tumbling in ruins; and first huge stones were hurled aloft, rising as high as the very summits, then came a great quantity of fire and endless smoke, so that the whole atmosphere was obscured and the sun was entirely hidden, as if eclipsed. Thus day was turned into night and light into darkness. Some thought that the Giants were rising again in revolt (for at this time also many of their forms could be discerned in the smoke and, moreover, a sound as of trumpets was heard), while others believed that the whole universe was being resolved into chaos or fire.

These are the words of the third-century historian Dio Cassius, describing the day Vesuvius erupted, burying Pompeii in a hail of red-hot boulders, molten lava, pumice and ash, and burying neighbouring Herculaneum in a boiling sea of mud. From the time the skies went black, it would take more than sixteen hundred years for the two towns to see the light of day again, petrified as at the moment the world ended for them on 24 August 79. It was after an Italian peasant inadvertently stumbled on the ruins of Herculaneum in 1709, while digging a well, that the two sites were gradually unveiled in archaeological digs on an historic scale.

It was a unique opportunity. These were not towns that had been altered by centuries of invasions and rebuildings; artefacts whose meanings had been changed by countless hands; people whose secrets had been lost by those who followed them. Never before had there been such a chance for the modern world to survey the ancient.

It was not just the scale but the details of the finds that captured the imagination of the Western world; the evidence of human habitation was to be made even more dramatic by Giuseppe Fiorelli, head of the excavations in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was Fiorelli who invented the technique of filling the corpse-shells made by the hardened ash with liquid plaster to re-create the final moments of Pompeii: a chained dog desperately trying to get away; a beggar dying...
at the Nucerian Gate; a contorted, crouching figure covering his face against the suffocating fumes.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the classics to the society that witnessed the unveiling of Pompeii. Classical culture, both Greek and Roman, was the cornerstone of the education system. The ancient world had become the model for civilization: the modern world was investing its future in the achievements of the past. It was as though the ancient texts from great classical civilizations would underwrite the greatness of the new ones. This did, of course, require a set of deft footwork. It was already becoming common currency that the Roman Empire had been fatally weakened by lax morality, and concerns were expressed that parts of the classics were likely to excite the sexual feelings of young boys. None the less, with judicious selectivity it was possible to preserve society’s preferred reading of ancient culture. But even the most skilful evasions would be inadequate in the face of the wholesale assault on moral sensibilities presented by the Vesuvian discoveries.

In the mid-eighteenth century, at the beginning of the excavations at Herculanum, work started on the Villa of the Papyri, which had the largest and most impressive private collection of statuary to have survived. One statue caused immediate consternation: a marble piece of the god Pan in an apparently rewarding act of coitus with a goat. While not unfamiliar with classical references to bestiality (like Leda and the Swan), Western art had performed the singular task of keeping the sex in these images at arm’s length. But whatever remoteness had been conferred upon such references was conspicuously lacking here, most notably in the detailed and meticulous rendering of the act of penetration by the phallus.

As Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, director of the British School at Rome, says, ‘Normally with a statue, the bits that you can’t easily see are only roughly cut. But with this, if you peer down and look in detail, you find that the genitals of both Pan and the nubile goat are fully present and visible. You can’t ever get an uninterrupted view, you must always look through a haze of legs and hoofs, but they’re there all right.’

In a response that telescopes any distance we have travelled from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to today, the statue seemingly still has the power to shock. When John Paul Getty re-created the Villa of the Papyri later in the twentieth century, although he reproduced most of its significant garden statuary, the Pan and the Goat was omitted, despite the fact that it is one of the finest pieces of the collection.

In the past, as in recent times, the immediate impulse was to hide it from view. Charles of Bourbon, King of Naples and Sicily, gave orders that the statue be entrusted to the care of the royal sculptor, Joseph Canart, with specific instructions that no one should have access to it.

But the shock of the old did not end there. Unearthed from the ruins was a giant phallus in painted tufa that stood over two feet tall. There were the drinking-bowl masks, the mouths of which, instead of tongues, had phallics which would bob about in the bowl when it was full. There was a terracotta lamp in the shape of a faun with an oversized veined phallus with detailed gills. There were flying phallics with tiny wings and dangling bells.

The age that unearthed this profusion of phallics was the age that had eliminated the phallus from view. If, as was becoming apparent, the phallus was everywhere in ancient Rome, it was nowhere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This, and increasingly so, was a delicate and genteel age. As a writer in The Gentleman’s Magazine of 1791 remarked, ‘We are every day becoming more delicate, and without doubt, at the same time, more virtuous; and shall, I am confident, become the most refined and polite people in the world.’ And while later in England, contrary to popular belief, Victorians might not in fact have seen the need to hide phalic scenes in engravings (based, as this idea was on a single, unverifiable observation by an Englishman in America, recounted only to ridicule), this was certainly an age that witnessed a refinement of language from the latter part of the eighteenth century, not only in England but also in Europe and in the United States, where legs were to be referred to as ‘limbs’ and chicken breasts as chicken ‘bosoms’. But this delicacy of language served only to draw attention to and sexualize hitherto undescribed and unheeded sexual territory.

These were not the first ancient phallics to demand attention from those who would have preferred to ignore them. The Cenere Abbas Giant presented an impressive example on the North Dorset Downs. It is still not known when he was etched into the chalk as there is no record of him prior to 1694, when churchwardens’ accounts dated 4 November refer to a payment ‘for repairing of ye Giant 3d. 6d. Nor is it clear what he represented: was this a Roman Hercules, part of a short-lived cult advanced by Emperor Commodus; or an image of Hells the Huntsman, an Iron Age god or warrior; or even, as is sometimes suggested, a practical joke?’

Whatever his origins, though, the Cenere Abbas Giant was a troubling presence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first known illustration appeared in 1764 in The Gentleman’s Magazine, complete with genitals. However, mysteriously the penis had dropped off by the time of the next known illustration, in 1774, while the testicles had been reduced to two large boil-like objects on the inner thighs. By the Victorian era, both the penis and the testicles had disappeared from illustrations altogether. And nature imitated art when the giant member was gradually covered by a fig leaf of overgrown grass. When it was proposed by Lord Rivers that the giant be cleaned up again, the vicar of Cenere Abbas expressed concern that this would have an undesirable effect on the morals of his parishioners. In 1868, when the cleaning took place with apparently restorative effects on the giant member, one observer commented ‘in the sequestered valley... the eye is arrested by the apparition of a gigantic human figure... which...is an astounding and probably a repulsive object... As to the anatomical proportions of the relative parts of his frame we prefer to remain silent.’

* Quant as it may seem today, while top-shelf magazines regularly show, in great detail, splayed female genitalia, the erection or otherwise of the penis still serves as an effective dividing line for magazine editors between what is and what is not acceptable for general sale. The erect penis is still a hallmark of obscenity, and to show it is to run the risk of seizure under the Obscene Publications Act. It is this that still confuses the legal boundaries between the partially erect penis. Exactly where to draw the line is a trickier question, however, and acceptable levels of engagement are the subject of some discussion.
The sheer quantity of phallic objects being unearthed at Pompeii and Herculaneum was mesmerizing. ‘For the very first time we had a whole town, a whole culture, and it was possible to see where that imagery fitted into the town. And for the first time it became impossible to avoid the fact that on every street corner you could see an erect phallus,’ explains Cambridge classicist, Dr Simon Goldhill.

These outrageous artefacts presented a problem to the excavators. Public display was out of the question, as the objects were clearly unfit for exhibition, and yet, in the interests of archaeology, haphazard as that nascent science was, the objects could not be destroyed. The excavators ultimately took the only course of action available to them. As with the Pen and the Goat statue, they hid them away. Following a suggestion by Francis I, Duke of Calabria, in 1819 that the erotic artefacts should be confined to a single room in the Museum of Naples, so that access could be limited to ‘persons of mature age and of proven morality’, more than a hundred objects were confined to the so-called Gabinetto degli Oggetti Osceni (Cabinet of Obscene Objects).

As Walter Kendrick has so effectively argued, the nineteenth century had risen to the cultural challenge of the erotic onslaught from the ancient Romans by creating a brand-new physical and cultural space: a ‘secret museum’. This was a place that would preserve both knowledge and public morality; a place where problematic objects could be separated and set aside, with access restricted and monitored. And a new name was found for these objects: ‘pornography’. The first official, systematic catalogue of this collection appeared in 1866, and it was simply called the Pornographic Collection.’

The etymology of the word ‘obscene’ is unclear. Some suggest the origin is the Latin ob causam, ‘from fault’. Others favour the Latin ob scenum, meaning ‘off or to one side of the stage’. Lynda Nead is among the latter, suggesting, therefore, that the secret museum can be seen as a spatial enactment of the term ‘obscene’.’ The objects themselves were made to act out their own obscenity by being carted off-scene, out of view and beyond presentation. The secret museum was at once part of the museum yet separated from it. While its presence was not denied, the museum would act as if it was not there. Like the objection of sex in the society that created the secret museum, it was both there and not there, part of society and yet not properly acknowledged.

Classical culture was the heritage of the nineteenth century; people had fashioned themselves in its image. How could the image of classical (and therefore contemporary) society be rescued in the light of these new discoveries? ‘It’s very important for the Victorians that the ancient world, both Greek and Roman, was full of clean white statues that they could respond to as purity, beauty and sublimity. The discovery of extensive works that they thought obscene caused a problem. They had to sustain their image in the face of what was really quite stunning counter-evidence and one of the ways they did it was by inventing a category of the obscene which they could segregate off, separate to one side in secret museums; they could say that it is some area of ancient culture but not the ancient culture which provides us with its inheritance,’ says Simon Goldhill.

Having created a secret museum, the next question was who should have access to it – or rather, who should not have access to it. The special Pornographic Collection was kept in a locked room. Admission was restricted to those with a valid royal permit and later, after Giuseppe Garibaldi assumed power, by special permission of the directors of
the museum. Women, children and the lower classes were all excluded; pornography was to be the preserve of the educated gentleman.

'The gentleman,' says Simon Goldhill, 'considered himself to be protected from erotic stimulation and corruption. If you were a proper gentleman, you were above the possibilities of that sort of corruption. It was only the vulnerable, the women and the children and the working classes, who might be corrupted by this.' Position and power were preserved by this act of keeping certain groups out, allowing gentlemen who were granted access to reaffirm their social status and power.

The fear stalking the age was any loss of control that might threaten the very roots of social order and empire; good order in the family and among the lower classes was held to be fundamental. Women in particular were thought to be weak and vulnerable and in need of protection from sexual material; but equally, the fear was that they would be rendered dangerous and troublesome if they were excited by it. What posed as an act of protection should perhaps more accurately be seen as an act of self-protection. As Simon Goldhill remarks, 'This is fear of female sexuality. Female sexuality threatened the very substance of society. Female sexual pleasure at one level threatened the security of marriage; the security of the family and children and childbirth and legitimacy. At another level it threatened the security of the men themselves and their own self-identity; the fear and threat to the male identity of female sexual pleasure.'

In addition, children and males of immature years would need to be kept out of the secret museum. Once again, the fear was the corrupting influence of inappropriate sexual material. Indeed, warnings about the calamitous fate of the habitual self-abuser whipped up a state of sufficient anxiety to create a market for penile rings with spikes to deflate unwitting arbour during sleep and, even more terrifying, a device whereby a filial erection was made to ring an electric bell in the parents' room! 'Self-indulgence, long pursued, tends ultimately, if carried far enough, to early death or self-destruction,' declared William Acton in his book The Function and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, which was published in 1857 and ran to four editions in his lifetime. This was Acton's description of a habitual masturbator:

The frame is stunted and weak, the muscles undeveloped, the eye is sunken and heavy, the complexion is sallow, pasty, or covered with spots of acne, the hands are damp and cold, and the skin moist. The boy shuns the society of others, creeps about alone, joins with repugnance in the amusements of his schoolfellows. He cannot look any one in the face, and becomes careless in dress and uncleanly in person. His intellect has become sluggish and enfeebled, and if his evil habits are persisted in, he may end in becoming a drudging idiot or a

peevish valetudinarian. Such boys are to be seen in all stages of degeneration, but what we have described is but the result towards which all they are tending."

The fact that this was a ruinous pit into which anyone — indeed everyone — could fall makes it more than an issue for the individual; it was an issue for society.

Girls were equally at risk, according to Samuel-Auguste-André-David Tissot's Onanism: Essay on the Afflictions Produced by Masturbation, first published in 1758. "Masturbation in females could lead finally to 'uterine fury, which deprives them at once of modesty and reason and puts them on the level of the lowest brutes, until despairing death snatches them away from pain and infamy'.

Even after creating a secret museum, there was the problem of how to record its contents. In an age of obsessive classification, how would these objects be listed? With difficulty, as it turned out, and authors of guidebooks and catalogues were impaled on the horns of yet another dilemma: should they serve good taste or truth?

On the whole, it was truth that lost out. Phallics were either lopped off completely, covered with fig leaves or tapered into improbable cones. Clouding over the especially rude bits turned out to be a particularly useful way of saving the blushes of illustrator and reader alike. One catalogue resorted to the use of untranslated Latin and Greek to allow the author to assure all concerned that proper care had been taken to keep unsuitable material out of the wrong hands: 'We have taken all the prudential measures applicable to such a collection of engravings and text. We have endeavoured to make its reading inaccessible, so to speak, to poorly educated persons, as well as those whose sex and age forbid any exception to the laws of decency and modesty.'

The statue of Pan and the Goat presented a special problem. Golding it could not efface the bestial and unacceptable whole, so it was either left out altogether and simply not listed or accompanied by a health warning. One catalogue, after taking the precaution of clouding over the genitals, exhorts the reader to 'turn the page over quickly'.

The confusion and uncertainty about the best way of dealing with these shocking artefacts were mirrored in the apparent arbitrariness of the treatment of some of the objects themselves, particularly in the early years of excavation. Of the five pictures that you can see today on the south wall of the tavern on the Street of Mercury in Pompeii, two have been defaced beyond recognition; the same is true of two pictures on the east wall. Our only knowledge of the original sexual content of these paintings comes via surviving engravings by Roux, published in 1836. As the images that have not survived are those with an
erotic content, it seems likely that they were destroyed in some act of moral outrage.
Sometimes, in an ironic reversal of moral fortunes, the very survival of the obscenity is
due to an excess of moral zeal. For instance, in the House at IX.5.16 a small room
containing erotic pictures is the one best preserved, whereas the rest of the building and
those surrounding it are in ruins. The only reason this room is still intact today, according
to art historian Professor John Clarke, is because a solid roof and heavy door were built
by the excavators to 'protect the morals of the curious'.

It was known, of course, that erotic artefacts had been made in ancient Greece and
Rome; they had been thrown up on a piecemeal basis for centuries. What shocked the
excavators was their ubiquity. 'It was all right to find one, but to find so many made them
think that this must have been a world turned upside down, where every value that these
gentlemen had was completely cancelled out by the hideous obscenity of life that they
were uncovering,' says John Clarke.

This was not the Roman Empire people either expected or wanted to find, and
attempts to understand the ancient in terms of the modern proved an unexpected trial.
The sexual practices and associated imagery of the ancients were being nailed to the
Procrustean bed of Victorianism and, not surprisingly, they did not fit. Stretched to
breaking point, something had to give. The first casualty was understanding.

Revealing their own prejudices about the display of sexual material in public spaces,
early excavators reasoned that all erotic paintings and artefacts must belong to a brothel
if they could not easily be placed in a quasi-religious category. In 1780 when Pierre
Sylvain Maréchal catalogued certain vases, lamps and everyday utensils, he noted, 'We
must believe that articles shaped like this were intended only for bawdyhouses,' so
inconceivable would be the depravity otherwise.

For the age that uncovered these obscenities, following the logic of the story of the

Fall in Christian tradition (at least as it had been handed down), innocence = sexual
innocence = lack of sexual knowledge. But inherent in this reasoning there is a flaw,
because once innocence and guilt are hitched to knowledge, it becomes impossible to
recognize innocence without having lost it oneself. The ability to name the guilty simply
underlines one's own lack of innocence, like the dirty-minded censor who sees smut
everywhere. There is a logical impossibility at the heart of Western tradition. What, then,
was the solution to this double-bind? The solution was hypocrisy. Some Victorian ladies,
for instance, felt obliged to swoon when confronted with the sexually suggestive an act
that was at once a private recognition of and a public refusal to admit what one had seen
or heard. Sex was alluded to but not named. Sex was present but not acknowledged.
Pompeii would have had thirty-five brothels, a striking per capita concentration of one brothel for seventy-one men and nearly eighty times as many brothels per capita as Rome.18 It’s ridiculous. In fact Pompeii had only one building that was actually made for the purpose, and the rest of them were inventions of the dirty minds of the “Victorians.” Every time they saw something that looked like sex, they wanted to name it a brothel, says John Clarke.19

Take, for instance, the House of the Centenary, which takes up a whole block and obviously belonged to a wealthy family. In a small room there are two erotic paintings: one shows a woman astride a man with her back to him and the other a woman with a ‘breast band’ crouching over the man and seemingly guiding his penis. According to John Clarke, those who discovered this room, and rooms like it in Pompeii, reasoned it must be a brothel, part of the house that had gone “bad.” Everyone wanted to make it into a brothel when it was discovered in the nineteenth century. There is no other way it could be explained in their terms. But in fact this is a luxurious room in a very luxurious house.

The next assumption was that the room must be some kind of chamber reserved especially for lovemaking. Wrong again, according to Clarke. The key to understanding the significance of the pictures in Pompeii is to understand their original context. Where were they seen? Who would have seen them? Where did they belong in the house? In this context, he argues, a proper consideration of the layout of the house shows that this little room can be seen as an entertainment suite, imitating similar suites in wealthy villas. It spelled ‘luxury’, not ‘lust’. ‘It’s the place that the patron would have brought his favourite and most important guests’, says Clarke. ‘The images were to make people understand that the owner had good taste. They were not to turn people on. There was no notoriety. It was a matter of showing the beautiful aspects of sexual play. It was sex as sport.’

What confounded the excavators in their attempt to understand first-century Romans was as much their concepts of privacy as their ideas about sex. There was no word for privacy in the Latin language. There was no way to express it. There were places where you can be secret, but that’s always for some sort of political activity. It’s not for sex,” according to Clarke. Simon Goldhill says, “It’s very striking that as soon as the images were discovered on Pompeian walls they were all assumed to be in the most private rooms of the houses. But we now know that many of these images were indeed in the most public spaces of Roman culture. Public and private are not natural divisions. Cultures divide them differently: for Victorians in particular, their close commitment to privacy and pornography is quite different from a Roman sense of the public performance of your own identity.”

The Victorians had not expected to find these pictures on open display. It was very perplexing, because what they wanted to do was to find them only in dark, dirty corners where people did it. And instead what it showed was that people were proud of them. They wanted to show them to the people that came to see them in their houses. These were proper pictures to have in their house,” says John Clarke.

The infamous Pinax and the Goat statue was openly displayed in the peristyle garden of the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum. Not only was it evidently acceptable to the wealthy owner of his house but it would have been seen by respectable visitors, and
was on show with statues that had no discernible sexual content at all. It is clear that what the modern world found imperative to remove from view was, to the ancients, natural enough to display in the house. As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill says, 'These Roman images show us the sexual just naturally inhabiting all sorts of areas. They may be displayed in the garden, in general circulation areas, and one reason for that is they don't think of the house as this place for the family.'

Children had access to these images, as did women. 'What everyone wanted to find, and they didn't find,' according to John Clarke, 'is that somehow the Romans cordon off these paintings from the children and from the women. And the (excavators) tried to find passages in the ancient literature which would say this, and you have to look very hard to find even one prude who said, well, maybe young girls shouldn't be looking at pictures of copulation. Ridiculous. Children, women, people of every class saw and enjoyed these images.'

The Roman state may not have attempted to regulate sexual images, but this did not mean that there were no rules of sexual behaviour. Ideas about what was proper were deeply etched in the Roman psyche.

At the risk of oversimplification, the basic sexual rule for the Romans was to penetrate but not be penetrated. It did not much matter who you did it to, how you did it, what orifice you chose to enter by; the cardinal point was to screw and not be screwed. Sex being what it is and requiring at least two, someone was always on the wrong end of the deal: women, slaves, prostitutes, young males and even children. Penetration was a way of expressing masculine citizenship; to be a proper citizen you had to be a penetrating, active male. As John Clarke says, 'As long as the man is involved in inserting his penis, it doesn't matter too much in what part of the other person he is inserting it. As long as he maintains his phallic position, he is completely without shame.'

According to Simon Goldhill, 'The threat of passivity was the threat that you lost self-control, that you became the object of somebody else's desire. In the ancient world, desire is something very rarely reciprocal. You don't want to be loved back by someone who you love. That's a modern invention. For the Roman citizen, you should desire somebody and not be the object of desire. You had to be the master of your body and its desires. The worst thing that could happen is that you become the object of somebody else's mastery or desires. That is to say, a slave, or indeed a woman. Hence being penetrated or even, at an extreme, being desired makes you not the subject, not the master of your own being.'

In short, the principles of appropriate sexual behaviour centred on the notion of the Roman male citizen and what was required to maintain his status. Sexuality, like much else in Roman society, was based on inequality and power; and the social position of the freeborn male was expressed in the act of sex.

In 1986 a set of paintings was discovered in a changing room of a complex of Roman baths known as the Suburban Baths, so called because they stood just outside Pompeii's walls. The Suburban Baths had a number of attractions: a dry-heat room, a large heated swimming pool, a cold plunge, a mosaic waterfall and a number of elaborately decorated rooms. And in the middle of these was the changing room, with a sequence of the most sexually explicit images to be found in the whole of Pompeii.
They were painted directly above a series of two-dimensional painted 'boxes', which in turn represent real lockers below (these have now disappeared) where bathers would have deposited their clothes. Each of the painted 'boxes' has a number so that (presumably) each sexual image, plus its 'box', represented the real locker below it. The image above box number III shows fellatio — a relatively rare image in Roman paintings, as it was a sexual practice primarily associated with prostitutes. Box number IV’s image shows cunnilingus, as the woman spreads her legs and exposes her depilated genitalia. Images of cunnilingus are even rarer than those of fellatio, and this one is unique among wall paintings that have survived. The image attached to box number VI depicts a threesome: one man penetrates another man, who in turn penetrates a woman. The image for box VII shows four people having sex.27

The Suburban Baths are not divided into separate sections for men and women. There is only one dressing room and it is thought to have been used by both sexes: 'Every man and woman who would come to the baths would see these as he or she undressed and got ready to bathe and exercise,' says Clarke. Even more significant is the fact that the sexual acts depicted would have been considered improper at the time. Many of these acts were not appropriate for a Roman citizen to engage in. For here, not only were the sexual acts those associated with prostitutes, but in many cases the man is seen in passive sexual positions which would have considerably compromised his active, penetrative status as a Roman male citizen. ‘These were images that turned social etiquette upside down. Even so, they were not the object of the sorts of lurid, hidden glances that have come to characterize pornography today. They were available and openly witnessed — and presumably enjoyed — in a public space. ‘For us it’s almost impossible to imagine having representations of sex that we would call hard-core in a place where we would also bathe, socialize, perhaps listen to a concert, exercise and so on,’ continues Clarke. ‘It’s completely inconceivable to us moderns to have that kind of mixture of sexual imagery of such an outrageous sort in a place where you do normal innocent socializing.’

Naples did not house the only secret museum in Europe. Other collections of pornography existed in Florence, Dresden and Madrid in private galleries which acted as depositories for ‘obscene relics’ brought from Egypt and Greece. London too had its own Museum Secretum, which was started in 1865 when the British Museum accepted a collection of erotic objects from George Witt. The curators of the British Museum were faced with the same dilemma as their Neapolitan counterparts, and their solution ran along similar lines. As Dr David Gaimster, curator of medieval and later antiquities at the British Museum, says, ‘It was forbidden to destroy the material culture of the past; at the same time, it was forbidden to display the objects. So access to the Secretum was tightly controlled. Those persons wishing to see the collections would write to the director of the museum or the head keeper to apply to see this material, and then would have
undergone a stringent cross-examination. The process was calculated to weed out all but the most scholarly and the most honest.”

In the secret museum in Naples, any item of an apparently sexual nature, whether it was religious, apotropaic or symbolic, was dumped in this one place, creating a peculiar repository of orphaned objects. There are small phallic amulets that were hung around a child’s neck – little more than good-luck charms, like horseshoes today; phaluses from household shrines; marble sculptures from Roman art collections designed to show off the wealth and good taste of their owners; decorative bronzes; and votive phallic carvings designed as offerings for the gods. There are functional everyday household objects like lamps and vases and mirrors; lebes or basins that were used in religious rituals; tripartitisula or phaluses with bells to ward off the ‘evil eye’; paintings that had been hacked down from walls. These are things that do not belong together, but once put side by side and classified as dirty, naughty, rude, the label tends to stick. As Catherine Johns of the British Museum says, ‘The different classes of sexual representation had a wide range of meanings, and ... some of them, in antiquity, would have aroused the furtive, guilty and hostile response which they have all been accorded in the recent past.’

The odour of the secret museum is apparent today. According to John Clarke, ‘What they were creating when they made these pornographic collections was the equivalent of a modern sex shop. What it does, of course, is it creates a concentration that totally distorts the context that these came from.’

At the beginning of the nineteenth century ‘obscenity’ began to be the consideration that overrode all others in deciding how to classify objects of the past. Items with any kind of sexual content were separated out, compartmentalized and hidden away. And
then they were misunderstood. No matter where the objects had come from, no matter what purpose they had served, they were automatically labelled obscene. Removed from their original contexts, they were grouped under the new and artificial heading 'obscenity', which, as Catherine Johns points out, 'is not a scholarly category, it is a moral one, and it is academically indefensible.' Once torn from the context that gave them meaning, their significance was often lost altogether. It was an injury whose mark scholarship bears to this day.

The remnants of Europe's secret museums can still be seen, often retained from a sense of nostalgia. After the Second World War, as attitudes changed, many of the objects – at the British Museum, for example – emerged from their cupboards to join the public collections. But not every object. As David Gaimster says, 'There was a sense that perhaps it would be important to try to maintain this collection to provide scholars and interested observers with a nineteenth-century time capsule.'

The moral logic that created the secret museum is today derided rather than shared. In fact, there's nothing like a shot of Victorian moralizing to confirm our own sense of superiority. We use the Victorians to feel better about ourselves. But as the walls of the secret museums have been dismantled by a more liberal age, the secret museums still stand. These days we may not furnish them with the same objects – a century of legal wrangling over the meaning of 'obscenity' has put paid to that. Religious and artistic artefacts have been rescued from the dark and naughty corner and put back on open display. But a category of objects we wish to separate out, hide away, keep from view, worry over and police still exists. And we still call those objects by the same name: 'pornography'.

As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill says, 'Inescapably we are the heirs of our Victorian ancestors. The moment you set up the category of the pornographic, the moment you say that area is separate from and different from everything else, you can change the internal rules that define pornography as much as you like, but it will still remain separate. Separate in a way that wasn't true of the Roman world.'

In one fell swoop, the secret museums had created a new problematic category which was deemed dangerous and morally threatening – a threat which would require policing if society was to be protected. This legacy is still with us, and indeed is part of a much larger inheritance. Having invented the term 'sexuality', this was an age that created hitherto unknown pathologies and unimagined deviances of sexual behaviour. The pornographic was but a product of this new taxonomy of sex. But while 'pornography' as a regulatory category may have been invented in the nineteenth century, this is not when the story of the problem of sexual representation starts. For this we must turn to what happened during the hundreds of years that passed between the burning of Pompeii and its eventual excavation: the triumph of Christianity.