VISUAL EVIDENCE
Picturing food and food culture in Roman art

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Introduction
As thematic studies of visual culture become increasingly common, the depiction of food and food culture promises new insight into patterns of actual or aspirational consumption as well as the role of quotidian subjects in ancient aesthetics and art history. Similar to the textual evidence for diet and nutrition, discussed by Kim Beerden in this volume, the visual evidence necessitates a critical evaluation of its formal characteristics, function, and representativeness. In this chapter, I present a sketch of visual sources primarily from painting and mosaic in Campania and North Africa from the first century BC through to the first century AD. These regions offer a substantial quantity of visual evidence for the types of food items depicted and provide parallels to textual sources on depictions of food. Additionally, where possible, I note archaeological context in order to suggest how social space and the conditions of viewing inform the significance of visual representations.

Formal analysis of visual sources
In ancient Greco-Roman art depictions of food serve a variety of visual functions from ornament to narrative. Because most of the visual evidence for food comes from architectural surface decoration (wall paintings, floor mosaics, relief sculpture), artists had flexibility in how to use food as a subject. The style of individual examples largely depends on medium, region, and date, but the appearance of food, for example a pomegranate or loaf of bread, does not vary significantly whether it is part of a still-life or a scene with human figures. Similarly, depictions of food are consistent between domestic, commercial, and funerary spaces.

Food, particularly fruit, frequently appears as an ornament, alone, or woven into a garland along with flowers, greenery, ribbons, and cultic items (for comparison see Dunbabin, 1999, 29). As examples from ancient tombs or sacred architecture demonstrate, in these contexts it is usually symbolic. In tombs, depictions of food associated with the afterlife or fertility and rebirth, such as single pomegranates or eggs, fill in the spaces between figures (discussed further below). On the interior walls of the Ara Pacis—designed to imitate a sacred precinct—the relief sculpture portrays thick garlands weighed down by produce from all seasons of the year. The
supernatural abundance asserts a message of largess and, along with suspended paterae and bucraaria, echoes the solemnity of the religious procession depicted on the monument’s exterior walls (Kleiner, 1992, 90–91).

Artists also depicted food as an autonomous subject, often, but not always, portrayed within an illusionistic frame or decorative border. Scholars frequently refer to such depictions as “still-life,” or “xenia,” a Greek term discussed in greater detail below. In the tradition of European painting, “still-life” refers to a work of art that eschews human figures in favor of objects, small animals, food, flowers, and so forth.3 Some examples of still-lifes from Campanian wall painting are not only depictions of food but also depictions of panel paintings of food. These motifs feature illusionistic frames, sometimes with shutters, as if they are set upon shelves or hung on the wall (Croisille, 2015, 30–31 and passim). Within the frames artists depicted foods, tablewares, and other objects arranged on and around three-dimensional shelves, plinths, or windows. In later paintings of the Third and Fourth Style, the frames become increasingly flat so that they are only nondescript monochrome lines. The realism of objects and space within the frame continues for many, but not all, still-lifes.

In Second Style wall paintings, un-framed still-lifes appear fully integrated into an illusionistic scene such as a bowl of fruit sitting on a ledge or freshly killed game hanging from a wall (Croisille, 2015, 24–31).3 In later Third and Fourth Style paintings, still-lifes are depicted on neutral backgrounds with little suggestion of a space (Croisille, 2015, 34–35, 42). Usually a decorative border appears as an organizational feature (rather than an illusionistic frame) similar to the geometric borders that separate different subjects in mosaics (Croisille, 2015, 34; Dunbabin, 1999, Pl. 47, fig. 117).4

Finally, food appears in scenes with human or divine figures. It might be part of a scene of distribution (De Caro, 2001, 104–105) or convivium (Dunbabin, 1999, 312, Pl. 46). And in mythological paintings it adds to an environment and supports the story depicted. For example, in paintings from Campania, fruit-laden baskets symbolize the fertility of Arcadia (De Caro, 2001, 40–42), or serve as a wedding gift from a centaur to Pirithoös (De Caro, 2001, 44).

Common subjects of visual sources

The eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79 preserved a large corpus of visual evidence at Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the villas at Oplontis and Stabiae. The extent of preservation at these sites in Campania demonstrates the ubiquity of food in visual culture and offers an important source for the study of diet and nutrition. To date, most scholarship on depictions of food has centered on identification or the relationship between images and text (Croisille, 2015; Squire, 2009; De Caro, 2001). Much work remains to be done on the archaeological context of visual sources in this region and throughout the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, the subjects of Campanian art offer a point of departure. In his study of still-life, S. De Caro identifies “utility” as an organizing principle of objects, particularly food and tableware (2001, 21–22). Adapted for the present discussion, his summary of subjects that relate to food and dining from Campanian painting comprises the following:

1. Edible land, sea, and air animals such as poultry, goats, birds, hares, rabbits, deer, fish, crustaceans, and mollusks.
2. Edible plant life such as gourds, cucumbers, asparagus, mushrooms, nuts, grains, and fruit.
3. Bread, cheese, and eggs.
4. Tablewares and containers, including vases, plates, and cups made of metal, glass, or terracotta as well as woven baskets.
The subjects of the visual sources not only offer evidence for consumption patterns but also relative value. Peaches, for example, were considered to be a recent import in the first century AD (Jashemski and Meyer, 2002, 151–152) and they appear in Campanian painting, including two famous still-lifes from the Garden Cryptoporicus at the Casa dei Cervi (IV.2) in Herculaneum (Croisille, 2015, 64–66, 88). The choice to depict non-native produce is striking because textual sources suggest moral value was related to tradition and local cultivation. Another still-life from the cryptoporicus shows a mixture of fruit—apples and pomegranates—with peaches (Croisille, 2015, 66). Does this painting, along with the still-lifes of peaches alone, suggest equal symbolic value between the different types of fruit? Would an ancient viewer have reflected on the origins of the fruit depicted? As recent studies suggest, the subjects of the paintings could be a self-conscious reflection on the consumption of “everyday” foods and their pictorial illusion of sensuality.6

Visual sources in commercial and private contexts

Visual evidence for Roman food and foodways comes from commercial, domestic, funerary, and sacred contexts throughout the Mediterranean. The social function of a space and the audience and viewing conditions demonstrate the significance of visual sources for the study of diet and nutrition. At the same time, there is similarity in the style and subject matter of the visual sources regardless of the function of a particular space. This consistency not only demonstrates the interconnectedness of private and public display or regional trends but also food as a multivalent subject of visual representation.

While we may assume that elite tastes govern a majority of visual sources, it is important to keep in mind that viewing or making works of art was not limited to elites.7 Little is known about artists of surviving works and yet they produced art with parallels in the descriptions of works by the most famous artists of the Greco-Roman world, including those credited with depictions of food like Sosos of Pergamon (discussed below).8 Additionally, ancient wall painters and mosaicists had to account for the physical location of their designs and a viewer’s perception. In the following examples, I discuss how artists adapted their techniques of representation in order to emphasize the sensuality of food and to make it appear present as if it was an ingredient, a cooked dish, the remnants of a luxurious banquet, or a dedicatory offering.

At Ostia and Pompeii, paintings of food and tableware decorate commercial areas, perhaps as depictions of items sold and consumed there. In a second-century painting from a tavern in Ostia comestibles are displayed in three groups (Croisille, 2015, 113). The only indication of space is the apparent three-dimensionality of the objects themselves. At the left is a plate set atop a plinth. On the plate there is a cup, some olives, a knife, and carrot or parsnip. Next there is a glass cup holding five olives and set on another plinth. At the right are two round objects—possibly wrapped meat or cheese—hanging from a nail. There is little overlap between individual objects; even the olives are painted as single dots of pigment. This composition allowed viewers to identify the subjects of the painting at a glance and perhaps see them as items for sale (Croisille, 2015, 44; Mielsch 2001, 200). Additionally, the artist’s technique makes the food and tableware appear to project towards a viewer. The three-dimensional plinths elevate the plate and cups and the nail holds up the meats. The plate is depicted as if it is seen from an angle above such that its surface looks as if it is tilting forward in order to better show off its contents. Similarly, the transparency of the cup indicates its solidity while also framing a view of the olives it contains.9 The visibility of the foods makes it seem as if they are fully available to the eye and evokes the perception of a hungry guest who purchases a meal at the establishment.
Visual evidence

The still-lifes from the *tablinum* at the Praedia of Julia Felix (II.4.3) in Pompeii demonstrate a similar approach to space and perspective in an effort to highlight a variety of foods, including fruit, grains, eggs, game, fish, and more (Croisille, 2015, 76–82). The relatively large-scale (1 m × 0.72 m) still-lifes appeared in a frieze just above eye-level on the north wall of the room (Figure 3.1). A simple reddish-brown line frames each of the compositions as if they were paintings hung on the wall. Painted at a similar height, in the atrium, is a very fragmentary still-life that included a basket and fruit (Figure 3.2).

![Figure 3.1 View of the northeast corner of the tablinum of the Praedia of Julia Felix (Pompeii, II.4.3), 2014 photograph by author, with permission of the Soprintendenza Speciale per I Beni Archeologici di Pompei, Ercolano e Stabia.](image-url)
Figure 3.2 View from the tablinum into the atrium of the Praedia of Julia Felix (Pompeii, II.4.3), facing northwest, 2014 photograph by author, with permission of the Soprintendenza Speciale per I Beni Archeologici di Pompei, Ercolano e Stabia.
The paintings come from a private residence within the complex that also featured a large garden with an outdoor triclinium, baths, and rooms for rent; an inscription names Julia Felix as the proprietress. Appropriately the wall paintings of the tablinum mixed private and commercial imagery: in addition to the food and dining-related subjects, there is a depiction of writing implements and coins (Croisille, 2015, 79).

Like the painting from the tavern at Ostia, the still-lifes of the Praedia portray food and tablewares with an appearance of corporeality. One of the compositions—another of the most famous paintings of ancient Roman art—features a large glass vessel set on a plinth and packed with fruit (Croisille, 2015, 80). The vessel’s transparency shows off the technical skill of its anonymous painter and draws attention to the quinces, apples, pears, pomegranates, and grapes within. Perhaps the depiction of transparent glass is as much a comment on the deceptive nature of art (Squire, 2009, 402; Naumann-Steckner, 1991, 97) as it is a virtuoso subject. Certainly it functions as a frame for the perfectly ripe fruit visible within. By contrast, the terracotta vessels in the same composition required a different approach in order to suggest or show their contents. One, a lidded amphora, leaves the viewer to imagine it contains liquid—wine or oil—based on its shape, while the other, with its lid removed, shows off a pile of small brown objects (dried plums?) piled up above its rim.

In a pendant composition to the still-life with the glass vase, there is silver tableware set on a plinth along with game, a white bottle, and fringed towel (Croisille, 2015, 78). From left to right the silver includes a vase with flared mouth and a spoon with a long handle resting obliquely over it (possibly a cochlere for eating escargot), a plate of eggs, and an oinochoe. Although the silver is opaque and reflective, the plate is shown from a slight angle above, like the plate from the tavern at Ostia. Thus it gives a full view of the eggs arranged on its surface. A similar approach to the depiction of a round shape is evident in the transparent glass vase as well. Although fruit conceals much of the rim, a section of it on the left is visible and suggests that the curve of the mouth is a wide oval. Thus the mouth of the vase, like the plate, indicates that it is seen at a slight angle from above. This perspective is not consistent with the side-view of the vase but it maximizes the food’s visibility.

A third composition from the tablinum shows live fish swimming through blue water (for comparison see Croisille, 2015, 142–143). The side-view of the fish is common in painting and mosaic, regardless whether the fish are alive, in water, or freshly caught and spilling forth from a basket (Croisille, 2015, 119). This view makes each fish easily identifiable by type and it recalls the perspective of a diner who looks down on to a plate of cooked fish lying on one side.

While most Campanian paintings feature food ready-to-eat, rather than consumed, a trompe l’oeil theme of floor mosaics depicts the remnants of a feast. The Elder Pliny credits the invention of this motif—the asarotos oikos or unswept floor—to the fourth-century BC mosaicist, Sosos of Pergamon (Dunbabin, 1999, 26–27). One of the best-preserved examples, now in Rome, depicts chicken bones, fish skeletons, partially eaten nuts, fruit, and more. This illusionistically rendered food appears in three bands of mosaic that corresponded to the placement of dining couches in a room. Each piece of food appears to cast a shadow, as if it is something recently tossed onto the floor. Adding temporality to the mosaic is the depiction of a small mouse nibbling on a nut. Like the paintings discussed above, the asarotos oikos represents food as an object of consumption. Rather than a tantalizing portrayal of food ready-to-eat, however, this image is the aftermath of a luxurious meal.

The illusionistic techniques of ancient artists make it possible to identify many different types of foods in painting and mosaic. This high-quality of illusionism must remind us, however, that ancient artists were not interested in documentary evidence for the study of diet. They
produced works in a variety of contexts and for different patrons. Interdisciplinary study is therefore necessary to understand the significance of visual representations of food as advertisement, demonstration of wealth, and more.

**Xenia: Vitruvius on visual sources**

Textual sources suggest at least one interpretation of the paintings of food as symbols of hospitality. The testimony of the architect Vitruvius even seems to offer a name—*xenia*—and a social and artistic practice to associate with visual evidence. His account also illustrates the seemingly contradictory relationship between luxury and humility that is often evident in textual sources on food. In a discussion of Greek houses, he writes:

> When the Greeks were more refined and more wealthy, they outfitted dining rooms and bedrooms with well-stocked pantries for their arriving guests, and on the first day would invite them to dinner; subsequently they would send over chickens, eggs, vegetables, fruit, and other rustic produce. For this reason painters who in their pictures imitated the things that were sent to guests called such paintings “hospitalities,” *xenia*.

The connection between *xenia* and painting offers a useful source for the iconography and reception of surviving depictions of food. It also explains why these subjects were not limited to areas used for food preparation and dining. A painting or mosaic of chickens, eggs, vegetables, fruit, and the like conveyed a message of hospitality and therefore wealth and abundance to visitors. At the Casa dei Cei (Pompeii, I.6.15), for example, paintings from the *triclinium* and *fauces* feature similar depictions of food. In the *fauces*, on the interior wall above the entrance, there is a still-life of two pairs of birds, pomegranates and quinces and a handful of nuts on a white background (Figure 3.3).

As visitors left the Casa dei Cei the painting was a reminder of *xenia* regardless of whether or not they had dined there. Similarly, in the *tablinum* at the Casa dell’Ara Massima (Pompeii, VI. 16.15) small roundels show food (fruit, poultry) and tablewares against a monochrome background. The only sign of three-dimensional space (besides the objects themselves) are “shelves” that divide the composition into registers. Did a visitor see these paintings with

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*Figure 3.3* Detail of fruit and birds in a Third Style wall painting above the entrance to the Casa dei Cei (Pompeii, I.6.15), 2014 photograph by author, with permission of the Soprintendenza Speciale per I Beni Archeologici di Pompei, Ercolano e Stabia.
shelves as visual allusions to a well-stocked pantry? Like the still-life from the fauces, the still-lifes in the tablinum were part of a well-trafficked area in the house.

At the Casa dei Vettii (Pompeii, VI.15.1), a depiction of Priapus with a basket of fruit brings the symbolism of xenia into a cultic scene (De Caro, 2001, 115). The painting depicts the god in Eastern attire as he holds a scale and weighs his large phallus against a bag of money. While the subjects of a xenia painting were humble, as Vitruvius’ reliquisque res agrestes suggests, the ability of the host to provide food for guests was a demonstration of wealth. And, as noted above, the ability to afford such decor was also indicative of means.17 The concept of xenia therefore offers a useful lens through which to understand the relationships between décor and viewers or house-owner and guest.

**Visual sources in tombs and votives**

The portrayal of food as an object of cult is no doubt among its oldest functions in the visual arts. In ancient Italy there is a long history of depicting food and feasting as part of tomb decoration. Lucanian tombs, dating to the fourth century BC, feature paintings with pomegranates, eggs, and grapes as offerings. Single pomegranates also function as ornament between figures (Pontrandolfo et al., 2002, 35 and passim; De Caro, 2001, 40–41). Similarly, Etruscan tomb paintings depict feasts that include eggs and pomegranates (Steingraber, 2006, 211 and passim).18

An unusual late fourth-century BC terracotta votive, now in Basel, features a plate on which a mouse nibbles on a leaf while surrounded by nuts, an apple, grapes, figs, and a pear (Figure 3.4).19

![Figure 3.4 Late fourth-century BC terracotta votive of a nibbling mouse on a plate (diameter of 14.5 cm) with fruit and nuts, Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig, Inv. Lu 128.](image-url)
The food is dedicatory and the mouse adds a temporal element, similar to the one in mosaic of the *asarotos oikos* mentioned above. Animals often appear with food, sometimes as scavengers like the rooster, partridge, cat, or rabbit (Croisille 2015, 50, 55, 22, 77) in various paintings and mosaics. These depictions are not limited to the funerary context but rather are a ubiquitous motif.

Later in date, the wall paintings of the Tomb of Vestorius Priscus at Pompeii decorate the walls of the tomb and its enclosure with similar imagery. The paintings include a banquet, and still-lifes of a silver drinking service and a peacock standing near/next to a plate of offerings (Mols and Moormann, 1993–1994, 27–32). Both of the still-lifes demonstrate the same pictorial techniques discussed above. The service is set on a table that appears to “tilt” forward and the plate of offerings is depicted as if from slightly above (Mols and Moormann, 1993–1994, 30, 34). Instead of visually presenting the items and food as objects of human consumption, however, the perspective displays them as offerings in commemoration of the 22-year-old man to whom the tomb was dedicated. Similarly, a tomb painting from Rome features a lavish transparent glass vase filled with fruit (Croisille, 2015, 55). The vessel fully displays a view of its contents and casts a shadow on its supporting plinth. Two birds stand on either side, and one, a partridge, even lifts its beak to nibble some grapes spilling from the vessel’s mouth.

**Conclusion: Visual sources on food production and distribution**

Although this chapter has emphasized depictions of food as an object of human consumption, all types of media (painting, mosaic, sculpture) depicted it as the subject of production and distribution as well. By way of a conclusion I will present several examples related to bread. Paintings at an Etruscan tomb in Orvieto not only depict butchered meat but also figures baking bread in preparation for a banquet (Steingraber, 2006, 211–213). At Rome, the monumental tomb of Euryaces, a freedman and wealthy baker, includes a frieze that shows the production of bread from grinding grain to placing loaves in an oven (Hackworth-Peterson, 2003). Unusual cylinders built into the tomb evoke actual equipment used during the baking process (Hackworth-Peterson, 2003, 246). In a painting from the House of the Baker (Pompeii, VII.3.30), a togate citizen is shown handing a loaf of bread to a man (Roberts, 2013, 28–29). Piled around the “baker” are more yellow loaves waiting to be distributed. The painter depicted lines on each loaf that divide it into wedges. These lines appear in other depictions of bread from still-life (Croisille, 2015, 45, 96) and evoke the actual cuts visible in a carbonized loaf from Herculaneum (Roberts, 2013, 65). Scoring makes bread easier to share, a realistic detail of the paintings that underscores their significance as signs of generosity.

Visual sources for the ancient Roman diet recall the role of food in daily life if they feature human figures, like the scenes of baking bread and distribution, or focus on the foods and utensils meant for human use. Although it may be difficult to recover the degree to which they reflect historical reality, the visual sources continually remind us of the many people for whom the depictions of butchered game, round loaves of bread, or colorful fruits and fish were served forth.

**Notes**

1 Throughout this chapter I cite visual reproductions of paintings and mosaics in Croisille, 2015; De Caro, 2001; and Dunbabin, 1999.

2 On the problematic use of the term “still-life” to describe ancient paintings see Squire, 2009, 360–371.

3 B. Wesenberg identifies these as “integrated” still-life and argues that they transition between the viewer’s reality and the fantastic illusion of the wall painting (1993). M. Squire goes further to show
how depictions of food were visual arguments that engaged viewers in a discourse on the nature of pictorial illusion (2009, 398–408).

4 This compositional strategy is not well represented in the literature on still-life. For an example see the triclinium paintings at the Casa dei Ceii (I.6.15) in Pompei: pitture e mosaici (hereafter PPM), vol. 1, 1990.

5 For discussion and additional reproductions see also Dunbabin, 2003, 159–161.

6 Blake, 2016; Croisille, 2015, 104–110; Squire, 2009, 412.


8 It is still often assumed that the artists were copying now lost Greek panel paintings, e.g., De Caro, 2001, 22 and passim. In her seminal article, B. Bergmann convincingly argues for a more nuanced approach to the wall paintings’ imagery (1995). More recently see Pearson, 2015.

9 F. Naumann-Steckner suggests it is possible that the glass is not meant to appear transparent but rather the “olives” are a depiction of surface decoration similar to actual “blobbed” glasses (1991, 97).

10 A number of still-lifes attributed to the Praedia do not survive. For additional reproductions, including eighteenth-century prints see PPM, vol. 3.

11 For a discussion of the relationship between the visual effects of the still-lifes—especially transparency—and perception see O’Connell, 2015, 95–137; currently, I am revising my work on this topic for publication.

12 For example, depictions of glass and metal vessels emphasize material qualities (e.g. transparency, reflectivity) and only approximate actual vessels in form and scale (Naumann-Steckner, 1991, 95–97; Riz, 1990, 4).


14 Other sources on xenia include Philostratos’ Imagines, in which two paintings are identified as xenia, and Martial’s books of epigrams entitled Xenia and Apophoreta. For an overview of these sources see Croisille, 2015, 104–110. For further discussion of reception see Squire on Philostratos (2009, 416–427) and Blake on Martial (2016).

15 PPM vol. 1; Croisille, 2015, 31–33.

16 Croisille, 2015, 70–71.

17 Squire describes Campanian paintings of food as successfully fusing elegance and luxury with the moral ideal of simplicity and traditional Roman values (2009, 408–419).

18 Cf. also an Etruscan bronze statuette of a woman holding a pomegranate at the Harvard Art Museums, Inv. No. 1956.43.

19 Traces of red, yellow, and violet paint remain (Berger, 1982, 97).

20 Mols and Moormann argue that the tomb commemorates specific aspects of Priscus’ life and career (1993–1994).

21 On the service see Tamm, 2005.