MONT ALLEN is Assistant Professor of Classics & Art History at Southern Illinois University, where he teaches courses in Greek Mythology and various aspects of Greco-Roman Art. After winding through three separate undergraduate degrees — in Geography, the History of Religion, and Modern European History — the study of Classics and ancient Greek and Roman Art finally sunk its claws into him for good. He earned his Ph.D. in Ancient Art History from UC–Berkeley in 2014, and hasn't looked back since.

ABOUT THE TALK: The public face of Roman art is painfully sober. In the privacy of their tombs however, free to cast off their stern public personae, Romans surrounded themselves with art of a different nature. Here, on the elaborately carved sarcophagi that dominated the Roman visual imagination of the second and third centuries, the imagery does something entirely different: it plays. Diminutive Pans wrestle with wee goat kids, Sirens face off against Muses in singing competitions, and Cupids role-play as chariotteers, giddily racing their carts around the Circus Maximus. Scenes of games, contests, and play appear with astonishing frequency here — on the sides of coffins, in the face of death — as nowhere else in Roman art.

What forms did this play take on Roman coffins? Why did Romans ground play so deeply in the domain of death? And what would happen with the coming of Christianity?