



Cellini, Benvenuto (1500-1571)

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Sculptor, goldsmith, memoirist, and flamboyant pederast, Benvenuto Cellini is one of the greatest artists in the history of Western art. He was the ultimate--that is to say, the last--Renaissance artist, for the free exploration and celebration of the sensual (particularly the homoeroticism) that inspired his genius and was a hallmark of Renaissance Florentine culture were soon aborted.

Benvenuto Cellini was born in Florence at the peak of the Italian Renaissance. Apprenticed to a goldsmith, he excelled in that art. In fact, he was so successful that he was called upon to fulfill major commissions throughout Italy and France. Indeed, he traveled so much that until he was forty-five years old, he never lived longer than five years in any one place.

The reasons for his sometimes abrupt departures ranged from political upheavals and plague to outbursts of temperament, including murder. His contemporary Vasari described him as "spirited, proud, vigorous, most resolute, and truly terrible."

At nineteen, Cellini went to Rome, where over the years he worked for Popes Clement VII and Paul III, for whom he made jeweled ornaments, coins, and medallions. In 1536, he traveled to France, where he made the famous salt-cellar for King François I and sculpted decorations for the palace at Fontainebleau.

In 1545, Cellini returned to Florence, where he lived the rest of his life. Florence was notorious in the Renaissance as "Sodom City": in German slang, "Florenzer" meant "sodomite." In the late fifteenth century, one in two Florentine men had come to the attention of the authorities on suspicion of sodomy by the time they were thirty.

In 1432, the "Office of the Night" was created to eliminate sodomy, but after seventy years it was disbanded as the task was deemed hopeless. About ninety percent of the cases reported involved boys under the age of eighteen. Sexual activity between men and boys was an integral feature of Florentine culture in the sixteenth century.

Cellini himself was convicted of homosexual sodomy in Florence in 1523 and in 1557. He was prosecuted but absolved of charges of heterosexual sodomy in France.

In Florence, Cellini was supported by his appreciative patron Duke Cosimo I de'Medici. Cosimo's first commission was for a large bronze *Perseus* holding Medusa's severed head. This magnificent nude figure in the Piazza della Signoria is a gay icon for its depiction of a beautiful young man.

Cellini's subsequent works, including the marble statues of *Ganymede and the Eagle*, *Narcissus*, and *Apollo and Hyacinth* are particularly appealing to men who love boys. In *Ganymede and the Eagle*, the young



Top: A portrait of Benvenuto Cellini.
Above: *Perseus* by Cellini.

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Trojan boy lovingly ruffles the neck feathers of his seducer, while in *Apollo and Hyacinth*, the mature Apollo ruffles the tousled curls of an expectantly receptive Hyacinth, on his knees at the god's feet.

The homoerotic spirit that nourished Cellini's art was soon to be crushed in Florence. In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) adopted policies designed to make the Church even more austere than the Protestants. It also embarked on a campaign to crush heresy.

It established the Index of Prohibited Books and it proscribed carnality in art. In 1559, Pope Paul IV ordered draperies painted on the nudes in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. The Council's decrees were enthusiastically enforced through the sadistic power of the Inquisition.

In this context, Cellini was convicted of sexual relations with a young man in 1557 and sentenced to four years in prison. Thanks to the intervention of Duke Cosimo, the sentence was commuted to four years' house arrest.

During his years of house arrest, Cellini attempted to rehabilitate his reputation. Not only did he devote himself to religious art (including a deeply religious marble crucifix), but he also took minor holy orders and fathered a son in 1560 by his servant Piera, whom he married in 1563. They subsequently produced three more children.

Most importantly, however, during his period of house arrest, Cellini began his celebrated *Vita*. In this autobiography, the artist recounts his acquaintanceships with princes and popes and his great achievements as sculptor and goldsmith, while disavowing, with wounded innocence, his reputation as a pederast.

He implies that he is a ladies' man, but cannot resist bragging that once he took his apprentice Diego in drag to a party of artists and their whores. The boy was voted the most beautiful prostitute in Florence, which nearly caused a riot when one of the girls groped Diego and discovered the truth of his sex.

Although the *Vita* attempts to present an appearance of orthodox morality and fails to mention Cellini's gay affairs or his convictions for sodomy, it nevertheless repays interest for its homosexual content. Especially significant in this context is Chapter 71 of Book Two, which may be read as a defense of sodomy, that "noble practice" indulged in by "the greatest emperors and the greatest kings of the world."

Cellini says that he lacks the knowledge or means to meddle in the "noble practice," but he nevertheless commends it as "a marvelous matter." Whether these passages can be taken seriously or in jest is a matter of debate; certainly the context in which he was writing--under house arrest for having had sex with a young man--is an important consideration in interpreting the autobiography.

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