



## Classical Art

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Homoerotic experience is represented in classical Greek and Roman art in several ways.

Some images of same-sex courtship, pursuit, and sexual intercourse survive, especially on Greek vases. These images invariably focus on the activities and responses of men, and they seem to have been made for male patrons.

There are as well a large number of statues that can be understood in relation to ancient literary texts and inscriptions about same-sex desire and desiring gazes, again male.

In addition, ancient art offers some interesting representations of transvestism, and it provides images both of androgyny and of the category known as the hermaphrodite.

These bits of evidence, although they all are very different from one another, reveal various aspects of ancient Greek and Roman men's experiences of gender and sexuality at the point where these categories diverge from our own.

For example, as modern viewers, we might expect to find examples that we can be certain show us lesbians or that speak to lesbian desire, but we will not find such unambiguous images.

We might also expect to find representations of the cinaedus, that Roman figure attested in literature as a man who prefers to play the passive role in a homoerotic system that is never admitted to be fully reciprocal; but, again, such images do not exist.

The current debates in the field of classics about whether there was a "gay" subculture in Rome to which some cinaedi belonged cannot be resolved so far with the aid of visual or archaeological evidence, for there simply is none. What can be said is that certain categories of people could be talked about by male authors in their writings but were apparently considered out of bounds for depiction in visual form.

### Greek Vases

The richest source of evidence both for homoerotic sexual activity and for viewers' apparent desire to look at such activity comes from the vases of the later sixth and fifth century B.C.E. in Athens. At the time, Athens dominated the vase making and exporting market, so their decorated vases are found all over the Mediterranean, and Etruscan buyers in central Italy seem to have bought them in substantial quantities.

The vases show everything from Zeus running along one side of a vase in pursuit of the charming boy



Top: An ancient Greek vase painting marked with the word KALOS, or beautiful.

Middle: An ancient Greek vase painting depicting sexual activity between a man (left) and a youth.

Above: An ancient marble sculpture of a hermaphrodite.

Adapted from photographs in Licht, Hans, pseudonym of Paul Brandt.

*Sittengeschichte Griechenlands in Zwei Bänden und Einem Ergänzungsband.* Dresden und Zürich: Paul Aretz Verlag. 1925-1928.

Ganymede, who rolls a hoop on the other side (*Berlin Painter*), to a young man fondling the genitals of a smaller and clearly younger boy before him, to "intercrural" sex where the man's penis is clearly placed between the boy's thighs.

All these vases circulated within the culture of pederasty that held an honored place in later sixth and fifth century elite Athenian society. As represented in literature, affairs between youths in their not-yet-married older teens and pre-pubescent boys (both freeborn citizens) were understood to be thoroughly respectable. The older partner acted as a mentor as well as lover of the younger, teaching him the ways of manhood in the culture and preparing him for a life of citizenship and responsibility.

Penetrative sex is not illustrated in these relationships because of the stigma attached in Greek elite culture to being penetrated; the penetrator can, in effect, have sex with almost anyone as long as he remains the active party.

The vases may in some cases have been used at drinking parties attended by men and youths who were entertained by boy and girl slaves and prostitutes; but some of them were gifts given in the process of wooing boys, and the vases often bear the name of a boy and the word *KALOS*, or beautiful.

That the vases formed part of a culture of institutionalized and socially regulated pederastic sex in exchange for gifts is visible from the scenes on the vases as well as from the writings of men such as Plato.

The vases occasionally show us scenes of homoerotic (and heteroerotic) sex that involve people looking on, watching at doors, and even masturbating as they watch. Many of these scenes have as their protagonists the ever-cheerful, ever-ready satyrs, half man and half goat. The satyrs delight in sex with anything, living or inanimate, and looking on also gives them very obvious pleasure.

That men felt desire at the sight of sexual activity is one aspect of the scenes, whether with satyrs or humans, but another important aspect is that the vases themselves seem to have been meant as incitements to desire.

This suggests, as do some literary texts, that visual stimulation was assumed to be part of men's desire for both women and boys. A second-century C.E. satiric travelogue written by a man now known as Pseudo Lucian tells, for example, of a group of men visiting the famous nude statue of Aphrodite at her sanctuary in Knidos, on the coast of Asia Minor.

Granted they go as tourists rather than worshippers, but what is most interesting is the way one viewer expresses his desire for the female beauty of the front of the statue while a second man exclaims over the boyish glory of the back of the figure.

Thinking about these texts, one sees the great and serene statues of nude athletes, warriors and gods of the Greek past with different eyes, sees them increasingly as objects of visual desire with a strongly homoerotic component.

Whether nude statues of Aphrodite evoked a similar homoerotic response among female viewers is hard to know given that women left so little writing or other evidence of their feelings, but the possibility is there in spite of their being so deeply silenced. Only Sappho's fragmentary poems speak of delight in seeing beautiful girls; and women's motives in giving statues of beautiful goddesses to sanctuaries, although homoerotic visual pleasure may well have played a part, remain unknown beyond their expressions of piety and devotion.

Although both Greek and Roman art show men in homoerotic sexual situations, the few scenes depicting women together are extremely hard to interpret. One vase shows a group of women reclining on banqueting couches and drinking together, some as couples under one blanket, but they use none of the

sexual gestures common on vases depicting men.

A second vase represents two nude women, one standing, the other crouching before her and examining the standing woman's crotch. One cannot tell whether the scene concerns sex or depilation, who the women are (probably prostitutes because of their short hair), and who the intended viewers were.

The Roman images of sexual activity provide no equivalents to even these mysterious images, although tombstones with pairs of women in traditional familial poses may indicate the existence of lesbian couples. Again, there is no confirming evidence.

### **Roman Art**

Because the Romans had no equivalent to institutionalized pederasty and did have laws on the books that penalized sex between adult men and citizen boys, they seem never to have had a strong tradition of representing homoerotic sex in the arts.

Their Italian neighbors, the Etruscans, left no literary evidence about attitudes to sexuality, but some of their paintings and decorative objects do show men having anal sex; some scholars assert that these men must be slaves to have been shown in this form.

Among the few exceptions to the Roman reticence about showing homoerotic sex is a famous and problematic silver cup (London, British Museum: *Warren Cup*), believed by some to be modern rather than ancient. It shows two young men about to have anal sex in an elegant interior; on one side of the cup a figure peeks at them through a doorway.

Group heterosexual activity, as shown in the wall paintings of the Suburban Baths in Pompeii, includes at least one scene in which a man anally penetrates a man who is penetrating a woman.

These are exceptions to the rule that, despite the plentiful graffiti and literary texts about homoerotic activity between men (and the rarer ones about lesbian sex, also written by men), the visual arts of Rome avoid the subject except in idealized and mythicized forms, as when Ganymede and other mythological figures are shown on the walls of Pompeian houses.

### **Gender Instability: Hermaphroditism, Transvestism, Androgyny**

In later Greek and Roman art images appear that question the notion of stable sexual and gender identities. The most famous of these is the hermaphrodite, the youth with a penis and breasts. The Greeks (and Roman copyists) depicted the figure lying down asleep in a pose that seems from the back to be a woman but from the front reveals the confusing attributes and shocks the viewer.

This notion of the shocking joke emerges in Pompeian paintings that combine the hermaphrodite with a satyr or faun who recoils in horror at the sight of the "truth" about the object of his lust. For the Romans, the ambivalence about "prodigies," whose characteristics confused ideas about the natural, revealed itself in the fact that along with the jokes went old stories about burning or burying alive real hermaphrodites.

Along with the hermaphrodite's challenge to nature came images of mythological figures of hyper-masculine men in women's clothing. Hercules appears in statues and paintings wearing the feminine garments of Queen Omphale, who had such control over the hero that she could exchange clothes with him and make him sit spinning with her female courtiers.

Omphale always appears nude with the lion skin and club of Hercules, and the nature of her cross-dressing is always confused by her nudity and presentation as feminine.

The same problem attaches to depictions of the Amazons, whose femininity is always asserted through pose, exposure of breasts and legs, and the deeper fact of their invariably being defeated by Greek men.

By contrast, Achilles dresses in women's clothing but is nevertheless always clearly a youth because of his athletic pose and the gesture of reaching for a sword, a gesture that reveals him to Odysseus who has come to find him. Achilles appears cross-dressed on decorative objects, paintings and even funerary sarcophagi, because his mother attempted to save him from death in the Trojan War by hiding him among girls at the court of a friendly king.

For mythological heroes to appear in women's clothing does nothing to challenge the gender system as it was practiced; rather, the point of the stories is the reassertion of the system. So too with Omphale in her Venus-style body and the ever-dying Amazons. Both male heroes go on to deeds of super-human strength and bravery, and these cross-dressing episodes seem merely to cast into relief the power of their masculinity.

Why these episodes should appear on funerary monuments remains an open question. Part of the answer may have to do with death's power of change, but perhaps there is as well an element of fascination with the instability of gender and even of sex in a world where mythological figures can and do change sex as well as gender.

Finally, androgyny as a feature of young men (but not of girls) is an important element in both later Greek and Roman art. Gods such as Bacchus and Apollo were regularly represented as silky, long-haired youths, their poses sinuous and their musculature undefined. Although they are both powerful gods, capable of slaughter as well as joy and art, their boyish bodies were clearly meant to evoke the sexiness of pederasty's boy lovers.

This model seems to have held no attraction for those Romans who, commissioning statues or reliefs for the tombs of their beloved relatives and friends, asked the artists to combine a portrait head with a famous statue body.

For girls, the figure of Diana was the most popular of all, but here the boyishness of the goddess of the hunt is obviated by the emphasis in myth and religion on Diana's chastity and her avoidance of men. Nevertheless, if there is a faint sense of female androgyny and of a world of girls without or prior to men, it remained submerged under the normative, assumed heterosexuality of virgin girls who would inevitably marry.

Young Roman men appear in commemorative and honorific statues with the athletic bodies of classical Greek heroes: except for the beloved of the emperor Hadrian, Antinous. The youth is known from about a hundred portraits made after his mysterious drowning in the Nile (in 129-130 C.E.), and his image almost always stresses the sensual, unmuscular body, the thick curly hair, the soft smooth face, and the curving lips of the beloved boy.

Antinous's portraits regularly stress his resemblance to Bacchus and Apollo, to Hermes and the woodland god Sylvanus, all of whom are young and a bit androgynous. Even when he appears in the guise of a pharaoh to stress his identity as Osiris, one of the gods the emperor associated with the dead youth whom he declared a god, his body never evokes muscular adult male power.

Antinous is in some sense the pivotal figure in a sexual system built out of paradoxes and ambivalences, a system that made all things possible to the discreet but actively penetrative elite man, while pretending that such a man would never lose his head over the wrong person. To see Antinous (and the ancient Greek and Roman sexual system) in this light is to understand why the lesbian and the cinaedus must remain invisible and why the hermaphrodite must be a joke or be murdered.

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