



European Art: Renaissance

by Patricia Simons

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A great deal of evidence about sexuality survives from the Renaissance; its interpretation, however, varies. People did not conceive of themselves in terms of having a sexual identity, so a purely biographical approach to the period is not very illuminating. Instead, one can consider various cultural patterns, especially the conditions of artistic production and the types of subjects and themes represented.

Conditions of Artistic Production and Evidence of Same-sex Activities

Although it was once believed that there was a paucity of evidence about same-sex activities in Renaissance Europe, it is now possible to emphasize the virtual ubiquity of same-sex *conditions* during the period.

The genders were frequently segregated, especially among the upper classes, in educational and religious institutions, and in most work environments, all sites important to the production and consumption of art. Women were largely enclosed; men consorted with other men in a range of homosocial spaces.

Evidence about actual sexual practice varies, but there is often no proof of an artist's "heterosexual" interest. Social historians note the coexistence of various erotic experiences and observe that, as Michael Rocke comments, "males were in general rather flexible about the biological sex of the objects of their desire." Rocke's study of fifteenth-century Florence estimates that two of every three males left some legal record of sodomitical experience.

Even condemnations of an "unspeakable," "unnatural vice" gave it a discursive existence and spread intimations of what was erotically possible. Attempted censorship increased the piquancy and desirability of overtly sexual imagery.

The issue is not so much the quantity of evidence as the types, and the ways in which it is read for sexual content. Besides straightforwardly positive or negative representations of same-sex activity, scholars are beginning to notice such modalities as satire, burlesque, irony, nuance, and equivocation.

Whether or not various documented practices began in the Renaissance, new kinds of evidence survive. The advent of print culture codified and disseminated forms of oral culture, such as sexual invective, pasquinades (or lampoons), and obscene jokes. Print technology also enabled the wider marketing of erotic imagery, which in turn increased demand. The Reformation sharpened polemic accusing opponents of same-sex sins.

Homeroeroticism is also evident in artists' writings, including poetry by Michelangelo and established to regulate sexuality, with the resulting denunciations of artists for sodomy with models (Leonardo in 1476 and Botticelli in 1502, and Cellini in 1523 and 1550 for example).



Top: Detail from a painting by Giovanni Bellini showing Saints Anselm (left) and Sebastian.
Center: *Cupid Carving his Bow* by Parmigianino.
Above: *Saint George* by Donatello.

Conditions of production in a workshop system favored all-male sociability and erotic contact. Trainees were advised to avoid women; many artists did not marry. Several anecdotes record Donatello's erotic relations with apprentices. A succession of attractive models and pupils enthralled Leonardo. For twenty-six years he endured the antics of his favorite (*suo creato*) "Salai" ("Satan") who entered his service as a ten year old in 1490 and was his model for depictions of youthful, curly-headed male beauty.

Botticelli, described by Vasari as "extraordinarily fond of those he knew to be students of the arts," was renowned for having nightmares about being married. A poet described the married Giovanni Bellini in bed with a boy. Married with two children, the painter Sodoma nevertheless openly adopted the daring nickname by which he is still known. Cellini pled guilty to the charge of keeping an apprentice for five years "as though he were a wife" (a common expression).

Social gatherings in workshops provided sexual opportunities, and such occasions multiplied in the sixteenth century when artist clubs staged fancy-dress parties or theatrical entertainments. Cellini described a Roman dinner party for artists that was attended by female prostitutes and a seductively cross-dressed youth.

Official disapproval and punitive measures co-existed with a fair degree of tolerance among many patrons and humanists. Bonds between patrons and dependent artists were sometimes eroticized. Particularly in restricted circles, such as a poetic coterie, a courtly elite, or a so-called academy (reading group), homoerotic imagery and wit was appreciated.

Bronzino's double-sided painting of the front and rear of a naked dwarf in the Medici court, for instance, makes several homoerotic allusions. The humanist Willibald Pirckheimer wrote a Greek inscription on his portrait sketched by his friend Dürer: "With erect penis, into the man's rectum."

The interests of certain collectors are telling. For example, Antonio Pèrez, Philip II's Secretary of State until accused of sodomy in 1579, owned Correggio's *Ganymede* and Parmigianino's *Cupid carving his bow*.

Particularly obscene, overt imagery circulated in prints, which reached a wider market. Today they are sometimes extant in only one or a few copies, suggesting their over-use and deliberate destruction, both voluntary and through institutional censorship.

Hans Sebald Beham and his brother Barthel issued and reissued engravings of naked women touching each other with lewd gestures of genital contact. In the first three decades of the sixteenth century, Marcantonio Raimondi's erotic oeuvre included several suggestive male couples, and an engraving of a woman masturbating with a dildo. Variants and a copy in reverse exist of a School of Fontainebleau print showing aristocratic women erotically engaged while at the baths.

The Rebirth of Classicism

"Renaissance" refers to the "rebirth" of classicism. New energy devoted to archaeology, antiquarianism, humanist scholarship in the secular world, and the appropriation and adaptation of classical form had a fundamental impact on erotic culture.

Art historians debate the precise influence of Neoplatonism on the visual arts, yet little attention is paid to the central element of male-male desire in the writings of Marsilio Ficino, a key proponent of the syncretistic philosophy. More generally, the revitalization of classicism greatly expanded the vocabulary and framework of fantasy.

Mythological narratives, for example, provided avenues for the depiction of same-sex desire. Two of the most popular were the tale of the shepherd boy Ganymede swept into the heavens by amorous Jupiter, and

the seduction of the nymph Callisto seemingly by her beloved mistress Diana.

Desire was coded in classicized terms: a poet praised Donatello's *St. George* as "my beautiful Ganymede"; Cellini likened a model to Antinous, the beloved of the Roman emperor Hadrian.

Since ancient myths dealt with transforming metamorphoses, and were situated in timeless realms, they were apt vehicles for erotic dreams and for giving visual form to what was ostensibly taboo. Generic classical allusions justified the representation of idealized naked bodies in motion and intimate contact, seen in outright erotica but also in more mainstream formats such as allegory and pastoral.

The ancient heritage of same-sex desire was frequently invoked, sometimes as an explanation for corruption and sometimes as a model to be emulated. Accused by a rival of being a "dirty sodomite" in the presence of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, Cellini cleverly retorted that he had neither the power nor knowledge "to meddle in such a marvelous matter," for the "noble practice" was the affair of the god Jupiter with Ganymede and "the greatest emperors and the greatest kings."

During the years he worked at Cosimo's court, Cellini produced three marble sculptures of what he called Greek "fables" when referring to his own love for youths. Each statue represented a beautiful youth with his male lover (Apollo and Hyacinth, Ganymede with Jupiter's eagle, Narcissus captivated by his reflection).

These subjects were generally recognized as ones inflected with homoeroticism, as were, in certain manifestations, such figures as Eros/Cupid and Orpheus. Beefy Hercules was feminized under Omphale's sway, or enjoyed genital contact while wrestling with Antaeus.

Religious Representations

An erotic component in any image did not exclude other effects and themes. Religious representations included Christ's adored body, ephebic St. Sebastian penetrated by arrows, same-sex kissing in Paradise, pious women bonding intensely, or witches seducing women. In some of Michelangelo's drawings men grapple in close embrace, eroticizing the soul's struggle between opposing forces.

Renaissance imagery might appear to condemn non-normative sex or treat a non-erotic subject such as the feminine personification of Virtues, but it was possible for viewers to take the works in other, imaginative directions. The issues of multivalence and alternative reception require more study, and are especially important in relation to female viewers.

Women as Viewers of Art

Many images representing erotic activities between women were made for a presumptively male audience. Nevertheless, in palace interiors (such as one at Fontanellato frescoed by Parmigianino, or the French king's villa at Fontainebleau decorated by Primaticcio and others) women were expected to see scenes of naked women bathing together and touching each other during their toilette, usually in the context of propounding chastity (not having sex with any man other than one's husband).

Women were understood to find sensual pleasure from looking. Titian's close friend Pietro Aretino published in 1534 an obscene scenario in which nuns at an orgy were aroused by pornographic illustrations and had sex with each other. Around 1585 the minor French aristocrat Brantôme described noblewomen enjoying erotic books and paintings, and another chapter concentrated on "woman with woman" (*donna con donna*) sex.

Liminal Masculinity

The most conventional object of homoerotic desire was the adolescent youth, usually imagined as

beardless. Attraction to liminal masculinity was also evident in the popularity of angels (officially sexless, yet pictured as boyish) and androgynes. For many influential writers and artists, the erotic and the beautiful were male, or anybody imbued with qualities perceived to have a crucial element of masculinity.

Thus, in 1542 Aretino praised Michelangelo's painting of Venus because it depicted a goddess whose female body had "the male's musculature, such that she is moved by virile and womanly feelings."

Toward the end of the next decade, Lodovico Dolce's paean to Titian's painting of *Venus and Adonis* included the comment that Adonis's face had "a certain fine beauty which could participate in the feminine yet not be remote from virility--an amalgam (*mistura*) which is hard to achieve and agreeable."

In 1550, Vasari singled out Michelangelo's statue of Bacchus for similar reasons. Carved in 1496-1497, the tipsy youth was said to show "a certain fusion (*mistione*) in the members that is marvelous, and in particular--both the youthful slenderness of the male and the fullness and roundness of the female."

In a patriarchal, androcentric culture, polymorphous sexuality was primarily a male privilege, but same-sex erotic fantasies and experiences were available to women too.

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About the Author

Patricia Simons, Associate Professor of the History of Art and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtq.com. Her scholarly interests include the art of Renaissance Italy, with a special focus on the representation of gender and sexuality, and interdisciplinary research on the construction of authority and identity.