



Flandrin, Hippolyte (1809-1864)

by James Smalls

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In art history, the considerable accomplishments of Hippolyte Flandrin are often overshadowed by those of his mentor, J. A. D. Ingres (1780-1867). Flandrin adhered closely to Ingres's focus on purity and perfection of line. He also followed Ingres in expressing a reverence for the past and for classical themes and subjects. Both artists had an unusual way of mixing tradition with innovation.

However, Flandrin's studies of male youth distinguish him from his master, especially insofar as these works are richly and suggestively homoerotic.

Flandrin came from an artistic family in Lyons. After moving to Paris, where he studied with Ingres, and following a five-year stint in Rome for further study, he quickly gained a reputation as a painter of mythological and religious scenes.

Later in the nineteenth century, art critic Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) equated Flandrin's purity of line and color with purity of emotion and spirituality. Flandrin himself was devotedly religious and approached his art from a spiritual rather than secular point of view. Many of his most ambitious projects were commissioned by churches such as Saint-Germain-des-Près and Saint-Vincent-de-Paul in Paris.

Nothing about Flandrin allows us to identify him as homosexual. He was married and had several children. He apparently did not consciously conceive of his work as homoerotic.

Many of his mythological scenes, however, concentrate on the youthful male nude as aesthetic object. Flandrin himself claimed that the classical beauty of his work was born out of his knowledge of Homer, Plutarch, Tacitus, and Virgil. The majority of his mythological scenes, produced between 1833 and 1836, feature secluded youthful nude males situated in calm and still environments.

Most of his figures express "a perfect peace" and mix Virgilian lyricism with a striking realism in the detailing of head, hands, and feet. In some of his works, he exploits compositional devices that cover the genital area but also focus attention on it. The homoerotic overtones of these works are profound.

One of these, *Polytes, Son of Priam Observing the Movements of the Greeks Near Troy* (1833-1834; Saint-Étienne, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire) shows a nude male youth sitting in profile atop a classically decorated pedestal. He looks out of the picture and into the distance. The prominent curve of the youth's back and the formal focus on the interplay between form and line communicate a quality of hushed beauty and frozen purity.

The work is implicitly erotic and imbued with a quality of meditative spirituality. One outstanding detail is the hyperreal rendering of the young boy's exposed pubic hairs. This detail seems to be at odds with the idealized quality of the rest of the painting. Flandrin thus blends the real and the ideal, the erotic and the contemplative, a poeticized romanticism and an incongruous realism, and classicized form and pious



Top: A portrait engraving of Hippolyte Flandrin (1864).

Above: *Figure d'Etude* (1835-1836) by Flandrin. Engraving courtesy Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

emotion.

Flandrin's most popular and recognizable work is his *Figure d'Étude* (Nude Youth Seated on a Rock, 1835-1836; Paris, Louvre). Typical of Flandrin, this work uses the nude male figure as a showcase for the stylistic purity of line, modeling, chiaroscuro, and color. These features are underscored by a mysterious, meditative calm provoked by a moonlit seascape. The youth's body and the environment work together to evoke an aura of poetic lyricism.

The work has been hailed as an exquisite example of visualized spirituality and beauty. The painting is distinguished not only by a hyperreal rendering of the boy's arms, hands, and feet, but also by its geometric composition, which consists of an equilateral triangle within a circle, which may have mystical significance.

The curled up, fetal pose was a unique compositional invention and has subsequently been repeated by artists ranging from Edgar Degas to Baron von Gloeden to Robert Mapplethorpe. The pose is perfect for highlighting the male body as an object of spiritual and erotic contemplation.

Bibliography

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