



## Parmigianino (Francesco Mazzola) (1503-1540)

by Joe A. Thomas

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Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck* (circa 1526).  
Northwestern University  
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Parmigianino (literally, "the little guy from Parma") is the name given to the sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance painter Francesco Mazzola. Hailing from the Emilian town of Parma in north-central Italy, where he was born in 1503, Parmigianino is almost universally recognized as one of the most important practitioners of the cultural style that dominated Italy and much of Europe in mid- to late-sixteenth century: Mannerism.

Little is reliably known about the personal life of this rather eccentric painter, a lifelong bachelor, although much has been speculated. However, his superbly refined and tortuously complex style has often appealed to a gay male audience sensitive to the extremes of taste embodied by Mannerism.

Parmigianino also often imbued his subjects with an overt or subtle eroticism, some of which may be interpreted homoerotically.

Reared by two painter uncles in Parma, Francesco was something of a prodigy, commissioned to paint important frescoes in the Cathedral of Parma at the age of nineteen in 1522. Two years later he was in Rome, presenting one of his most famous works to Pope Clement VII: *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

This work, a virtuoso bust-length depiction of the young artist as though reflected in a curving, convex mirror, already showed many of the characteristics of Parmigianino's later work: facility, grace, and, especially, *invenzione* (inventiveness or imagination). The power of the work is such that it inspired poet John Ashbery to write his poem of the same name almost four centuries later.

Leaving Rome after the Sack in 1527, Parmigianino wandered through Italy, eventually returning to Parma after a successful stay in Bologna.

Around this time he painted the famous *Cupid Carving His Bow*, which depicts a highly androgynous Cupid carving a deadly-looking bow for his arrows of love, as two *putti* struggle at his feet.

This painting refers to Renaissance ideas about love as a painful experience, but the ambivalent gender of the main figure marks an interest in androgyny that, while it toys with expressions of sexual identity, relates to the artist's documented interests in the arcane science of alchemy.

Toward the end of his life Parmigianino was reportedly obsessed with alchemical experimentation, to the detriment of his artistic career.

Parmigianino's most famous work, *Madonna of the Long Neck*, from around 1535, was never finished. The artist's interest in gender ambiguity is clearly evident here in the androgynous attendants who swarm at the Virgin's right side. An oversized, almost alien-looking Christ child sprawls languidly across her lap while a mysterious, tiny figure of a prophet unrolls a scroll in the background. The Virgin herself, with her greatly elongated proportions and contrived pose, epitomizes the hyperbolic grace and artifice that were hallmarks

of Mannerism.

While Parmigianino's drawings do include overtly homoerotic images and male nudes (as the *Figure Study* of 1526-1527), his own sexual orientation is as ambiguous as the androgynes he painted. Cecil Gould sums it up coyly, "Judging from the totality of his art, I suspect that his instincts were bisexual."

The appeal of the artist to a gay audience is his exploration of an extreme aestheticism that can be appreciated for its artistic imagination as well as for its camp excessiveness.

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### **About the Author**

**Joe A. Thomas** is Associate Professor and Chair of the Art Department at Clarion University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses primarily on issues of sexuality and representation, but also digresses into American Pop Art and Italian Mannerism.