



Il Sodoma (Giovanni Antonio Bazzi) (1477-1549)

by Patricia Simons

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Saint Sebastian (1525)
by Il Sodoma.

A prolific painter who dominated the art scene of early sixteenth-century Siena, Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (better known as Il Sodoma) produced images with sentimental appeal. Born in 1477, the son of a shoemaker, Bazzi was apprenticed to a local painter in the north Italian town of Vercelli for much of the 1490s but he had moved to Siena by 1502.

A husband and father of two children, he is nevertheless regarded anachronistically by some as a proud, "outspoken" homosexual who was surrounded by, in James Saslow's words, "an entourage of foppish boys." This picture derives from one source, the biography published by Giorgio Vasari in 1568. Bazzi is presented there as an eccentric, self-indulgent, overdressed and amusing collector of animals.

For Vasari, and all subsequent commentators, the chief evidence about Bazzi's sexuality hinges on the nickname, "Il Sodoma."

"Since he always had about him boys and beardless youths, whom he loved beyond the usual (*fuor di modo*), he acquired the by-name of Sodoma; and in this name, far from taking umbrage or offence, he used to glory, writing songs and verses about it." According to Vasari, after one of Sodoma's horses won a Florentine race, chanting of the nickname offended local citizens.

Actually, the name "Il Sodoma" was voluntarily adopted by March 1513, when it appeared in Siena's racing records. The word is Italian for the biblical city Sodom, from whence comes the noun *sodomia*. The variety of spellings (for examples, Sogdoma, Sodone) may suggest his name was not always associated with sexuality or sin.

What perhaps began as a racing stable name was then used throughout Sodoma's life. It occurs, for example, in communal records and the patronage documents of a religious confraternity, his own letters to princes, his mother-in-law's will, and the inventory of goods drawn up when he died.

Only one document from the artist's lifetime indicates that anyone thought the name could refer to sexual practice. Nine Latin couplets, published in 1517 in Siena, celebrated Sodoma's picture of Lucrezia, probably the painting that earned him a knighthood from Pope Leo X. The last four lines satirically play with the nickname and say outright that "Sodoma is a bugger (*Sodoma pedico est*)."

Humor and sexual double entendre is more evident in a mock-tax return Sodoma may have penned in 1531, although this document could be a seventeenth-century forgery. Nothing definite about his sex life can be deduced from the burlesque lines.

What is clear is that Sodoma was not a modern, out gay man; he was a showman (who named his son Apelles), and may have been erotically interested in both sexes. His widespread acceptance in Italian culture of his day is indicated by honors and frequent employment from civic and religious patrons alike.

Another nickname, used by monastic patrons in 1505, was "Joker." If anything, flaunting of such a self-promoting sobriquet as "Sodom" attracted admiration and renown.

Sodoma's art is often charged with sentimental affects of same-sex intimacy. He painted androgynous, youthful beauties, such as *St. Sebastian* (1525). Franciscan monks in their Sienese cloister enjoyed the sight of a muscular, curvaceous *Christ at the Column* (ca 1514).

Decorating the Roman bedroom of the Sienese banker Agostino Chigi around 1516-1518, Sodoma's fresco of the *Marriage of Alexander and Roxane* highlighted the emperor's beautiful male lover Hephaestion.

Sodoma also depicted fondness and physical tenderness between women. Groups of lightly clad women hold hands, gaze at or touch each other in such scenes as *Prostitutes Invited to the Monastery* at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto (1505-1508) or the *Tent of Darius* in Chigi's bedroom. Frescoes for St. Catherine of Siena's hometown chapel (1526) included the saint swooning in ecstasy, delicately supported by two loving female attendants.

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