



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Androgyny

by Joe A. Thomas

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Androgyny, as opposed to hermaphroditism, is based on gender ambiguity rather than the display of dual sexual characteristics. An androgyne is a figure of uncertain gender in whom identifying sexual characteristics are stylized or combined.

In practice, however, artists have had little reason to observe such fine distinctions, and as a subject in art, androgyny and hermaphroditism have often been confused. Thus, the history of androgyny in visual culture is somewhat tortuous and vaguely defined; however, it nevertheless constitutes a significant and recurrent subject in art, and one that has often held special significance for glbtq people.

As a subject, androgyny has occurred in diverse geographical contexts throughout the history of art. Androgynous figures crop up in ancient Egyptian representations of gods and goddesses; likewise, Hindu deities, with their vast multitude of avatars, or personae, may simultaneously exist as both sexes, and artistic representations frequently express this fact. The Shiva Ardhanisvara, for instance--seen in numerous examples in both painting and sculpture--is male on one side and female on the other.

In times and places in which the representation of humans is forbidden or under suspicion (as occurs at various moments in both Christian and Islamic art), figures were stylized to avoid excessive naturalism, and in the process distinguishing sexual characteristics were sometimes blurred or eliminated.

In fact, probably the most famous androgynes in western art are angels, who have no sex, consistent with the belief that the angel of the Annunciation played no role in the conception of Christ. A good example of this kind of representation is Fra Angelico's famous *Annunciation* (ca 1437) in the monastery of San Marco in Florence.

The contemporary image of the androgyne as a beautiful youth of indeterminate sex is at least partly a legacy of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the "father" of modern art history. The homosexual Winckelmann's adoration of Greek art (and European interest in Greek culture in general) included in many cases an undercurrent of fascination with the ancient Greek idolization of the beautiful boy, whose beauty was frequently compared to that of a woman.

Conceptions of the androgyne from the Renaissance onward in the West largely relied on such classical ideas, including the notion that the original state of humankind was androgynous (a theory attributed to Herodotus). The continuing popularity of the beautiful, androgynous inhabitants of Edward Burne-Jones's *Song of Love* (1868-1877) demonstrates the androgyne's ongoing appeal.

The notion of the homosexual as a sort of feminine man or masculine woman (an "invert") has contributed greatly to the popular connection of androgyny with homosexuality. Oppressed and secretive gays of earlier generations could use such images as coded references for mutual identification; and they frequently identified with androgynes as a symbol of their difference. Thus, androgynous figures in visual culture have



The contemporary image of the androgyne is at least partly a legacy of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who was fascinated by the Greek idolization of the beautiful boy, particularly as it was expressed in the *Apollo Belvedere* (above).

continued to resonate with a gay and lesbian audience.

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