



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Diana

by Patricia Simons

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Artemis (Diana) drawing an arrow from her quiver. Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

The Greek Artemis, or Roman Diana, is the goddess of chastity. She exemplifies and protects virginity, and for married women she models strict avoidance of adultery.

Protectress of the hunt, Diana is pictured amidst her attendant nymphs in a landscape, or resting at a secluded pool. In the latter case, her nymphs lovingly care for her body, removing clothing, drying her after the bath, and generally enacting a considerable degree of physical intimacy. Sometimes voyeuristic Actaeon disrupts them, in which case concerted attempts to hide their nakedness can result in them touching each other in erotic ways.

Diana, guardian of purity, is also pictured fighting Venus, goddess of sex and desire, or with her followers resisting lascivious satyrs. Diana is a militant enforcer of same-sex seclusion amongst women.

One of the most popular tales concerns the nymph Callisto. Jupiter lusted after this devoted member of Diana's band, and he managed to seduce her by taking on the disguise of Diana herself. Callisto thus experienced what she thought was her mistress kissing her "not modestly, nor as a maiden kisses" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2:401-507; *Fasti* 2:153-192).

She resisted only after Jupiter went further and embraced her so that she realized the body was masculine. Subsequently raped and pregnant, the ashamed maiden tried to hide her state but was eventually discovered when disrobed at the pool. The pregnancy was taken as a betrayal of the vows of chastity, and Diana angrily expelled Callisto.

Images of the seduction, in prints or as paintings, often depicted two female figures in close contact. For example, the episode decorated a lunette when the cycle of Callisto's myth was chosen in the 1540s for the bathing suite of the French king Francis I. Primaticcio's now-lost wall painting of Callisto being kissed and fondled by "Diana" is recorded in Pierre Milan's contemporary engraving.

Domestic objects and paintings in women's chambers upheld Diana and her all-female associations as exemplary models. Women like queen Christina of Sweden or the seventeenth-century writer Mlle de Scudéry represented themselves as Diana, surrounded by women, loving Callisto. Lower class women branded as "witches" sometimes gathered in Diana's name.

Bibliography

Reid, Jane Davidson. *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1990s*. 2 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Simons, Patricia. "Lesbian (In)Visibility in Italian Renaissance Culture: Diana and Other Cases of *donna con donna*." *Journal of Homosexuality* 27 (1994): 81-122. Reprinted in *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History*. Whitney Davis, ed. New York: Haworth Press, 1994. 81-122.

Traub, Valerie. "The Perversion of 'Lesbian' Desire." *History Workshop Journal* 41 (Spring 1996): 23-49.

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.glbtc.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.