



## Subjects of the Visual Arts: Dildoes

by Patricia Simons

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Women with dildoes are represented in many cultures (for example, Japan and Mughal India), but to date we know most about their representation in Europe.

The ancient Greeks displayed a *phallos* during certain religious rituals. Women could be in charge of this cult object, and the legend of Isis credited that goddess with inventing it. The Greeks also had specific words for a dildo (*olisbos* or *baubon*). Sappho may refer to "receivers of the *olisbos*" (Fragment 99.5); Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* speaks of women satisfied by the leather devices.

Vase paintings depict women, primarily alone, putting dildoes to sexual use. One instance may show a woman with a strapped on dildo about to enter a woman from the rear. Another strap-on is probably present in a damaged painting from a Pompeian bathhouse.

A few medieval manuscripts show women plucking "fruits" from a phallus tree. For centuries Catholic penitentials condemned women who possessed "instruments."

By the fourteenth century, secular writers such as Boccaccio and Sercambi envisaged women wielding them either alone or with each other, and in 1534 Aretino's orgy set in a nunnery had novices using glass dildoes (*Ragionamento* I). A decade or so earlier, an engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi pictured a standing nymph calmly penetrating herself with one.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, court gossip in France and England mentioned women owning what was frequently represented as a salacious import. The English word "dildo" is first recorded around 1592, in a poem by John Nashe. John Donne in his licentious elegies also refers to dildoes. In the eighteenth century, Fuseli drew a woman wearing one, while pornographic hacks pictured ladies openly shopping for dildoes.

Whether in Renaissance carnival songs, or modern pornographic photographs, the dildo is most frequently represented by way of humorous "phallic symbols" such as vegetables or bottles.

So-called phallic substitutes might be regarded as threatening in misogynist polemic, but comments in other genres such as comedy and medicine indicate more complex attitudes. Notably, Greek satyrs or male youths are occasionally shown with dildoes, and men brandish them in some pornography.

Today, sex toys are parodied (for example, by the lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel) and sold to people with a wide variety of sexual interests. Lesbian theorists discuss appropriation of an object that does not have to be seen as inherently masculine.

### Bibliography



An ancient Greek vase painting depicting a woman using dildoes. Adapted from a photograph in Licht, Hans, pseudonym of Paul Brandt. *Sittengeschichte Griechenlands in Zwei Bänden und Einem Ergänzungsband*. Dresden und Zürich: Paul Aretz Verlag. 1925-1928.

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