



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Hercules

by Patricia Simons

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Hercules is an exemplary hero, personifying bravery, fortitude, and strength. His myths are a reminder that such a supreme manifestation of virility and physicality can also encompass sexual deeds outside the heteronormative.

Hercules is complex and multivalent. He was dual by birth, fathered by Jupiter with the mortal Alcmena. His feats thus had a godlike quality, and apotheosis after death ensured his place on Olympus.

But his path was far from smooth, and he especially suffered bouts of madness. After murdering his children, Hercules undertook Twelve Labors as penance. These and other feats came to stand for moral triumph as well as physical victory.

In the Greek tradition, according to Nicole Loraux, his insanity and painful death "constitutes a means of experiencing femininity in his body."

One of his exploits particularly enabled depiction of close physical contact with another male body. The giant Antaeus drew his strength from Mother Earth and thus was defeated when Hercules wrestled him off the ground. Many artists--such as Mantegna and Michelangelo-- enjoyed the challenge of representing two naked, muscular, male bodies grappling at close quarters.

Usually, Hercules lifted Antaeus up so that the giant's buttocks were near or touching the hero's genitals. Sometimes, Hercules stood directly behind the elevated giant.

Intimations of sodomy are especially clear in a Florentine "Picture Chronicle" attributed to Maso Finiguerra or the workshop of his pupil Baccio Baldini, and dated to the 1460s or early 1470s (British Museum). The entwined couple of a beardless youth and a mature adult seem to share the same torso. Conquered Antaeus is in the throes of orgasmic "death."

Alongside his heroic exploits, Hercules was a man given to pleasures. He had several affairs with women, but was most often pictured with a Lidian queen, Omphale. As her slave and lover, Hercules cross-dressed and took up spinning. Images of this effeminized Hercules illustrated the adage "Love conquers all."

But Greek legend also claimed that Hercules loved the golden-haired youth Hylas. Poliziano's *Orpheus*, first staged in 1480, has its chief protagonist repudiate women and praise male-only love since it is practiced by the gods: "To this holy love did Hercules concede."

Bibliography

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Hercules and Cacus by Bartolommeo Bandinelli (1493-1560).
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