



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Hermaphrodites

by Martin D. Snyder

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A Roman copy of a Greek sculpture of Hermaphroditus (ca 200 C. E.). This photograph appears under the the CeCILL license and is attributed to Rama.

In classical mythology, the nymph Salmacis loved the handsome but unresponsive Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite. When he bathed in her spring, she forcibly embraced him. As Hermaphroditus struggled to free himself, Salmacis prayed that they never part. The gods granted her wish, and the two became a single being with both male and female sexual characteristics. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.285 ff.)

In ancient art Hermaphroditus, either specifically or as a generalized type, is a common subject. He is either nude or lifts his garment to expose his genitals; alternatively, a satyr, who mistakes him for a woman, assaults him. The most famous portrayal represents Hermaphroditus asleep, lying on his stomach, head turned to the side, and torso twisted just enough to reveal his breast and genitals. (National Museum of the Terme, Rome, and the Louvre, Paris.)

Hermaphrodites disappear from post-classical art history until the Renaissance, when writers of alchemical treatises rediscovered them as non-erotic symbols for the union of opposites (a potent image for later Jungian psychology), and emblem books portrayed them as symbols of marriage. (For a modern interpretation, see Marc Chagall's *Homage to Apollinaire*, 1911.)

The tale of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis was portrayed occasionally in Renaissance and Neoclassical art. Among the depictions are the following: Jan Gossaert [Jan de Mabuse], *The Metamorphosis of Hermaphroditus and the Nymph Salmacis* (1505), Bartholomaeus Spranger, *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* (1581), Francesco Albani, *Salmacis Falling in Love with Hermaphroditus* (ca 1660) and *Salmacis Kissing Hermaphroditus in the Water* (1660), and François-Joseph Navez, *The Nymph Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* (1829).

Since the Renaissance, hermaphrodites have most commonly been depicted as medical anomalies or sideshow freaks. However, contemporary scholars, such as Anne Fausto-Sterling, have demonstrated that hermaphrodites represent a naturally occurring alternative to the rigid designation of sex as exclusively male or female.

This new appreciation of hermaphrodites has affected the visual arts. See, for example, the notion of hermaphroditic architecture in Günther Feuerstein's *Androgynos* and the treatment of transsexuality in Charles Moffat's paintings, *Archive XIV: The Hermaphroditus/Salmacis Series*.

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