



Subjects in the Visual Arts: Narcissus

by Roberto C. Ferrari

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The myth of Narcissus as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was probably intended as a moral fable against excessive pride. The son of a river god and a nymph, Narcissus was a beautiful youth loved by both men and women. Because of his good looks, however, he was very proud, and he spurned the advances of everyone who approached him.

The nymph Echo (who had been punished by Juno to repeat the words of all who spoke to her) saw him wandering in the woods one day and fell in love with him. When Narcissus realized he was lost and cried out for help, Echo responded. Eventually she revealed herself, and he spurned her as he had all who loved him.

To punish him for his pride, the gods cursed him: he would feel the unrequited love he instilled in others. When he bent to drink from a lake, he saw his own reflection and fell in love with it. His efforts to reach out and kiss himself proved fruitless, but because he was so in love with his reflection, he could not leave. He eventually died and was transformed into a flower.

Narcissus, like Ganymede, has functioned frequently in the arts as a symbol of same-sex passion. This meaning has been ascribed to the figure probably because of the affection of men for him and because he finally fell in love with a man (himself). Narcissus has also been seen as masturbatory because of his self-love and effeminate because of his focus on his own beauty.

The term "narcissism" was first used by the sexologist Havelock Ellis to define "self-love." Sigmund Freud later expanded the notion of narcissism. He viewed the Narcissus myth as symbolically homosexual in its context, the love of one for another of the same gender who shares identical interests and appearances with the narcissist.

The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1990s cites about 100 visual works of art featuring Narcissus. Among the more famous artists who depicted him are Raphael, Domenichino, Cellini, Caravaggio, Poussin, and Lorrain.

Early representations of Narcissus usually show him as a teenaged, sometimes cherubic, youth staring longingly into water. He is often seen in these works at the moment when he has discovered his reflection.

Late Baroque and Rococo depictions often place Narcissus in Arcadia and tend to emphasize the idealism of classical culture rather than the myth itself.

More modern representations are narrative and illustrate the temptation of youthful beauty. Solomon J. Solomon's *Echo and Narcissus* (1895) shows Echo swooning over Narcissus while the handsome youth ignores her and stares at his reflection. Gustave Moreau's *Narcissus* (ca 1890) depicts the youth nude as an odalisque surrounded by lush foliage, his eyes staring at the viewer rather than at himself.



Top: A Pompeian wall painting of Narcissus.
Above: *Narcissus* (ca 1596) by Caravaggio.

Bibliography

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