



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Nude Males

by Richard G. Mann

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Ancient sculpture of Harmodius and Aristogiton.
Northwestern University Art Collection.

Throughout much of history, the nude male figure was virtually the only subject that could be used to articulate homoerotic desire in publicly displayed works of art. In most cases, representations of nude males were intended to embody the spiritual and political ideals of the societies in which they were produced. Only rarely were erotic qualities overtly emphasized in public works. Nevertheless, artists, patrons, and viewers who recognized the sensual appeal of these figures almost certainly exploited them to nourish their romantic lives.

In many cultures, sexually explicit depictions of male nudes were confined to works of art intended for discreet, private "consumption." Unfortunately, the study of these images has been inhibited by the efforts of successive waves of conservative political and religious groups, who have sought to find and destroy "offensive" erotic works.

For a variety of reasons, most modern scholars have been reluctant to study and publish extant images. The recovery and systematic analysis of visual expressions of homoerotic desire in earlier cultures remain urgent tasks for scholars.

In the post-Stonewall era, many artists have publicly exhibited images of nude men infused with erotic desire. Moreover, contemporary artists have utilized nude figures to explain complex political, social, and spiritual issues from distinctly queer perspectives.

Because the nude male has been a major theme in the visual arts, this article can mention only representative examples from various periods; important artists and works are necessarily omitted. For the purposes of this essay, the terms gay and queer are used to refer to any images relevant to the study of same-sex love. However, these modern categories do not adequately express the open-ended understanding of sexuality characteristic of many earlier cultures.

Ancient Art

A fluid conception of sexuality characterized the ancient civilizations of India. Among the major living religions, Hinduism was unique in celebrating all manifestations of sexuality as means to transcend the limits of temporal, earthly existence and to attain unity with the divine principle.

In accord with these beliefs, the exteriors of many temple complexes in India originally were covered by sculptural figures of men and women enthusiastically engaged in all kinds of sexual play. These images simultaneously represented both deities and ordinary mortals.

Although mixed gender configurations predominated, same-sex couples and groups also were shown. Successive waves of Islamic and British invaders succeeded in destroying most of the sexual scenes on Hindu temples, but some examples have remained intact, as at the Vishvanatha Temple at Khajuraho (950-1050).

In contrast to later Western practice, ancient Greek culture esteemed erotic bonds among men, believing that they could, among other positive contributions, encourage heroism in war.

Thus, for example, it was generally recognized that Harmodius and Aristogiton, who established democracy in Athens through their courageous attack on dictatorship in 514 B.C.E., were devoted lovers. The *Tyrannicide Monument* (477 B.C.E., based upon the original of 510 B.C.E.) was erected in Athens to commemorate their patriotic achievement.

This monument has great importance in art history as one of the earliest and most impressive manifestations of the characteristic Classical Greek expression of social values through the use of idealized, but anatomically correct nude male figures.

The emotional rapport of the men is suggested by the way that Aristogiton extends his arm, as if to shield his partner from attack. However, their relationship is not otherwise indicated; the public context of the sculptural monument restrained the explicit expression of their love, which was, however, readily acknowledged in written sources.

Although they did not depict sexually explicit themes in large scale sculpture, ancient Greeks frequently represented erotic interactions among nude male figures in the painted decoration of vases and pots.

The scenes ranged from casual flirtations between bearded older and smooth-faced younger men (for example, *Men and Youths Courting*, painted in approximately 540 B.C.E. by the Berlin Painter on a black-figure amphora) to wild "orgies" (for example, *Dionysian Revelry* on a black-figure vase of the 6th century B.C.E. and "*Boisterous*" *Satyrs* on a cup by the Nikosthenes Painter, 6th century B.C.E.).

Despite their exuberance, these images rigorously adhere to conventions, which (at least in theory) regulated same-sex relations among men in ancient Greece. Men were encouraged to nurture the physical and intellectual skills of "worthy" youths. Sex was an accepted part of these relationships, provided that the (older) men consistently assumed the "active" roles. Once a youth had passed through puberty, men were expected to "break off" any intimate associations with their protégés.

Nude male figures reveal that conceptions of gender and sexuality had broadened considerably during the Hellenistic era (approximately 330-150 B.C.E.). The *Apollo Belvedere* (a marble copy of the bronze original of 300 B.C.E.), one of the most influential ancient statues, exemplifies the androgynous treatment of the male nude, which became increasingly frequent in the Hellenistic period. Elongated proportions, smooth flesh, and graceful pose distinguish this statue from such earlier classical works as the *Tyrannicide Monument*.

At the opposite extreme of the *Apollo Belvedere* is the *Farnese Hercules* (a Roman copy of a Hellenistic original of approximately 330 B.C.E.), notable for its exaggerated muscularity and bulky proportions. The legends of both Apollo and Hercules included numerous same-sex encounters; thus, as in modern "gay" culture, "feminized" and "ultra-masculine" figures equally could be associated with homoerotic desire.

The charismatic and powerful leader, Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.E.), is known to have been deeply devoted to his soldier-companions. His love for his advisor and companion Hephaestion is celebrated in a Hellenistic relief (preserved in a Roman Syrian marble copy, approximately 200 B.C.E.), which shows the nude Alexander standing next to the clothed figure of his lover.

Ancient Roman artists produced numerous copies of Greek nude figures for wealthy patrons, but the Romans were less likely than the Greeks to employ full nudity in public images of national leaders and heroes. Although not illegal, same-sex love was no longer commonly associated with patriotic virtue or with the education of young men.

Nevertheless, the Emperor Hadrian (reigned 117-138 C.E.) sought to promote devotion to his lover, Antinous; after his accidental death (d. 130 C.E.), the Emperor commissioned numerous (partially clothed) statues of the beautiful young man for display throughout the empire.

Same-sex love also was celebrated in the famous sculptural group variously identified as the *Ildefonso Group* and as *Castor and Pollux* (Madrid: Prado, date uncertain), which depicts two nude, athletic figures casually embracing. However, outside the imperial court, men who favored the passive role in same-sex intercourse were generally regarded as an inferior class, and a variety of derogatory terms were devised to refer to them.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the decline in the valuation of same-sex relations, a vibrant homosexual subculture emerged in the physical and social "fringes" of Roman cities. Quickly and cheaply painted scenes of lively nude male figures engaged in a wide variety of sexual activities covered the walls of bathhouses (such as the House of Jupiter and Ganymede, Ostia, Italy, 184-192 C.E.), which served as gathering places for men who were attracted to other men.

The *Warren Cup* (first century C.E.), an exquisitely executed silver vessel, deserves special mention, as it depicts beautiful and dignified figures breaking the taboos that normally limited same-sex experiences in Rome. In violation of the principle that citizens should assume only "active" sexual roles, one side of the *Warren Cup* shows a citizen lowering himself onto the penis of a "foreign" worker; the evident eagerness with which he seats himself on the penis also challenges limited notions of "top" and "bottom."

Early Modern Art

As part of wide-ranging efforts to impose uniform "moral" standards, homosexual acts were made illegal throughout Europe during the medieval period. Regarded as an incitement to lust, nudity of any kind was discouraged in the visual arts.

Not surprisingly, men who were attracted to other men played a major role in reviving the classical theme of the nude male figure during the Renaissance; only a few of these major figures can be noted here.

For example, Donatello, whose attraction to young men is well documented, created the first life-size nude male statue since the ancient Roman period: the bronze *David* (1430s). In an elegant contrapposto pose, directly based on ancient Greek works, David stands with one foot on the head of the slain Goliath.

Emphasizing the erotic implications of this statue are the feathers of Goliath's helmet, which extend all the way up David's legs to his crotch. The educated Renaissance viewer certainly would have understood the implications of the triumph of Eros depicted on the helmet. Although stripped of his garments, David is shown wearing a hat, popular among young working class youths in Florence. The intense naturalism with which the adolescent body is depicted suggests the artist's careful (and admiring) study of his apprentices.

Although prohibitions against homosexual acts were still rigorously enforced, Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (1477-1549) boldly chose to be called by the nickname "Il Sodoma" (the sodomite). His numerous paintings of nude martyred saints (such as *Saint Sebastian*, 1542) evoke both the sensual beauties of the male body and the physical and verbal abuse that his public stance "provoked."

Renaissance artists generally depended upon the requirements of mythological and religious subjects to justify the inclusion of nude figures. However, the prominent German artist Albrecht Dürer portrayed naked men provocatively gazing at one another in the contemporary setting of the *Bathhouse* (woodcut, 1496); he emphasized the sexual implications of the scene by placing a cock (rooster) on top of the large faucet that projected in front of one of the figures.

The most famous of all Renaissance artists, Michelangelo utilized the nude male figure to represent the

highest ideals of his culture: whether political, as in the case of *David* (1504), a symbol of the Republic of Florence, or spiritual, as in the case of the *Risen Christ* (1516). Their sensual beauty so disconcerted many contemporary viewers that their genitals were concealed (in opposition to the will of the artist) a few years after their completion.

In contrast to Il Sodoma, Michelangelo fully absorbed Catholic proscriptions against same-sex intimacy, and his diaries and letters reveal that he suffered from profound guilt because of his love for other men. He revealed his conflicting feelings about his sexual desires in a pair of drawings in made in 1533 for his beloved Tomasso Cavalieri: *Ganymede*, which depicts the beautiful, nude adolescent being carried up to heaven by an embracing eagle, and *Tityos*, which shows an eagle eating the intestines of a very similar figure.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Caravaggio, who boldly flaunted his attraction to other men, created numerous homoerotic works, including provocative variations upon famous representations of nude figures by Michelangelo. For instance, his *Love Triumphant* (1602), based upon an allegorical statue of *Victory* by Michelangelo (1530s), shows a naturalistically depicted street youth trampling on symbols of human achievement.

Caravaggio's overt challenge to constrictive moral standards was not continued by later artists during the Baroque era, when both artists and their works increasingly were expected to conform to heterosexual "norms." However, Guido Reni's *Saint Sebastian* (1615) eloquently reveals that nude figures, required by certain devotional and mythological subjects, could be infused with a languid and subtly subversive sexuality.

At the same time that Catholic and Protestant reform movements were seeking to restrict both nudity and homoeroticism in European art, Japan witnessed a remarkable flourishing of sexually explicit art, which was avidly collected by the prosperous middle classes. Many famous and popular artists depicted scenes of lovemaking in the male and female brothels legalized throughout the reign of the Tokugawa dynasty (1603-1868).

Only a relatively small percentage of the many hundreds of scenes of male prostitutes and their clients depict full nudity; Yoshida Hanbei's *A Sexually Excited Male Prostitute with a Client* (woodblock print, 1705) and the anonymous *Sexually Aroused Men Kissing* (woodblock print, mid-18th century) are among those that do.

More typically, as in Nishikawa Sukenobu's *Customer with Boy Prostitute* (scroll painting, early 18th century), the figures were shown with some items of clothing to indicate social class and sexual roles. However, genitals and anus consistently were not only exposed, but also emphasized through enlargement, strong outlining, and other devices.

Nineteenth-Century Art

At the height of the French Revolution in 1791, sodomy among consenting adults was decriminalized, and the Napoleonic Code of 1804 reaffirmed the legalization of same-sex relations. Thus, it is not surprising that numerous prominent artists exhibited paintings of overtly homoerotic nudes at the Paris Salons in the early nineteenth century.

For example, the sinuously posed nude figures of Achilles and Patroclus establish a sensual mood in Ingres' *Achilles Receiving the Ambassadors of Agamemnon* (1801).

Hippolyte Flandrin's *Figure d'Etude* (1835), which depicts a youthful model with his head bent down onto his raised knees, freed the homoerotic subject from the requirements of a mythological or historical theme.

Because the pose conceals the genitals, rules of "propriety" were respected, and a reproduction of this painting (purchased for the Louvre by Napoleon III) could be displayed openly in one's home without fear of reprisal; the mountain setting also dignified Flandrin's work, by infusing it with the mood of the "sublime," so esteemed by the Romantic movement.

This painting quickly became a widely recognized and enduring symbol of same-sex desire; it continues to be referenced in innumerable ads directed to the gay community (for causes ranging from AIDS prevention to ocean cruises). The many later variations of Flandrin's famous composition include Robert Mapplethorpe's *Ajitto* (1981), which depicts an African-American model with an erect penis.

Despite Flandrin's example, most nineteenth-century artists depended on classical themes to "justify" sensual depictions of nude male figures. Thus, for example, Jean Delville's *School of Plato* (1898) depicts the ancient philosopher surrounded by languidly posed, nude youths; Delville's androgynous conception of the nude was characteristic of many of the artists associated with the Aesthetic Movement of the late nineteenth century.

Among adherents of this style, Simeon Solomon is particularly noteworthy because he raised complex personal and social issues through his treatments of such subjects as *Bridegroom and Sad Love* (1865); this painting represents a nude youth dispassionately kissing the forehead of his bride while he fondles the genitals of the sorrowful adult Cupid standing alongside him.

Such powerful treatments of the problems affecting same-sex love in modern Britain caused Solomon to be ostracized by many other artists, even before his career was cut short by the scandal surrounding his arrest in 1873 for soliciting sex in a London public toilet.

The new medium of photography was exploited by artists seeking to record the beauties of the male figure. Settling in Taormina, Sicily in the 1880s, the German baron Wilhelm von Gloeden devoted himself to photographing local youths, posed nude with garlands and other classical attributes. Justifying his project by the goal of recreating the splendors of the ancient world, he established a successful mail-order business, selling his works to wealthy men throughout Europe and the Americas.

The American painter Thomas Eakins also recorded the appearance of nude youths in numerous photographs, which he intended as preparatory studies for such paintings as *The Swimming Hole* (1885). Inspired by Walt Whitman's glorification of the common man, Eakins sought to create naturalistic, distinctly American images of heroic, nude male figures.

Twentieth-Century Art

In the first decades of the twentieth century, well-known artists began to create more sexually explicit and accurate images of the lifestyles of men in the nascent "gay" subculture. For instance, in the late 1910s, the American painter Charles Demuth created several watercolors of men engaged in sexual play in New York bathhouses; he restricted the circulation of these works, giving them as gifts to close friends.

Later in the century, George Platt Lynes, a prominent fashion photographer, created elegantly posed, intensely erotic photographs of men (such as *Nude Man*, 1932) for a carefully screened and discreet wealthy clientele. A friend of his, painter Paul Cadmus boldly created for public display monumental paintings depicting the lives of urban gay men; these included numerous paintings of nudes, such as *Horseplay* (1935) and *The Bath* (1951).

Deliberately positioning himself outside the mainstream art world, the prolific Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen), created countless drawings of nude working class men, joyfully engaging in S&M sexual play. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he informally circulated his images through "underground" networks, based in European gay bars.

The subsequent publication of his images in magazines catering to the emerging gay "market" helped to make them widely available. His portrayals of self-confident, athletic, and highly sexed men served as prototypes for gay "clones" in the 1970s and later decades.

Among the many later gay artists influenced by Tom of Finland's work is the prominent Japanese painter, Sadao Hasegawa. In such works as *Lion Dance* (1982) and *Secret Ritual* (1987), Hasegawa successfully sought to incorporate Tom's hyper-masculinity and exuberant sexuality into innovative depictions of themes ultimately inspired by the spiritual traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism.

In the 1980s, Robert Mapplethorpe defied taboos that still restricted exposure of explicit depictions of (homo)sexuality. In prominent fine arts galleries and museums in the United States and Europe, he exhibited carefully and elegantly composed "close-up" photographs that captured nude men in the midst of fisting and other S&M activities.

The Perfect Moment, a nationally touring exhibition of his work (1988-1990), provoked unprecedented furor, culminating in the arrest and trial of a museum curator on charges of disseminating pornography. Even many gay community leaders criticized the intense sexuality of Mapplethorpe's work as inappropriate in the era of AIDS.

In addition, his *Black Male* series (including such images as *Thomas on a Pedestal*, 1986) was attacked for its objectification of the black body. However, Mapplethorpe eloquently defended his goal of portraying the beauties of individuals who were overlooked in the mainstream art world.

Breaking with conventions that effectively restricted nude male images to depictions of athletic, young, white men, many recent artists have sought to produce works of art that reflect the actual diversity and complexity of queer communities.

Such photographers as Australian Jamie Dunbar (for example, *Positiv Sex Happens*, 1993) and Americans Mark I. Chester (for example, *Robert Chesley--ks portrait*, 1991), George Dureau (*Wilbert Hines*, 1983), Lyle Ashton Harris (*Constructs*, 1989), and Peter Hujar (*Manny*, undated) have devoted themselves to creating powerful nude images of men who would normally be excluded from representation because of their age, social class, HIV status, physical condition, and/or race.

Numerous contemporary queer artists have exploited the nude figure to create provocative narratives, with great psychological and political resonance. For instance, Nigerian-born photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode conceived several transcultural series (*Metaphysick: Every Moment Counts*, 1991, among others) that synthesized Western conceptions of erotic art with Yoruba spiritual traditions.

The prominent Mexican artist Nahum Zenil has made his own nude body the primary subject of his work. In *Dart Game* (1994), Zenil depicts himself (in the pose of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, a symbol of Renaissance ideals) against a target with the colors of the Mexican flag; he thus reveals the dangers to which he willingly has subjected himself as a very outspoken proponent of gay rights.

Sunil Gupta (a Canadian citizen and United Kingdom resident, born in India) is among the many contemporary queer artists who have found inspiration in historical art. For example, in the photographic series *No Solutions* (1990), Gupta depicted himself and his British partner (in various stages of undress) in positions that are deliberately evocative of ancient Hindu erotic sculpture.

To reinforce the references to earlier Hindu work, Gupta paired each of his photographs with a popular Indian religious print. Displayed with captions taken from an Indian government proposal to ban sex between Indian citizens and foreigners, *No Solutions* raised a variety of urgent political, spiritual, and personal questions. This piece eloquently reveals the links between historical and contemporary queer

culture, and it well exemplifies the vitality and complexity of recent images of the male nude.

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