



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Orpheus

by Peter R. Griffith

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Orpheus, a legendary poet of Greek mythology, was renowned for his skill with the lyre. It was said that he could soothe both the human soul and wild beasts with his song. In addition to his music, Orpheus passionately loved his wife Eurydice whose death, for which he blamed himself, broke his heart.

According to the myth, after her loss Orpheus despised women and turned his romantic attention to boys. He was then killed by the Thracian women for bringing homosexuality to Thrace.

The earliest references to Orpheus' homosexuality come from Phanocles' *Loves* (225 B. C.E.), a catalogue of poems about the loves of the gods and heroes for beautiful boys, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (10:78-85), whose popularity is most likely responsible for keeping the entire Orpheus myth alive.

Most writers and artists since Hellenistic times have ignored the homosexual aspect of Orpheus, concentrating on him as the classical pattern of the poet-musician. Even medieval moralists in their reworking of the *Metamorphoses* into the *Ovide Moralisé* did not always focus disparaging commentary on the poet's sexuality.

Colard Mansion provides one of the few early modern illustrations of Orpheus' homosexuality in a continuous narrative showing a sexual encounter between Orpheus and a young man and the poet's resulting death (*Ovide Moralisé*, 1484). The artist used the story-book-like construction to make clear to his viewer that sinful passion for young lads results in an untimely demise.

Ten years later the German artist Albrecht Dürer rendered Orpheus' death at the hands of the Thracian women in his *Death of Orpheus*. Dürer inserts a plaque just above the dying poet's head, "Orpheus, The First Pederast," to make clear the reason for the attack. What Dürer intended with the image remains unclear, but he may have been influenced by popular discussion of homosexuality in Italy.

In Italy the death of Orpheus appears in two major Renaissance works of art: Giulio Romano's *Sala di Ovidio* in the Palazzo del Te (1527-1534) and Andre Mantegna's *Camera degli Sposi* in the Castello San Giorgio (1465-1474). A contemporary viewer of these rooms would have been familiar with the Ovidian tale, but Orpheus' role in the decoration of these rooms is minor. It is doubtful whether either of these artists was commenting on contemporary homosexuality as much as simply drawing on the popular classical tradition of the Renaissance.

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Top: Orpheus (left), his wife Euridice (center), and the god Hermes (right) depicted in an ancient stone relief.



Above: *The Death of Orpheus* by Albrecht Dürer. Image of the ancient stone relief courtesy Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

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