



## Subjects of the Visual Arts: St. Sebastian

by Jason Goldman

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*The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* by Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo.

There is hardly anything unusual or particularly compelling about a gay icon who is young, beautiful, white, shirtless, and baby-faced. But what if this same boyish icon had emerged from a key historical antagonist of same-sex desire: the teachings of Christianity?

The case of Saint Sebastian, who was martyred in 287, animates several complex questions about the evolution of a gay idol, not the least of which is his so-called appropriation from the hallowed pages of Church history and martyrology to the visual, literary, and filmic works of numerous gay artists.

For example, Sebastian appears in the work of Marsden Hartley, F. Holland Day, Frank O'Hara, Marcel Proust, Derek Jarman, and Pierre et Gilles, to name but a prominent few; and he was a featured subject of a host of Renaissance and baroque artists (including Tintoretto, Mantegna, Titian, Guido Reni, Giorgione, Botticelli, and "Il Sodoma") whose works inspired an explicitly homosexual cult of Saint Sebastian in the nineteenth century.

Sebastian's broad and long-standing presence in queer artistic production suggests that there is more to his appeal than the good looks with which he is most often rendered. Rather, several coexisting elements of his narrative make him an enduring trope of modern gay fascination.

Renaissance representations of Saint Sebastian--mostly paintings of a tender, loin-clothed youth writhing in the ecstasy of the arrows that pierce him--are perhaps ground zero for his appointment as the patron saint of gay sensuality.

And for seemingly obvious reasons. Sebastian's supple, near-naked body; the wink-wink symbolism of the penetrating arrows; his thrown-back head expressing a mixture of pleasure and pain; and his inviting gaze all readily contribute to his homoerotic appeal. But Sebastian's entry into gay cultures in the first place most certainly involves his origins as an emblem of Christian godliness and martyrdom.

Same-sex desire is often, on many levels, about the crossing of lines, the overturning of sacred norms, the pleasure of the forbidden. Both the story of Sebastian and his subsequent role in modern gay cultures epitomize this subversive impulse: Sebastian revels in the pleasure of his own martyrdom as gay men revel in gazing upon an off-limits emblem of Christian holiness. By all accounts, Sebastian is a very good "bad object choice."

The question of whether Sebastian himself was gay is largely moot. While some historical records suggest a notable affection between the saint and his male superiors, after almost two thousand years Sebastian's sexuality is not only greatly speculative, but also rather inconsequential.

However, while it is doubtful that a buried homosexual existence could justify his current camp popularity, it seems equally doubtful that his homoerotic associations can be explained away as the superficial afterthoughts, revisions, or cross-readings of a willful contemporary gay purview.

Like many personages who are continually reiterated, Sebastian has essentially grown up alongside modern notions of sexuality and the formation of gay consciousness, becoming an accessible touchstone of both gay desire and gay experience in the process.

As Richard A. Kaye aptly notes, "contemporary gay men have seen in Sebastian at once a stunning advertisement for homosexual desire (indeed, a homoerotic ideal), and a prototypical portrait of tortured closet case."

The melancholy tone of Sebastian imagery--to say nothing of Sebastian's accompanying torment--is a ready parallel to the feelings of shame, rejection, inverted desire, and loneliness endured by queer people in a homophobic society.

The coding of these maladies is perhaps all the more effective because it is not easily separable from--indeed, it is rendered by the same means as--Sebastian's come-hither beauty and sexual availability.

In all, Sebastian's narrative complexity, vernacular resonance, and theological origins speak volumes of the queer representational strategies through which he is deployed.

### **Bibliography**

Kaye, Richard A. "Losing His Religion: Saint Sebastian as Contemporary Gay Martyr." *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*. Peter Horne and Reina Lewis, eds. New York: Routledge, 1996. 86-105.

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