

Reclining Nymph: Androgynous figures in Renaissance art



Reclining Nymph, Domenico Beccafumi, about 1519, oil on wood, 71.7 x 13.8 cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to our series of online Tuesday Talks presented by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, at the University of Birmingham.

I'm Kirsty Clarke, the Student Engagement Coordinator. Today we will be exploring Domenico Beccafumi's 1519 oil painting, *Reclining Nymph* and androgynous figures within Renaissance Art.

Beccafumi was an Italian Renaissance painter associated with the Sieneese School of Painting, who was born in 1484 and died in 1551. The son of a peasant, he received the patronage (and the name) of the Tuscan landowner Lorenzo Beccafumi, who spotted his talent for drawing.

This 'reclining nymph', painted on a wooden panel, originally formed part of the decoration of the bedchamber of the noble and influential Francesco Petrucci of Siena and his wife Caterina Piccolomini, where it was used as the headboard. With its themes of love and fertility, it sat alongside other panels in the room in a series illustrating virtuous heroines from antiquity.

The androgynous figure in the centre has been identified as Venus, the goddess of love, sexuality and fertility, but has also been interpreted as a water nymph due to the setting, with the figure reclining on a mossy and fecund riverbank. The figure is accompanied by a putto (the representation of a small, naked, often winged, male child) who is holding a whirligig, a spinning windmill toy, perhaps signifying the transience and disquiet of love.

What may immediately strike the modern eye is the reclining figure's gender-ambiguous appearance, with a 'feminine' face and breasts but an athletic 'masculine' physique. Such androgynous figures are a familiar feature in works of Italian Renaissance masters like Michelangelo and Leonardo. These figures now provoke a variety of reactions, from mirth to awe, wonder and serious academic questioning.

One reason offered for this representation of anatomy is that standards of moral propriety limited the availability of female life models, and so enterprising artists simply used men as models and then applied the head and breasts of women on male bodies. This explanation is not totally satisfying as there are many examples of wholly 'female' forms from the period. Whilst we can perhaps imagine the artist, exasperated by lack of access to female models, resorting to what could be termed a cut-and-shut method of painting, it is more difficult to imagine wealthy patrons being satisfied by this approach.

It seems likely that the Renaissance viewer of such figures perceived them very differently to us, their modern counterparts. Perhaps one possible explanation can be found in differing philosophical understandings of sex. Contemporary American historian and writer, Thomas Laqueur argues that there was "... in the sixteenth century, as there had been in classical antiquity, only one canonical body, and that body was male". The classical Roman surgeon and philosopher Galen held that all bodies were essentially male, that is they held the all elements and properties of the male archetype, but that women's bodies were deformed versions. Lacquer suggests that this idea persisted into, or perhaps was re-born in, the Renaissance. Though contested by contemporary historians such as Katharine Park and Monica Green, this "one-sex model", has been a prominent way to examine depictions of the sexes in Renaissance Art.

Alternatively, the use of androgynous figures in Renaissance art has been linked to the artists' sexuality, and perhaps the use of a 'masculine' physique simply shows the sexual preference of the painter. This explanation, however, again requires that the patrons be satisfied with the results. Perhaps homosexuality, which was common in Renaissance Italy, simply influenced the broader aesthetic values of art.

Another explanation is that androgynous bodies were used due to a fascination with such figures from classical myths. The writings of the ancients were being re-discovered and incorporated into the rising number of secular paintings at this time, and these texts abound in androgyny. In the Athenian philosopher Plato's Symposium, we find Aristophanes' tale of the androgyne - the original human in whom the

sexes were combined, and then there is the tale of Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who united with the nymph Salmacis to form a single body.

But perhaps the most appealing explanation is that androgynous figures were simply seen as beautiful and aesthetically pleasing in their own right. Mario Equicola, an Italian Renaissance humanist, claimed in 1525 that ‘the effeminate male and the manly female are graceful in almost every aspect’.

While we might not come to any firm conclusions about the use of androgynous figures in Renaissance art, considering the various possible meanings invites us to question our own received certainties about sex, gender, bodies and beauty. It is all too easy to imagine that society’s ideas about what is male, what is female and what is beautiful are universal and eternal, but by looking at works like *Reclining Nymph* we see that this is not the case. We might conclude that the ambiguous and un-categorisable has always existed and that the absence of certainty can itself be beautiful.

Thank you for joining me on this Tuesday Talk. We will be taking a short summer break before starting the series again in September.

If you have any questions or would like to continue the conversation, please get in touch with the Barber (info@barber.org.uk) or use our social media platforms.

Speaker info

Kirsty Clarke joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as Student Engagement Coordinator in February 2020. She has programmed a series of creative online workshops and events as part of our Barber Home programme, remotely introducing new and existing students to the Barber Institute of Fine Arts.

Kirsty Clarke is an artist based in Birmingham, UK. Recent projects include, *The Growing Project*, Grand Union, Birmingham (2019) *Ways of Learning*, Baltic 39, Newcastle (2019); *Fermentations: Remembering Cucumbers*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (2019) and *Ways of Learning*, Grand Union, Birmingham (2018).

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.