

# All Forms of Love

## IN LOVE AND WAR

Path 1 – The first path analyses the representation of the heroic soldier and the boundaries between masculine prowess and bisexuality



1  
Constantinople  
**Central Panel of Triptych with the  
Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, 10<sup>th</sup> c.**  
Ivory, 17,6 x 12,8 cm  
Inv. Nr. 574  
© Skulpturensammlung und Museum  
für Byzantinische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen  
zu Berlin / Jürgen Liepe

The ideal soldier has often been associated with the image of the heterosexual male. However, this is a contemporary cliché that has little to do with the representation of the greatest traditional heroes of Antiquity.

In Antiquity, bisexuality walked hand in hand with heroism. These

sexual practices were encouraged in the army as a way to establish tight bonds of affection among soldiers, promote combative spirit, and keep the morale high. The most important military heroes of Greek and Roman sacred narrative (known as mythology) displayed, therefore, bisexual orientations.

Although not openly sexual, medieval society also glorified intense emotional bonds, especially between men, which represented powerful secular and sacred ideals. Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, feudal society was structured upon a system of loyalties and personal support, ennobled by the spirit of chivalry –



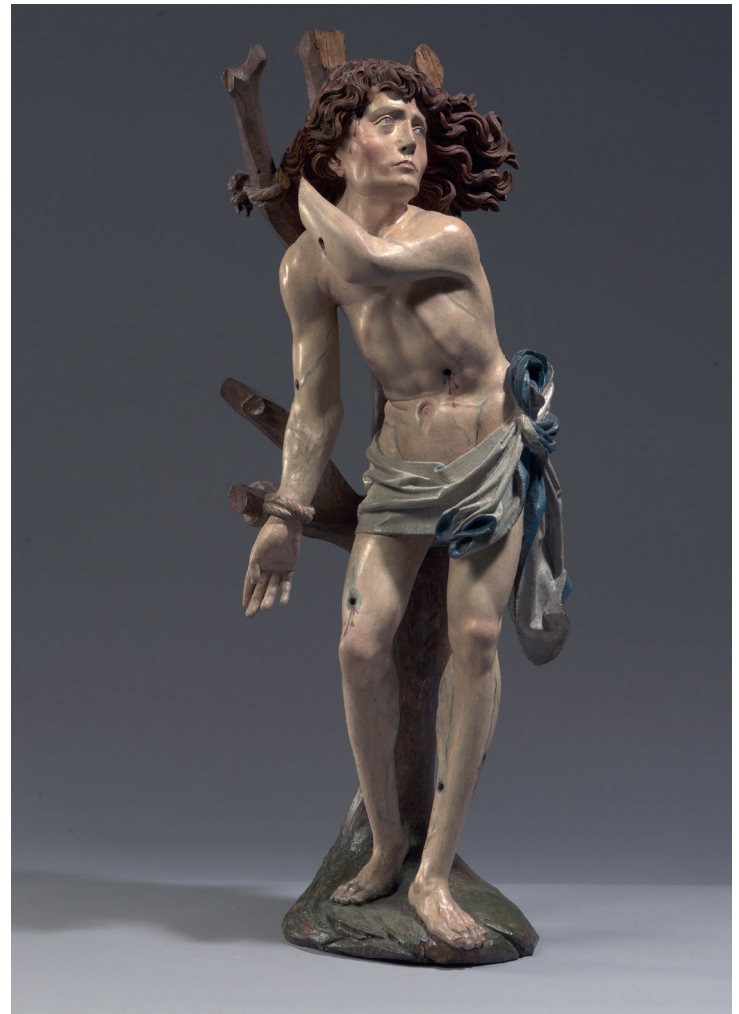
2  
Region of Lake Constance  
**Saint John the Apostle Leaning  
on Christ's Breast, ca. 1310**  
Oak, old polychromy, 89 x 47 x 31,5 cm

Inv. Nr. 7950  
© Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst  
der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin / Antje Voigt

military honour – which bound knights in devoted comradeship. This ideal was extended to the Church, whose monasteries were organised as fraternal communities, following Saint Paul's parallelism between »good Christians« and »good soldiers of Christ Jesus«.

Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, Europe recovered some of the economic prosperity lost since the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the year 476 and entered a period of social stability that led to expanding populations and growing cities. For the first time since the Roman period, bigger towns offered the

critical mass and freedom required to develop homosexual networks, which was accompanied by a flourishing erotic literature. The secular urban authorities often cultivated a climate of liberty, and much homoerotic poetry – mostly in Latin – was written at the time. Unlike in poetry, which could be produced within a private subculture, such developments were hardly possible in the visual arts, as painting and sculpture depended on workshops and high expenses. Church and nobility were almost the only existing patrons, but the first had no interest in exposing homosexuality and the latter feared punishment if



3  
Master of the Biberach Holy Kinship  
**Saint Sebastian, ca. 1515**  
Limewood and original polychromy, 70 x 28 x 17 cm

Inv. Nr. 10/84  
© Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst  
der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin / Antje Voigt

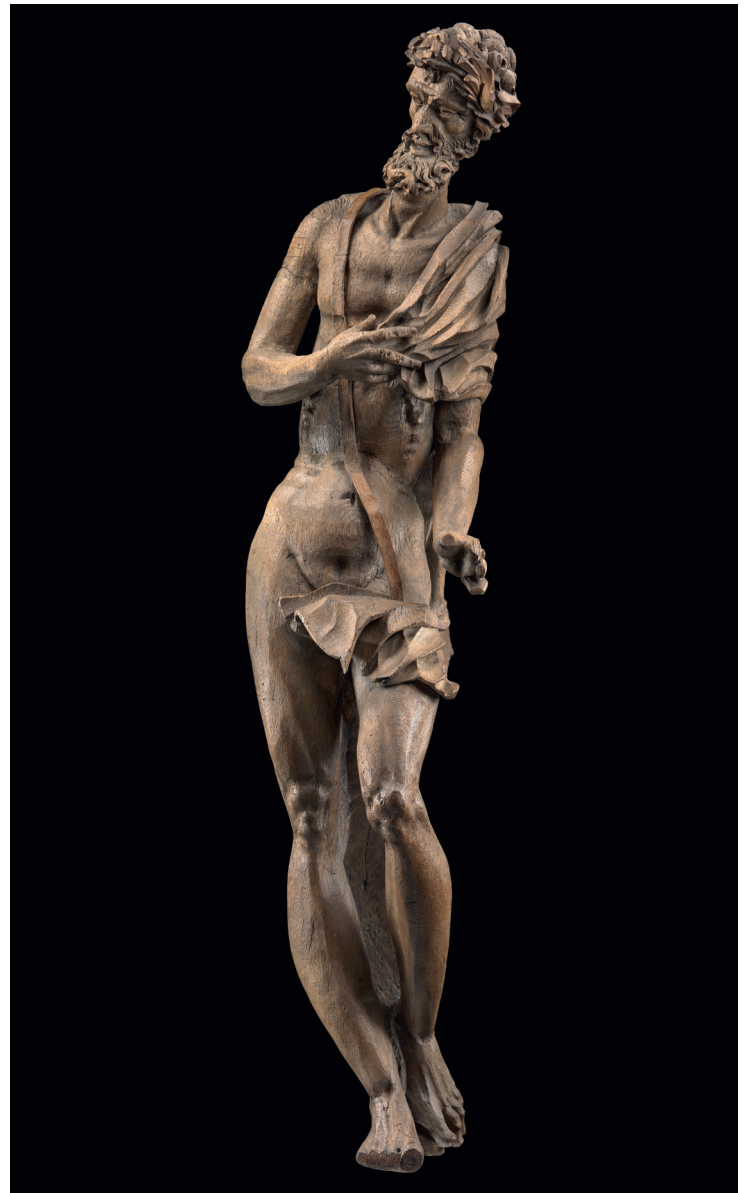
doing so. That is why the only illustrations of same-sex intimacy in this period are religious subjects where eroticism is only present, if at all, by implication.

The representation of Christian soldiers provided the right scenario that could be, if not openly representative of homosexuality, at least expressive of physical proximity and true affection among men. To the Byzantine collection of the Bode Museum belongs one of the most famous representations of the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* (fig. 1). According to legend, those soldiers were condemned to die from exposure

to cold on a frozen lake near the city of Sebaste, because of their profession of the Christian faith. Usually depicted just before death, the situation offered an unusual opportunity to represent a group of men hugging each other, searching for warmth and consolation.

This atmosphere of relative freedom changed dramatically in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Strong political rivalries and the decadence of feudalism led secular and religious authorities to extend control over all aspects of their subjects' lives, including sexual regulations. Homoerotic poetry virtually disappeared but, ironically, more images depicting affections or taboo behaviours were created than before. Many of them, despite intending to offer uplifting religious or knightly examples, offered an ambiguous physical reading, and spiritual and carnal love were not always neatly separated. A motif from around 1310 of Saint John the Apostle leaning his head against Christ's breast exemplifies the kind of male intimacy portrayed at the time (fig. 2). This representation, derived from the account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John (which was thought in the Middle Ages to have been written by John the Apostle), shows Christ and John in a posture that recalls the central couple of soldiers in the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*. Jesus is portrayed as a bearded man who tenderly holds the »beloved disciple«. Groups like the one kept in the Bode Museum were often placed in female convents, dedicated to commemorate the fraternal devotion of Saint John for Jesus. Such images would help the nuns to identify their mystical marriage to Jesus with the androgynously depicted saint.

Among the several chivalrous examples often revered by the Church, that of Saint Sebastian is particularly interesting because of the evolution of his iconography throughout the history of art. According to one of the most important medieval sources on the lives of the saints, the *Golden Legend* (13<sup>th</sup> century), he was a Roman soldier living in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century who served as a personal bodyguard to the emperor and commanded the first cohort of the Praetorian Guards. Sebastian converted to Christianity and was consequently dismissed from the army. From that moment, he understood his duty towards his fellow Christians as similar to that of a soldier towards his war companions. He accompanied several martyrs during their torture, supported them in their battle against temptation, and encouraged them in the pursuit of their final aim: to reach the kingdom of God through martyrdom. Sebastian finally suffered martyrdom himself, being first shot with arrows and then beaten to death.



4

Ludwig Münstermann [1570/80–1637/38]

**Apollo, 1615/1616**

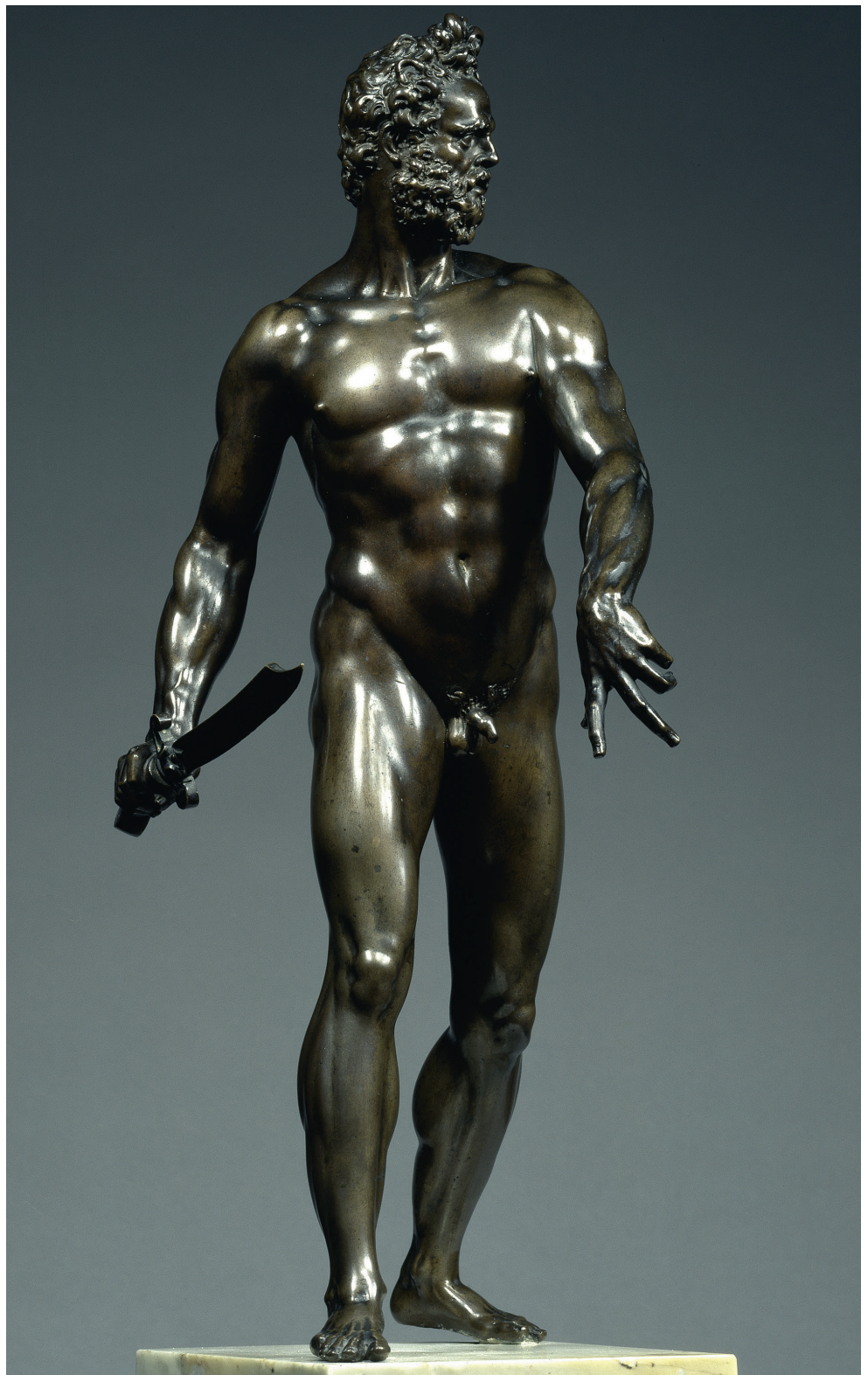
Oak, 98 x 22 x 24 cm

Inv. Nr. 2/63

© Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin / Antje Voigt

Nothing in Sebastian's legend suggests possible homosexuality. During the Middle Ages he was often represented as a soldier wearing armour, either holding arrows or being pierced by them. It was at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th centuries when he started to be portrayed as a handsome and partially undressed adolescent. Such development resulted from the combination of the Christian tradition with the new interest on the antique myths and culture, which started in the Western world at that time. It was the beginning of a new era: the Renaissance (in English »rebirth«), which attempted to reconcile new scientific knowledge with the values of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and also with the teachings of the Catholic faith. This tension between paganism and Christianity was prolonged and reinterpreted until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, the personalities of antique heroes and Christian saints were endlessly rethought and even iconographically interwoven in not a few cases.

An important characteristic of the Renaissance was a strong relation to the earthly world. As we can see in a carving by the Master of the Biberach Holy Kinship (ca. 1515), Sebastian's physical appearance and nudity became so important that it nearly eclipsed his moral and protective virtues (fig. 3). Sebastian acted as protector against plagues in the Middle Ages, the illness being then represented as a volley of arrows. However, the connection of the martyr pierced by arrows with the plague is not an intuitive one. In Greco-Roman mythology, the archer god Apollo (bisexual and the epitome of male beauty) was the deliverer from pestilence, and the figure of Sebastian Christianised this association. Since the 19th century, Saint Sebastian has become a homoerotic



5  
Giambologna [1529–1608]  
**Mars Gradivus, ca. 1580**  
Bronze, height 39,5 cm

Inv. Nr. 4/65  
© Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin / Jörg P. Anders

ideal as well as a prototype of the tormented one in a homophobic society.

With the recovered interest in Antiquity, the fine arts found an iconography independent of religion where nudity and homoeroticism could be more freely expressed. Differing from the Christian soldiers mentioned above, pagan heroes and their expressions of affection and physical proximity – including bisexuality – could be more openly depicted and exposed. Like Apollo, the Roman god Mars and the half-god Hercules (in Greek Heracles) were among the highest models of bellicosity in classical mythology. They also engaged in countless heterosexual and homosexual relations, all of them exposed as illustrations of their virility.

Apollo, who represented the ideal of male beauty in both Greek and Roman mythology, was considered to be the god of the sun, poetry, plague, and healing, among others. He was usually portrayed as a handsome young man only partly covered by a cloak, as in Ludwig Münstermann's (1570/80–1637/38) carving (fig. 4). The list of his male lovers is at least as long as the female ones.

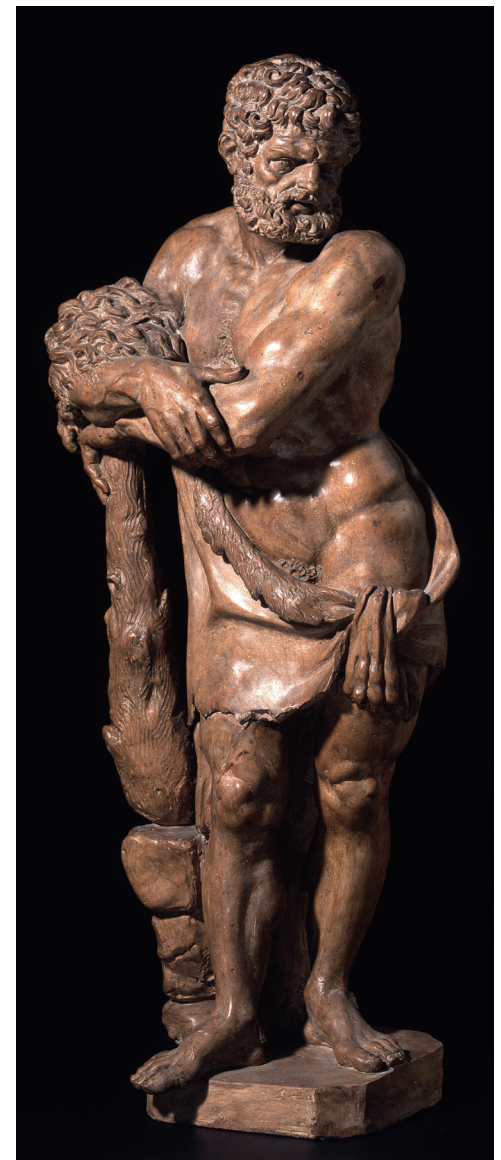
Mars (in Greek Ares), god of war, was considered the epitome of masculinity in Antiquity. He was often represented nude (as a symbol of fearlessness), muscular, standing in a courageous position, and holding or wearing attributes related to war – such as a spear, helmet and shield. This tradition was continued in the Renaissance, as we can see in Giambologna's (1529–1608) Mars (fig. 5). Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, his spear and shield have been used as the international symbol representing the male gender ( $\sigma$ ), while the mirror of his wife Venus (in Greek Aphrodite; goddess of

beauty) represents the female ( $\varphi$ ). Being married to the most beautiful of all goddesses did not stop Mars from having several affairs with mortal men.

Hercules, son of Jupiter (in Greek Zeus; king of all gods), was the greatest of all classical heroes and a paragon of masculinity. Taller and stronger than any other mortal, he played a central role in the war between the Trojans and Athenians narrated by Homer in the *Iliad*, the most important epic poem of ancient Greek literature (8<sup>th</sup> century BC). Hercules had several same-sex affairs with fellow warriors and younger men he was training as soldiers. He was traditionally depicted as an extremely muscular person, nude or partially covered with a lion skin, and holding a club. This iconography was fixed by the so-called *Hercules Farnese* – a 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Roman sculpture excavated in Rome in 1546 and a copy of the original by the famous Greek sculptor Lysippus. Hercules's pose and exaggerated musculature were admired by the artists of the time, heavily influencing the art of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, including work by Pierre Puget (1620–1694) (fig. 6). With the passing of time, the ideal representation of the male body invented by Lysippus remained as one of the standardised iconographies for the homoerotic.

In conclusion, the theme depicted in no way determines the artistic quality of a work of art. Neither does the sexual interpretation – objective or subjective – that we make of it. The masterful execution of a work cast in bronze, a wood carving or the modelling of clay certainly depends on the mastery of the artist. But, as seen in these examples, gender perspective is nevertheless necessary for understanding works of art, beyond

their mere technical perfection, as a reflection of a society, and a tool for accessing a historical context. After all, bisexuality did not stand in any way against the recognition of a soldier as a hero. And generic ambiguity was fundamental both for the iconographic evolution of Saint Sebastian and for the religious composition of Christ and Saint John to have the desired effect.



6  
Pierre Puget [1620–1694]  
**Hercules, ca. 1660**

Clay, 67,5 x 26 x 18,5 cm

Inv. Nr. M 256, Property of the Kaiser Friedrich Museumsverein  
© Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin / Volker Schneider