

Path 4 – The fourth path concentrates on the representation of women's intimacy and female-to-female sexual affection.



1
Franconia [Bamberg?]
Chest with the Life of Jesus (Detail), ca. 1100
Walrus-bone [?], 14 x 41 x 29 cm
Inv. Nr. 616
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2
Austria
Saint Margaret (Detail of a Retable), ca. 1517
Lime and conifer wood, original polychromy,
117,2 x 120,5 x 28 cm
Inv. Nr. 2770
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The social role of women varied very little throughout most of history. Their engagement in everyday life was generally restricted to maternity or religious roles. Customarily, a woman was first subjected to her father and, after marriage, her husband. The ability of a woman to remain independent was strictly linked to her personal wealth. Very few, however, had enough money of their own and, moreover, economic affluence did not automatically result in higher social status.

Given the restricted social chances women had on their own, why would some of them not want to get married? Motives could be plenty and the rejection of heterosexual relations was certainly one of them.

Antique mythology – the stories of Greek and Roman gods – and Christian hagiography – the biographies of the saints – tell of many women freely renouncing active heterosexual relations. Both sources share a common pattern: Unmarried

women were socially accepted as long as they communicated the same virtuous message of women's chastity.

Concerning Christendom, the main virtue of nearly every female martyr saint (killed because of her faith) was an unequivocal defence of her virginity, at least during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. Thus, chastity became compulsory for holy females, if not throughout their entire existence, at least from



3
Bernardino Cametti [1669–1736]
Diana the Huntress, 1720/50
Marble, height 258 cm

Inv. Nr. 9/59
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the very moment in which they devoted their lives to God. For their male counterparts, however, sexual activity remained irrelevant.

When considering women's sexuality, medieval culture was clearly misogynistic. Female sexual desire was simply not taken seriously unless it threatened male privileges or the primacy of the male sex. Just one reprobation of female homosexuality can be found in Christian scriptures: the Letter to the Romans written by Saint Paul (»even their women exchanged natural sexual

relations for unnatural ones«). But despite the scant attention paid in the Bible to the subject, it was denounced by theologians and clerics, and some of the most important medieval Christian writers, such as Saint Augustine (354–430) and Thomas Aquinas (1224/1225–1274), specifically condemned female homosexuality in their texts.

Even though references to female homosexuality in the Middle Ages are scarce, ordinary displays of, at least, affection among women began to be portrayed at the time. At the

beginning of the 9th century a new depiction of the subject of the Visitation began to circulate in Europe. According to the Gospels, before Jesus' birth Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth who, despite her advanced age, had miraculously become pregnant with John (called »the Baptist«). When both women met, John leapt from joy in his mother's womb as he became aware of the presence of Christ. The traditional scene of those women greeting each other was now open to more effusion. Moreover, they were often represented physically intertwined, cheek-to-cheek,



4

Giuseppe Mazza [1653–1741]

Diana with Nymphs and Acteon, ca. 1710

Marble, 56 x 72,5 x 8 cm

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or even kissing each other's lips, portraying a very emotional moment. This is the case shown in the walrus-bone chest (ca. 1100) kept in the Bode Museum (fig. 1).

In general, female martyrs suffered a larger number of tortures than their male counterparts. They were also often stabbed with knives or swords, or pierced by arrows. Those weapons carry implicit allusions to the role of the male genital in heterosex-

ual copulation. In one way or another, early female martyrs transgressed the established norms of traditional feminine virtue, above all by the explicit rejection of heterosexual relations. Paradoxically, had they not breached heterosexual principles, they would have never attained martyrdom and, by extension, holiness.

Three of those female saints – Ursula, Catherine and Agatha – share similar histories. All were born into wealthy

families, Ursula and Catherine being even princesses. They were betrothed against their will, but renounced riches and marriage in order to devote their lives to God. The three suffered what was known as »female martyrdom«: Saint Ursula being pierced by arrows, Saint Catherine being tortured on a spiked breaking wheel, and Saint Agatha having her breasts mutilated.

However, the case of a fourth saint, Saint Margaret, patently shows the triumph of woman's sexual self-determination over men. According to Jacobus da Varagine and his 13th-century writings on the lives of the saints (known as the *Golden Legend*), Saint Margaret refused to marry in order to devote her life to God. Upon her refusal, she was imprisoned and tortured. It was in prison that the Devil appeared to her in the form of a dragon, a fabulous beast which was used in Christian legends to symbolize evil in general and sexual temptations in particular. Varagine then recounts two different versions of the same episode. In the first one, Saint Margaret was swallowed by the dragon, but she managed to escape from his belly by making the sign of the Holy Cross. In the second, Saint Margaret defeated the beast – which according to the legend even took on a manly appearance – grasping him by the beard, beating him with a hammer, and, finally, triumphantly planting her foot on his neck. In other words, she physically dominated him.

Within the Bode Museum's collection several images of Saint Margaret can be found, most of them showing her accompanied by a peaceful dragon lying at her feet. But the right wing of an altarpiece is decorated with an image of the martyr exposing two unusual details alluding to the fight, the resulting victory, and the final domination of the dragon by the woman (fig. 2): We can see Saint Margaret wearing a martyr's crown and handling a papal ferula (pastoral staff) that keeps the revolting dragon under control, thus reminding it who is master.

The role of women in society did not progress much with the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance in the 15th century. They remained segregated at home or secluded in convents and were only allowed minimal education. Nevertheless, the inspiration that the Renaissance (in English »rebirth«) drew from Antiquity and its myths opened new perspectives in the representation of women and female homosexuality.

In Ancient mythology, the goddess Diana (in Greek Artemis) represents the virtue of heterosexual chastity but serves also as a model for lesbian love. As in Bernardino Cametti's (1669–1736) sculpture, Diana is often depicted sporting a well-toned body and taking over those roles traditionally ascribed to men, such as hunting (fig. 3). In this case, her defiant attitude recalls the part of the classical male hero. Her rejection of men was recounted by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–17 AD) in his poem *The Metamorphoses* where Diana converted Actaeon into a deer after he was found secretly watch-



5

Paulus Ättinger

Diana Riding the Deer, 1600–1605

Silver, partially gilded, inlaid with gems and pearls, 34,5 x 30 x 15 cm

Inv. Nr. 3864, on loan from the Würth Collection.

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6

Giambologna [1529–1608]

Sleeping Nymph, ca. 1600

Bronze, 20,5 x 34 x 15,4 cm

Inv. Nr. 7243

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ing her while she was bathing. This is the scene chiselled in Giuseppe Mazza's (1653–1741) relief (fig. 4). Actaeon is placed in the background, sprouting deer antlers, while Diana stands in the foreground surrounded by her nymphs – the female spirits who usually accompany the goddess as her entourage, often depicted in sexual attitudes towards each other. Other representations show Diana apparently free of sexual connotations, as for instance when riding a deer (fig. 5). The scene represented by Paulus Ättinger on a Vessel can surely allude to her love of nature, but it can also serve to subtly remind the observer of the goddess's domination when riding Actaeon.

Bath scenes were the most common situations in which nude women were represented during the Renaissance and Baroque times. *Diana and her Nymphs* was among the most common examples. The richness of the Bode Museum's collection of bronzes offers many examples of bathing and sleeping nymphs, such as that by Giambologna (1529–1608) (fig. 6). *The Three Graces* was also a beloved subject. They were minor goddesses of beauty, charm, fertility and creativity, usually portrayed naked, holding hands or even embracing each other. As in the case of Leonhard Kern's (1588–1662) relief, those gestures of affection among women were, paradoxically, traditionally marketed to men for heterosexual pleasure (fig. 7).

Scenes of female intimacy were also integrated as secondary subjects within mythological and religious topics. In Simone Mosca's (ca. 1523–1578) *The Fall of Phaeton*, these two themes are completely intertwined (fig. 8). In Greek mythology, Phaeton was the son of the solar god Helios, (in Latin Sol) who was allowed by his father to drive the sun chariot for a day. Phaeton was, however, unable to control the horses and Zeus (in



7
Leonhard Kern [1588–1662]
The Three Graces, before 1650

Alabaster, 37,8 x 23,3 cm
Inv. Nr. 1044, on loan from the Würth Collection.
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Latin Jupiter), king of all gods, had to strike the chariot down in order to prevent the earth from being burned up. Phaeton fell then into the river Eridanos – here portrayed as an old man – where he drowned. Human beings and their bodies were one of the central topics in the Renaissance and their depiction, in this case, often became the main subject of the art work. In this relief, the interaction among all figures has a strong homoerotic component, emphasized by the fact that all bodies are shown nude: Phaeton's genitals are placed at the very centre of the composition, the three nymphs on the right side show an open lesbian intimacy, and Eridanos – despite directly looking at the women – does not seem to react to them. He is, moreover, portrayed with open legs and showing his genitals in a so-called homoerotic position.

Whether within mythological legends or Christian traditions, all women discussed here are trailblazers who broke the repressive roles of their time. Only by overcoming or erasing social and gender boundaries did these women become an integral part of art history. This message of freedom ultimately anticipates the claim the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir made to Alice Schwarzer in 1976 in connection with lesbianism: »in itself, exclusive homosexuality is just as restrictive as heterosexuality. It would be ideal to be able to love a woman just as well as a man, simply a human being. Without fear, without compulsion, without obligation.«



8
Simone Mosca, called Il Moschino [ca. 1523–1578]

The Fall of Phaeton, ca. 1560

Marble, 124 x 96 x 26 cm

Inv. Nr. 282

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