All Forms of Love

CROSSING BORDERS

Path 5 – The fifth path introduces both historical characters and interpretations of gender reassignment and gender ambiguity

Gender reassignment and gender ambiguity play an important role within the Bode Museum's collection. Both Christian and mythological works of art show how the representation of all forms of love was a recurrent concern throughout human history. The broadness of this theme was already acknowledged in Antiquity and portrayed through the double nature of the Greek goddess of Love, Aphrodite (in Latin Venus).

Greek mythology (which refers to the tales of Antique gods) bestowed Aphrodite with a double personality of two different origins: Aphrodite Pandemos, which embodied the love of sensual pleasures and was daughter of Zeus (king of all gods) and Dione, and Aphrodite Urania, personifying the love of body and soul. The latter was conceived from the foam produced when the severed genitals of the god Uranus were thrown into the sea.

Despite the distinction, both Aphrodites were regarded as equals. Nevertheless, in order to distinguish between their natures, Aphrodite Urania was represented with a celestial globe evoking her more spiritual personality. This globe can be observed at the feet of Giambologna's *Urania* who, lost in thought, tries to cover her naked body with a cloth (fig. 1).

That Aphrodite Urania was conceived without the intervention of a woman was acknowledged by the Greek philosopher Plato (428/427–348/347 BC) who discussed the diversity of love in his *Symposium*. In 1864, before the term »homosexual« was used for the first time in public, the pioneer of the rights of homosexuals, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895), elaborated on Plato's argumentation and developed the terms »Uranian« and its heterosexual equivalent »Dioning« in his *Research on the riddle of male love*.

Despite Aphrodite's beauty winning unlimited praise, there was, however, a long tradition of considering a woman's body to be impure and sinful. Important early Christian authors such as Augustine (354–430) and Jerome (347–420) even proposed a way women could, through spiritual steadfastness and renunciation of their femininity, attain at least some kind of allegorical male status. Even Saint Paul had already stated in his *Letter to the Galatians* that baptism would not only overcome all boundaries of ethnic, religious and social origin,
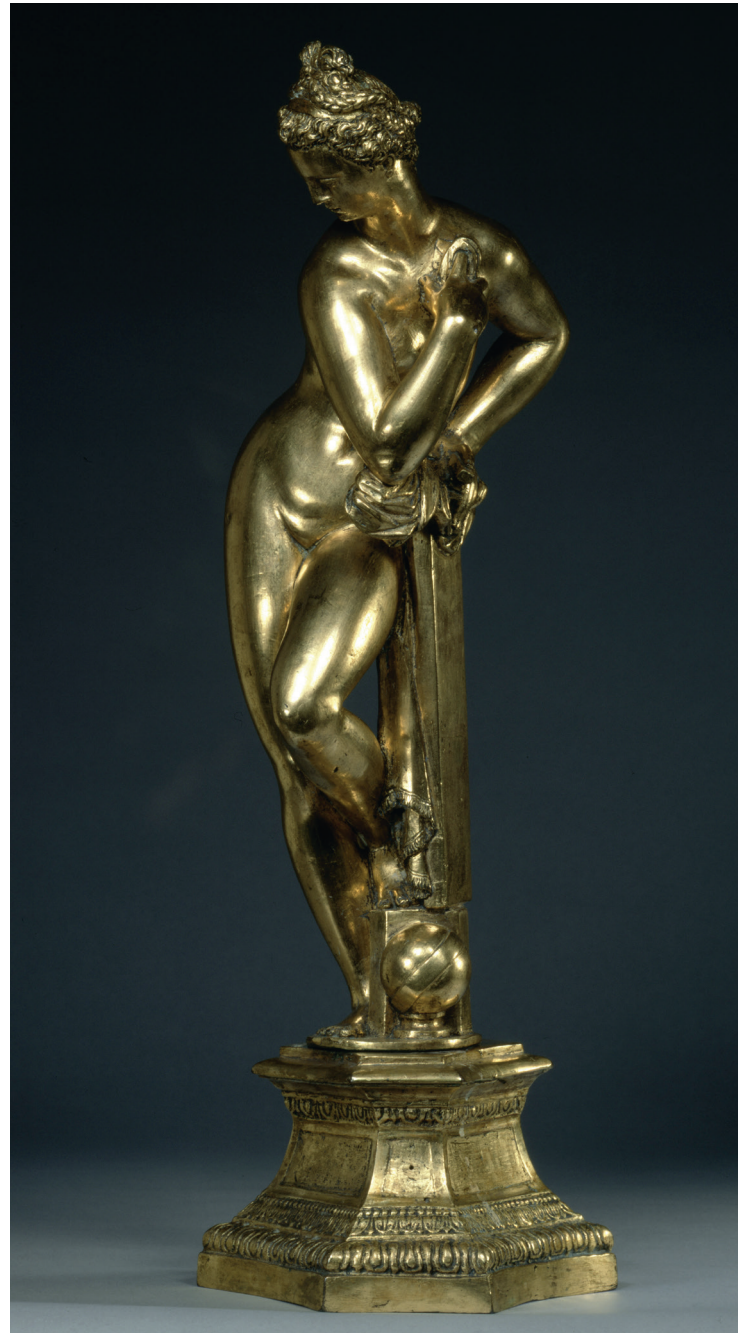
1
Giambologna (1529–1608)
Venus Urania, 1573
Gilt-bronze, 43,5 x 15 cm
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but also of gender: »Here is not Jew nor Greek, here is not slave nor suitor, here is not man nor woman; for you are all one in Christ Jesus«.

Over the centuries, Christian scholars interpreted these words according to the rules of their patriarchal societies. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Christian canonisation of women was equalised to transforming and debasing their bodies, subverting their own gender and thus becoming almost nearly »non-female« or »almost men«. Moreover, even if those holy women actually died by beheading, they were usually depicted while their sexualised tortures were in progress.

On the other hand, other Christian writings – like the 13th-century compendium on the life of the saints known as *The Golden Legend* – encouraged members of both sexes to aspire to a mystical union with Christ and cultivate all his virtues and values, such as hope, faith, love, courage and moral strength – regardless of the fact that the first three qualities were considered inherently feminine and the last two predominantly seen as masculine. This is how, despite the clear definition of the roles of men and women in the Middle Ages, there were opportunities for slippage between genders.

Nowadays, gender studies usually distinguish between biological (sex) and social (gender) gender. The Middle Ages already offered a similar framework. Saints like Ursula, Catherine, Agatha and Margaret underwent a passive forced transformation of their gender (see path 4 »Heroines of Virtue«). But other early female martyrs took an active part in that change through voluntary conversions. These were the cases of Saint Lucy and Saint Wilgefortis, both of

whom were born women but actively renounced their original gender in order to devote their life to God.

According to different legends, Saint Lucy suffered martyrdom during the 1st century in the city of Syracuse, Sicily. A converted Christian, Lucy was betrothed to a »pagan« man who denounced her faith to the Romans. She was sentenced to be raped, hitched to a team of oxen, boiled in oil, stabbed by a dagger thrust into her throat, and finally beheaded. The legend of Saint Lucy grew with the passage of time and in the 15th century another episode was added to her story: being constantly courted because of her beautiful eyes, Lucy pulled them out in order to ruin her loveliness and therefore preserve her virginity. Since then, Lucy's eyes symbolised her renouncement of the female gender. On the right wing of the 15th-century *Zams Altarpiece*, Lucy is portrayed as a beautiful, self-confident woman, firmly holding a plate with her left hand (fig. 2). Her eyes – today lost – must have been laid on the plate. She is presenting them to God, showing the way to sanctity to the viewer.

The history of Saint Wilgefortis (also known as Kümmernis, Uncumber, Liberata and Librada, depending on the country) arose in the 14th century as a result of the intersection of a legend with an iconographical misinterpretation. The former tells the transformation of a woman into a man and the latter the reversion of a man into a woman. Beginning with the legend, princess Wilgefortis desired to remain a virgin and to pursue a religious Christian life. In order to escape an unwanted marriage to a »pagan« man, she prayed to God, imploring for help, and was rewarded with a beard. As a result,

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Tyrol

Saint Lucy (Detail of the Zams Altarpiece), ca. 1485

Conifer wood, original polychromy, 275 x 260 x 60 cm

Inv. Nr. 3112

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her fiancé broke the engagement but nonetheless she was sentenced to crucifixion – a martyrdom traditionally reserved to men.

The second source is the *Sacro Volto* (Holy Face), now lost and once kept in the Italian city of Lucca. It was a well-known devotional image in the Middle Ages and a popular pilgrimage destination. Seldom exposed, the *Sacro Volto* was probably made in the 12th century and consisted of a wooden-carved robed figure of a bearded crucified Jesus, and decorated with precious jewellery. Following the ancient Oriental traditional representation of Christ on the cross, Jesus was portrayed as a king, with open eyes, wearing a purple tunic, and decorated with precious jewellery. He had very long hair and showed female-like features. When copies of the figure migrated to Northern Europe, the meaning of their uncommon depiction was not recognised anymore. New legends had to be developed in order to explain the image, the iconography was misinterpreted and a bearded woman was now seen in it. The origin of the name Wilgefortis could lie in the northern German expression »hilge Vartz«, the literal translation of the Italian »Sacro Volto«. The Bode Museum's Kümmernis has been undoubtedly portrayed as a woman, bearing breasts and wearing a feminine dress (fig. 3).

In the Middle Ages, virginity was seen as not only a physical, but also a spiritual state. For women aspiring to sainthood, their body was both an instrument of sanctification and a hindrance. On the contrary, men's control over their bodies – and the renouncement of their male gender – challenged notions such as nobility and chivalry.

Saint George was considered the prototype of the male Christian hero and is one of the most venerated saints since the Middle Ages. Probably a Roman soldier of the 3rd century, his legend was enhanced in the 9th century by the addition of a fantastic combat with a dragon, together with the rescue of a princess. One of the most portrayed saints within the Bode Museum's collection, he is usually dressed as a medieval knight and represented in the critical moment of killing the beast. Contrary to our common preconceptions of the heterosexual male hero (see path 1 »In love and war«), George offers a good example of ambiguity in gender roles.

The number of tortures that Saint George suffered through his martyrdom varied according to multiple medieval legends. This vast amount of torments has been compared to the prototype of the female martyrdom,

3
Osnabrück
Saint Kümmernis, ca. 1520
Oak and polychromy, 144 x 132 x 22 cm
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der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin / Antje Voigt

which was usually formed by a long list of punishments and with an emphasis on the suffering of the entire body, especially of those parts related to her gender – such as the breasts. In contrast, male martyrs usually suffered fewer tortures and often the martyrdom was reduced to only beheading.

Although the historical texts made no mention of the virginity of Saint George, several other symbols common to virgin female martyrs can actually be found in his iconography; for instance, the insistence on his nude

representation throughout his martyrdom and the burning of his nipples as one of the tortures suffered. He also defeated sexual temptation twice: first by killing the dragon (a Christian symbol of such temptation) and secondly by refusing to marry the princess. In the 16th-century Bavarian sculpture of Saint George in the Bode Museum, the dragon has been clearly humanised in an attempt to seduce the saint (fig. 4). It exhibits not only human teeth but also female genitalia, clearly displayed at the centre of the composition. Furthermore, the beast lies on its back, ready for a humanised face-to-face intercourse. However, despite this more than obvious sexual proposal, Saint George remains imperturbable.

The question of how George, Lucy Aphrodite or Kümmernis would have defined themselves in terms of gender cannot be answered. Nor is it possible to answer whether they wanted to or were able to find themselves in the conventional definition of men and women. Their stories and the works of art based on them, however, point to an ancestral human need to reflect the absence of gender boundaries: in other words, the need to represent a reality that had little to do with Western social conventions. Indeed, the right of every human being not to be defined as a woman or a man was recognized by the German Federal Constitutional Court on 10 October 2017 (file number: 1 BvR 2019/16). The World Health Organisation officially decided in May 2019 to stop classifying transgender people as mentally ill.

4
Bavaria
Saint George, ca. 1520
Limewood and original polychomy, 153 x 52 x 36 cm
Inv. Nr. 3066
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