



Subjects of the Visual Arts: David and Jonathan

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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The biblical narrative of King David, contained in the First and Second Books of Samuel and the opening chapter of the First Book of Kings, invites the reader to visualize homoerotically the shepherd boy turned warrior and king.

The narrator volunteers that David is "ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to" (1 Sam. 16:12), a remarkable statement in that, apart from Absalom and the Bridegroom of The Song of Solomon, the Bible shows no interest in any other male character's physical beauty.

Emphasis is laid not on David's size or strength, but on his complexion and coloring, and on the fact that he has beautiful eyes; his power clearly lies in his youth and attractiveness.

What is more, in the only instance in the Bible that records the effect of a man's beauty on its beholders, David is repeatedly the object of other characters' visual scrutiny, the prophet Samuel satisfied that David's comeliness is proof that he is the chosen of Yahweh, while David's adversary on the battlefield, the Philistine giant Goliath, foolishly dismisses David as a pretty boy (1 Sam. 17:42).

It is not surprising, when the biblical narrative insists that David be looked at and admired, that he should emerge in Western art as the incarnation of male physical attractiveness, and that visual representations of his relationships with other men be regularly invested with homoerotic significance.

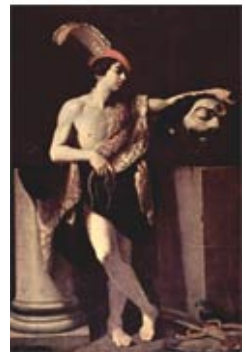
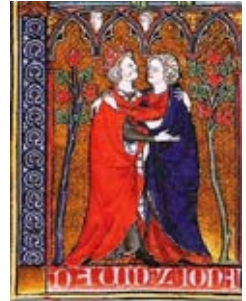
Michelangelo's David

The premiere representation of David is Michelangelo's fourteen-foot-tall statue, completed in 1504. Sculpted from a piece of perfectly white marble, a physically mature David holds a slingshot in one hand and focuses his thoughts as he prepares to enter the list against Goliath.

While David was presumably intended as a symbol of Florentine republican spirit (allegorically the giant represents Tyranny), its colossal, uncompromising nudity and its perfection of physical form have made it an icon of male sexual attractiveness.

Michelangelo shrewdly uses biblical tradition to sanction the glorification of the naked male body, justifying a reassertion of Greco-Roman aesthetics under the guise of Christian homiletics.

Complaining that handsome men like himself are expected to do all the work in sex, television's Al Bundy offers as his most telling case in point, "You don't ask the statue of David to move a little." Bundy's comment indicates the extent to which Michelangelo's David has been absorbed by popular culture as the icon of male physical perfection, the statue itself capable of supplying erotic satisfaction to the viewer.



Top: A fourteenth-century French depiction of David and Jonathan.

Above: *David Contemplating the Head of Goliath* (ca 1605) by Guido Reni.

In *Fully Exposed*, Emmanuel Cooper prints John S. Barrington's "Jack Cooper Posing as 'David'" (ca 1950), which presents the photographer's physical ideal in the pose of Michelangelo's statue, and Lea Andrews's eight-foot tall photographic self-portrait as Michelangelo's David (1987), in which the statue's groin is superimposed over the model's in a challenge to culture's idealization of erotic reality. Both use Michelangelo's sculpture to comment upon contemporary social fashioning of masculinity.

Whether transformed into a set of refrigerator magnets that allow the statue's naked figure to be variously dressed as a surfer boy, football player, or leather punk--or appropriated to advertise everything from health insurance to amyl nitrate--Michelangelo's David has become one of Western culture's most visible sexual fetishes.

When film and opera director Franco Zeffirelli commissioned from Tom of Finland a contemporary recension of Michelangelo's David, the artist produced a figure with broader chest, more prominent nipples, and a genital endowment "at least quadruple the size of the one Michelangelo gave him. And . . . instead of wearing a frown of determination, Tom's David slyly peeks at the viewer as if to say, 'I know what you're looking at!'"

Even in the process of parodying Michelangelo's David, Tom of Finland reaffirms the Renaissance statue as an erotic, particularly homoerotic, ideal.

David and Saul

David's name in Hebrew means "beloved," and the ambivalent nature of his relations with Saul, Goliath, and Jonathan in the biblical narrative has invited representation as well of his ability to arouse love or sexual desire in others.

By depicting Saul and David as two men in close contact wearing only jockstraps, for example, Robert Medley (b. 1905) not only comments upon the repressed homoerotic desire that possibly drove the older man alternately to persecute and then call to his side his attractive young rival but also, by transferring their rivalry to the tennis or handball court, suggests the underlying homoeroticism of many contemporary competitive sports.

David and Goliath

Not surprisingly, David's defeat of Goliath has witnessed an iconographic transformation nearly as complex as that associated with Michelangelo's David. Because the Bible calls attention to Goliath's awareness of David's beauty, some readers speculate that Goliath was defeated by the sight of David's beauty rather than by the stone that the boy fired from his slingshot.

Donatello's famous bronze (ca 1430-1440) presents David as a nude ephebe whose left foot stands triumphantly upon the severed head of his enemy. The ambisexual grace of the boy--coupled with the triumph of Cupid depicted on the defeated Philistine's helmet, and the curve of the helmet's plume along the inside of the naked boy's thigh, sinuously inching towards his buttocks--suggests a celebration of pederastic love.

Donatello's supposed representation of himself as Goliath initiated a tradition in which a homosexual artist depicts himself as the defeated giant, and his male beloved as the beautiful, victorious boy.

Caravaggio, for example, painted three versions of David with the head of Goliath, suggesting an obsession with the motif. In *David II* (ca 1606, Galleria Borghese), Caravaggio's lover Cecco Boneri posed as David, whose loosely fastened trousers call attention to his crotch, and whose sharply angled sword suggests sexual violence; the head of Goliath that the boy holds at arm length is clearly the artist's self-portrait.

Paul Cadmus's *Study for a David and Goliath* (1971) offers a playful variation upon this iconographic tradition, presenting a domestic scene in which Cadmus sits on the floor drawing, his back supported by the bed on which his lover, Jon Andersson, partly reclines.

The T-square that the naked Andersson holds to help the artist in his work becomes a sword, while the red scarf around Cadmus's neck suggests the bloody severing of the artist's/Goliath's head from his body.

Andersson, a dancer by profession, whose perfectly muscled body was drawn repeatedly by Cadmus in the course of their long partnership, grins malevolently at the viewer, possibly suggesting--in biographer David Leddick's words--"how beauty can undo the importance of art in an artist's life."

The Representation of David and the Artist's Sexual Orientation

Like the story of martyred St. Sebastian, the narrative of David's victory over Goliath provided biblical justification for the representation of naked male beauty of which numerous Renaissance artists, both gay and straight, availed themselves.

Too sensuous a representation of naked David, however, has proved enough to raise questions regarding an artist's sexual orientation, as in the cases of Aubin Vouet's depiction of an androgynous boy in *David Holding the Head of Goliath* (ca 1622-1626, Bordeaux) and Guido Reni's *David Contemplating the Head of Goliath* (ca 1605, Louvre).

In the latter, the teenaged boy's sensuality is emphasized by the rich fur draped across his torso, and by the unnecessarily jaunty plume in his fashionable cap. The head of Reni's Goliath is apparently a portrait of the artist's professional rival, Caravaggio, suggesting that the painting may be a comment upon what contemporaries perceived to be the sexual irregularities of Caravaggio's life.

Indeed, throughout the history of the motif, the severed head of the boy's adult male admirer suggests the danger of the gaze, whether biblically authorized or not, that David's naked beauty invites, making the motif one of the most psychologically complex in the history of the representation of desire.

David and Jonathan

Finally, the biblical narrative's emphasis upon David's relationship with Jonathan, the son of David's predecessor Saul, adds another homoerotic dimension to his representation. "The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David," the narrator records, "and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam. 18:1).

Later, when Saul's murderous jealousy causes his young rival to flee the court, the two friends suffer a poignant parting at which "they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded" (1 Sam. 20:41).

Jonathan's death alongside his father in battle with the Philistines occasions from David this powerful lament: "The beauty of Israel is slain upon the high places; how are the mighty fallen! . . . I am very distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love was wonderful, passing the love of women" (2 Sam. 1:19-26).

In the Middle Ages David and Jonathan's embrace became the Christian icon of male friendship, figuratively related to Jesus's sitting with the head of John, his beloved, laid against his chest. Numerous medieval manuscript illuminations depict them embracing or exchanging what was typologically considered to be the Christian kiss of peace, as for example in the early fourteenth century French *Somme le roi* (reproduced in Saslow).

But in the light of the biblical narrative's repeated emphasis upon David and Jonathan's emotionally

expansive and physically intimate relationship, the homoerotic possibility of such an embrace is impossible to discount, the viewer of such illustrations not always certain what he or she sees.

In 1983, the San Francisco chapter of Dignity celebrated its tenth anniversary by printing a poster-sized imitation of what appears to be a seventeenth-century Russian icon of David and Jonathan embracing, the organization's name providing an interpretive context that medieval manuscripts otherwise lack.

An even more telling example of such interpretive ambiguity is Sir Frederic Leighton's *Jonathan's Token to David*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1868, which depicts the incident narrated in 1 Samuel 20 wherein by the ruse of practicing archery with a servant boy, Jonathan alerts the outlaw David of the need to flee the murderous wrath of King Saul.

In *The Sexual Perspective* Emmanuel Cooper analyzes the homoerotic appeal of Leighton's Jonathan (who, significantly, repeats the pose of Michelangelo's David) and his servant boy, but fails to note that Jonathan's wistful gaze is directed off the canvas, presumably towards the retreating David whom Jonathan understands he will never see again.

The biblical narrative notes that "the lad" who waited on Jonathan and was essential to the lovers' stratagem "knew not anything: only Jonathan and David knew the matter" (1 Sam. 20:39), making him an excellent stand-in for the naive viewer: a witness to--yet oblivious of--the homoerotic drama of Leighton's painting and of so many other homoerotically suggestive representations of David in art.

Gay Composers

David's story, especially his lament for Jonathan following the latter's death in battle, has proved an inspiration to gay composers as well. In his autobiography, *Knowing When to Stop* (1994), composer Ned Rorem reports that in 1947, when he dared to set the lament to music, a classmate at New York's prestigious Juilliard School warned him that "the 'gay' text (young David bewailing to Jonathan: 'Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women') would outrage the faculty."

And, after failing to engage, first Igor Stravinsky and later Erik Satie as his collaborator on a ballet titled *David*, Jean Cocteau printed a David and Goliath drawing on the cover of the inaugural issue of *Le Mot* (1914).

Shortly before his death in 1990, Leonard Bernstein began what he described in his working papers as an opera on the "Saul, David, Jonathan Triangle" that would hinge "upon suggestions, lightly done," of both the father's and the son's sexual attraction to David. According to biographer Humphry Burton, Bernstein "even drafted the dialogue for a full-blown love scene between David and Jonathan." Like so many of Bernstein's other projects in his last years, however, the opera was not completed.

It would be more than ten years before gay audiences could hear a biblically-inspired oratorio on the subject of homosexual love: on May 30, 2001, the Gay Gotham Chorus, in conjunction with the Cosmopolitan Symphony Orchestra, premiered a choral version of Stefan Weisman's 1996 epic poem, *David and Jonathan*, which applies to his lover, Jonathan, David's line in the Psalter: "Of all men you are the most handsome, your lips are moist with grace."

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Raymond-Jean Frontain is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.