

# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

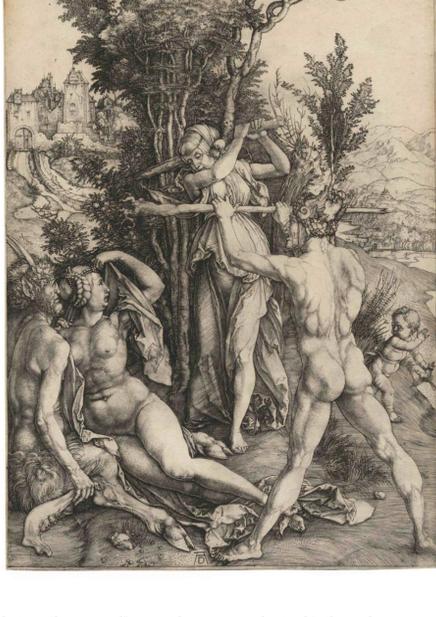
Distraction / Abwechslung  
1 May 2020

Was Dürer gay? The question is far less gratuitous as one might think. Granted, it is most likely to come up in the occasional piece of journalese whenever a newspaper is looking for some racy copy to accompany, say, Dürer's famous self-portrait drawing in Weimar.



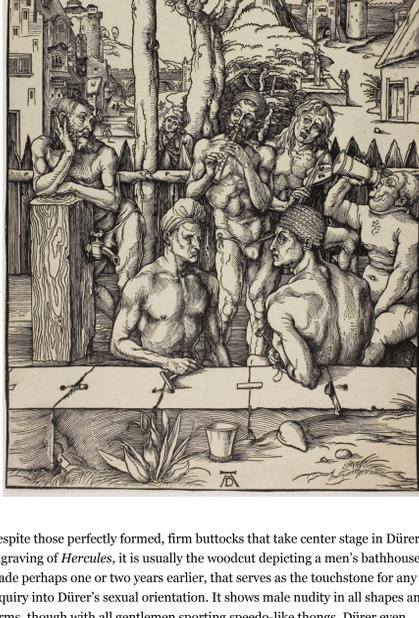
Yet the question also attracts more serious attention—most notably, of course, in academic subfields such as queer art history or within the scholarly LGBTQ community. Since I can't claim much expertise in either, I am using a fine recent article here by Bradley J. Cavallo as my guide in trying to summarize what recent scholarship has to say on the subject ("Albrecht Dürer's *The Men's Bathhouse* of 1496–1497: Problems of Sexual Signification," in *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, Fall 2016 [special issue: *New Queer Readings*], pp. 9–37; unless otherwise noted, all direct quotes in the following text are from Cavallo's essay).

However one approaches the question, it is important to always be aware of what the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer called one's own *Bedeutungshorizont* (horizon of meaning). It's hardly possible to escape the frame of reference that is one's own time. As L.P. Hartley wrote in the wonderful opening line of his 1953 novel *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Thomas Schauerte echoed this when he titled his recent biography on the Nuremberg master Dürer: *Das ferne Genie* (The Distant Genius; published in 2012), reminding us that Dürer's universal fame gives us an illusion of familiarity—with him, his work, and his world—that we simply cannot have. Schauerte describes this as a "paradox of closeness." The same pertains to the question of Dürer's homosexuality.



The term "homosexual" was not known nor understood in the modern sense during Dürer's time. The dichotomy between "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" is a product of the nineteenth century. Applying it to Dürer's period would therefore—as Cavallo writes in contemporary scholarly lingo—threaten "to overlay the historical record with a post-modern binary."

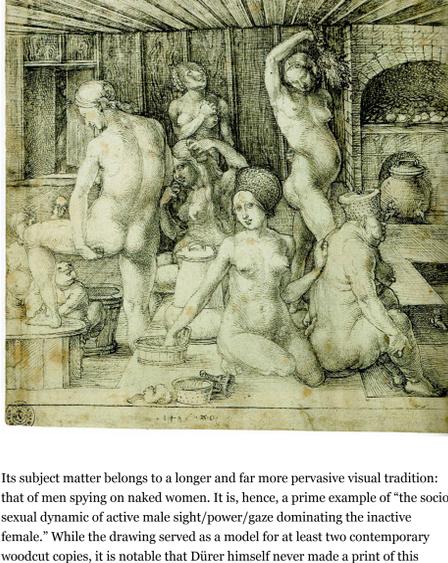
Describing artworks or artists in such a way "introduces a misleading anachronistic lexicon that obscures historical modalities of being. No such terms as 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual' existed in the early modern period of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, let alone terms encompassing enough to connote sexual attraction, orientation, and a self-instantiating, subjective identity based upon physical desire."



Despite those perfectly formed, firm buttocks that take center stage in Dürer's engraving of *Hercules*, it is usually the woodcut depicting a men's bathhouse, made perhaps one or two years earlier, that serves as the touchstone for any inquiry into Dürer's sexual orientation. It shows male nudity in all shapes and forms, though with all gentlemen sporting speedo-like thongs. Dürer even shows a sense of humor when positioning a cock and spout for water in front of the nether regions of the man leaning on an upright wooden block to the left.



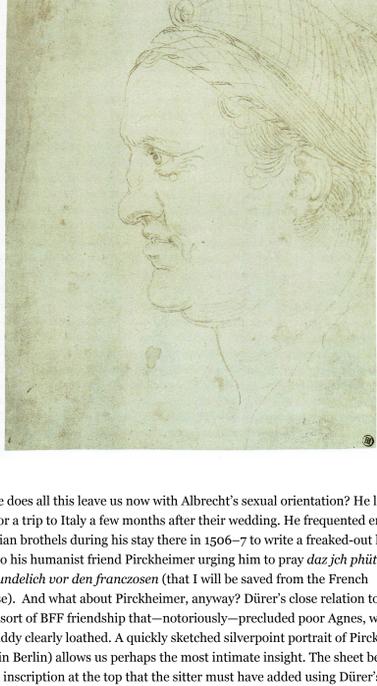
In a certain way, his famous drawing *The Women's Bath*, dated 1496 (Kunsthalle Bremen), can be seen as a pendant to the woodcut.



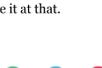
Its subject matter belongs to a longer and far more pervasive visual tradition: that of men spying on naked women. It is, hence, a prime example of "the socio-sexual dynamic of active male sight/power/gaze dominating the inactive female." While the drawing served as a model for at least two contemporary woodcut copies, it is notable that Dürer himself never made a print of this subject. A decade earlier, an engraving by Lower Rhenish Master PM had already shown a women's bath in print, and during the 1530s and 40s Sebald Beham made engravings as well as a circular woodcut of the subject. Dürer's *Men's Bathhouse*, on the other hand, stands out by boldly adapting this prevalent late medieval iconographic tradition of the women's bath and changing it into an all-male scene. It is large, masterfully cut, and must have been, judging by the many surviving impressions from the worn-out, wormhole-ridden block, printed in considerable quantities. Yet it has no precursor and practically no successor in printed form (with the exception of two small, poorly cut prints used as title pages in books). But is what we see really an imagined "homo-topia"? Cavallo is circumspect and proposes "an interdisciplinary synthesis of art historical and gender/sexuality historiography" that ultimately "reveals the informative interplay of classicism and 'homosexual' eroticism evident within the artwork and before the existence of such a categorization." Yes, we do see "a homosocial gathering of men gazing upon other men"—"suggestively salacious but ambiguous in intent." Yet the setting of the bathhouse provided "the perfect visual context in which an artist could titillate viewers . . . without incurring accusations of artistic or sexual impropriety."

When using images as illustrations of a past—real or imagined—it is once again necessary to take the historical context into account. As it turns out, the popularity of bathhouse scenes (to which the many depictions of the mythical "Fountain of Youth" dating from the first half of the sixteenth century can also be added) coincides with the very moment in history when people actually started to shy away from them. It was a period of social distancing! Germany saw a recurrent outbreak of the plague in 1494. It had arrived in Nuremberg by August and led to nearly 10,000 deaths (a third of the city's population). Probably in response to this threat, Dürer, who had married Agnes Frey only on July 7, hastily departed south. The other and far longer lasting pandemic at the time was syphilis. This was a new threat, in all likelihood brought to Europe from the Americas by Christopher Columbus and his crewmen. The first written records of an outbreak are from Naples and date from 1494/95. Since it happened during an invasion of French troops, it became known as the "French disease," a name that stuck (as did that of the "Great Pox"). The poor hygienic standards in the bathhouses made them hotspots for infections. What contributed further to the spread of this disease was the fact that many of those late medieval bathhouses were open to both sexes and, more often than not, became, to use today's irresistible academic lingo again, "a space of some moral ambiguity" and a "site of bodily relaxation and enjoyment." By 1523 Erasmus observed that "twenty-five years ago nothing was more customary among the [people of Brabant] than public steam baths. Now these are out of fashion everywhere, for the new pox has taught us to let them alone." The standards of personal hygiene went downward from there for centuries to come.

This shows that the majority of the depictions of public bathing in art date from a time when this, "one of the oldest, continuously practiced social traditions to have survived from classical antiquity," began to disappear. They are therefore instilled with a retrospective, nostalgic element, showing something that is ceasing to be part of everyday life. For artists, however, bathhouses now became a new pretext for allowing the depiction of male and female nudity—in the same way that art had always used subjects from mythology (Judgement of Paris, Venus) or religion (Adam and Eve, Lot and His Daughters) for the same purpose. As we have seen, Dürer could employ this as a "cover" when exhibiting the multitude of male nudity in his woodcut.



Where does all this leave us now with Albrecht's sexual orientation? He left his wife for a trip to Italy a few months after their wedding. He frequented enough Venetian brothels during his stay there in 1506–7 to write a freaked-out letter back to his humanist friend Pirckheimer urging him to pray *daz jeh phüt wird und sundelich vor den frantzosen* (that I will be saved from the French disease). And what about Pirckheimer, anyway? Dürer's close relation to him was a sort of BFF friendship that—notoriously—precluded poor Agnes, whom his buddy clearly loathed. A quickly sketched silverpoint portrait of Pirckheimer (now in Berlin) allows us perhaps the most intimate insight. The sheet bears a Greek inscription at the top that the sifter must have added using Dürer's stylus (since Dürer neither read nor wrote Greek or Latin): ἀρρενοῦς ἢ φιλῆ ἔξ τῶν πρῶκτόν. I wanted to elegantly refer to: ἀρρενοῦς, and Google to translate this but realized that, probably thanks to incorrect family filters, it does not come out right; I therefore have to provide the correct idiomatic translation myself: "with a cock up his ass." So, was he? Were they? Bradley Cavallo's answer to those delicate questions is appropriately sensitive when he suggests "a subtle but significant enlargement in the scope of Dürer's sexuality that complicates an understanding of his relationships with his patron Pirckheimer and his wife Agnes." Let's leave it at that.



Dürer



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