

Zeus's Beloved: Ganymede, Homoeroticism, and Florentine Pederasty in Renaissance Art

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Ganymede has served as a symbol of homosexual desire in the visual arts since antiquity—Ganymede's homoerotic tradition is likely almost as old as the myth itself. The fifteenth century marks the beginning of the most prolific era for Ganymede iconography; between the Renaissance and early Baroque periods, the myth of Ganymede becomes the subject of at least 200 surviving or recorded works of art.¹ In their art and lives, many notable Renaissance artists were highly influenced by the birth of Florentine Neoplatonism in the fifteenth century. Among other effects, the rise of Neoplatonism fostered a renewed curiosity about same-sex relationships. The revival of Plato's ideas about the divine power of love between men legitimized homosexual desire as a serious topic of spiritual and artistic investigation; as a side effect, Renaissance depictions of male bodies take a turn for the homoerotic. Meanwhile, the persistence of sodomy laws in Italian art centres like Florence and Venice created an unfavourable atmosphere for flagrant artistic expression of these desires. In the face of limited options, artists often opted to hide their homoerotic themes and imagery beneath the thin shroud of mythological or religious context. Pagan figures like Apollo and

¹ James M. Saslow, "Ganymede in Renaissance Art: Five Studies in the Development of a Homoerotic Iconology (Homosexuality, Italy, Iconography)" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 1, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/303259993?pqorigsite=primo&parentSessionId=pKq4HtB65lrN xg3WueeAv2PwkVmRa0fLpIl%2BLIofd1w%3D>.

Narcissus, as well as biblical ones like David and Saint Sebastian, all became popular vessels for homoerotic expressions. The myth of Ganymede, however, was especially popular because of its compatibility with the resurrected Florentine version of Greek pederasty.²

In this study, I intend to focus on Ganymede alone as an icon for queer desire and a symbol for the passive beloved of the Greek tradition. In terms of iconography, the figure of Ganymede is important not only because of his significant presence in the history of queer art; analyzing Renaissance artists' allegorical uses of Ganymede's abduction provides uniquely rich insight into contemporary Neoplatonist ideas about love between men, and the virtues of the pederastic, lover-beloved relationship dynamic.

The Italian Renaissance marks the first time that themes of homoeroticism and homosexual desire rise to prominence in art since classical antiquity. The Christian zeal that characterized much of the Middle Ages accounts for the practical non-existence of homosexuality, or indeed any sexual subject matter, in the art of the period. While the Christianization of the Roman Empire had begun decades earlier under Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the official religion of Rome in 381 CE during the reign of Theodosius. Nine years later, the Theodosian Code of 390 CE made sexual activities between men punishable by death.³ Significantly, Theodosius decreed that those found guilty of the crime of homosexuality should be burned, which historically had been a punishment reserved for crimes of heresy.

² James Smalls, *Homosexuality in Art* (New York: Parkstone International, 2002), 72, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mtroyal-ebooks/detail.action?docID=915178>.

³ Smalls, 34.

The extreme measures taken against so-called sexual deviancy by early Christian authorities are a far-cry from the hedonism that characterized the Greco-Roman era. Most of what we know about the sexual habits and customs of the Greeks is derived from surviving literature, art, and of course, myth. Alongside tales of divine power and heroism, Greek myths also address the numerous sexual adventures of the gods, the nature of which were both hetero and homosexual, and occasionally incestuous or bestial. Myths about doomed love, frequently between gods and mortals, were particularly popular as subjects for all kinds of art including vase paintings, sculpture, and frescoes.

Greek mythology offers many archetypes for romantic and sexual relationships between men—Apollo for instance is involved in a plethora of queer relationships—but the story of Zeus and Ganymede is perhaps the most replicated scene related to homosexual desire in Greek art.⁴ In the myth, Ganymede, a young Phrygian shepherd described by Homer as “the fairest of mortal men,” is abducted by Zeus to serve as a cupbearer in Olympus.⁵ In Book 10 of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid, referring to Zeus by his Roman titles, recounts the abduction:

The king of all the Gods once burned with love for Ganymede of Phrygia. He found a shape more pleasing even than his own. Jove would not take the form of any bird, except the eagle's, able to sustain the weight of his own thunderbolts. Without delay, Jove on fictitious eagle wings, stole and flew off with that loved Trojan boy: who even to this day, against the will of Juno, mingles nectar in the cups of his protector, mighty Jupiter.⁶

In some versions of the myth, Ganymede's role as cupbearer remains mostly ceremonial, while other authors like Theognis ascribe more sexual meaning to Zeus's interest in the boy's beauty in lines such as, “A pleasant thing hath [loving boys] ever been since Ganymede was loved of the

⁴ Smalls, 11.

⁵ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 20: 233.

⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Brookes Moore, vol. 10 (Boston: Cornhill Publishing, 1922), ll. 155–61, <https://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidMetamorphoses1.html>.

great Son of Cronus, the king of the Immortals, who seized and brought him to Olympus and made him a God.”⁷ Over time, the more erotic interpretation appears to dominate; at some point, all depictions of Zeus and Ganymede on red-figure vases feature Ganymede holding a cockerel, which was a gift commonly given by older Greek men to young boys who they sought a relationship with.⁸ This gifting practice was part of the ancient Greek social institution of pederasty, which refers to a homoerotic and sexual relationship between an adult male (the *erastes*, or active lover), and an adolescent boy (the *eromenos*, or passive beloved).⁹

Given this context, the gradual eroticization I described earlier can also be characterized as a rise in pederastic influence on the myth. Whether the myth itself is pederastic in origin has been highly debated by scholars, but regardless of origin, according to Vernon Provencal, “[b]y the fifth century [BCE], Zeus’ abduction of the handsome youth Ganymede was being cited as the origin of pederasty, which had become institutionalized among the Greek aristocracy.”¹⁰ An Attic red-figure kylix attributed to the Penthesilea Painter (c. 460-40 BCE) illustrates one example of an erotic, pederastic treatment of the subject. Here, Zeus, in the role of the *erastes*, is depicted in “amorous pursuit” of Ganymede, the younger *eromenos*.¹¹ This depiction also features the aforementioned cockerel motif as a symbol indicating the pederastic nature of the two figures’ relationship. Interestingly, all extant renditions of the Zeus and Ganymede myth in ancient vase paintings represent Zeus in human form rather than as an eagle; in later Renaissance

⁷ Theognis, “The Elegiac Poems of Theognis,” in *Elegy and Iambus*, trans. J.M. Edmonds, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), ll. 1345–50, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0479%3Avolume%3D1%3Atext%3D11%3Asection%3D2#note-link329>.

⁸ Saslow, “Ganymede,” 6.

⁹ Vernon Provencal, “Glukus Himeros: Pederastic Influence on the Myth of Ganymede,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, no. 3/4 (2005): 90, https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v49n03_04.

¹⁰ Provencal, 90.

¹¹ Provencal, 91.

depictions, the opposite becomes true. Artistic evidence, then, shows that a homoerotic, pederastic version of the myth of Ganymede was dominant in ancient depictions of the subject.



Figure 1. Penthesilea Painter, *Kylix with Zeus and Ganymede*, c. 460-440 BCE. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Ferrara, Italy.

The triumph of the sexual interpretation of the Zeus and Ganymede myth carries over into the art of the Renaissance era when renewed interest in Classical Antiquity and humanism allows for homoeroticism to re-emerge in cities like Florence. While same-sex unions were considered sodomy as “both a sin against God and a crime against the state” and as such were still punishable by death, executions were seldom enacted. By the mid-fifteenth century,

Florence had become notorious for sodomy—so notorious, in fact, that the German verb for sex between men was *florenzen*.¹²

An early Renaissance work that has inspired endless discussion by art historians, much of which is dominated by the nature of its perceived homoeroticism, is Donatello's enigmatic *David* (1446-60). While the bronze is acknowledged to be the first free-standing nude sculpture since antiquity, its stylistic ambiguity makes it difficult to determine the extent to which the *David's* superficial appearance is influenced by classicism. Donatello demonstrates further classical influence through his use of the ancient hollow-casted bronze technique and adoption of the *contrapposto* pose, but his rendering of David's body, standing in triumph over the slain Goliath, abandons the idealized masculinity of classical Greek and Roman sculptures (see fig. 2). Here the biblical hero's physical form evokes none of the god-like strength and presence of the *Apollo Belvedere* (c. 330 BCE), for example. Instead, *David's* apparent youth toes the line of prepubescent—this version of David is very clearly still a boy. The youthful, effeminate appearance of Donatello's bronze *David* alone is enough to set him apart as an object of sexual desire because it effectively links the figure to the homoerotic Greek pederastic tradition, casting David in the role of a beloved youth, or *eromenos*. According to Michael Rocke, following the Greek tradition, the predominant form of homosexual behaviour in Renaissance Florence was similarly pederastic, which as I will discuss in more detail later in this paper, was likely due to Renaissance philosopher's revival of classical ideas about the practice.¹³ Additionally, if one is to believe popular rumours, Donatello tended to select his apprentices based “primarily on good

¹² James M. Saslow, “The Desiring Eye,” in *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 150, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118391488.ch6>.

¹³ Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 88, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mtroyal-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4701920>.

looks rather than on talent,” an anecdote that tentatively links both the interests of the artist himself and the Florentine apprenticeship system to pederasty.¹⁴

All this considered, what is the relevance of David, a biblical character, in a study interested in the pagan myth of Ganymede? Donatello’s *David* is certainly an example of homoerotic art in its own right based solely on the figure’s visual emulation of the pederastic beloved. However, I would take this a step further by arguing that Donatello’s sculpture is itself an evocation of the myth of Ganymede. One element of the work that I have not yet discussed, but that feels strikingly sexual, is the head of Goliath between David’s legs, and the long feather of his helmet stretching upwards to caress the youth’s inner thigh. In his discussion of the sculpture, James Saslow reminds us of the relationship between feathers and the Zeus-eagle of the Ganymede myth. Likewise, the youthful David reminds one of Ganymede himself, who as we have already discovered, is similarly linked to the pederastic beloved in the post-Homeric, eroticized versions of his abduction by Zeus. Perhaps then, one reading of Donatello’s *David* might be that metaphorically, Goliath, like Zeus in the Ganymede myth, has “lost his head” over a beautiful youth.¹⁵ A Ganymedean interpretation of *David* is given more plausibility by the other connections art historians have made between the biblical David represented in Donatello’s work and potential pagan influences on his appearance. Kenneth Clark, for example, characterizes the figure as a “transformation of the king of Israel into a young Greek god,” noting in particular *David*’s resemblance to Dionysian statues with his “dreamy smile and

¹⁴ Smalls, *Homosexuality in Art*, 57.

¹⁵ James M. Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (Toronto: Penguin, 1999), 83; Smalls, *Homosexuality in Art*, 57.

flexible pose.”¹⁶ Others identify similarities to Hermes, or even Eros.¹⁷ Whether *David*’s appearance is intentionally homoerotic on Donatello’s part is probably impossible to determine, as Peter Weller’s recount of decades-long debates about the topic between scholars demonstrates.¹⁸ Regardless of intent, the work serves as a useful tool to examine how Renaissance art might have functioned to reinforce the pederastic model of homosexual relationships. Likewise, the connections one can draw between *David* and Ganymede demonstrate how mythological themes and narratives can be identified in the more subtle details of artworks.

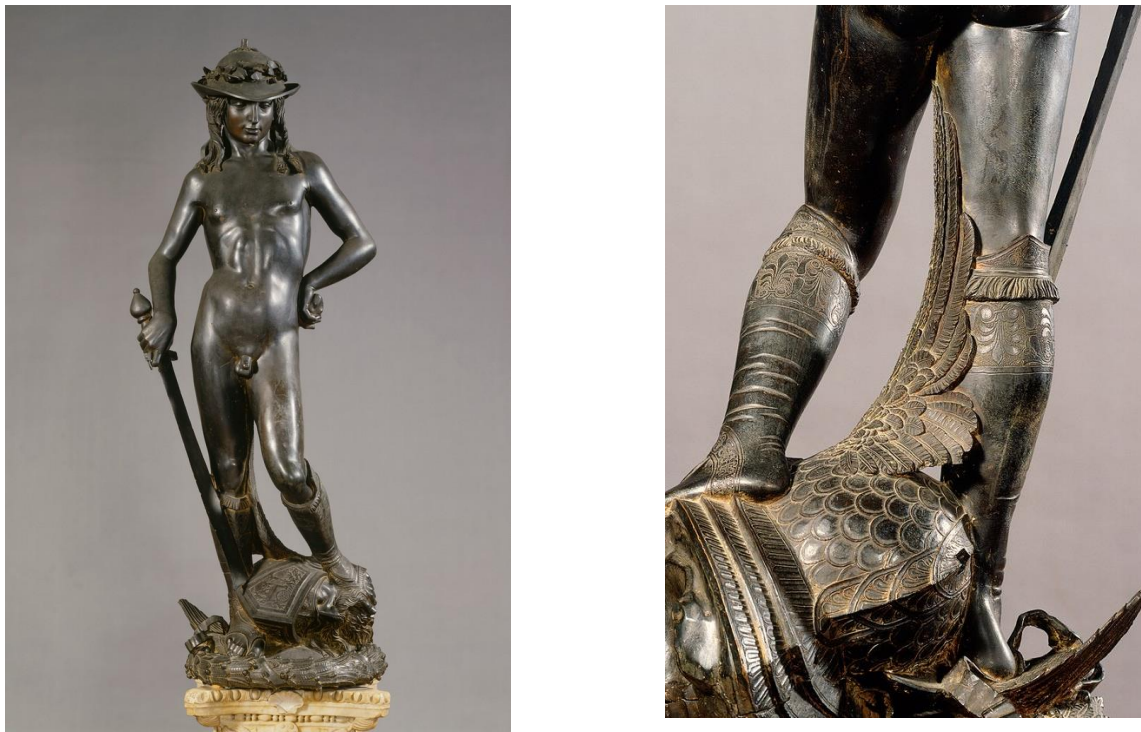


Figure 2. Donatello, *David*, c. 1430 – 1432, bronze, Museo Nazionale Del Bargello, Florence.

¹⁶ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study In Ideal Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 54, <http://archive.org/details/nudestudyinideal00clar>.

¹⁷ Terrance Walsh, “Donatello’s *David*, or Flesh Made Spirit,” *Religion and the Arts* 1, no. 3 (1996): 12–14, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852996X00504>.

¹⁸ Peter Weller, “A Reassessment in Historiography and Gender: Donatello’s Bronze ‘*David*’ in the Twenty-First Century,” *Artibus et Historiae* 33, no. 65 (2012): 56–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23509711>.

While the Ganymede reading of Donatello's work is somewhat speculative, there are several overt examples of the Zeus and Ganymede myth in Renaissance art with similarly distinct homoerotic qualities. As a side effect of the constant speculation surrounding the artist's sexuality and personal life, Michelangelo's *The Rape of Ganymede* drawing is arguably the most famous depiction of the narrative. The *Ganymede* drawing was made as part of a series of gift drawings for young aristocrat Tommaso de' Cavalieri, who Michelangelo had an emotionally intense relationship with in the 1530s. The drawing, representing the moment of the young Phrygian's abduction by the Zeus-eagle, soon inspired countless copies and adaptations, which in Saslow's opinion, establish Michelangelo's rendition as "by far the most influential single illustration of this myth in Renaissance art."¹⁹

The pose of the two figures has Ganymede caught in the talons of the Zeus-eagle, who forcefully spreads his legs into a lewd, vulnerable position, unsubtly implying the airborne sexual act that may be occurring between them. This rather violent position is juxtaposed by Ganymede's calm, almost euphoric expression as he drapes his arms languidly across the eagle's back and left wing. Svetlana Alpers aptly describes Michelangelo's representation of the scene as "Ganymede succumbing to an ecstatic swoon even while in the position of struggling against the bird."²⁰ As Saslow hinted at, this same erotic pose is referenced in later Renaissance works, one example being a 1540 painting, also titled *The Rape of Ganymede*, by an artist referred to as Master of Volterra (see fig. 4). Looser adaptations of the pose appear to persist into the early Baroque period as well in works like *The Abduction of Ganymede by Jupiter* (1644) by French

¹⁹ Saslow, "Ganymede," 50.

²⁰ Svetlana L. Alpers, "Manner and Meaning in Some Rubens Mythologies," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30 (1967): 275, <https://doi.org/10.2307/750746>.

painter Eustache Le Sueur (see fig. 5). It is worth noting that in these adaptations, Ganymede's physique bears resemblance to the slender, underdeveloped figure of Donatello's *David*; the thick musculature of Michelangelo's Ganymede seems to be atypical during the Renaissance and can likely be attributed to the artist's style.



Figure 3. Giulio Clovio, *Ganymede*, c. 1540, copy after Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1532, black chalk on paper. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure 4. Master of Volterra, *The Rape of Ganymede*, 1540, oil on wood. Cyfarthfa Castle Museum.



Figure 5. Eustache Le Sueur, *The Abduction of Ganymede by Jupiter*, 1644, oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

The *Ganymede* drawing and its companions, accompanied by numerous letters and poems, are undoubtedly an expression of Michelangelo's intimate feelings towards Cavalieri, who was 34 years his junior.²¹ However, it would be a mistake to write off the homoeroticism of the *Ganymede* drawing as a simple expression of sexual desire on Michelangelo's part. Although it is widely accepted that Michelangelo was homosexually oriented in one way or another, because his feelings towards other men were intrinsically tied to contemporary Neoplatonist philosophies, discussing the homoerotic themes in his work requires more nuance than our modern categories of sexuality allow for. Both James Smalls and Maria Ruvoldt describe Michelangelo's expressions of love as 'tortured,' Smalls' reasoning being that the artist's sexual

²¹ Smalls, *Homosexuality in Art*, 61c.

desires were at war with Catholicism's denial of homosexuality, while Ruvoldt's view is that he was struggling to rise to the spiritual effects of Platonic love.²² My own analysis of Michelangelo's visual art as well as his poetry is in agreement with Ruvoldt's interpretation, though Catholic guilt may have also played a role. In any case, what is significant about Michelangelo's use of the Zeus and Ganymede myth as personal imagery is that it provides insight into what the motivations and ideologies behind homoerotic art may have been for Neoplatonist artists as a collective.

Fifteenth-century philosopher Marcilio Ficino's (1433-1499) interpretations of works like Plato's *Symposium* were crucial in setting the "homoerotic tenor" of the Renaissance. In Neoplatonic thought, as dictated by Ficino, love is understood as a journey of ascension from earthly physical desire to spiritual contemplation, which is "initiated by the sight of beauty."²³ As it relates to sexuality, 'the sight of beauty' can be taken to mean the sight of the beloved (the *eromenos*). Ruvoldt describes this so-called journey rather succinctly:

The trajectory of love had two potential outcomes: a torturous experience of frustrated desire on earth or an ecstatic connection to heaven. Sexual desire, the recognition of the attractions of the physical, is the necessary first step on the ladder of love, but it must be suppressed; the lover must overcome physical desire, direct his attention toward the higher forms of love and beauty present in his beloved, and respond with a creative act . . . in Neoplatonic thought the forms of creativity are as various as the forms of love, ascending in order from physical reproduction to the highest modes of procreation: the products of intellect.²⁴

The creative and intellectual focus of the latter half of Ruvoldt's descriptions calls to mind Xenophon's fourth century BCE interpretation of Zeus's love for Ganymede as intellectual rather

²² Smalls, 61b; Maria Ruvoldt, "Michelangelo's Dream," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003): 105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177328>.

²³ Ruvoldt, "Michelangelo's Dream," 105; Smalls, *Homosexuality in Art*, 54b-56.

²⁴ Ruvoldt, 105.

than sexual, claiming that “in the case of Ganymede, it was not his person but his spiritual character . . . that influenced Zeus to carry him up to Olympus.”²⁵ Not only do we know from contemporary sources that Michelangelo was a Neoplatonist; we also have explicit evidence that he endorsed this Platonic model of love from his own poems. Here, he makes a distinction between the debasing effect of love for women, and the exalting effect of love for other men:

Love stirs and wakes us, and feathers our wings;
and from that first step, with which it's not satisfied,
the soul can mount up and rise to its creator.
The love I speak of aspires to the heights;
woman is too different from that, and it's not worthy
of a wise and manly heart to burn for her.
One love draws toward heaven, the other draws down
to earth;
one dwells in the soul, the other in the senses,
and draws its bow at base and vile things.²⁶

Michelangelo's references to feathers, wings, and flight towards the heavens remind us again of Zeus's abduction of Ganymede. Supposing then that the drawing speaks this Neoplatonic language of love, Michelangelo's *The Rape of Ganymede* can be read as a representation of the artist's desire to overcome his 'torturous' physical passions—his sexual desire towards Cavalieri and other young men—and ascend to an intellectual or spiritual form of love. Lastly, it should be noted that while Platonic love, as described by Ficino and Xenophon, champions a nonsexual version of the pederastic relationship, the inherent power dynamic of the arrangement is still reinforced. The passive beloved's purpose is still to satisfy the desires of his older lover, the only difference is that in Neoplatonist thought, these desires are spiritual or intellectual rather than sexual. So, while the literal narrative of the Zeus and Ganymede myth expresses homoeroticism,

²⁵ Provencal, “Glukus Himeros,” 92.

²⁶ James M. Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 440, ll. 6–14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vm6x9>.

the figurative narrative is the journey to divine communion through love. Functionally, the allegory upholds the Florentine pederastic model.



Figure 8. Pierre Julien, *Ganymede*, 1785, marble, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 9. *Antinous Farnese*, c. 130-37, marble, Naples National Archaeological Museum.

By the nineteenth century, Ganymede is replaced as the quintessential symbol for homosexual love and desire by a new icon: Antinous, the deified young lover of the Roman emperor Hadrian. The most likely cause for the decline in Ganymede's popularity is a gradual movement away from the Greek pederastic model for relationships between men. There is visual evidence for this in Ganymede's shift in appearance in eighteenth and nineteenth century

paintings, where he is still youthful, but possesses a noticeably more masculine figure (see fig. 8). Antinous is depicted similarly, as a handsome young man whose physique emulates the classical convention of idealized athleticism (see fig. 9). While Antinous's rise to popularity marks a cultural shift away from the troubling pedophilic aspect of the *erastes-eromenos* or lover-beloved dynamic, the hierarchical nature of his relationship with emperor Hadrian means that as an icon for homosexual love, he functions similarly to Ganymede. In fact, their relationship is sometimes considered a real-life counterpart to Zeus and Ganymede's.²⁷

Ganymede's iconographic function, as I've demonstrated throughout this analysis, is ultimately to visually reinforce the institution of pederasty in its various historical conceptions. In ancient Greek art, the dominance of the erotic, pederastic version of the myth of Ganymede coincides with the institutionalization of pederasty among the Greek aristocracy, indicating that the practice was partially justified by its supposed mythological origin. Similarly, when Ganymedeian imagery re-emerges during the Renaissance in the works of artists like Donatello and Michelangelo, it does so alongside the rise of Neoplatonic ideals about love and desire between men, suggesting that the Zeus-Ganymede myth was a popular visual allegory for the revived Florentine pederastic model. In both instances, artistic depictions of the myth uphold the normative model for homosexual relationships between a dominant adult lover and his submissive young beloved, legitimizing the inherent power imbalance of these arrangements.

Labelling the myth of Ganymede as a symbolic means for maintaining a dominant social structure may come across as an overly grim way to characterize one of the most iconic figures in the relatively limited history of queer art. While it is tempting to look at the extant illustrations of Zeus and Ganymede as eroticism for eroticism's sake, it would be a mistake to erase or

²⁷ Smalls, *Homosexuality in Art*, 27a.

explain away the less ‘sexy’ aspects of Ganymedeian iconography in western culture simply because our modern sensibilities may struggle to grapple with them. If we are to continue sensationalizing the Italian Renaissance as a brief window in history where male same-sex love was exalted in both art and life, we must also contend with the potentially discomfoting realities of this exaltation.

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