The English Art Critic Brian Sewell famously said the body in art has been a shifting manifestation. Always defying an absolute.

We are living in a time of change in how gender is perceived. No longer are young people constrained by notions of masculinity or femininity. This may appear radical and unique, but history has shown us there have been obviations in how gender has been experienced. This is most apparent in art.

Consider the images on the screen. These works show a traditional image of men. Beards and unrefined features. But in the same era, there is a contrast. These works show an ambiguous representation of men, feminine some might say, languid figures.

My research examines what influenced these depictions. What aspects of the society factored into the creations, ultimately asking what societal factors influenced the creation of these works?

In conducting this research, I took a two-step process. The first phase was a literature review, investigating works regarding the Italian renaissance to understand the culture. One of the foundational texts I studied was the Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, published by Jacob Burkhard in 1558. Essentially, I was determining features of the society that may have lead painters to certain ideas. Really, the literature showed three themes became apparent as potential influences.

The first was philosophy and the philosophy of humanism. It refers to a revival of antiquity and the study of studio habitats and academic discourses of the classical age. Another prominent theme was the prevalence of same-sex attraction. Michael Rorke's 1990 book Forbidden Friendships makes the fascinating point that male relationships in the renaissance were particularly prevalent and accepted. A potential hypothesis arose where I considered that perhaps in painting men in a more desirable way, it was an appeal to homosexual love.

The final point I want to raise is the rise of mannerisms. Mannerism refers to a style of theatrical painting. If we consider these late medieval works, we see a staunch, conservative depiction of the body. Mannerism was a transition to the theatrical, the comedic representation of the body, brought about by new methods of studying the body.

The second phase of the research was conducted as a content analysis. The content analysis involved isolating individual pieces of data and testing them against a framework. In my case, I was isolating ten works from the period of 1450-1550 and testing them against a framework developed by Archer to determine which were more feminine and which were more masculine. In conducting the research, I wanted to select ten works to indicate a basis for further research.

At the conclusion of the content analysis, three works emerged as being clear depictions of ambiguous representations. These include Albrecht Durers Portrait of the Artist. Raphaels Portrait of Bindo Altoviti and Bronzinos Portrait of St Sebastian.

The final stage of my research was conducting individual analysis of each painting to determine if they had associations with themes raised earlier. I was determining their relation to humanism, whether the artist was same-sex attracted or they were indicative of a broader shift in painting.

In investigating this, the research did align with my hypothesis. In the case of all the artists represented, they existed in humanist circles, where the emphasis on masculine identity would become clear. The second is the prevalence of same-sex attraction, in the case of Bronzino and Durer, there are a number of letters that show the men were involved in same-sex relations or a culture where homosexuality was endorsed. Finally, we see the influence of mannerist painting. This is not as clear in Durer, but in the Raphael and certainly the Bronzino, this is very apparent.

Of course, in any work of art history, there is bound to be a level of subjectivity. How you respond to art is different to how I respond to art. One of the main issues that arose in this study was the potential for bias. The way I navigated this is by having two third parties conduct the analysis.

Both showed similar results. The second issue that arose is the problem of applying a modern framework to classical paintings. Who are we to restrict the figures of th past to modern standards? We will never know entirely the truths of that era. But through using history to enhance our understanding of today, the true worth of art becomes known to us.

Some may ask, what is the worth of this research? Certainly compared to my peers today conducting research in the fields of science and sociology, it is easy to question its importance. This research has personal importance. Australia has an insidious culture of masculine expectations.

I, in my teenage years continually questioned my masculinity. This research shows that such ideas are nonsensical. This research showed that expectations of masculinity have changed and evolved pursuant to societal ideas. And just as our own societal perceptions shift, they will continue to do so.

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