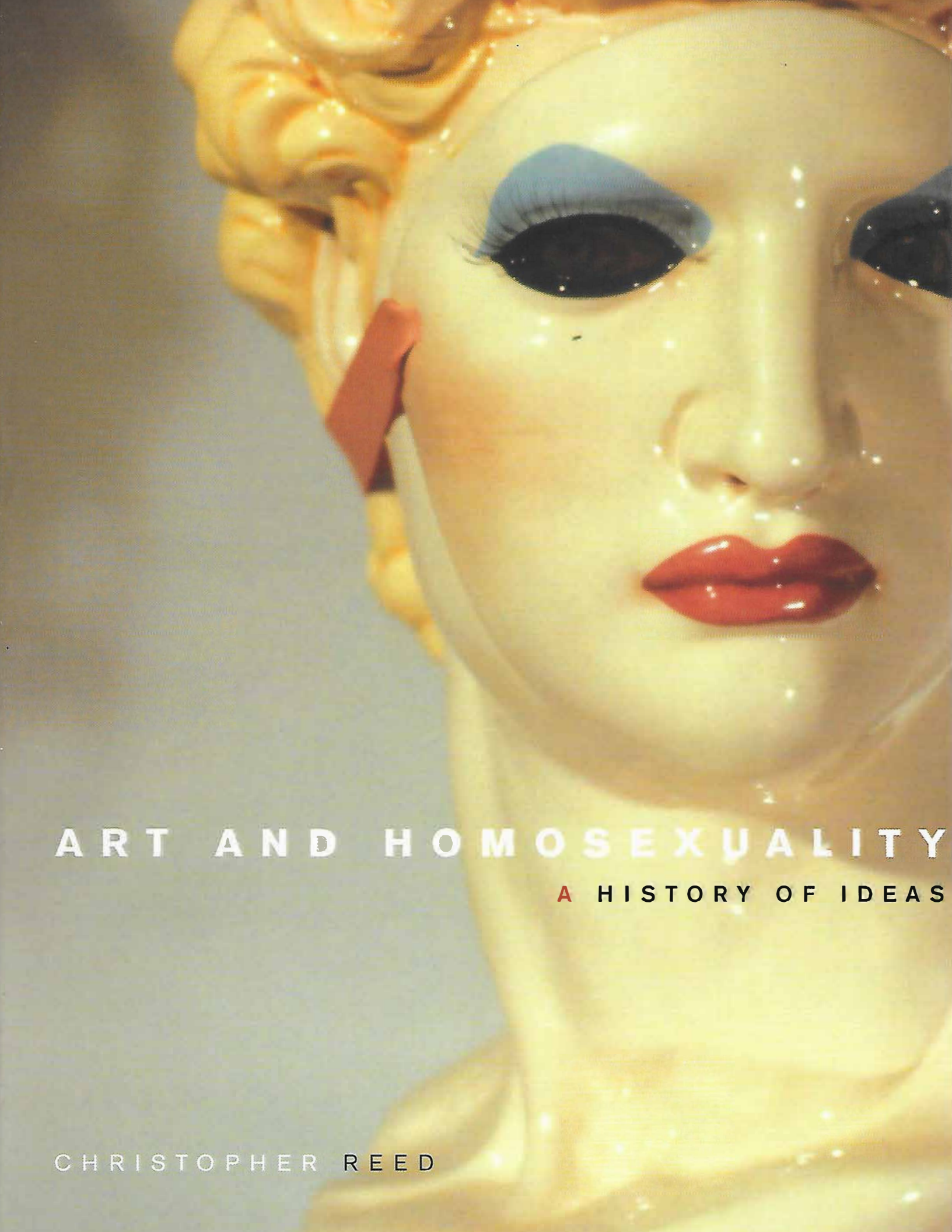

# ART AND HOMOSEXUALITY

## A HISTORY OF IDEAS

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CHAPTER 3

# INVENTING THE MODERN

## ART AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

### ARTISTS AT MID-CENTURY

The penalties associated with straightforwardly avowing deviant sexual behavior ensure that much remains unknown about the sex life of individual nineteenth-century artists or critics. By the end of the century, the practice of analyzing sexual behavior to understand personality was sufficiently established to produce detailed case studies, some of which described artists, but these were kept anonymous to protect their subjects. Around 1890, however, John Addington Symonds (1840–93), the historian of Renaissance art (see chapter 2) and Havelock Ellis's collaborator, wrote a study of his own "psychological condition," which detailed both his childhood homoerotic experiences and his adult relationships with men. Symonds produced this remarkable memoir in 1889 knowing he could not publish it (it appeared only in 1984), but hoping that some "scientific student of humanity" in the future "will appreciate my effort to be sincere." Well versed in the new theories of sexology, Symonds

described his homoerotic desires as an innate part of his character, but he also defended the moral value of his homoerotic impulses. Drawing on the writings of two contemporary poets, the American Walt Whitman and the Englishman Edward Carpenter, Symonds argued that his sexuality led him to long-lasting intimacy with men of diverse nationalities and classes whom he would never otherwise have known. For Symonds, these bonds heralded the dawn of a modern return to the democratic ideals of the Greeks, and he used his expertise in classical and Renaissance art to argue that earlier eras had recognized and even welcomed the impulses and emotions he experienced. A much-quoted appendix to his *Life of Michelangelo* (1892) engaged recent sexological studies of the artist to conclude that the artist, although "of physically frigid temperament," "was one of those exceptional, but not uncommon men, who are born with sensibilities abnormally deflected from the ordinary channel. He showed no partiality for women, and a notable enthusiasm for the beauty of young men." Symonds used this finding as an occasion to challenge the "medical psychologists of modern Europe" who classed "individuals of Michelangelo's peculiar temperament" as diseased, asserting, "The history of ancient Hellas [Greece] precludes this explanation of the phenomenon. In Hellas they found a social environment favourable to their free development and action....It is not impossible that the tragic accent discernable throughout Michelangelo's love-poetry may be due to his sense of the discrepancy between his own deepest emotions and the customs of Christian society."

Symonds thus forged a productive synthesis of his historical knowledge of passion between men, sexology's claims to describe a separate class of homosexual people, and the efforts by Whitman and Carpenter to define that identity as rooted in love, open to a range of physical expressions of intimacy, and oriented toward progressive politics. But this balance could not be sustained. Whitman's and Carpenter's idealistic conceptions of homosexual identity as a fusion of ideology and attraction remained influential through the first decades of the twentieth century (as discussed in chapter 4). But these ideas were ultimately subsumed by medical authorities' claims to be able empirically to label homosexuals as a category of person defined by sexual impulses that increasingly were classed as a form of illness subject to cures of one kind or another.

In his own time, Symonds's uplifting ideals clashed with the repressiveness of his culture, as demonstrated by the record of artists who were legally prosecuted and socially persecuted for their sexuality. The promising career of the painter Simeon Solomon (1840–1905) ended in 1873 with his arrest in a London urinal for sexual activity with a sixty-year-old man. The legal repercussions for Solomon were slight (in contrast, his working-class partner was sentenced to eighteen months in prison), but the artist never recovered from the ostracism of former friends and patrons, retreating into alcohol and other drugs. Solomon's dreamy images often related to his prose poem "A Vision of Love Revealed in

**Figure 3.5.** Simeon Solomon, *My Soul and I*, as reproduced in Julia Ellsworth Ford, *Simeon Solomon: An Appreciation* (New York: Frederic Fairchild Sherman, 1908). One of many drawings Solomon made to illustrate his poem "A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep," this coupling of handsome young men represents the author's encounter with his soul, described in the poem as "unclothed, save for a fillet binding his head."

Sleep," first published in 1871, which traced the allegorical journey of a repentant man who is guided by his Soul toward reconciliation with "the Very Love, the Divine Type of Absolute Beauty" (Figure 3.5; Text 3.1). Drawing on biblical imagery to express a deep desire for fulfillment both artistic and sexual universalized as a new religion, the poem records Solomon's struggle to reconcile aesthetic, erotic, and spiritual experience at a time before the idea of minority sexual identity took hold. Gender fluctuates ambiguously throughout the poem through the personification of abstract concepts like Love as handsome men and such images as his poet's heart as a "bride" whose tears are kissed away by "him who knows that she is wholly his." Similar ambiguities mark Solomon's 1865 drawing *Bridegroom and Sad Love* (Figure 3.6). Although it could pass as a rendition of the winged Cupid's leave-taking from a groom whose assumed-to-be-heterosexual amorous adventures are over, in light of the artist's biography the drawing takes on more poignant meanings. The bridegroom's grasp suggests less than wholehearted heterosexuality, and the image seems, more generally, to express despair at the impossibility of love between adult men.

For the most part, our understanding of the sexuality of mid-nineteenth-century artists and critics must be pieced together without evidence as concrete as Symonds's journal or Solomon's arrest. Children are evidence of heterosexual behavior, of course, but not of the absence of homosexuality: Symonds had a wife and family, as did Oscar Wilde, who by the end of the nineteenth century became the prototype of the homosexual. At mid-century, before widespread belief in distinct and mutually exclusive homo- and heterosexual types, these medical categories are unlikely to reflect any artist's self-perception. Nevertheless,

**Figure 3.6.** Simeon Solomon, *Bridegroom and Sad Love* (1865), drawing, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

a number of mid-nineteenth-century artists were later taken to exemplify homosexual identity. Examination of their lives reveals the fluidity of nineteenth-century sexual dynamics before they coalesced into the forms that structured so much of twentieth-century experience.

The English painter Frederic Leighton (1830–96) is a case in point. Never married, Leighton in the 1850s was known by the nickname "Fay" within his circle of anglophone artists in Rome, a group of men and women noted for their androgynous dress and behavior (the women sculptors of this group are discussed below). Leighton was fascinated by Arab culture and made five trips to northern Africa and the Near East, buying Islamic tiles and other architectural fragments. These he used to construct an "Arab Hall" in his London house, complete with fountain and onion dome, allying his home—and by extension his life—with the exoticism of the Middle East. Art, for Leighton, was a passionate engagement between men. His lectures to the British Royal Academy describe the "fecundating contact" in which viewers—at a time when the normative viewer was male—are "impregnated and transformed" by the genius of great artists. And throughout his life, Leighton maintained warm relationships with young men, whose beauty he freely noted in his letters.

## FINAL PARAGRAPHS FROM SIMEON SOLOMON, "A VISION OF LOVE REVEALED IN SLEEP" (LONDON: "PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR," 1871)

Now there arose before me the image of him whom we had seen sleeping in the ruined temple; his arms were wound about his head, which lay back on them; he was naked, but his form was wrapped about with the soft star-lighted air; his lashes were no longer moist with tears, but his face shone as became one through whom the Very Love was to be revealed. And now I felt the heart of the universe beat, and its inner voices were made manifest to me, the knowledge of the coming presence of the Very Love informed the air, and its waves echoed with the full voices of the revolving spheres. Then my Soul spoke to me....

And now the image of Sleep filled the orbit of my sight and through the veil of his form I saw him who bore the mystic saffron raiment wherewith he had covered his hands. My spirit well-nigh fainting, I turned unto my Soul, and knew by the increasing glow upon him that strength was given me yet again to lift my eyes. Well was it for me that what came was revealed to me through the veil of Sleep, else I could not have borne to look on it.

From out the uplifted hands of him who stood within the Holy Place there sprang forth a radiance of a degree so dazzling that what else of glory there was within the temple was utterly obscured; as one seeing a thin black vapour resting before the face of the mid-day sun, so I saw upon the radiance the brooding cherubim, their wings meeting, their faces hidden; I saw within the glory, one who seemed of pure snow and of pure fire, the Very Love, the Divine Type of Absolute Beauty, primaeval and eternal, compact of the white flame of youth, burning in ineffable perfection.

For a moment's space I shielded my eyes from the blinding glow, then once more raised them upon the Beatific Vision. It seemed to me as though my spirit were drawn forth from its abiding place, and dissolved in unspeakable ardours; anon fiercely whirled round in a sphere of fire, and swiftly borne along a sea of throbbing light into the Very Heart. Ah, how may words shew forth what it was then vouchsafed for me to know? As when the thin, warm tears upon the cheek of the sleeping bride are kissed away by him who knows that she is wholly his, and one with him; as softly as his trembling lips are set upon the face transfigured on his soul, even so fell upon my heart, made one with the Heart of Love, its inmost, secret flame: my spirit was wholly swallowed up, and I knew no more.

Many of these men modeled for paintings and sculptures depicting stories of passionate, nurturing bonds between men (Figure 3.7). His representations of heterosexual couples, in contrast, illustrate almost without exception stories with lethal outcomes. Anxiety over eroticism is not confined to Leighton's images of heterosexual couples, however. Another important category of his imagery, typified by the battle with the phallic snake in Leighton's sculpture *Athlete Wrestling a Python* (Figure 3.8) or the apparent undoing of the Ganymede plot (discussed in chapter 2) in his painting *Youth Rescuing a Baby from the Claws of an Eagle*, suggests fantasies of resistance to or escape from homoerotic desire. Taken together, Leighton's images might be read as illustrating a dynamic that

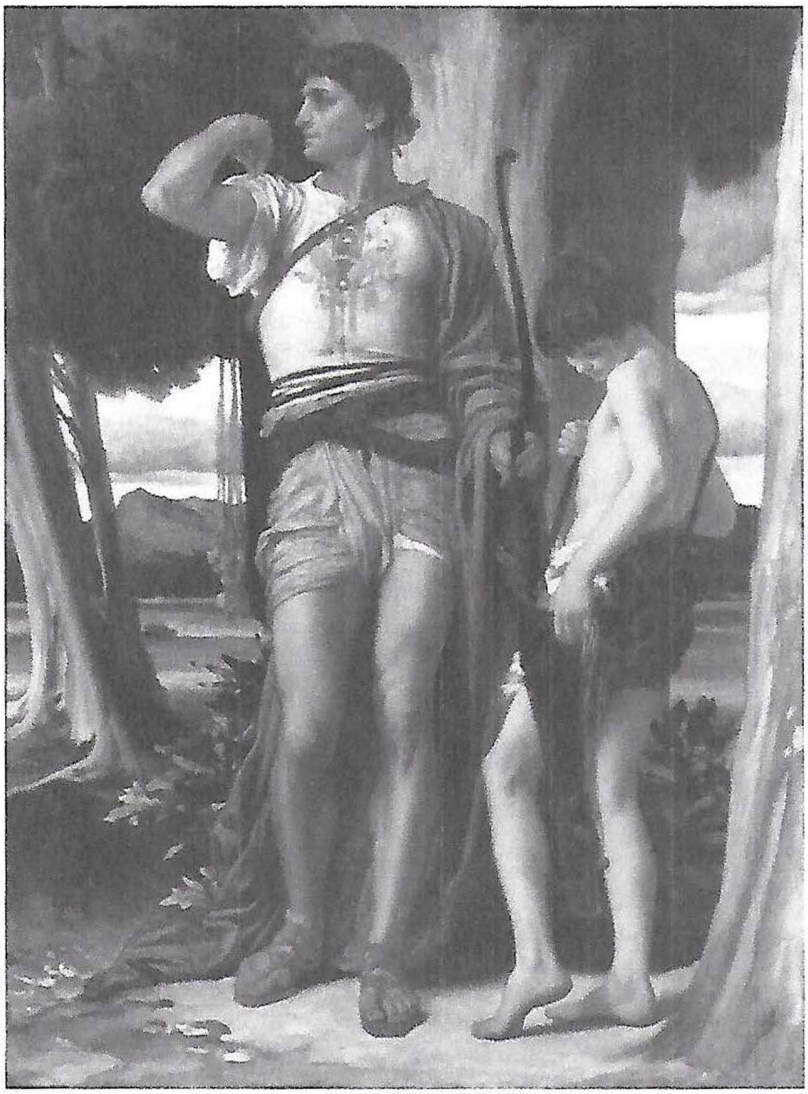

**Figure 3.7.** Frederic Leighton, *Jonathan's Token to David* (c. 1868), oil on canvas, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The John R. Van Derlip Fund. Leighton shows the biblical pair after their separation due to Saul's murderous jealousy over David's popularity and divine favor. Jonathan is poised to fire arrows into the woods hiding David so that, pretending to dispatch his youthful attendant to retrieve the arrows, he can send the devastating message that his

is explicit in Symonds's sexual memoir: panic in the face of expectations of heterosexuality combined with contradictory wishes to be free of stigmatized homoerotic desire yet to cherish the impulses of tenderness toward other men that this desire aroused.

Despite what might now look like signs of homosexuality, however, Leighton's art was not seen that way in his time. His paintings brought high prices, and the bronze *Athlete Wrestling a Python* was purchased by the British government. Leighton was elected president of the Royal Academy in 1878 and made a baron by Queen Victoria in 1896. His pseudo-Arab home became a center of London social life, and his funeral filled St. Paul's cathedral, with the crowds outside so thick that people were injured in the crush. That such a prominent man remained unmarried did spark gossip, but it was Leighton's images of women and his gifts of money and patronage to female models that attracted innuendo during his lifetime. Leighton was also generous to the young men in his circle, however. If Leighton's biography seems to exceed the emerging categories of homo- versus heterosexuality, characterizations of the artist by his contemporaries are equally inconclusive. Though by the time of Leighton's death in 1896, traits noted in elegies—that he was "strangely sensuous," "rather effeminate," and "made more like a Greek than an Englishman"—were coming to imply homosexual identity, many of these terms had earlier been used to associate him with the excessive heterosexuality of the libertine.

Like Leighton, the French painter Gustave Moreau (1826–98) now seems to embody many attributes of homosexual identity. Moreau never married, living his whole life in his childhood home, most of it with his much-loved mother. Though he carried on an intense and somewhat surreptitious relationship with a woman, there is no evidence as to whether it was sexual or not. Like Leighton, Moreau

enjoyed a prominent career. His paintings commanded high prices, and he taught at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts. As with Leighton, Moreau's art looks homoerotic today. One source of this apparent homoeroticism reflects Moreau's practice of painting his androgynous youths from female models. In his depictions of heterosexual couples, the figures' near-identical faces and postures require viewers to scrutinize other indications of sex—delicately rendered nipples and barely shrouded genitals—heightening the ambiguous erotic charge of his art (Figure 3.9). This fascination with bodies is linked to fear. Again as with Leighton, many of Moreau's most famous images connect heterosexuality and death, and others, such as his *Hercules and the Hydra* (1876), can be seen as expressions of anxiety over attraction to the male body in general and the phallus (here a many-headed monster) in particular (Figure 3.10). But these images were not interpreted as confessional at the time. Moreau's *Hercules and the Hydra* was triumphantly exhibited at the 1876 Salon, the most prestigious annual art exhibition in Paris.

Moreau and Leighton exemplify how awkwardly modern binary identity categories fit nineteenth-century artists. But that is not to say

**Figure 3.7.** (*Continued*) friend must flee. This scene of frustrated love and coded communication precedes the parting of Jonathan and David when, the Bible says, "they kissed one another, and wept one with another" (1 Samuel 20:18–41). Leighton's Jonathan echoes Michelangelo's famous *David* (Figure 2.9), emphasizing biblical descriptions of the bond between the two men: "the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1).

**Figure 3.8.** Frederic Leighton, *Athlete Wrestling a Python* (1874), reduced preliminary plaster cast, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London; marble replica, 1890. Inspired by the Laocoön, a famous classical sculpture, this was Leighton's first sculpture. It was widely admired, and, after initially modeling the figure in clay in 1874, Leighton authorized the production of versions in various sizes and in plaster, bronze, and marble.

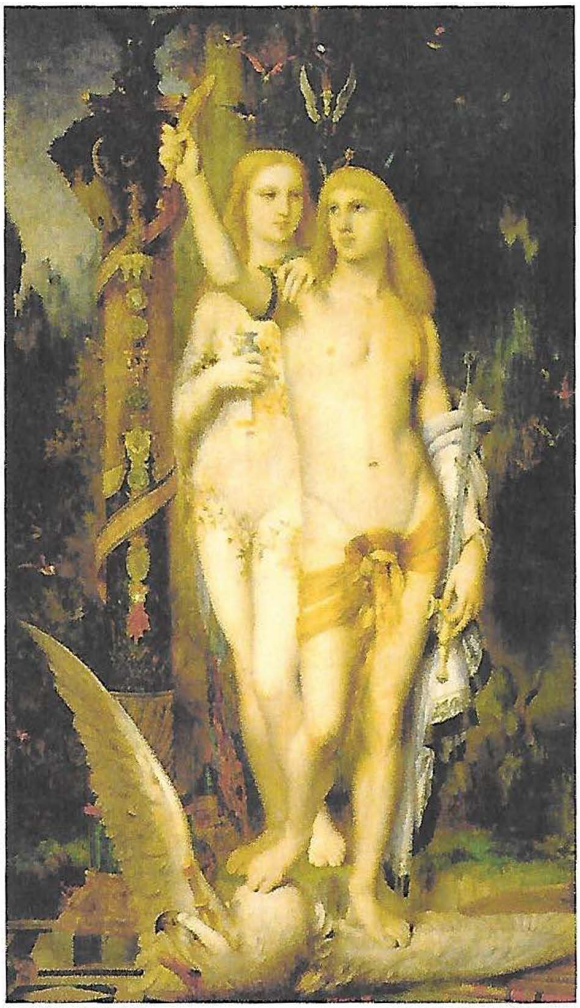

**Figure 3.9.** Gustave Moreau, *Jason and Medea* (1865), oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY. This composition echoes *The Marriage of Alexander* by the Renaissance artist Sodoma (Figure 2.7), whose paintings Moreau copied in Rome.

that their work is peripheral to the history of homosexuality. Whatever Moreau's own sexual feelings and experiences were, his art became an expression of subcultural sensibilities defined by, if not an explicit affirmation of homosexuality, then certainly a dissent from imperatives toward heterosexuality. During Moreau's lifetime, his art was seized upon by a circle of avant-garde writers whose exotic themes and convoluted language earned them the sobriquet "Decadents." Seeing Moreau's paintings as visual correlates of their writing, the Decadents produced innumerable poems celebrating the mystical eroticism of his art. In Joris-Karl Huysman's 1884 novel *A Rebours*, known as the "hand-book of the Decadence" and notorious for a passage of homoerotic reverie, the protagonist is fascinated by Moreau. The novel includes poetic descriptions of Moreau's paintings, and praises the artist and his works as exemplars of modernity: "By uniting and melding legends originating in the Far East and transfigured by the beliefs of other peoples," Huysman wrote, Moreau "justified...his hieratic and ominous allegories sharpened by the anxious insights of a completely modern sensibility; and he remains forever sad, haunted by the symbols of perversities and other-worldy loves, divine trances consummated without release and without hope." Such passages defined the "completely modern" avant-garde sensibility as a desperate fusion of the exotic and the perverse.

Emerging scientific ideas about identity types inflected *A Rebours'* presentation of avant-garde sensibility as something both deeply rooted in the individual's psyche and shared with others in a community: the hero of *A Rebours* finds that Moreau's paintings depict his own dreams. For the Decadents, Moreau's art exemplified a style of perception and expression that not only united a contingent of the avant-garde, but also defined a type of person. Not quite, but almost a total lifestyle; not quite, but almost defined completely by deviance from heterosexual norms—this community presaged the development of subcultures based on sexual type. A character in the 1901 novel *Monsieur de Phocas* by the Decadent writer Jean Lorrain says of Moreau: "In the light of his painting, an entire generation of young men came into being, languishing and tender." By 1920, Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* used Moreau's art to evoke a type of androgynous young man by describing him, propped up in an elaborately carved bed: "next to him, on the frame of the bed was carved an

elongated reclining Siren, very beautiful, with her tail feathers in mother-of-pearl, holding varieties of lotus in her hand . . . with the palmettes and golden crown nearby; it was very moving, altogether the composition of Gustave Moreau's *Young Man and Death*" (Figure 3.11).

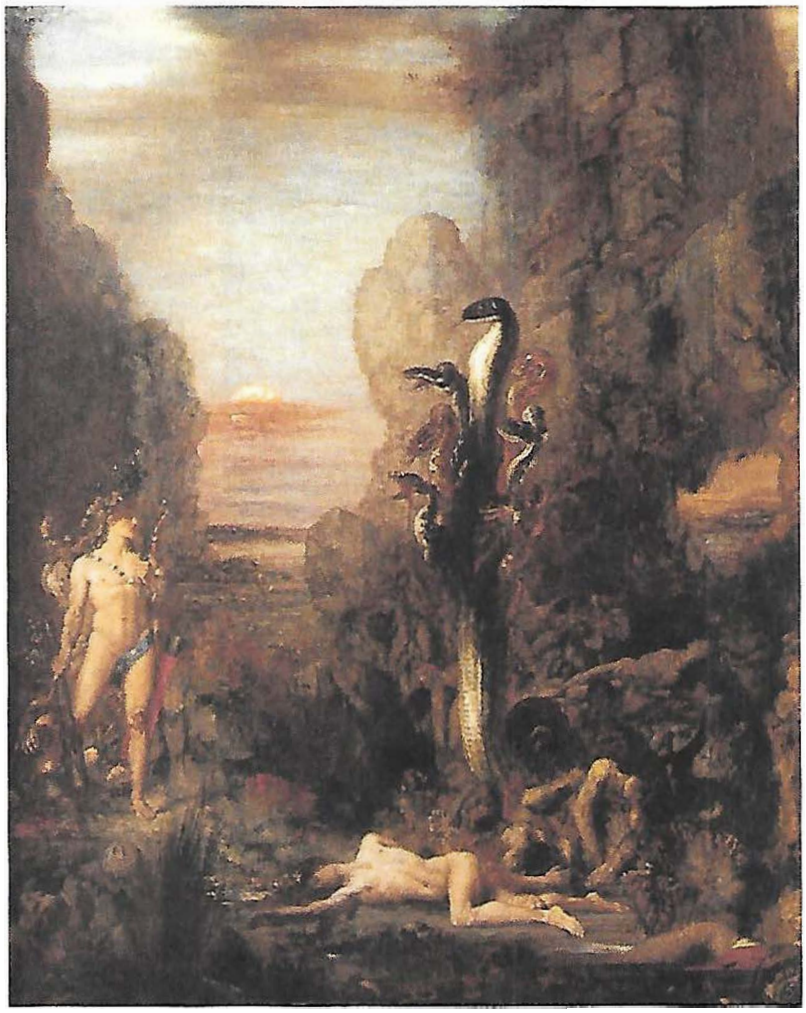

**Figure 3.10.** Gustave Moreau, *Hercules and the Hydra* (1876), oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago. Licensed under the GNU Free Documentation License.

In another parallel with Leighton, Moreau turned his house into a semipublic showcase for his aesthetic. In 1895 he added a two-story gallery above the living quarters to display his drawings, studies, and unfinished paintings. Although not initially popular with a general public accustomed to the meticulous finish of Moreau's completed paintings, this tightly packed treasure-trove containing thousands of Moreau's works-in-progress became a Decadent pilgrimage point. Two characters in Lorrain's novel recommend the gallery, where, like the hero of *A Rebours*, the narrator discovers himself in the gazes of the youths depicted by Moreau: "these were just the eyes in my dream, the eyes in my obsession." Again, the suggestion that Moreau's art reveals what is already latent in certain viewers associates art and identity in a way that is almost—but not yet quite—the image and type of the homosexual.

While the Decadents seem to presage many aspects of twentieth-century gay identity, mid-nineteenth-century premonitions of lesbian subculture characterize a community of expatriate American sculptors, almost all of them unmarried, living in Rome. Preeminent among these women were Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908), Emma Stebbins (1815–82), and Mary Edmonia Lewis (1845–c. 1910), all of whom made monumental statuary in neoclassical style, a genre of art long associated with the highest levels of male accomplishment. Dismissed by a competing male sculptor as a "harem (scarem)" of "emancipated females," they were described by the novelist Henry James as "that strange sisterhood of American 'lady sculptors' who . . . settled upon the seven hills in a white, marmorean flock." This sisterhood was a subset of larger Roman

**Figure 3.11.** Gustave Moreau, *Young Man and Death* (1865), oil on canvas, Harvard Art Museum, Fogg Art Museum, Gift of Grenville L. Winthrop, Class of 1886, 1942.186. Photo: Katya Kallsen © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

communities of anglophone artists (including Frederic Leighton) studying Italian art and American women escaping the supervision of their families by living abroad. Creating a community characterized by art-making, progressive politics—campaigns for women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery, in particular—and deviation from conventions of middle-class femininity, these women anticipated aspects of lesbian identity that developed in the twentieth century.

Harriet Hosmer was the best-known female sculptor of her day. Her whimsical statues of childlike angels, reproduced in many versions (as was common with statuary at this period), fetched high prices from such eminent patrons as the Prince of Wales. Hosmer's masculinity contributed to her notoriety. Nathaniel Hawthorne noted her "mannish" clothes. Leighton described her fondly as "the queerest, best-natured little chap." Hosmer dreamed of creating a temple dedicated to female achievement, and her art reflected her bonds with other women, both real and imagined. A statue of the nymph Daphne, for instance, she sent to a friend with the instruction, "When Daphne arrives, kiss her lips and then remember that I kissed her just before she left me." Hosmer created her most celebrated work, the larger-than-life-sized *Zenobia*, for the Great Exhibition in London in 1862 with the hope that the figure, which emphasized the dignity maintained by the Syrian queen despite the shackles of her Roman captors, would be purchased by another female monarch, Queen Victoria (Figure 3.12). Hosmer made extensive studies of ancient jewels to render the crown and belt, which contrast with the chains to suggest the injustice of this noble queen's confinement by her male enemies. Hosmer's friend, the novelist Lydia Maria Child, described the artist as "so much in love with her subject that she rejected as unworthy of belief the statement that Zenobia was ever shaken by her misfortune. To her imagination she was superbly regal, in the highest sense of the word, from first to last." Hosmer needed such role models, for she failed to attract Victoria's patronage and, until she threatened libel charges, British art journals asserted that she hired men to make her sculptures. In patriotic contrast, her *Zenobia* was enthusiastically received when the statue toured the United States, and Hosmer's reputation for depicting the dignity of strong women led to a commission for a statue of Queen Isabella in San Francisco.

Hosmer's colleagues also achieved significant recognition in the United States. Emma Stebbins was commissioned to create two

well-known New York monuments: a statue of Christopher Columbus (1867), originally sited in Central Park and now in Brooklyn, and the *Angel of the Waters* figures for the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park (Figure 3.13). But modernist disdain for neoclassical statuary contributed to quick oblivion for the "marmorean flock," and much of its work has disappeared, probably destroyed. In the 1980s, feminist scholars rediscovered Hosmer and her colleagues for the history of women artists. More recently, this extraordinary circle of women has inspired artists working to develop self-consciously gay and lesbian aesthetics. Stebbins's *Angel of the Waters* became the final, deeply symbolic image in Tony Kushner's 1992 play *Angels in America*, an exploration of the intersection of national and sexual identities under the impact of AIDS. A decade later, the New York artist Patricia Cronin embarked on an ambitious project of research about Hosmer, tracking down and making watercolor illustrations of every one of her sculptures. Those that have been lost without visual record are represented by blurry "ghosts." "Who gets written into history? Who is forgotten?" These are some of the questions Cronin says her project addresses.

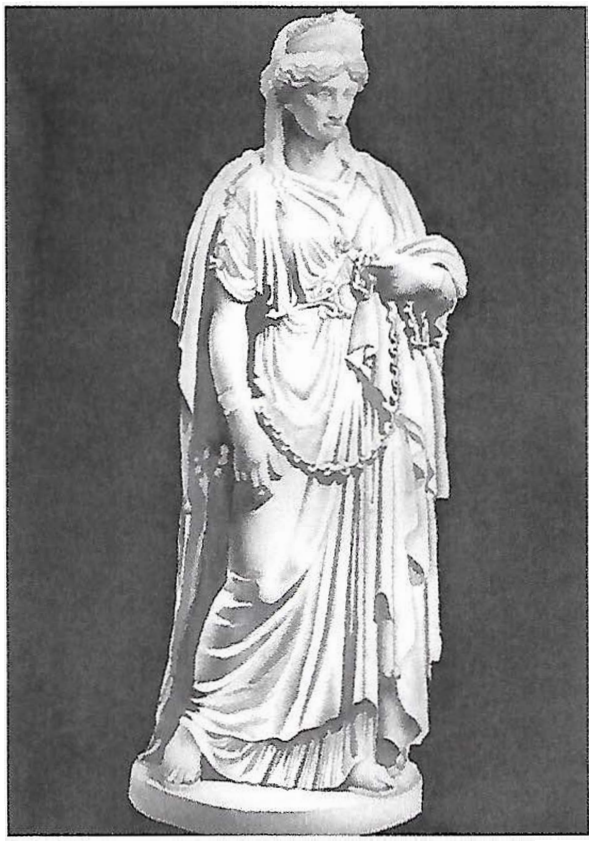

**Figure 3.12.** Patricia Cronin, Harriet Hosmer's *Zenobia* (2007), watercolor, from the series *Harriet Hosmer Lost and Found: A Catalog Raisonné*. Wanting to work in a specifically lesbian artistic heritage, Cronin, between 2003 and 2007, painted every one of Hosmer's works. This image reflects the dignity nineteenth-century viewers admired in Hosmer's *Zenobia*. Like other sculptors of the period, Hosmer employed assistants to help produce copies of her most popular works. Cronin catalogs three full-length versions and two busts in American museums.

Our understanding of these nineteenth-century artists as origin points for sexual and gendered identities that achieved cultural currency a century later is especially acute in the case of Edmonia Lewis. The orphaned daughter of a Chippewa mother and an Afro-Caribbean father, Lewis was raised and educated by whites with the financial support of her gold-miner brother. She quickly found success as an artist in Boston, where, during the Civil War, she personified the abolitionists' belief in the potential of blacks to succeed according to European standards of skill and beauty (Figure 3.14). Lewis financed her 1865 trip to Italy by selling 100 plaster copies of her marble bust of Robert Gould Shaw, a Bostonian who was killed leading a regiment of African-American soldiers during the Civil War. In Rome in 1867, she created *Forever Free*, a monumental sculpture of a slave couple with broken shackles, titled after a phrase in the Emancipation Proclamation. This and her *Cleopatra*, made for the 1876 Centennial Exposition, were enthusiastically received, but the backlash against blacks during Reconstruction and the declining prestige of neoclassical sculpture plunged Lewis into such obscurity that neither her place nor date of death is now known. Today the remarkable Lewis is often cited as a first: the first—here one can fill in "African-American," "Native American," and "woman"—to achieve international acclaim as a sculptor. With so many claims to fame, it may seem superfluous to adduce Lewis into the history of sexual identity,

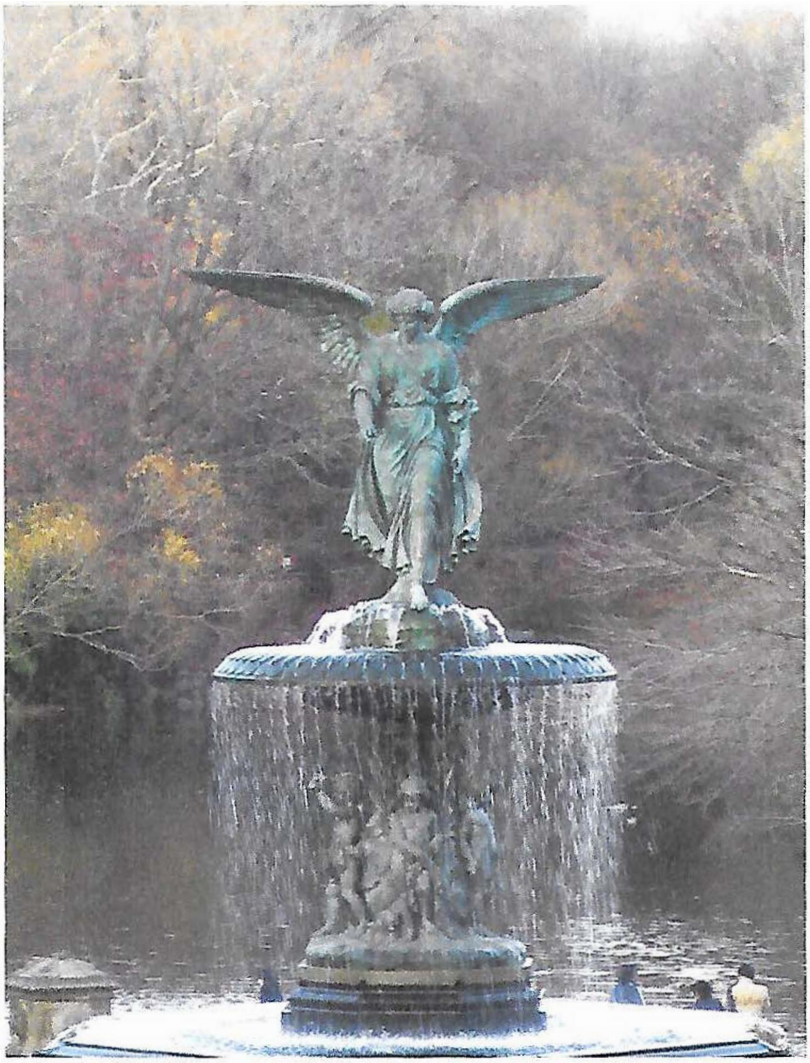

**Figure 3.13.** Emma Stebbins, *Angel of the Waters, Bethesda Fountain*, (1859-64), bronze, Central Park, New York City. Photograph by Christopher Reed.

too, but she was very much a part of the proto-lesbian community of expatriate women in Rome. The other women in the group supported her—Stebbins helped organize funds to buy Lewis's work for American institutions—and Lewis was seen by outsiders as the clearest example of the masculinization of female sculptors in Rome because she insisted on executing even the most arduous physical stages in the creation of marble statuary, the rough cutting of the major forms for which even male sculptors usually employed assistants.

The relationships among these women do not fall neatly into twentieth-century categories of sexual identity. Historians, such as Lillian Faderman and Lisa Merrill, work hard to interpret data that to some extent suggest current ideas of sexual identity and in other ways expose our distance from nineteenth-century culture. Hosmer, for instance, referred to her circle as "jolly bachelors," while Stebbins called Hosmer her "wife," before transferring her affections to the American actress and self-described "tomboy" Charlotte Cushman, with whom she remained in a lifelong partnership. Records of jealousy within this circle of women and evidence of censorship in both the writing and preservation of their letters suggest amorous and even erotic feelings. Nothing specific is known about their sexual practices, however, and the frankness with which members of the group—especially the extravagant Cushman—expressed appreciation for women's charm and beauty in letters and remarks to numerous friends and relations bears complex interpretation. On one hand, such expressions reveal a deep love for specific women and for women in general, and there is no reason to exclude the possibility that this love included erotic or sensual elements. On the other hand, the openness of this love at a time when deep friendships between women were prized but lesbian sexuality was taboo shows that such feelings did not necessarily imply eroticism. Like Leighton and Moreau, therefore, the "marmorean flock" may be best understood as presaging, rather than itself embodying, modern homosexual identity.

Also like Leighton and Moreau, however, this community of women is central to the history of art and homosexuality. Though not founded on homosexuality in its current sense, the group was bound together by another form of what might be called sexual identity: its active rejection of heterosexual imperatives. And this identity was explicitly linked to the professional identity of the artist. In 1854 Hosmer wrote:

> Even if so inclined, an artist has no business to marry. For a man it may be well enough, but for a woman, on whom matrimonial duties and cares weigh more heavily, it is a moral wrong, I think, for she must either neglect her profession or her family, becoming neither a good wife and mother nor a good artist. My ambition is to become the latter, so I wage eternal feud with the consolidating knot.

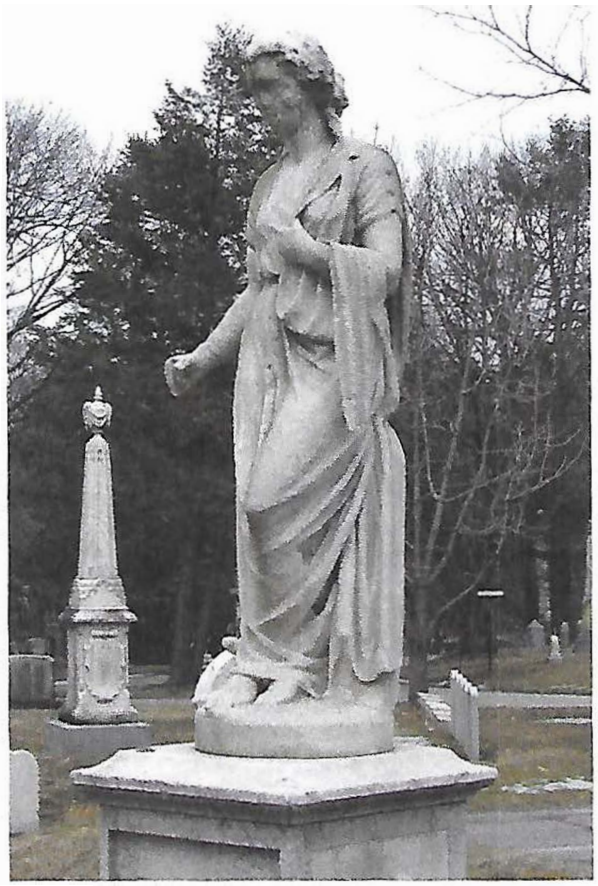

Figure 3.14. Edmonia Lewis, *Hygeia* (c. 1871–75), Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Photograph by Christopher Busta-Peck. A testament to the importance of late-nineteenth-century communities of educated women, Lewis's sculpture of Hygeia, Roman goddess of healthful cleanliness, marks the grave of Dr. Harriot Kezia Hunt, a pioneering woman doctor.

Hosmer here opposed the identities of "spouse" and "artist," more vehemently for women than for men, to be sure, but included men in her initial statement of principle. The idea of the artist as a breed apart, as a type of person who does not marry, is further evidence of the convergence of sexuality and art as markers of related identities in the late nineteenth century. That this group of not-heterosexual women artists created a community based on this shared identity argues for their status among the closest progenitors of modern lesbian identity. Their belief that they were role models for other women—an idea evident not only in their art, but in their efforts to publish their letters and memoirs as evidence of their exemplary lives—parallels the Decadents' sense of themselves as harbingers of the modern. These women's self-conscious pride in their professional and personal identity also led them to seek out women they saw as allied sensibilities. Searching through history, the sculptors turned to figures like Zenobia, who, though married, was renowned for her strength and chastity. Turning to other successful women among their contemporaries, they collected photographs of female celebrities and made pilgrimages to the French painter Rosa Bonheur (1822–99), who "said such lovely things to us," Cushman reported, "it made me blush."

Today, Bonheur is often cited as the first lesbian artist, and by some measures this is true. Bonheur lived for forty years with a woman she called her "wife" and, after this woman died, spent the last decade of her life with the expatriate American painter Anna Klumpke (1856–1942),

whom she made her heir. Bonheur, however, downplayed her unconventionality and avoided the avant-garde, building her career on images of animals rendered in a conservative style. Her ability to make her unconventionality acceptable is evidenced by her successful career: she earned enough to buy her own château and in 1865 became the first woman inducted into the *Légion d'honneur* with her medal pinned on by the empress herself. When Bonheur cut her hair short and wore men's clothing—actions for which she needed permits authorized by a doctor and filed with the Paris police every six months—she claimed her masculine appearance was required by her work in the livestock markets. Her defense of her relationship with her "wife" reflects the ambiguity of sexual norms at the period. Despite the "purity" of their relationship, Bonheur complained that

> people tried to make the affection we felt for each other suspicious. It seemed extraordinary that we managed our finances in common, that we were one another's beneficiaries. If I had been a man, I would have married her and people could not have invented such crazy stories. I would have created a family, I would have had children who would have been my heirs and no one would have any right to complain.

Here Bonheur deflects suspicions about her relationship from sex to money, but then justifies her financial arrangements as the practice of a man characterized by all the husbandly attributes, including the expectation of children. Whether such statements were cannily contrived to confuse gossips or whether Bonheur genuinely never imagined the possibility of sex with her female companions is unclear. In either case, however, like the American sculptors in Rome, Bonheur's emotional life was concentrated on women she saw as spouses.

The fascinating ambiguity of Bonheur's life has long been seen as lacking in her paintings, which were dismissed by avant-garde critics of her day—and since—for their conventionality. In a pioneering 1992 essay on the representation of lesbian identity in painting, however, James Saslow argued that Bonheur's art is as ambiguous as her words, proposing that certain apparently male figures—the central beardless rider who looks out at the viewer in the celebrated *Horse Fair*, for instance—are self-portraits that subtly define "an androgynous and proto-lesbian visual identity" (Figure 3.15). This reevaluation of Bonheur in the light of modern notions of lesbian identity, Saslow pointed out, continues a process that began immediately after her death in 1899. The 1900 annual survey of literature on homosexuality published by Hirschfeld, the German sexologist, opened with an illustration of Bonheur in male attire captioned by a brief obituary identifying her as a "famous French animal painter" and a "mentally and physically pronounced example of a sexual intermediate." Here

Bonheur's identity as a female who defied gender norms to compete with men as a successful artist was linked to new medical conceptions of sexual identity. In retrospect, it seems that at this moment—on the cusp of the twentieth century—Rosa Bonheur posthumously became the first lesbian artist.

**Figure 3.15.** Rosa Bonheur, *Horse Fair* (1853), oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Cornelius Vanderbilt 1887 (87.35). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.