This reading sample is a translation of chapter 6 from the book „Dürer und die Männer. Eindeutig zweideutig.“ by Reinhard Bröker. Imhof-Verlag 2023. The book is only available in German. www.duerer-eindeutig-zweideutig.de

07: Wild orchids, carnations and combs: “The Men’s Bathhouse” (1496/97) or *bathing pleasures and leisure* (Translated by Marie Girton-Frohling)

((Fig. 74, The Men’s Bathhouse))

The Men's Bathhouse (Das Männerbad), executed in 1496/1497,[1] is one of Dürer's most famous woodcuts because—as a so-called genre scene—it portrays an exemplary view of medieval bathing culture.

The image depicts six scantily clad men socializing in the outdoor area of a bathhouse. Two of the men are standing behind a stone parapet in the foreground; two are playing musical instruments; one is drinking beer; another is leaning against a wooden post and gazing about, while a seventh, clothed man is observing these activities from the far side of a rail fence.

Those who look more closely at the image may quickly wonder what exactly is being depicted here. Do the semi-naked musicians even belong to the group of bathers? Was this kind of "performance" typically conducted in medieval bathing houses, and was it customary for such an obvious outsider, who today would be regarded as a peeper,[2] to be allowed to pursue such voyeurism?

The obese man on the far right of the woodcut is drinking from a large stein, resting his left arm between his legs. The two muscular men in the foreground are facing one other, although they do not appear to be conversing; one holds a kind of comb in his hand, the other a flower. The *piffara* player in the center casts a glance at the man leaning against the wooden block, on which is fitted a cock-and-spout tap that conceals his genitals.

The location is not a bathing chamber but a covered terrace where the men are probably cooling off from a steam bath, a common feature of bathhouses in the late Middle Ages. Yet, if we did not know that this arbor was part of a bathhouse, we would be much more likely to assume it was a semi-public homosexual meeting place featuring music, drinks and free-body culture, much like that of nudist clubs today.[3]

If Dürer's focus had been bathing and personal hygiene, this scene would have more closely resembled his pen and ink drawing, *The Women's Bathhouse (Das Frauenbad)* (1496), which depicts an actual bathing scene in the steam room of a bathhouse.[4]

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[1] For more on dates, see, among others, Jan-David Mentzel, "Körper und Welt. Albrecht Dürers „Männerbad" in neuer Deutung," in: *Von der Freiheit der Bilder. Spott, Kritik und Subversion in der Kunst der Dürerzeit*, edited by Thomas Schauerte and Jürgen Müller (Petersberg: n.p, 2013), 48.

[2] See also Joseph Leo Körner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: n.p., 1993), 435.

[3] The image was perfectly suited for the cover of an important anthology on the history of homosexuality in the Middle Ages. Lev Mordechai Thoma, Sven Limbeck (eds.), *"Die sünde, der sich der tiuvel schamet in der helle:"Homosexualität in der Kultur des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* (Ostfildern: n.p., 2009).

[4] The "naked picture(s)," as Dürer called them, (the term "nude" did not yet exist in the artist's time) represent a novelty in art history; the so-called *Bathing Woman* (1493) is considered the first nude study based on a live model. Cf: Anne-Marie Bonnet, *Albrecht Dürer. Die Erfindung des Aktes* (Munich, 2014), 15. The drawing, now back in the Bremen Kunsthalle, has had an exciting past as looted-art. Cf. *Vor dem Misthaufen gerettet: Beutekunst kehrt zurück* (online at https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/beutekunst-vor-dem-misthaufen-gerettet-beutekunst-kehrt-zurueck-130962.html (accessed Aug. 5, 2021).

((Fig. 75, *The Women's Bathhouse))*

Indeed, *The Women's Bathhouse* is not simply a portrayal of female bathing and grooming rituals; the work also has sexual connotations.[5] The two young boys on the left look up between the legs of the woman, whose back is turned to us. Peeking through a slight opening in the doorway in front of her is a peeping Tom, who also gazes at the woman's private parts, which she appears to be displaying somewhat brazenly.[6] The second lad on the left hands the woman a pear, which had been considered a sexual and phallic symbol at least since Konrad von Würzburg's "half pear." In 1483/1488, the Nuremberg master singer Hans Volz wrote an adaptation of this tale (the "Half Pear B"),[7] with which Dürer was likely familiar.[8]

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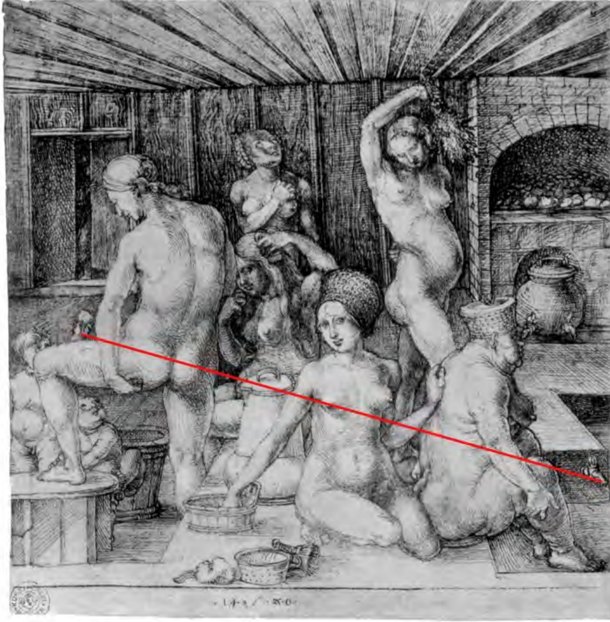
[5] And not only because of the sexually connoted bathing comb in the middle of the image's foreground, to which Münch refers. Cf. Birgit Ulrike Münc, "Das Männerbad, der Jabacher Altar und die große Angst vor den frantzosen: Albrecht Dürers vielschichtige Klagen über die Syphilis," in *Die Klage des Künstlers. Krise und Umbruch von der Reformation bis zum 1800*, edited by Birgit Ulrike Münch, Andreas Tacke, et al. (Petersberg: n.p., 2015), 33.
[6] See also Christiane Andersson and Larry Silver, "Dürer's Drawings," in *The Essential Dürer*, edited by Larry Silver, Larry, and Jeffrey Chipps Smith. (Philadelphia: n.p., 2010), 12-34, here 21.
[7] Cf. about Dürer, Christoph Petzsch: "Folz, Hans," *Neue Deutsche Biographie 5*. (1961), 288-289 [online version]; URL: https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118534211.html#ndbcontent (accessed Aug. 5, 2021).
[8] Hans Folz, "Die halbe Birne,"The Half Pear," *in Kleinere mittelhochdeutsche Verserzählungen. Mittelhochdeutsch – neuhochdeutsch*, edited Jürgen Schulz-Grobert, (Reclams Universal-Bibliothek. Vol. 18431). (Stuttgart: n.p., 2006), 218-231.



((Fig. 76, Imaginary Line in Women's Bathhouse

And what is the function of the unscrewed cock-and-spout on the right, underneath the bench, which does not belong to the water container (with two spouts) above the bench? Might the water spout in *The Women's Bathhouse* refer to what the cock-and-spout in *The Men's Bathhouse* conceals?

An imaginary line runs from the tip of the pear to the top of the faucet and crosses the tailbone of the woman on the left through the nipple of the woman in the middle and the spout of the large water jug. In the Middle Ages, however, a "spout" referred not only to a tap on a jug, but also to the sleeve into which a shaft was inserted.[9]

Thus, this imaginary line intersects with three phallic symbols (two of them liquid-ejecting phalli

The Women's Bathhouse also has an erotic; to the medieval viewer, it would have constituted a pornographic print avant la lettre.[10] It would be very surprising if *The Men's Bathhouse*, executed around the same time, had no such sexual connotations.

The Men's Bathhouse is not simply a scene of men socializing in an outdoor area of a bathhouse. Rather, it a meeting place for men, where fiddlers and woodwind doublers also advertise their sexual preferences. Even in the late Middle Ages, playing the violin was not only a musical but also a sexual act.[11]

I will discuss the obvious interpretation of the flute as a willingness to perform fellatio later in this chapter in the context of Mantegna's adaptation of "Bacchus with Silen;" this theme also will be explored further in chapter 12 (Flutes: whistlers and drummers or pick up codes).

The arbor depicted in Dürer's "*The Men's Bathhouse"* is most likely based on an outdoor bathing area in the historically documented *Waldbad*, a thermal spa on the island of Schütt.[12] In the background, one

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[9] Cf. *Grimmsches Wörterbuch*, keyword Tülle, Vol. 22, sp. 1696-1700.

[10] Cf. Berthold Hinz, "Nackt/Akt – Dürer und der „Prozess der Zivilisation," in *Städel Jahrbuch*. (Munich: 1993), 199-230, here 223. "It goes without saying that these drawings, which were certainly kept somewhat discreetly and of which there had been nothing comparable north of the Alps before, did not leave collaborators and friends untouched - especially if, like Baldung, they possessed a correspondingly receptive disposition."

[11] CF. Ulrich Kuder, Bärbel Manitz and Walter Sparn (eds.), *Des Menschen Gemüt ist wandelbar. Druckgrafik der Dürer-Zeit* (Kiel, 2004), 243. "The musicians, a bearded flautist and a younger one playing the fiddle, are comparable to the lascivious friends of Job in the Jabach Altar, in which Dürer also included a self-portrait and musical instruments, which had sexual symbolic connotations." Cf. ibid. *Grimmsches Wörterbuch,* Lemma, "violins," http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui_py?sigle=DWB&mode=Vernetzung&lemid=GG05235#XGG05235, i.e., Vol. 5, column 2579.

[12] So also most recently Mentzel (2013), 56, as well as Münch (2015), 35, 38.

sees a river (the Pegnitz) and a bridge leading to it, as well as the Schuld Tower (today Heubrücke, at that time the Schuldturmbrücke); on the right is the forecourt to the Kaiserburg with its fountain, and on the left the Lorenzer quarter with the view of a building on today's Bergauerplatz.

In addition to the thermal spa, the island boasted a small municipal park, “which Konrad Celtis described in 1495 as ‘a grove-like square’ surrounded by tree plantings.”[13]

The fact that Dürer created this woodcut in 1496/1497 could well have been a political allusion to the time. In 1496, the Nuremberg City Council issued a ban on bathhouses’ admitting guests suffering from syphilis, an illness known as the Frenchman’s disease.[14] According to the decree, the utensils used for shaving and other treatments performed on these individuals were to be destroyed:

“... *all bathhouse supervisors shall be fined ten guilders or one poen, if people suffering from the new disease, malum frantzosen, are bathed in their baths, nor should they use the same scissors and razors they use on these sick people in the bathrooms afterwards.”* [15]

Birgit Ulrike Münch very convincingly demonstrates how Dürer’s intense preoccupation with the Frenchman’s disease in the final years of the 15th century was reflected in his art. She sees a consistent development from *The Syphilitic* (1496) to *The Women’s Bathhouse* and *The Men’s Bathhouse* and finally to the *Jabach Altarpiece* (c. 1503). Yet, although Münch writes that the scene in *The Men’s Bathhouse* seems homoerotically charged—note, for instance, with how many appealing ‘flip sides’ the foreign traveler[i.e., the voyeur beyond the fence, R.B.] is presented (...),”[16]—it does not include the implication of an analysis of what the Frenchman’s disease means for a homoerotic circle of friends and their contacts beyond it.

In the woodcut, Münch sees a “lamentation of a new plague,”[17] although the men in the outdoor space—just as little as the women in *The Women’s Bathhouse* or the minstrels in the *Jabach Altarpiece*—do not appear to bemoan anything. On the contrary, the image seems to depict a brief pause

((Fig. 77, The Syphilitic))

[13] Lemma, *Insel Schütt,* MW (= Matthias Weinrich), http://www.nuernberginfos.de/strassen-plaetze-nuernberg/insel-schuett.html. The fact that Celtis, who would later die of syphilis, describes the "grove" at all, might also refer to a visit to a bathhouse with an outdoor space!
[14] Cf. Kai Kupferschmidt, “Wenn Krankheitsnamen beleidigen.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 9, 2015. “Syphilis (...) was once called French disease in Germany, the Polish disease in France and the German disease in Poland. The Japanese called it the Chinese Heavenly Penal Ulcer, which is at least a bit more creative.” Online at https://www.sueddeutsch e.de/gesundheit/who-wenn-krankheitsnamen-beleidigen-1.2471294a (accessed May 8, 2021).
[15] Ulrika Kiby, “Von der Heilkur zum Jungbrunnen,“ in Karl Michael Armer, *Badewonnen. Gestern. Heute. Morgen*, edited by Hansgrohe, with contributions by Karl Michael Armer, Ulrika Kiby, Klaus Kramer and Erich Küthe. (Cologne: n.p., 1993), 57.
[16] Münch, (2015), 38.
[17] Ibid., 41.

before a grand finale in which all the men will participate. And this finale probably does not entail "everyone going home alone" but, rather, "things really heating up!"

"In any event, syphilis was a disease with which the intellectual elite dealt in a highly intellectual manner immediately after its appearance (...)."[18] Without knowing exactly the disease's origin or how it was transmitted, many suspected that the bathhouses were a breeding ground for it and that specifically men who "were together" in these establishment were its victims.

There is no doubt, however, that syphilis played an unusual role in Dürer's life. At the latest on his journey to the Netherlands (1520-1521), the artist tried to protect himself either prophylactically from contracting the disease or to intervene therapeutically at an early stage of it by purchasing special objects that were thought to cure the illness.[19]

Despite the fact that all bathers were completely naked and did not wear rudimentary loincloths as depicted on the woodcut, *The Men's Bathhouse* does not provide the viewer with any unusual insight into bathing culture of the time.[20] Instead, it depicts a typical situation familiar to us from various depictions in heterosexual contexts, including the famous leaf from the miniature book of Duke Antoine of Burgundy from ca. 1470.

((Fig. 78, from the miniature book of Duke Antoine of Burgundy from ca. 1470.))

[18] Münch, (2015), 41.

[19] Dürer also bought French wood, which was considered an effective medicine against syphilis in splintered form . Cf. Unverfehrt (2007), 144

[20] Cf. ibid., 36: "People already went to the bath in a bathing shirt or completely naked, as theft was probably widespread (...)." Or: "The Middle Ages knew only nude bathing even as a curative treatment." 55.

An integral aspect of bathing depictions—as in many other representations from this period—are the peripheral observers who derive a pleasure from viewing the scene before them.

This is precisely what occurs in *The Men's Bathhouse*; a spectator beyond the arbor fence observes the action within it. He mirrors the perspective of the viewer, who—like him—is also "peeking" at the action from beyond the picture frame. The pleasure of viewing and watching was integral to medieval bath culture and to the reception of its pictorial worlds. And, if Dürer did in fact depict himself as the spectator, he mocks his own perspective on the action taking place: as the creator of the painting itself, as a participant in the interaction, as well as both the viewer inside and outside the painting.

Here again Dürer's genius is revealed in the often fractured and exposed reciprocity of his perspective, which—in such complexity—is actually a modern invention.

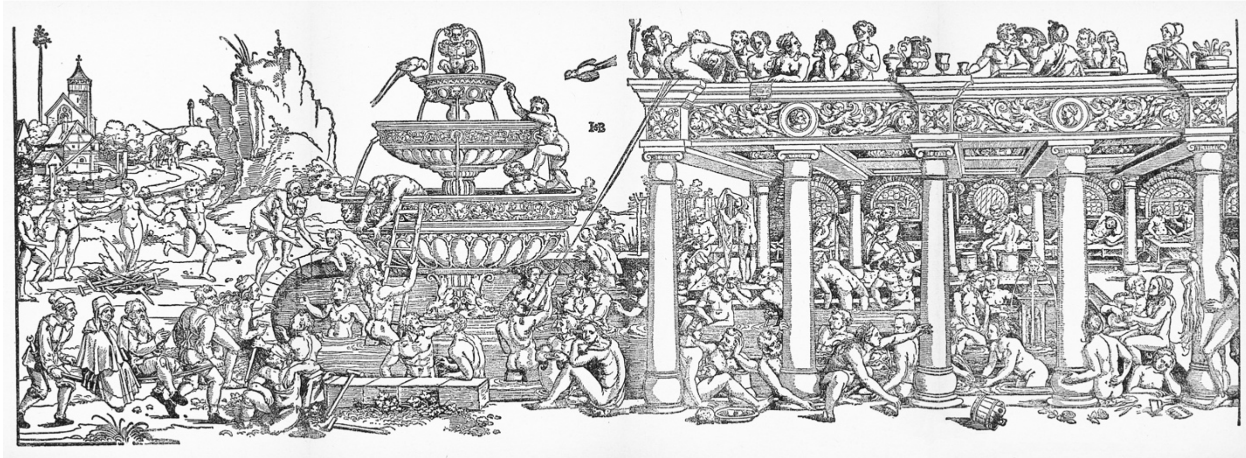
People did not just bathe, sweat and cool off in bathhouses; they also ate, drank, shaved, scrubbed, played games and had sex. In several medieval depictions of bathhouses, we find this association between play and sex.

The works of Master E. S. (ca. 1420 - ca. 1468)—a figure probably familiar to Dürer but whose name is unknown—includes an etching *Game of Chess in the Garden of Love*, which places the game playing in the center of the amorous scene.

((Fig. 79, Garden of Love))

Board games seem to have been particularly popular, including chess and the backgammon variant, trictrac. Here the game was a prelude to sex; both the winner and loser knew the stakes and playfully initiated sexual intercourse.

In Beham's *Fountain of Youth* (1531), a man and woman are also playing trictrac in an unambiguous situation.



((Fig. 80, Beham – Fountain of Youth))

We know that Dürer enjoyed going to bathhouses from his travel journal of his trip to the Netherlands in 1520-1521, in which he frequently mentions visiting bathhouses, carousing with "journeymen"[21] and fellows and enjoying himself at considerable cost!

"Item 5 Stueber (Stuever) spent on bathing and socializing with fellows. (...) I drank away and spent 5 Weißpfennig (white penny) with the fellows."[22]

We can assume that wherever Dürer gambled money, he was usually in a bathhouse (or the immediate vicinity of one); it was in these pleasant places that he met men with similar sexual interests. His gambling losses, which he often noted more in passing, reveal that he was either a bad gambler or uninterested in winning; instead, his goal was to initiate a closer relationship with the winner. Dürer did not go to the bathhouse because he liked to gamble; rather, he sought and found men at these places with whom he could bathe, drink, and have sexual intercourse initiated through the playing and betting on games.

I suspect that a deliberate monetary loss was a necessary part of engaging in sex in a bathhouse and ultimately served as a payment, one concealed as a gambling loss.

In the immediate vicinity of the thermal spa on the island of Schütt there was a park, which was probably already a gambling locale in Dürer's time: "*Even back then, there were all kinds of popular amusements on Pegnitz Island. The place seemed to have been very popular with gamblers, whereupon*

[21] The German word Duerer used in the original quote was "Gesellen" (plural of Geselle). In German, this word has multiple synonyms and meanings: 1: Geselle, Wanderbursche: journeyman; 2: Kerl, Gefährte, Mann, Bursche, Geselle: fellow; 3: Begleiter, Gefährte, Begleitung, Partner, Kamerad, Geselle: companion; 4 Kamerad, Kumpel, Freund, Genosse: mate
In this case, as a craftsman, Dürer may well have preferred the company of other crafts- or journeymen; however, here he may be referring to both journeymen as well as other fellows and mates (in the BE sense).
[22] Cf. ibid., 36: "People already went to the bath in a bathing shirt or completely naked, as theft was probably widespread (...)." Or: "The Middle Ages knew only nude bathing even as a curative treatment." 55.

on 19 March 1562, the city council subjected any kind of card and dice game, as well as monetary bets, to heavy fines."[23]

Viewing the "journeymen" Dürer mentions in his travelogue as trade or craft journeymen—a position repeatedly claimed in scholarly writings—is to miss the point. It is true that craftsmen also visited bathhouses, often subsidized by their masters, who were obliged to provide such visits through various city ordinances.

"*Craftsmen and guild members met in the bathhouse to "enjoy the baths," and many craftsmen finished their work an hour earlier than usual on Saturdays to go together to the bathhouse (to "clean themselves"), for which the master gave them the "bath allowance*."[24]

Dürer was looking for male companionship, whether with a crafts- or tradesman, merchant, soldier, cleric or nobleman, and he found this company in bathhouses, which also existed in the Netherlands. We may assume that Dürer not only became acquainted with similar procedures in the Netherlands, but that—even before 1500— the bathhouse was a popular institution, one where Dürer found other males who shared his sexual preferences.

Medieval bathhouses were hectic places. As theses establishments were not licensed to serve drinks or meals, such services were supplied by surrounding inns; numerous bathhouse hands and maids were continuously going in and out of the larger bath chambers, supplying guests with food and drink, replenishing the bath water, rubbing backs, removing leeches, mopping up blood and maintaining a certain degree of cleanliness. Servants came to the bathhouse to deliver messages to their superiors and help them dress. The bathhouse master advertised additional services (such as trimming beards, setting joints and dressing wounds) and tapped on the hourglasses, signaling that the bathing session was almost over and the tubs needed to be cleared for the following guests. Musicians came and went, as did invited guests (even weddings were celebrated in bathhouses[25]); bathhouses were not always peaceful and calm places!

People conversed and flirted, watched and observed, celebrated and bathed and enjoyed the equality that came with being unclothed.

We often imagine the Middle Ages as a dirty time: dirt everywhere, smelly people dressed in filthy clothing. This may have been true of life in the countryside, but it certainly was not the case in the large cities of the late Middle Ages.[26]

In Dürer's time, Nuremberg alone had 15 official bathhouses of varying sizes. These were located throughout the city, and each catered to a different segment of the population.

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[23] Lemma, *Insel Schütt*, MW (= Matthias Weinrich), http://www.nuernberginfos.de/strassen-plaetze-nuernberg/insel-schuett.html.

[24] Kiby, (1993), 44.

[25] Frank Meier, *Gaukler, Dirnen, Rattenfänger. Aussenseiter im Mittelalter* (Ostfildern: n.p., 2005), 98.

[26] Cf. also Ian Mortimer*, Im Mittelalter. Handbuch für Zeitreisende* (Munich: n.p., 2014), 258-264

Based on the relatively well documented thermal spa on the island of Schütt, located within the city limits,[27] one can imagine the size of bathing houses—or perhaps more aptly put—bathing establishments.

In 1577, this establishment, which was owned by the town and leased to a tenant, was renovated.[28] We know from the information provided by the council clerk Müllner that 176 bathtubs were in use after the renovation; fifty-seven of the tubs were from the original bathhouse and the remainder new purchases.

This renovation actually took place anti-cyclically. The heyday of bathing culture abruptly ended in the late 15th century, when many bathhouses were forced to close because of the rampant spread of the Frenchman's disease, i.e., syphilis, beginning in 1495. If it was possible for a bathhouse with 176 tubs to operate successfully in the mid- 16th century despite the difficult market conditions, we can assume that a similar number of baths were probably in operation in the early 1500s. The tubs varied in size and use, including a few for those bathing alone (i.e., only upper class people could afford this) and for group bathing events that required tub sizes for 20 people.

Thus, if we calculate bather numbers based on an average occupancy of two people per tub, we can assume that—per bath session—there were about 300 bathers even though a portion of the baths were not in use when they were being prepared for the next bathing session. Each bathing session lasted about 30 minutes. Hourglasses were used as timers and indicated when bathers needed to vacate the tubs. Thus, in a single hour there would have been 600 bathers. In summer, as well as on Fridays and Saturdays, the bathhouse was open for about eight hours, and we can assume 4800 bathers were accommodated on such days, and almost 10,000 on weekends.

In 1500, Nuremberg had almost, 20,000 inhabitants, including "suburbanites," although such individuals lived too far away to simply "pop into" one of the city's bathhouses. Nevertheless, the thermal spa on the island of Schütt alone could "bathe" half of Nuremberg's population on a single weekend; the bathhouse was also open on certain weekdays and there were 14 other bathhouses in the city.

This extrapolation demonstrates that the personal hygiene attained by visits to the bathhouse was important. The numbers further indicate that the bathing was an activity in which the entire population participated.

Because bathhouses were so popular, it is safe to assume that certain bathhouses 'specialized' in certain professions, services (pulling teeth, leeching, cutting hair; steam baths, tub baths, special food, certain

[27] Not "before the gates," as Mentzel writes (2013), 46.

[28] "In the mid-16th century, the increased number of bathers made a new building necessary. A large, stone half-timbered building with 176 tubs was built. A drawing shows that the south facade had eleven windows and three gates. Huge stacks of wood for firing were stored on the banks of the Pegnitz. The council scribe Johannes Müllner described the new building in 1577 as follows: "Wildbad [thermal spa] Neugepauet: In the month of June of that year, the old thermal spa building on the Schütt, which had stood for two hundred years, was demolished, and a new one of stone was built, one hundred and ninety-two shoes (ca. one foot long) and six and a half shoes wide, started to be built, with the ground dug up to the water, then two grooves (planks) were laid in and the stone was laid on top. It was finished in February of the following year. In the new thermal spa there were 176 tubs.: 119 new tubs, 57 old tubs, 266 old wood tub covers, and 371 new wood tub covers have been made for the tubs." Quoted from: M.W. (= Matthias Weinrich): http://www.nuernberginfos.de/bauwerke-nuernberg/wildbad-nuernberg.html, (accessed on May 22, 2020)

facilities, e.g. rest rooms, certain features, e.g., outdoor areas, or—as in the case of the thermal spa on Schütt)—in certain bather preferences.

In fact, the city's nobles frequented this bathing establishment: "*Since the thermal spa (...) was used primarily by the 'upper class,' and also served as a place for socializing, people wanted to show off what they had. The bathers sat in boat-shaped wooden tubs, which were faced with boards. The hourglass timer was placed on the cover, as were reading material, floral arrangements and drinks. Only the bather's head looked out of the tub, rendering headgear a status symbol. In 1502, the master builder Michel Behaim was given a black cap especially for the bathing ceremonies at a price of four pounds, the equivalent of 14 bathing days.*[29]

Bathhouse prices were dictated by the city's magistrate, but the individual owners could essentially charge what they wished for additional services, making these attractive propositions.[30]

The diversity of the bathing culture within the city led to the establishment of various different kinds of bathing houses; these included houses where the female attendants were particularly pleasant or wherever the medical care was particularly good, as well as houses that were frequented by certain men.

And it is precisely this latter group that Dürer captures in *The Men's Bathhouse*: a bathing establishment with an outdoor area where men could meet and have intimate contact with one another. The outdoor area was part of the steam bath (i.e., sauna, shvitz). These baths were frequented more often than water baths, because—compared to tub baths—less wood had to be burned to operate them, making their use less expensive.[31]

Viewers of the image at the time would have quickly understood what kind of bathhouse was being depicted. The city's citizens in particular would have recognized the location as the popular thermal spa on Schütt, with its outdoor area and its close proximity to the park and where gambling and its "implications" were pursued.

Half a century later, our limited knowledge makes it difficult for us to classify the "setting" accordingly. *The Men's Bathhouse* does not portray a curious isolated phenomenon; rather, it depicts an establishment that could be found not only in Nuremberg, but also in many large cities: a place where one could also initiate and participate in sexual activities.

Thus, prostitution,[32] de-tabooed sexual intercourse and sexual permissiveness were among the concomitants of the bathhouses, leading to their poor reputation among most citizens.

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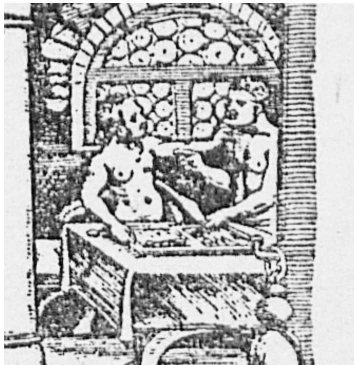
[29] Quoted from M.W. (= Matthias Weinrich): http://www.nuernberginfos.de/bauwerke-nuernberg/wildbad-nuernberg.htm (accessed on May 22, 2020).
[30] Cf. Meier, (2005), 98.
[31] Cf. Meier, (2005), 99. In Bamberg, a tub bath was twelve times as expensive as a steam bath.
[32] Sarah Khan, *Diversa diversis. Mittelalterliche Standespredigten und ihre Visualisierung. (Pictura et Poesis)* (Cologne: n.p., 2007), 228.

"*(...) Above all, the bathhouse supervisors and their assistants (...) were accused of decadence and loose practices, since prostitution was encouraged and conducted in the medieval bathhouse*."[33]

It is thus hardly surprising that Dürer's assistant, Hans Sebald Beham, frequently got into trouble with the Nuremberg Council for his sexualized pictorial content, thematized in numerous erotic variants in his large woodcut (over a meter long!), *Fountain of Youth* (1531).



((Fig. 81, Beham: Fountain of Youth - detail))

Regardless of whether one subscribes to the moralistic finger-pointing ("sin bath") often implied in art history research, Beham nonetheless provides a general view about life in the bathhouse, which was that it was clearly a place where one could engage in sexual pleasures of all kinds.[34]

Research has pointed out that the arrangement in the foreground of *The Men's Bathhouse* just in front of the wall inexplicably lacks interpretation.[35] Yet, even Mentzel, who attempted an interpretation of these three objects for the first time,[36] is not very convincing.

[33] Ulrika Kiby, "Auf dem Weg zur Neuzeit – Badevergnügen auch ohne Luxus," in Karl Michael Armer, *Badewonnen. Gestern. Heute. Morgen*, edited by Hansgrohe, with contributions by Karl Michael Armer, Ulrika Kiby, Klaus Kramer and Erich Küthe. (Cologne: n.p., 1993), 38.
[34] Cf: Jan-David Mentzel, "Taube im Sündenbad. Sebald Beham's "Fountain of Youth" from 1531," in *Die gottlosen Maler von Nürnberg. Konvention und Subversion in der Druckgrafik der Beham-Brüder,* edited by Jürgen Müller and Thomas (Emsdetten: n.p., 2011), 98-114.
[35] Cf. Mentzel, (2013), 46-47.
[36] "They provide a reflection on the possibility of representing the naked body from a Christian vantage point. In this context, the cup referred to the body as the vessel of the soul, the stone or lump of clay to God's act of creation, which the artist emulates, and the healing plant to the injured body after the Fall, which requires divine assistance and redemption." Mentzel , (2013), 61.

((Fig. 82, Men’s Bathhouse; Detail))

It is difficult to conclusively identify what kind of plant is illustrated in the woodcut in the foreground on the left. Although similar to a (pointed) plantain,[37] this plant does not possess the cluster illustrated here, where the leaves are mostly in a basal rosette. Plantains have visible and distinct leaf veins, which Dürer would certainly have shown if he were depicting a plantain.

Illustrated in the woodcut, however, are so-called perigone leaves—visible in the cluster—that protect (and are actually part of) the petals. These grow from so-called whorls, which develop from the nodal roots.

The leaves here probably belong to a wild orchid (in this case most likely the Orchis militaris).

[37] At the latest in the 18th century, this was considered a medicinal plant which was used to fight and treat the French disease. Cf. *Pharmacopoeia Universalis: Allgemeiner Medicinisch-Chimischer Artzney-Schatz*, edited by Johann Schröder, Friedrich Hoffmann et al. (Nuremberg: 1747), chapter 34th chapter, 185, section 43.

((Fig. 83, Wild Orchid, Orchis tephrosanthos))

((Fig. 84, Orchid militaris))

"Because the two tubers resemble testicles, the botanical genus name 'Orchis' comes from the Greek word όρχις, or orchis, meaning testicle. (...) Because of the paired root tubers and their resemblance to the male genitals, he named them 'Orchis' and substantiated the claim, which persisted in ancient writings for a long time, on the premises that women who ate the stronger and juicier of the two tubers would give birth to a boy (Theophr. IX. 18.3.). The German name "Knabenkraut" is also derived from this. Other names of in this genus include Stendelwurz, Stendel and Satyrion. In keeping with the common nomenclature, the Orchis tuber was recommended as an aphrodisiac and—by Paracelsus—a remedy against testicular disorders. In classical Greek mythology, Orchis, the son of a satyr and a nymph, was killed by Bacchants. His father's prayers transformed him into the plant that now bears his name." [38]

The orchid thus clearly supports the homoerotic reading of the woodcut.

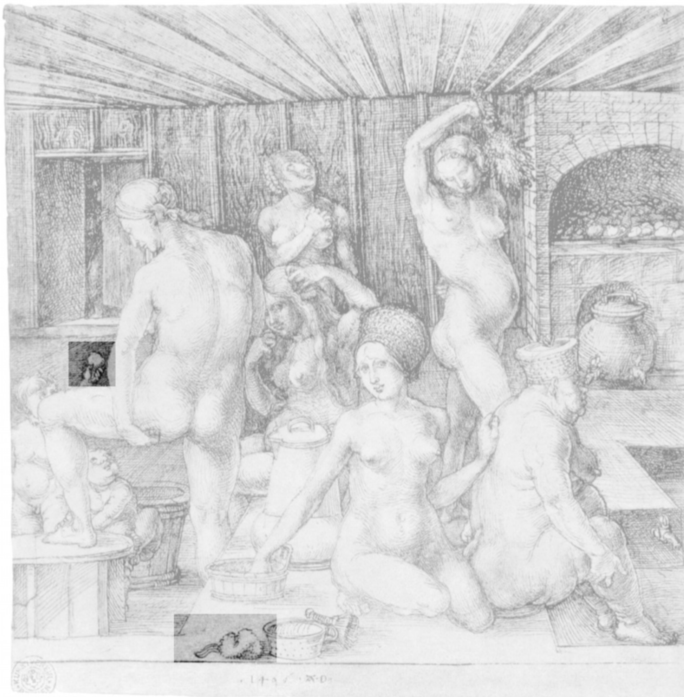
[38] Lemma, "Wild Orchids (Orchis)," in: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knabenkr%C3%A4uter_(Orchis), (accessed on May 22, 2020.

What is the significance of the drinking cup and the lump of clay to the right of the orchid?

Mentzel's reading is based on the premise that the drinking cup is ceramic and made from the same material as the form next to it.[39] The cup, however, is clearly not "unadorned."[40] Rather, it is decorated with two superimposed rows of a beaded, cord-like pattern. The application of such ornamentation on a ceramic cup is technically complex and inconsistent with its typical use as an ordinary drinking utensil found in rural craftmanship. I know of no evidence that supports the existence of such ornate ceramic cups.

It is more likely that this drinking cup was made of glass or silver.[41] If it were made of glass, however, there would be evidence of transparency. A more probable guess is that it was made of silver or zinc, materials Dürer, a goldsmith, would have been more apt to depict. This also corresponds to the elite class that frequented the thermal spa. Such silver cups with decorated bases were common only later;[42] yet it seems probable to me that Dürer wanted to present a relatively plain, but nevertheless, unusual silver cup.

The "clump" is much more likely to have been a pear, like the one depicted in Dürer's *The Women's Bathhouse*, where it can be seen in the foreground; it represents a significant gift from the infant and a pleasurable food. In both images the pear—a common sexual symbol at the time (see above)—alludes to illicit sexual intercourse.



((Fig. 85, Women's Bathhouse, Detail: Pear))

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[39] Cf. Mentzel, (2013), 55.
[40] Cf. Mentzel, (2013), 54.
[41] I would like to thank Dr. Heike Zech of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, for this reference.
[42] Cf., for example, the Nuremberg 'Becher der Färber' (Dyers' cup) from ca. 1534; the Norwich silver beaker by Arthur Hazelwood (1661) (https://www.waxantiques.com/antique-norwich-silver-beaker.html), a 17th-century "beaker" https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/197426) or a Dutch kiddush cup from 1720.

Although the pear's stem is missing in *The Men's Bathhouse*, this may have been due to an oversight by the woodcutter. It is also possible that the object is not a pear at all, but a shell.[43]

A conclusive interpretation of the silver cup remains elusive. Nonetheless, a cup was considered a symbol of reception, of a (hollow) space to be filled e.g., a woman's womb. As a receptacle for vital liquids, it symbolically also refers to the basic needs of life, those things necessary to be able to live at all. Could the cup thus express Dürer's possible belief that contact with men was a central elixir of his life?

The cup's prominent position in the painting—in the foreground and along the central axis—is undoubtedly for emphasis's sake and cannot be a coincidence. Dürer's symbolic use of the cup is underscored by its useless placement in the woodcut. This stands in stark contrast to the utilitarian object of the stein, from which the "fat man" on the right drinks.

The cup is also a sign of a covenant between a community of diners. Besides the Christian tradition of the chalice, which Jesus shared with his disciples at the Last Supper and defined as a symbol of the "new covenant,"[44] [45] in Greek antiquity the cup served as an expression of a deep covenant between men.

"On Crete, pederastic acts were part of a necessary initiation of a young man into the community of able-bodied men. A few days after an official announcement, the adult 'steals' the darling and spends two months together with him in solitude in the countryside. Afterwards, he releases him with gifts, which included a suit of war armor, a cup (a sign of one's membership in the male dining community in the men's house), and an ox (...)."[46]

It is precisely this symbol of the covenant among men that is thematized in *The Men's Bathhouse*. The bond, which finds its expression in the cup, does not include all those illustrated in the woodcut. It applies only to the four men situated in an imaginary angle, the vertex of which is the cup, i.e., Dürer, the two Paumgartner brothers and the "fat man," who is always associated with Willibald Pirckheimer (because of the similarity between the actual and illustrated figure).[47]

The alliance symbolized by the drinking cup may also be a reference to the "Herrentrinkstube" (men's drinking tavern), which was established exclusively for men in Nuremberg as early as 1495 and which

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[43] However, this would also support an erotic reading. Cf., for example, the shell as a genital guard /vine leaf in Jan Gossaert's painting "Neptune and Amphitrite," (1516), Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.

[44] Cf., for example, the presentation of the cup in Lucas Cranach's "Reformation Altar" in St. Marienkirchen in Wittenberg, completed in 1547.

[45] Cf. Luke 22:20: "Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you."

[46] Plato: Works. Volume V/4: Lysis, translation and commentary by Michael Bordt. (Göttingen, 1998), 113, note 236.

[47] Mentzel, (2013), 58, note 48; this qualifies the resemblance with the argument—first made by Martin Sonnabend—that, at the time, Pirckheimer may not have been as corpulent as he was in portraits 15 years later. However, there is no credible reason to assume he was not fat at the age of 26. The suggestion that Pirckheimer, as commander of the Nuremberg magistrate in 1499 during the Swabian War against the Confederates, would not have been fat is unconvincing. Commanders did not fight as soldiers in battles (and Pirckheimer would undoubtedly have been completely useless in such a role even as a slim man); such army commanders planned and organized battles.

relocated to the new “Waage” (weigh station or square) in 1497/1498. This “tavern” was open to members of the city’s established families who could hold office; however, about a third of its patrons were members of “respectable” families, whose members could hold office in court, as well as “people from the merchant and scholarly classes.”[48] It is quite conceivable that the “fraternal cup” represented this drinking community to which the Paumgartner brothers, Willibald Pirckheimer and the co-opted Dürer belonged.[49] Nonetheless, the city’s dignitaries appear to have been suspicious of this community; at any rate it is surprising that Sixtus Tucher invited neither Pirckheimer nor Dürer to his wedding in 1501. This is all the more remarkable because Sixtus Tucher “(...) was so closely associated with Willibald’s sister, Caritas, in those years, and Dürer accepted commissions from Tucher.”[50]

The cup shares the central vertical axis with the apple tree, the trunk of which plainly exhibits atypical anthropomorphic features. Contrary to Mentzel’s thesis,[51] here the apple tree does not symbolize transience and frailty; rather, it is to be understood—in the classical sense—as a symbol of seduction, temptation and as the recognition of man’s lust-oriented nakedness: *“… and they knew that they were naked*.” (Gen, 3:7)

The masculine setting of *The Men’s Bathhouse* is obviously not a reference to temptations of Eve, but to the seduction by the naked men who have come together in the bathhouse arbor and have formed a covenant; they have found their organic symbol in the “Knabenkraut” (boy’s weed) or wild orchid, a reference to extramarital sexuality in the “pear” and their sexual preferences expressed in the musicians.

Further pictorial elements in *The Men’s Bathhouse* support its sexual and homoerotic reading.

One of the men in the foreground is holding a carnation; research has revealed him to be Stephan Paumgartner. Seated next to him on the right is Lukas, his brother;[52] we will meet these men again and discuss them in more detail later in the book in the context of the *Paumgartner Altar*, commissioned by the Paumgartner family (cf. chapter 11).

The two brothers belonged to a renowned Nuremberg patrician family; although it had suffered great economic hardship in the previous generation, it was still—or once again—considered one of the city’s most esteemed families.[53]

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[48] Cf. Werner Schlutheiß, “Die Einrichtung der Herrentrinkstube 1497/1498 und deren Ordnung von 1561/97,” in: *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Nürnberg,* Vol. 44, (1953), 278. The title is misleading as it refers to the so-called "new" drinking room; Schlutheiß points out that there had already been a drinking tavern in February 1495 run by the Gabriel Gastelsdorffer, who would also be the landlord in the new drinking tavern from 1498.

[49] We know from Dürer’s 1506 letters from Venice to Pirckheimer that both visited this men’s drinking tavern. Cf. also Philipp Zitzlsperger, (2008), 58.

[50] Antonia Landois, *Gelehrtentum und Patrizierstand. Wirkungskreise des Nürnberger Humanisten Sixtus Tucher (1459-1507)* (Tübingen: n.p., 2014), 272.

[51] Cf. Mentzel, (2013), 60.

[52] *Cf. Hans F. Secker, “Beiträge zur Dürerforschung. I. Dürer und Mantegnas Fresken in Padua,” in: Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst 53*, new series. 29 (1918), 133-140.

[53] The insolvency of the merchant branch in Venice in 1465 probably cost the entire family a great deal of money. The Paumgartner branch that was responsible for the insolvency fled from Nuremberg to Augsburg, where it

The flower in Stephan's hand initially is difficult to identify; when enlarged, however, it becomes clear it is a wild carnation.

((Fig. 86, Men's Bathhouse: Detail: Carnation))

Set against a black shaded background, one can spot the node—referred to as a nodule by botanists—characterized by a distinct thickening of the shoot or stalk.

The carnation had three symbolic uses in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. It was a Christian symbol, as evident in Leonardo's *Madonna of the Carnation* (1478) because the fruit from the clove tree was understood to represent the nails used in the crucifixion. Dürer also employed this symbol in his own rendition of "*Madonna of the Carnation*" (1516))—notably without nodes!

In art history, the image of the carnation (Dianthus) was associated with the clove tree (Syzygium aromaticum), a member of the myrtle family, which is systematically wrong, i.e. the clove tree in question was amalgamated with the carnation depicted.

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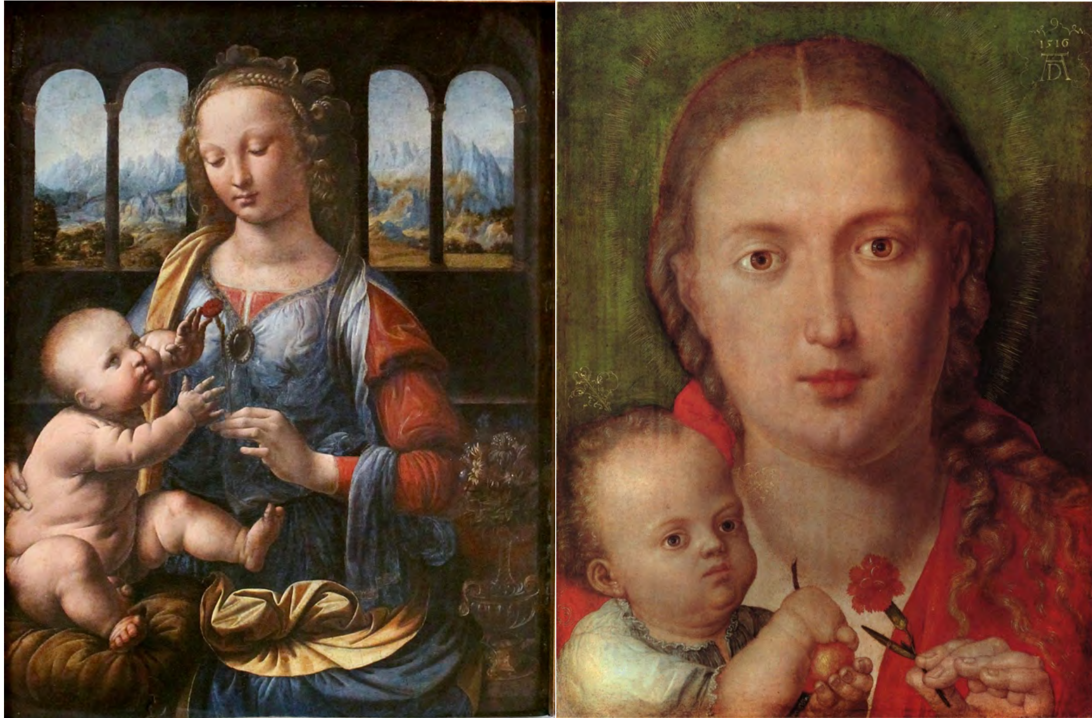
regained its wealth rather quickly thanks to the mercury trade, which it dominated. The Nuremberg Paumgartners, however, would have been severely affected by the insolvency; although the trading houses were separated by family branches, they were still linked under company law.



((Fig. 87, Leonardo, Madonna)), ((Fig. 88, Detail)), ((Fig. 89, Dürer, Madonna)), ((Fig. 90, Detail))

The white and pink carnation was also a symbol for betrothal. This figurative variant is depicted, for example, in Andrea Solario's portrait of a Venetian patrician *Man with a Pink Carnation* (1495).[54]

[54] Andrea Solario became a pupil of Bellini's in Venice in 1490 and may have met Dürer.

((Fig. 91, Solario, Men with red carnation))

Another variant of this symbolic meaning may be evident in Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man with a Carnation*, in which the flower it signifies is the 'promise' to join the Brotherhood of St. Anthony (thematized in the T-cross with the small bell) as a lay brother.

((Fig. 92, Eyck, Men with Carnation))

Thus, if the carnation could express both a betrothal (between a man and a woman) as well as a covenant (e.g., between a man and an institution), then it could also symbolize a male-male affiliation, which would also make more sense in the context of Dürer's *The Men's Bathhouse*.

The third symbolic use of the carnation—because of its distinctly penis-shaped syncarp—is the representation of genitals, love and fertility.[55]

This phallic and sexual classification of *The Men's Bathhouse*—in combination with the associated symbolism—is a far more convincing reading of the carnation than the Christian interpretation, which has been repeatedly evoked in art historical literature. Why should the Passion of Christ be addressed in *The Men's Bathhouse*? The Christian interpretation corresponds with no element in the woodcut, while the homoerotic interpretation of the carnation perfectly correlates with the objects in the image!

That the carnation's symbolism is sexual rather than Christian is evident in other Renaissance depictions of it that do not refer to homosexual interaction—as in *The Men's Bathhouse*—but to heterosexual intercourse. Yet, these images also support the thesis that the carnation must be read as a genital, seductive and sexual symbol.[56]

In Jan Massys' *Flora*, a courtesan is depicted holding three carnations in her hand (similar to Massys' *Venus of Cythera* in Stockholm).

((Fig. 93, Massys, Flora))

Even later, in Jacopo Zucchi's work *Amor and Psyche,* the use of the carnation as a sexual symbol persists.[57]

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[55] Cf. Christoph Wetzel, *Das große Lexikon der Symbole* (Darmstadt: n.p., 2008), 208.

[56] Cf. Konrad Renger, "Alte Liebe, gleich und ungleich, zu einem satirischen Bildthema bei Jan Massys,"in *Netherlandish Mannerism. Papers given at a symposium in Nationalmuseum Stockholm, 1984* (Stockholm: 1985), 35-36. "Beyond the narrow mythological framework, we also find this flower generally used as a symbol of seduction. Thus, for example, it is reported / 1477 of Maximilian's marriage to Mary of Burgundy that the bride concealed on her >a little carnation flower, which is for his graces to seek, after which he began to grasp and to seek with two fingers, but only found it when he opened the Virgin Mary's garment on the advice of the bishop of Trier."

[57] An interesting detail: In addition to the carnations, the bouquet also contains the thistle-like Eryngium, or "Mannstreu" (= man's faithfulness)! In general, this bouquet is to be understood as a fig leaf, which covers the

((Fig. 94, Zucchi, Amor, 07_94_Zucchi.jpeg))

The historical semantics of the carnation as a phallic symbol is supported by a text by Ovid, the *Metamorphoses*, which was also read in the Renaissance. In it, Artemis—the goddess of the hunt—returned from an unsuccessful pursuit (she hunted deer and men).

During the hunt, she met a shepherd playing the flute (shawm), whom she accused of having frightened away the game with his music. As a punishment, she plucked out his eyes and threw them among the stones. When she later repented of her act, the eyes became bright flowers: carnations.

This text outlines the contrast between Artemis, who is hostile toward men, and the shepherd, who is friendly toward them. This contrast is ultimately the cause of the punishment of blindness. Loss of sight and castration anxiety are closely linked here, also in the Freudian sense. Thus, the carnations in Ovid's poem can be interpreted as phallic symbols.

In the reception of Greek mythology during the Renaissance, the flute-playing demigod Pan corresponds to the shawm-playing shepherd, as well the silen and satyr,[58] who accompany the sensual and wine-loving Dionysus. The androgynous, hermaphroditic figures embody both homosexual and heterosexual qualities. Dürer would have been familiar with this hybrid creature as, in 1494, he worked on a model of *Bacchus with Silen* attributed to Andrea Mantegna.

In Dürer's ink drawing, which cannot be analyzed in depth here, the shepherd on the right is of interest, as he resembles the shepherd whose eyes Artemis rips out and turns into carnations. His greatly inflated cheeks reveal that he is not playing the flute (when playing any woodwind,[59] one's cheeks rest against the ridge of one's teeth). He is only pretending to play with his fingers; in fact, he puts both the flutes into his mouth, causing his cheeks to bulge and become conspicuously oversized. It is not, however, a

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genitals of the man, thereby referring to the act of de-flor-ation, or deflowering, as the breaking of the flowers. This is also the case in the German of Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, Deutsches Wörterbuch, [Vol. 2, column. 160], keyword "flower."

[58] It is worth noting that, in 1753, Carl Linné introduced the carnation plants under the generic name Silene in his book *Species Plantarum*.

[59] Only Dizzy Gillespie could play the trumpet with such inflated cheeks ...

comic illustration about a flute played incorrectly, but a distinctly ambiguous reference to the sexual practice of fellatio.

((Fig. 95, Silen, 07_95_Silen.jpg))

The semantic link between silen, carnation, shepherd, flute, and homosexuality was probably familiar in the Pirckheimer-Paumgartner alliance, whose members would have been well acquainted with Greek mythology.

In Dürer's *The Men's Bathhouse,* the carnation alludes to Paumgartner as a (homo)sexually active man. By holding the carnation, he reveals his sexual orientation and advertises his willingness to engage in homosexual acts.

In addition to the carnation in Stephan Paumgartner's hand discussed above, we should also take a look at its counterpart in his brother Lukas's hand.

((Fig. 96, Men's Bathhouse, Detail))

The tool, which only at first glance resembles a razor, is a comb;[60] although the tool plays a significant role in personal hygiene, it must also be read as an allusion to the bather's love drama.

In its larger (and coarser) form, such a comb was also used for grooming horses, as evident, for example, in the painting *Stableboy* (1534) by Hans Sebald Baldung, a collaborator of Dürer. Here, an ambiguous but "nevertheless" sexualized connection between the horse's croup, the view between the groom's legs and the hair care tool emerges.

((Fig. 97, Baldung; Stableboy))

In fact, there is evidence that plausibly suggests the comb represented the phallus and sexual intercourse in the late Middle Ages.[61]

As bathhouses were also places where one attended to one's personal hygiene and care, combs were a common tool used in them by both men and women.

A statement by Lorenz Beheim in a letter to Willibald Pirckheimer from 1507 implies that the smooth, hairless face was considered an attractive male characteristic, *"Yet, his beard, which he certainly twists*

[60] Because it has teeth, it is clearly not a "razor" as maintained by Mentzel, (2013), 52.

[61] Cf. Wolfgang Beutin, "Das nerrisch tut vil manig man, / der sich des schamt ein ander zeit." Zur Problematik des Obszönen im Mittelalter," in *Erotik, aus dem Dreck gezogen. (Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik 59)*, edited by Johan Winkelmann and Gerhard Wolf. (Amsterdam and New York: 2004), 24, note 6. And ibid. Walter Haug, "Die niederländischen erotischen Tragezeichen und das Problem des Obszönen im Mittelalter," 67, note 2.

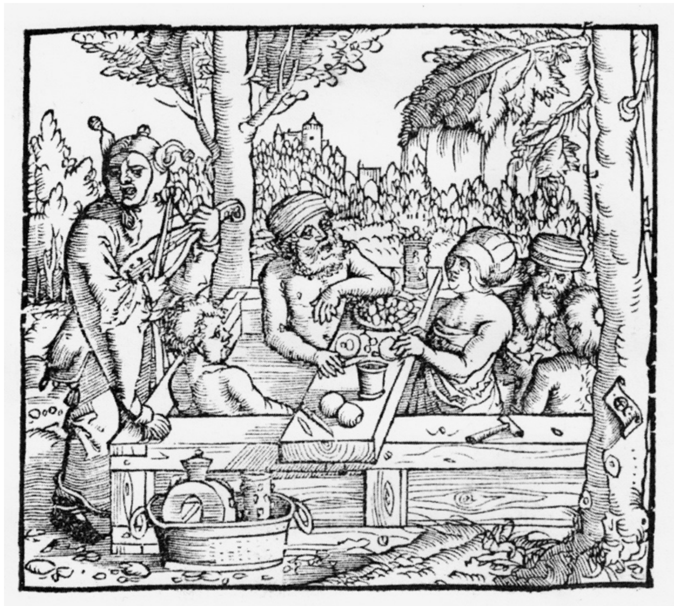
and curls daily, prevents him from having it stick out like boars' teeth. But his boy fears, I know it, his beard. Therefore, he should strive to make it appear smooth."[62]

In the late Middle Ages, hair generally had a greater erotic significance than it does today, while nudity probably tended to imply less eroticism.

In his book on life in the Middle Ages, the French historian Robert Fossier writes, *"In this period we today discover an eroticism that is very different from our own. Nudity apparently did not play the arousing role then that we assign to it today; for example, the Eve in Saint-Lazare Cathedral in Autun is nude only because she is an Eve. Hardly any other fresco or sculpture depicts a scene like the* Dance of Salome *or the* Allegory of Voluptuousness*. The small naked bodies, which represent the souls of the deceased, are androgynous. And, if it was at all possible, spouses at that time undressed separately. And even the [afore]mentioned naked bathers of both sexes in the steam bath wore a head covering. Sexual symbolism, on the other hand, was found in hair and arms (...)."* [63]

Thus, the comb refers to the impending events in the bathhouse. It suggests that with the 'opening' of one's hair there is also an opening to intimacy, i.e., the comb refers to a future sexual event. [64]

In a woodcut printed in 1519 in the *Tractat der Wildbeder* (Treatise of the Spa Bather) by Lorenz Fries (1489-1550), the comb (as well as the typical fiddler) reappears as a principal element in the bathhouse scene. The comb represents the anticipation of impending intimacy.



((Fig. 98, Unknown: Bathing Scene, 1519))

[62] Thomas Noll, "Albrecht Dürer und Willibald Pirckheimer. Facetten einer Freundschaft in Briefen und Bildnissen," in *Pirckheimer Jahrbuch 28 (2014). Willibald Pirckheimer und sein Umfeld. Pirckheimer Jahrbuch für Renaissance und Humanismusforschung*, edited by Franz Fuchs. (Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden: n.p., 2014), 25-28.
[63] Robert Fossier, *Life in the Middle Ages* (Munich, 2008), 113.
[64] Cf. also on the ivory comb: Julia Saviello, "Instrumente der Ordnung – Objekte der Verführung. Elbenbeinkämme als Bildträger im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert," in: *Werkzeuge und Instrumente. (= Hamburger Forschungen zur Kunstgeschichte,* Vol. VIII), edited by Philippe Cordez and Matthias Krüger. (Berlin: n.p., 2011), 49-66.

In Beham's previously illustrated *Fountain of Youth*, which depicts sexual partners in different variations, we also find a comb at the bottom right of the painting (and on top of the roof of the temple of friends, the man playing the flute).

When Lukas Paumgartner holds the comb in *The Men's Bathhouse* so prominently for the viewer to see, he is using it to signal—like his brother Stephan does with the carnation—of his openness to the approaching intimate act during which the turban (a hair covering) will be removed. "Combing: the suggestion of coition or the enticement to it."[65]

Art historical research has emphasized how much the three men in the second row and the voyeur look like Dürer.[66] *"The similarity of the men to each other in terms of their physical constitution (...) is striking. This resembles, more or less , Dürer's physique, as depicted in particular in his nude self-portrait in Weimar (W 267). The inclination has been to identify the spectator as a "hidden self-portrait;" the (later) Weimar print and this one - here with the irony of the water "tap" - share an emphasis on the genitals. Even the youngest, the fiddler, is closely related to a presumedly earlier self-portrait, the youth in the Hamburger "Liebespaar" (Lovers) (W 56)."*[67]

((Fig. 99, Dürer: Nude Self-portrait))

[65] Wolfgang Beutin, "Das nerrisch tut vil manig man, / der sich des schamt ein ander zeit." Zur Problematik des Obszönen im Mittelalter," in Erotik, aus dem Dreck gezogen. (Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik 59), edited by Johan Winkelmann and Gerhard Wolf. (Amsterdam and New York: n.p., 2004), 24.
[66] Cf. Ulrich Kuder, Bärbel Manitz and Walter Sparn, *Des Menschen Gemüt ist wandelbar. Druckgrafik der Dürer-Zeit*, (Kiel: n.p., 2004), 243.
[67] Berthold Hinz, Albertina Catalog, (2003), XX. Hinz further states, "This observation, however, in no way supports the occasionally expressed interpretation of the print as a kind of group portrait, but rather illuminates the model situation and the artist's narcissistic habitus." It remains unclear why the derogatorily meant "narcissistic habitus" speaks against the work's being a group portrait for Hinz.

Let us assume that the representation of the man leaning against the block is, in fact, a self-portrait of Dürer. It is worth emphasizing that the man—as in the Weimar nude self-portrait—wishes to allude to his private parts with the large cock-and-spout water tap. This fig leaf technique (of concealment) has already been mentioned in the discussion between Pelz, Celtis and Hammer, as Dürer often places objects in front of male genitals to conceal them, but—in so doing—highlights them.

The cock-and-spout water tap superficially obscures the genitals; yet their conspicuous concealment actually draws attention to them. This was probably meant less "ironically" (according to Hinz) than ostentatiously. The male artist expresses himself here as a sexual being,[68] especially since the cock, i.e. rooster, was considered an impure animal.[69]

"*However, the obviously phallic symbol recognized by Wind and others (...), may have another meaning: It may also symbolize the French per se and the plague of syphilis supposedly transmitted by them.*"[70]

The posture of the Dürer look-a-like, who is casually leaning against the wooden block from which the cock-and-spout protrudes, recalls a print by Antonio Pollaiuolo, whose work Dürer may have seen on his first trip to Italy.

"Dürer also found useful models of the human figure in action in the works of Antonio Pollaiulo and his followers. Dürer's assimilation of these sources can be vividly observed in a sheet of a nude male figure, with one arm raised, the other supporting a shield, follows, in morphology and in the specifics of anatomical interest, the central warrior of Pollaiuolo's print "Battle of the Naked Man." It also has striking affinities with the figure holding a cornucopia in Mantegna's print of a bacchanal."[71]

More striking—in my opinion—is the similarity between Pollaiuolo's male nude and Dürer's self-portrait. In Pollaiuolo's work, the man's right hand is slightly bent and pressing the top of his wrist against his hip in a gesture that today appears affected. On the other side of his body, he seems unable to comfortably support his body on a long , thin stick and looks as if he may topple forward. In Dürer's work, on the other hand, the man stands firmly, leaning on the wood block, visibly satisfied as he contemplates the scene with his hand resting against his cheek. Art historical research nevertheless sees this figure as the melancholic-depressive persona of "Melancholic - always recognizable by the propped up chin (...);"[72] yet, the man's hand does not support his chin at all, nor is he looking downward, a common gesture for the melancholic character established by Théophile Gautier.[73]

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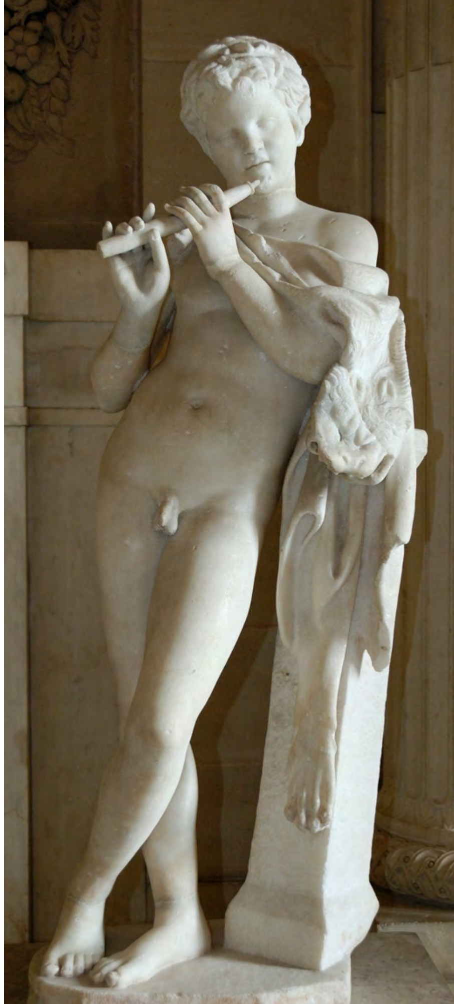
[68] Perhaps Dürer was aware of the colloquial meaning of "cock" (i.e., penis) in English, which was a familiar term and in use in the late Middle Ages. Cf. Lemma, "Cock," https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=cock (accessed July 19, 2020).
[69] Kuder, (2004), 49.
[70] Münch, (2015), 35.
[71] Andrew Morrall, "Dürer and Venice," in: *The Essential Dürer*, edited by Larry Silver and Jeffrey Chipps Smith. (Philadelphia: n.p., 2010), 99-114, here 103.
[72] Münch, (2015), 37.
[73] The extraordinarily extensive discussion of melancholia - starting from Dürer's "Melancholia" (1513)—which, by the way, does not support his chin with his hand (or fist, for that matter)—can, of course, only be mentioned in passing here. Like Paul Demont, I have doubts whether the posture of the man leaning against the wooden block in *The Men's Bathhouse* can be associated with representations of melancholia. Cf. Paul Demont, "Der antike Melancholiebegriff: von der Krankheit zum Temperament," in *Melancholie. Genie und Wahnsinn in der Kunst; zu Ehren von Raymond Klibansky,* edited by Jean Clair. (Ostfildern: n.p., 2005), 34.

((Fig. 100, Pollaiuolo; Male nude))

((Fig. 101, Dürer, Men's Bathhouse, Wood Block))

The crossed-leg pose was a homoerotic icon in antiquity, as evident, for instance, in Praxiteles' (of course!) *Faun Playing the Flute*, a familiar image thanks to numerous copies and replicas of it in circulation during the early Renaissance. [74]

[74] Cf. Müller, 392



((Fig. 102, Praxiteles, Faun))

Let us take a closer look at the man in the second row, towards whom the man leaning against the block—identified as Dürer—is looking. The corpulent man is sitting on the edge of a fountain, drinking from a stein. “*This one bears the features of Dürer's friend Willibald Pirckheimer. (...) The homoerotically marked relationship between Dürer and Pirckheimer is attested to by various turns of phrase in Dürer’s letters to Pirckheimer and by the words likely inscribed by Pirckheimer’s hand in Greek script and language on Dürer’s drawing “Portrait of Willibald Pirckheimer,” which … reads, ‘With the erect penis in the anus of the man.’ The musicians, a bearded flautist and a younger male playing the fiddle, are comparable to the lascivious friends of Job in Jabach Altar, in which Dürer also included a self-portrait and musical instruments containing sexual symbolic connotations.”*[75]

In addition, it has also frequently been noted that a similarity exists between the silen in *Bacchanal with Silen* (see above) and Pirckheimer.

The homosexual relationship between Dürer and Pirckheimer, presumed today (but only whispered in art scholarship), reflects the homoerotic life and reality of Dürer and his friends as Dürer perceived it: nudity, steam bath, orchid, comb, flute, violin, cock-and-spout water taps as genitals, the position of the legs, the look the “cock-and-spout” man exchanges with the flute player and the “fat man.”

Yet, the work represents more than an assemblage of different objects; one can read the woodcut as a cohesive catalog of homosexual desires. Just as *The Women’s Bathhouse* can be understood as a general depiction of heterosexual desire through the different views of the naked women, one can also read *The Men’s Bathhouse* as a comprehensive representation. Here the carnation symbolizes the phallic, the comb the fetish, the flute oral sex, the violin penetration, the peeping tom voyeurism, Pirckheimer anal intercourse and Dürer the exhibitionist. This would make *The Men’s Bathhouse* an extraordinary genre painting: a clearly ambiguous image of homosexual practices in the late Middle Ages.

This reading sample is a translation of chapter 6 from the book „Dürer und die Männer. Eindeutig zweideutig.“ by Reinhard Bröker. Imhof-Verlag 2023. The book is only available in German.
www.duerer-eindeutig-zweideutig.de

[75] Kuder, (2004), 243.