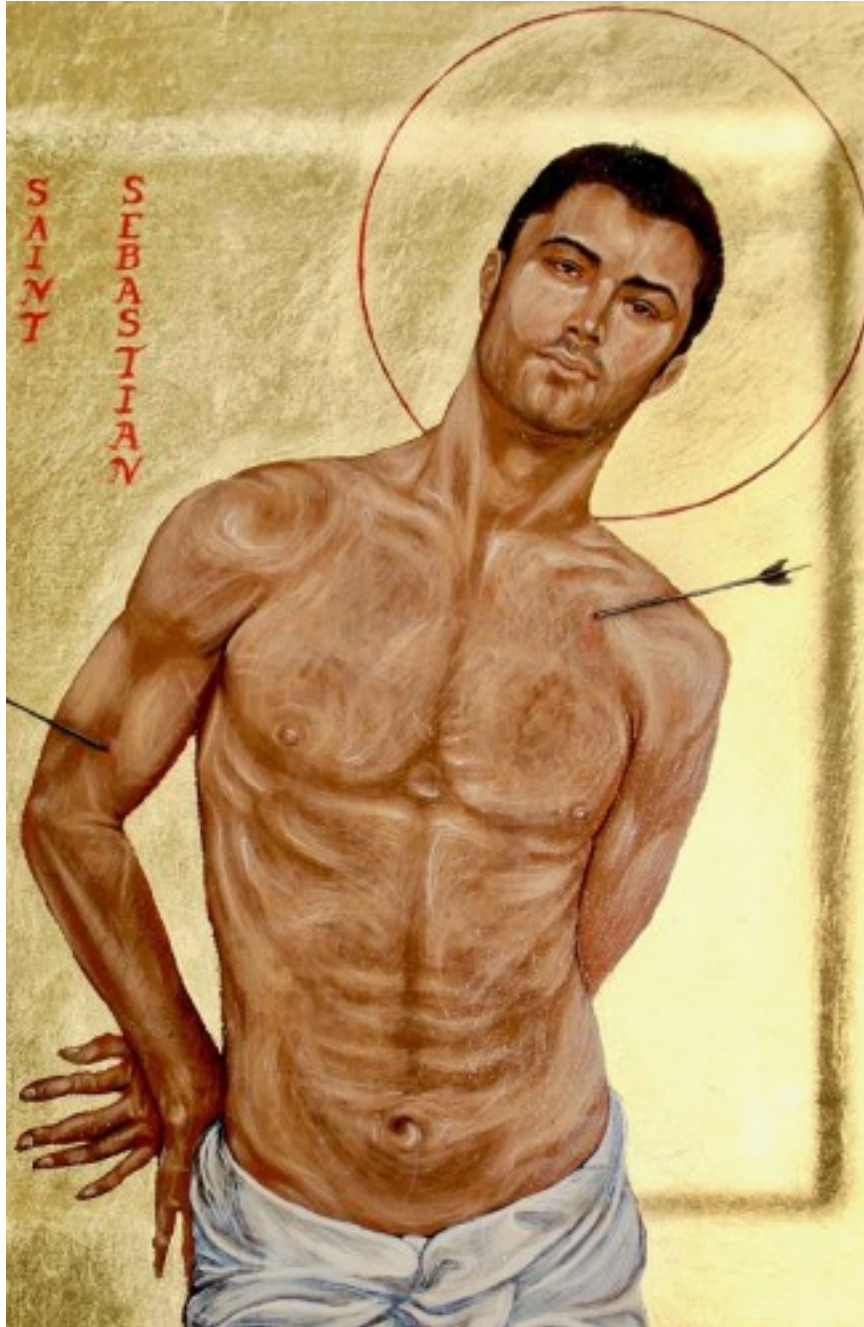


# Saint Sebastian: History's first gay icon?

by [Kittredge Cherry](#) | Jan 20, 2019



Saint Sebastian has been called history's first gay icon and the patron saint of homosexuality. His feast day is Jan. 20.



Saint Sebastian appears as a near-naked youth on [religious medals](#)

Sebastian was an early Christian martyr killed in 288 in Rome on orders from the Roman emperor Diocletian. He is the subject of countless artworks and [religious medals](#) that show him as a near-naked youth writhing as he is shot with arrows. the homoeroticism is obvious. Little is known about his love life, so his long-standing popularity with gay men is partly based on the way he looks and the sheer sensuality of his portrayals.



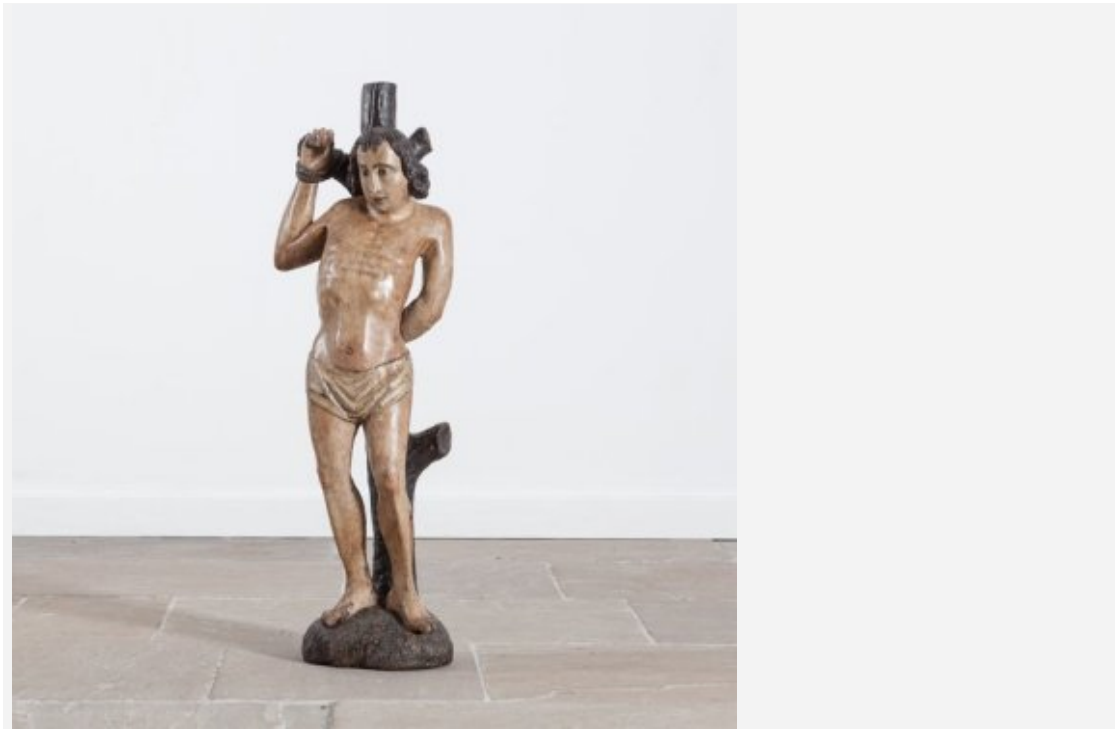
"Saint Sebastian" by Il Sodoma, 1525 ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

Other blogs have already compiled the Saint Sebastian masterpieces from art history since the Renaissance, so Q Spirit simply posts one historical example and refers readers to the many online collections of Sebastian art, such as:

[Saint Sebastian](#) (Counterlight's Peculiars)

[Saint Sebastian: The Homoerotic Patron of Gay Men](#) (Artwork I Love Blog)

[The Martyrdom Of Saint Sebastian, In Ascending Order Of Sexiness And Descending Order Of Actual Martyring](#)(The Toast)



15th-century polychromed oak carving of Saint Sebastian from Swabia, a region of southwest German known for its fine carvings.

The historical Sebastian actually survived the arrow attack and was nursed back to health by [Saint Irene of Rome](#), only to be “martyred twice” when the emperor executed him later.



A starkly simplified Saint Sebastian looks like a German expressionist woodcut in a porcelain oval medal ([Amazon.com](#))

In addition to his longstanding but unofficial status as patron saint of gay men, Sebastian is known as a protector against plague and a patron saint of soldiers, archers and athletes. The feast of Saint Sebastian or San Sebastián continues to be celebrated with lively festivals around the world, including in Italy, Mexico and Puerto Rico.

## Saint Sebastian in contemporary art

A strong, resilient Sebastian has light stubble and a contemporary vibe as he gazes directly at the viewer in the icon at the top of this post. It was created by Regan O’Callaghan, an artist/priest based in London, England. Originally from New Zealand, he moved in 1993 to the United Kingdom, where he studied art and religion, and was ordained by the Church of England. His Sebastian icon is available as a print gilded with real gold leaf on oak panel from his [Rrreheart Etsy shop](#).

On his [website](#), he describes how he designed this icon because he wanted to address the erotic and sexuality in faith and spirituality — even though fear and ignorance often prevent such discussion in some religious circles. He wrote:

“It is almost as if some people have let their own hands be tied behind their backs but when they look they see there is no rope! The question is why have some people allowed themselves to be conditioned into thinking the erotic as sinful in all contexts and sexuality as having implicit religious norms? The arrows of condemnation easily hit their intended targets in this situation. Hands are rung in despair and guilt but why? In this icon Saint Sebastian conveys all these emotions and confusions and yet thankfully he is not contained by the boundaries of religious judgement.”

Saint Sebastian is a favorite subject of many contemporary gay artists, including Tony De Carlo (1956-2014). He began his [Sebastian series](#) in the 1980s in response to the AIDS crisis and continued it for the rest of this life. It grew to more than 40 pictures before his death.



“Homage to Sebastian” by [Tony De Carlo](#)

“I chose him because he was known as the Patron Protector Saint Against the Plague, as the Plague was sweeping Europe,” De Carlo said in an [interview](#) with the Jesus in Love Blog. “It wasn’t until the year 2001 when I went into a Catholic store in New Mexico, picked up a pewter statue of Saint Sebastian, and saw a label on the bottom that said ‘Patron Saint of Homosexuals.’”

Tony De Carlo is gone, but another gay artist named Tony appears to be taking up the challenge and carrying on the tradition of creating an ongoing series of Sebastian art. Queer British artist [Tony O’Connell](#) has done many works based on Sebastian. For example, he sculpted a life-size statue of Sebastian and filmed his dramatic interactions with the figure to make a strong statement against homophobic violence in a performance art piece for All Saints Day. It includes a “Litany of the Queer Saints” that calls upon Sebastian to pray for and protect the downtrodden:



### Tony O’Connell prepares to kiss St Sebastian in his new film

“St. Sebastian, who strengthens the persecuted Pray for us...  
St. Sebastian empowered to protect from plague and AIDS, Pray for us...  
St Sebastian, loved and then abandoned by the Roman Emperor, Pray for us.  
St. Sebastian, loved and increasingly abandoned by the Roman Church, Pray for us.  
St. Sebastian, Loved by our people, Pray for us...  
Glorious Martyr and undefeated warrior,  
we ask that you protect the persecuted  
from tyrants and enemies.  
Use your unstoppable energy  
not to punish but only to humble  
those who dedicate themselves to oppression and evil.”

For the whole litany and more info, see my previous post [New art film highlights queer saints, Sebastian and homophobic violence for All Saints Day.](#)



St Sebastian is martyred by arrows in O'Connell's film

Sebastian also appears with a rainbow halo as a "wrathful protector saint" in O'Connell's "[Triptych for the 49](#)," a tribute to the people killed by a mass shooter at the Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida.



"Saint Sebastian No. 1" by Oscar Magnan

A tender image of the fallen Sebastian between a male companion and Saint Irene was painted by Oscar Magnan. He has an international background and many years as a full professor of fine arts at Saint Peter's University, a Jesuit institution in Jersey City, New Jersey.

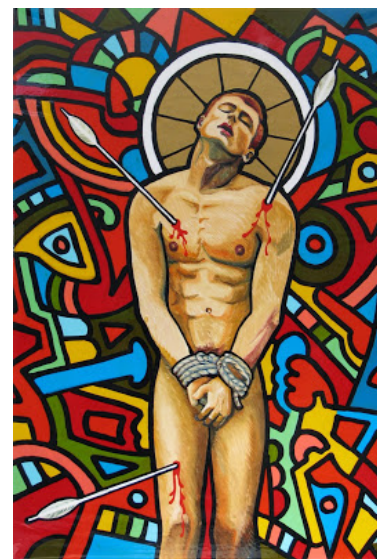


“Self Portrait as saint Sebastian by Christopher Olwage

He paints with enamel on the reverse side of clear plexiglas. Herold has a bachelor of arts degree in art and theology from the Benedictine Monastic University of St. John in Minnesota and a master of fine arts degree from Otis Institute of Art in Los Angeles. His religious artwork included a Stations of the Cross commissioned by Bob Hope for a church in Ohio before a conflict over modern art with the Los Angeles cardinal led to disillusionment with the church. Herold came out as gay and turned to painting male nudes and homoerotica.

“Saint Sebastian and Matt Shepard Juxtaposed” by JR Leveroni compares Sebastian’s martyrdom with the killing of a contemporary gay martyr, [Matthew Shepard](#) (1976-1998). Shepard was a student at the University of Wyoming when he was brutally beaten and left to die by two men who later claimed that they were driven temporarily insane by “gay panic.” His murder led to broadening the US hate-crimes law to cover violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Leveroni is an emerging visual artist living in South Florida. Painting in a Cubist style, he portrays the suffering gay martyrs in a subdued way with barely a trace of blood. A variety of male nudes and religious paintings can be seen on Leveroni’s website.



“Saint Sebastian” by Rick Herold

Two artists did new LGBTQ-affirming works based on Saint Sebastian in 2015. Gay New Zealand artist Christopher Olwage painted a self-portrait as Sebastian for his [“Ecce Homo” exhibit](#) inviting viewers to consider the possibility of a gay Jesus.

California gay artist Rick Herold places Saint Sebastian against a colorful, cartoon-like backdrop reminiscent of gay artist / activist [Keith Haring](#). “I over the years as a painter have been interested in the idea of the spirit and the flesh as one — began by Tantric art influences and then using my Catholic background,” he told the Jesus in Love Blog.



“Saint Sebastian and Matt Shepard Juxtaposed” by [JR Leveroni](#)

An important film biography for many gay men today is “[Sebastiane](#),” directed by British independent filmmaker Derek Jarman. The Latin-language 1976 film was controversial for its homoeroticism and is considered a landmark of LGBTQ cinema.

That moment of sexual awakening is given visual form in “Peter Hujar Dreaming” by gay artist [David Wojnarowicz](#). In a complex case of art imitating art, the sexually explicit [image](#) shows his mentor dreaming of Mishima and Sebastian. Another gay artist who showed Saint Sebastian in his later work is Keith Haring. Both Wojnarowicz and Haring eventually died of AIDS, and stigmatized the disease may have informed their portrayal of the martyred Sebastian.

British artist and self-described “dandy” Sebastian Horsley gave an insightful [video tour](#) of an exhibit of Saint Sebastian paintings Reni at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London.

## Saint Sebastian in literature

Sebastian is also referenced frequently in the gay literary world. For example playwright Tennessee Williams named his martyred gay character Sebastian in “[Suddenly, Last Summer](#),” and Oscar Wilde used Sebastian as his own alias after his release from prison.

In his autobiographical novel “[Confessions of a Mask](#),” Japanese author Yukio Mishima writes about becoming aware of his homosexuality. It happened when he was aroused by seeing Italian Baroque artist Guido Reni’s painting of St. Sebastian in one of his father’s art books.



## Links related to Sebastian as a gay saint

[Arrows of Desire](#) exhibit of St Sebastian art, Londton July 2019

[LGBT artwork marks Saint Sebastian Feast day](#) (liverpoolmuseums.org.uk)

[The Allure of St. Sebastian](#) (Wild Reed)

[Not Dead Yet: St Sebastian as Role Model](#) (Queering the Church)

[“Saint Sebastian in South Carolina”](#) by Ed Madden (Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide)

[James Fenton on the lure of Saint Sebastian](#) (Guardian)

To read this post in Spanish, go to:

[San Sebastián: Historia de icono gay primero](#) (Santos Queer)

Top image credit “Saint Sebastian” by Regan O’Callaghan. This icon is available as a print gilded with real gold leaf on oak panel from his

RRREHEARTEtsyshop.

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This post is part of the [LGBTQ Saints series](#) by Kittredge Cherry. Traditional and alternative saints, people in the Bible, LGBTQ martyrs, authors, theologians, religious leaders, artists, deities and other figures of special interest to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people and our allies are covered.

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