

The Ancient Cupid and Bacchus in Renaissance Art

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Introduction

The Italian Renaissance witnessed the revival of a past culture on a grand scale that had never been seen previously. The birth of the Humanist Movement heralded the return of interest in the culture of Antiquity. The Humanist Movement saw ancient texts translated and distributed, and their stories and histories were again read and told. But more importantly, the people of the Renaissance, notably the artists, were actually looking at the ancient architecture and art that was scattered across the Italian peninsula. No longer were people just passively seeing these artifacts, they were actively observing and studying them. From this sudden awareness of ancient Rome surrounding them, the artists began to take both what they saw and what they learned of the ancient stories and combine all the elements into their art. However despite this new awareness in their works, the Renaissance artists inaccurately depicted the gods of Antiquity in weaker positions than what would have been customary in their original time. To such gods who would face this fate are Cupid and Bacchus.

First, let us explore just where the trend of using the figures of Antiquity came from. It would come from the culmination of the Humanist Movement in the Italian Renaissance. It was not until the thirteenth century that Italy actively became involved with the contemporary culture of the Western Europe. Earlier than this time, Italy had lagged behind other Western European countries in the culture of the Middle Ages.¹ This was due to the fact that Italy had been more exposed to the Byzantine Empire and its culture while the rest of the Western European countries followed the cultural examples set forth by France. By following the trends of the Byzantine Empire, the Italians were able to continue with their traditions, some of which stretched as far back as the Roman Empire itself. It would be in the thirteenth century that French culture would

¹ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 92.

finally gain its prominence in Italy. Because the Italians had maintained such a strong association with their traditions, when they finally began to adopt various aspects of French culture, they combined it with their previously ingrained thought process. The Humanist Movement began to take shape in this cultural landscape. Historian of Humanism Paul Oskar Kristeller defines Humanism as “the general tendency of the age to attach the greatest importance to classical studies, and to consider classical antiquity as the common standard and model by which to guide all cultural activities.”²

The rise of the Humanist Movement generated the increase of interest in classical scholarship. Those who were pursuing an interest in studying Latin rediscovered many texts that had been neglected in the Middle Ages. The Latin scholars would be responsible for kick starting popularity to now well known and popular ancient authors.³ Some of the best known authors to have had a resurgence of popularity in this revival are Apuleius and Ovid.

Even more important than the Humanists’ revival of Latin literature during the Humanist Movement was their revival of Greek studies. The study of Greek had all but died in the Middle Ages. Those few who had actually bothered themselves to learn the language rarely decided to take an interest in classical Greek literature. However, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was an increase in interest in Greek writings, as more copies were made and translated into the more commonly used Latin. The Latin copies were then dispersed to libraries throughout Western Europe.⁴ This interest was originally reserved predominantly for writings in the scientific fields of mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and astrology. Not until the Renaissance did this interest spread to classical Greek literature.⁵ The renewed interest in ancient literature

² Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*, 95.

³ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*, 96.

⁴ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*, 96.

⁵ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*, 97.

coincided with rebirth of education and the arts in Italy. This movement would completely reshape learning in the Renaissance. By the fourteenth century, both classical authors and poetry were taught in Italy. By the next century, these sources became available outside Italy for those who wished and were able to pursue them.⁶

The importance of Antique literature to the art movement of the Italian Renaissance cannot be overlooked. In the Hellenistic period, literature held a far higher prestige than works of the visual arts, such as paintings and sculptures. Therefore, details recorded in the written word would have far more value than details found in the arts.⁷ There was no such thing as “Fine Arts” in Antiquity; in the Latin and Greek languages the term “art” could be applied to almost any handicraft or science.⁸ Painting was not taken as seriously in Antiquity as it later would be in the Renaissance. This is significant to know, as it makes the details from the ancient writings as important as the details incorporated into the paintings of the Renaissance.

The Humanist Movement made written sources from Antiquity available to those who had the means to acquire them and the education to read them. Many scholars and collectors were seizing any available information that they could get into their possession. These resources would have been used by any Renaissance artist who had access to them. The details provided by the text sources would be utilized by these artists in their art works featuring the figures of Antiquity. However, the literary sources were not the only sources used by the Italian Renaissance artists.

The Renaissance artists also displayed a renewed interest in Antique sculpture at the same time as the intellectuals’ renewed attention to Antique writing. Renaissance artists were

⁶ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*, 110.

⁷ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 169.

⁸ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II*, 164-166.

looking at sculptures to study both how ancient sculptors portrayed the human form and how certain ancient figures, such as Cupid and Bacchus, were portrayed. Ancient sculpture was more accessible to many of the artists in Renaissance Italy. Ancient sculptures practically littered the streets of what once was the ancient Roman Empire. An artist did not need to have access to books or be literate to study many ancient sculptures in Rome. One of the predominate sources artists of the Renaissance had access to were ancient Roman sarcophagi, which often featured Bacchus soberly residing over his raucous revelers as they sing and dance.⁹ Cupid was present throughout many sculptures as well. One of the best known Cupid sculptures of the Renaissance was a Roman copy of Lysippus' 4th century BCE *Amor Stringing his Bow*.¹⁰

The Renaissance's artists would merge details from both the sculptures and writings of Antiquity to depict ancient figures within their works. However, many figures from Antiquity faced a change in status when they were shown in the art of the Renaissance. Cupid and Dionysus, who were both powerful gods in their own time, suffered demotions in representations of their power. Cupid's demotion would come in the forms of blindness, through both physical and symbolic means, as well as in youthful naivety. The demotion of Bacchus came in the forms of inebriation and the loss of his followers and their respect.

Cupid

Cupid, the Roman god of love, is probably one of the ancient gods who underwent the greatest transformations when he was revived in Renaissance art. In his prime in Antiquity, Cupid was recognized as a powerful entity, a handsome youth who frequently plotted for both revenge and his own gain. Yet, by the end of the Renaissance Cupid was depicted as a small child who was easily made blind and ineffective at his sacred duty.

⁹ Phyllis Pray Bobber and Ruth Rubenstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1986), 106.

¹⁰ Bobber and Rubenstein, 88-89.

The Greek poet Hesiod described Cupid as the “fairest among the deathless gods, who unnerves the limbs and overcomes the mind”¹¹ In Antiquity, Cupid was respected as an all-powerful deity. His ability to strike desire and love within animals, mortals, and the gods themselves gave him a position of respect and power over all living things on the planet. In Apuleius’ Latin classic *The Transformations of Lucius*, also known as *The Golden Ass*, Cupid is able to approach Jupiter, the king of the gods, to intervene on his behalf in a confrontation with Venus. During this request, Jupiter not only agrees to assist Cupid, but he also acknowledges and shows his respect for the other god’s power:

Jupiter pinched his [Cupid’s] handsome cheeks and kissed his hand. Then he said: “My masterful child, you never paid me the respect which has been decreed me by the Council of Gods, and you’re always shooting your arrows into my divine heart—the very seat of the laws that govern the four elements and all the constellations of the sky.”¹²

In this passage, Apuleius expertly showed Cupid’s power over Jupiter. Jupiter calls Cupid out for never showing him his due respect. Yet, the king of the gods does not begrudge Cupid of this misdemeanor. Rather, he recognizes the power Cupid has over him, and therefore over the entire world. Apuleius writes Jupiter as accepting of the power that Cupid has as part of his nature, and he dutifully recognizes and accepts it as though it is common knowledge to the readers for whom the story was originally meant. This shows that the culture of Antiquity accepted that Cupid was a powerful force with whom to be reckoned.

It was not just Cupid’s nature that made him so powerful, however. Cupid was also recognized as an expert and proud strategist, capable of preparing and executing numerous schemes under the noses of his fellow gods to get his way. The story supplied by Apuleius in *The Transformations of Lucius* of Cupid successfully outwitting his mother to win the fair Psyche as

¹¹ Bober and Rubenstein, 88.

¹² Apuleius, *The Transformations of Lucius: Otherwise Known as the Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 141.

his wife is just one such example. Ovid also made note of the youthful god's cunning in *Metamorphoses* during "Book I"'s story of Apollo and Daphne. Within the first three lines it is recognized that the entire story was made possible "by Cupid's spiteful wrath."¹³ This wrath is brought about by Apollo when he makes the claim that his skills in archery surpass those of Cupid. To get revenge on Apollo for wounding his pride, Cupid used his skills in archery. First he struck the beautiful nymph Daphne with an arrow "dull and blunt, its [sic.] tipped with lead"¹⁴ that was designed to make the target never fall in love. Next, Cupid pierced Apollo with a gold-tipped arrow that made the god fall in love with the one female in the entire world rendered incapable of feeling that very emotion. The story goes on to show that Apollo's love is never returned and Daphne has herself turned into a tree to avoid the love-struck god.

Cupid reveals his intelligence in this well executed plan for revenge. Not once does either targeted party in this tale realize they have been affected by his manipulations. The plan also shows Cupid's love for irony, as he is able to bring down Apollo with his archery, the very skill Apollo had belittled. These are the actions of a strong willed and intelligent individual, not the blind and weak child that is shown in the art of the Italian Renaissance.

There is not only a supply of Latin writings to provide descriptions of Cupid. The god was a subject of many statues made in Antiquity. Perhaps the most influential that was known in the Renaissance are the Roman copies of the Greek sculptor Lyssipos' "*Amor Stringing a Bow*" [Figure 1].¹⁵ The Cupid within this marble sculpture is a mature winged-youth who is solidly focused on the task at hand. He is not distracted from his inspection of the bow, and he holds it almost intimately. The focus and gravity in his eyes reveal a level of maturity that makes up for the god's apparent physical age. This statue provides an actual visual representation of what both

¹³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14.

¹⁴ Ovid, 15.

¹⁵ Bober and Rubinstein, 88-89.

Greeks and Romans expected the god of love to look like. Though he is youthful in appearance, his eyes and the maturity of his actions suggest that he is one who is older than his years, very unlike the much younger and innocent adaptations that would come into being during the Renaissance.

When Cupid was included in the works of the Italian Renaissance, he was shown very differently than his ancient counterpart. The Renaissance Cupid was usually depicted as a much younger child, sometimes even a toddler. Where he had been able to operate independently in the works of Antiquity, the newer works showed Cupid restrained in some manner. This weakening came in many forms, the most common being blindness. Some artists, like Botticelli, depicted Cupid with a blindfold to illustrate his impaired vision. Others would show Cupid symbolically blinded by such concepts as beauty and youthful naivety. This type of blindness would often act as a gateway for more restrictions to be placed on the Renaissance Cupid.

Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* [Figure 2] perhaps offers one of the most ideal examples of a blindfolded Cupid in the terms of the Italian Renaissance. The painting was commissioned by the Medici family in 1482. For many years scholars believed that the painting had been made for Lorenzo di Pierfancesco due to the fact that it had hung in the house of his nephew and ward, Giovanni delle Bande Nere, in Castello in the early sixteenth century. However, recently published inventories reveal that the painting's original destination had been the Medici's Florentine palace.¹⁶ Botticelli used the peculiar painting style in *Primavera* to make the painting more closely resemble a tapestry, as the artist firmly believed that paintings and tapestries were equals in the realm of art.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1989), 122.

¹⁷ Lightbown, 123.

The painting depicts several characters of Roman mythology gathering in what is most likely the garden of the Hesperides. Cupid flies above the entire cast of characters, seemingly unnoticed by all the others at the gathering. Directly below him is Venus, his mother, uniquely depicted by Botticelli as the goddess of matrimony rather than lust.¹⁸ To the right of Venus is Flora, carrying a collection of fresh blooms, and Zephyrus chasing after a young nymph. On the other side of the goddess, three Graces dance with entwined limbs while Mercury stands away from them, reaching for one of the garden's famed golden apples.

In this painting, Botticelli depicted Cupid as a soft and pale toddler. A white blindfold is securely fastened around his eyes, so he cannot see the proceedings beneath him. Botticelli's choice to make the blindfold white reveals that the young god's blindness is not done out of malevolence or cruelty, but rather in innocence. Despite his blindness, Cupid is still preparing to fire one of his blazing arrows into the crowd of revelers, which would ignite passion within the stricken target. At its current position, the arrow would strike the Grace most distant from himself and his mother. This target reveals both his blind state and his ignorance of who is attending this garden party with his mother. Cupid means no harm; he is just attempting to fulfill his duty.

Despite Cupid's pure intentions, it is probable that calamity will ensue once his arrow is fired. Yet all three the Graces continue to dance about, oblivious of the impending doom that is hovering over them. Botticelli made use of every possible detail to emphasize the Graces' purity. They are shown wearing flowing, pure, white robes that wrap around their bodies as they dance. Each Grace wears pearls, which are associated with purity and virginity.¹⁹ He went to extra lengths to stress the targeted Grace's innocence by adding a pendant around her neck. The

¹⁸ Lightbown, 128.

¹⁹ Lightbown, 130.

pendant is made up of even more pearls and a sapphire. The light blue shade of sapphires was believed to cool fiery emotions, such as lust, and to keep the wearer chaste.²⁰ This extra accessory would seem to further emphasize the Grace's current chastity.

However, despite all the symbols of purity, Botticelli has made the Grace farthest from Cupid the one who would be most easily swayed by the flaming arrow, therefore marking her as the ill-fated target. While the Grace closest to Cupid wears strings of pearls both in her hair and on her clothes, and the middle Grace's robe is hemmed with the white stones, the farthest Grace wears a total of only five pearls. It is as though Botticelli intended to make the shedding of this Grace's innocence fairly easier than it would be for either of her sisters once she is struck by Cupid's arrow, making her the most vulnerable of the present Graces.

The reason Botticelli went to great lengths to stress the Grace's purity and vulnerability was to accentuate Cupid's weakness. The god is blind and therefore unable to use proper judgment and planning when taking aim for a target. His lack of vision will result in him striking one of the worst possible targets available to him. There are far more suitable targets present in the garden, but Cupid's blindfold prevents him from using his better judgment and taking aim at one of them instead.

Botticelli's Cupid is a typical example of a blindfolded Renaissance Cupid. The god is represented as a very young and soft child. The white blindfold shows that his blindness is innocent and not the cause of something like lust, which would probably have been shown with a vivid red. While the concept of a blindfolded Cupid was common, other artists would make Cupid's blinding and weakening using more symbolic means, such as lust or youth.

²⁰ Lightbown, 130.

One such artist who would use other means to blind and weaken Cupid was Agnolo Bronzino. In his *An Allegory of Venus and Cupid* [Figure 3], Bronzino depicts Cupid blinded by lust through Venus' advances and left vulnerable to her ulterior motives. There is fairly little known about the painting's provenience. According to Vassari, after its completion in either 1545 or 1546, *An Allegory of Venus and Cupid* was sent France for King Francis. Eventually, the painting found its way to its current residence in London's National Gallery.²¹

The painting depicts a young Cupid in an erotically charged embrace with his mother, Venus. As Venus seduces her son, the pair is watched by a wide array of characters. Folly, in the guise of a young, curly haired boy, steps forward to shower the duo with pink flower petals. Behind him stands the demented form of Pleasure. On the other side of Venus and Cupid Jealousy is huddled down and tearing at her hair, unnoticed by any of the other characters. Behind these five figures, Time and Fraud fight over the blue cloth that conceals the illicit love affair. Fraud tries to keep the cloth up while Time fights to wrench the cloth from her hands and reveal the deception to the world. Time is visually stronger than Fraud, and it is recognized by the viewer that it is only a matter of time before he is victorious.

Bronzino triumphed in creating a weak Cupid very unlike the Cupid created in the culture of Antiquity with this painting. Bronzino's Cupid is easily blinded by Venus' attention and seduction. Indeed, Cupid's eyes are half closed as he leans into Venus, making one take note that the younger god cannot see clearly. The goddess' affections have made Cupid blind to the danger in which he is currently located. He does not see the raucous struggle between Time and Fraud, nor the wicked approach of Folly and two-sided Pleasure. Cupid is so taken in his infatuation with Venus that he does not even see her stealing away the core item of his power, his precious

²¹ Charles McCorquodale, *Bronzino* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981), 88.

golden arrow. Without his arrow Cupid has no means to execute his sacred job, the one which gives him power over every living creature be they mortal or divine. The manner in which Cupid is blinded leaves him vulnerable and susceptible to loosing the power that allowed him to triumph over all living beings.

If Cupid were allowed his proper vision, there would be no way he would miss the struggles between the two figures in the background. Cupid's impaired vision only leaves him seeing Pleasure offering her sweet honeycomb, therefore only witnessing her better (and sweeter) side. Folly keeps Cupid blind to Pleasure's bitter side, which takes the form of a demented monster and carries a wicked stinger in a twisted hand.

Bronzino's Cupid is not the Cupid of Antiquity. He is not the youthful boy bordering on manhood who so successfully outwitted many gods and mortals on his own. This Cupid is one which turns his back on his duty for infatuation. In Antiquity, he never let his job fall by the wayside, even going as far as leaving Psyche so that he could attend to his job during their first days together as a married couple in *The Transformations of Lucius*. This boy created by Bronzino is not the youth of Antiquity who would so proudly defy his mother for his own self-gain and pride. Bronzino's Cupid is a sadly loyal child who would do absolutely anything to please this Venus, even if it meant succumbing to her advances.

The last version of a weakened Cupid crafted during the Italian Renaissance is a Cupid made blind and weak through his youth and naivety. One excellent example of this form of blinding is present in Parmigianino's *Cupid Carving his Bow* [Figure 4]²². This painting on panel was commissioned by Cavalier Baiavado in 1535.²³ In the work, a youthful Cupid looks away from his task of carving his bow to look at the audience. Cupid is halfway through

²² The painting currently resides in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum.

²³ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 587.

dragging his blade across the wood as he glances up from his work. Behind him are two putti figures, both recognizably younger than the god. Cupid seems to take no notice of them, though one is screaming in great pain, having just burnt himself by touching Cupid's apparently white hot flesh. If anything, the golden haired god in the painting finds his audience far more interesting than his current task at hand or the fighting putti in the background.

What makes this painting so special when compared to its contemporaries that depict a Cupid blinded by his youth is that this Parmigianino's painting can be directly compared to a visual artwork crafted in both the Greek and Roman eras. The sculpture, the previously discussed *Amor Stringing His Bow* [Figure 1], was originally crafted by the Greek sculptor Lysippos in the fourth century B.C.E. The sculpture was reproduced in marble numerous times during the Roman era. Examples of this statue were readily available in Rome and the rest of Italy during the Renaissance. One such specimen can now be found in Venice's Museo Archaeologico.²⁴ This sculpture from Antiquity shows Cupid consumed by his task, taking no notice of the world around. This version of the god gives him a mature air, where he is placing his natural duty before anything else.

Parmigianino's Cupid seems easily distracted from his duties. While handling the large and sharp blade, he turns his attention away from it to look out at the viewer. This shows that he is not dedicated to the task at hand, as he would rather dedicate his attention to anything else. This short attention span is common to young mortal children, but not to this plotting and powerful god. This lack of dedication to carving his bow also shows that Cupid does not just lack commitment to his current task, but to his job as a whole. Cupid needs his bow to strike love into

²⁴ Bobber and Rubinstein, 88-89.

other beings. Without his bow, he is powerless. The longer Cupid takes to complete his bow, the longer he is without power. His childish short attention span keeps him from his powers.

To further show his Cupid's naïve blindness Parmigianino included books at Cupid's workstation. Cupid carves his bow over this set of large books, and he braces one foot on the pile as though they are nothing more than a foot stool. He shows no worry of destroying these tomes with an accidental slip. Some argue that this detail was painted by Parmigianino to show love's triumph of intellect and reason.²⁵ What it also shows is Cupid's disregard for learning and the intelligence it brings. Like a child, he ignores tools of higher learning and their worth. He keeps himself blind by using the books as props rather than as a means of enlightenment. By ignoring the usefulness of the books, the god shows his naivety. As long as Cupid ignores the books and the information they offer, he will remain blind and uneducated, leaving him powerless.

Another affront and change to Cupid that Parmigianino includes in his painting is that he has flesh that is burning hot to the touch. One putto in the background has burnt his hand after touching the god's flesh. As he wails in pain, another putto is trying to force the burnt hand against Cupid's leg a second time. Cupid shows no awareness of the struggle between the two, nor does he seem to realize the pain he has already caused. In his childish ignorance, Cupid is made blind to the pain of those around him. He realizes neither the putto's agony nor the fact that he is the cause of it.

The very idea that Cupid's skin is hot to the touch is something alien to ancient thought. In Apuleius' *The Transformations of Lucius*, Cupid's new wife, Psyche, manages to burn him by accidentally spilling candle wax onto his bare chest. Therefore, his skin had to be cooler than the temperature of melted wax for Cupid to register the pain from the experience. Also, in this tale

²⁵ Hartt and Wilkins, 586.

he and Psyche lay together in bed numerous times, and she is neither burnt nor made uncomfortable by the god's touch. Just as Botticelli made Cupid dangerous because he could not clearly see when executing his job, Parmigianino has made the god an unintentional hazard. Though the god does not mean to, he puts those around him in danger. This is another form of weakening Cupid, as the young god is unable to control his powers and those he affects.

The culture of ancient Rome held Cupid in high esteem. In the stories of Apuleius and Ovid he is a god of unequaled power who is capable of creating intricate and well executed plans. In classic sculpture he is shown as a youth single mindedly dedicated to his duty and the tools necessary to complete his job. This was a far cry from the weakened boy who was portrayed in the works of Renaissance art. The Renaissance artists took away most of Cupid's power and prestige, reducing him to an easily blinded boy. Whether his blindness was induced through blindfolds, lust, or youth, he was effectively weakened and a made a pale shadow of the powerful being he once was.

Bacchus

Cupid was not the only ancient god weakened in Italian Renaissance art. Artists would also follow this theme with other gods of Antiquity, one of which was Bacchus, the god of vegetation and the grapevine. He was known as a master of both an "ecstatic folk religion" and as a figure of the Olympian Pantheon in ancient Rome.²⁶ There were two traditional forms in which Bacchus could be represented. His one form was aged and bearded, clothed in theatrical garb. The second depiction was as a young, sensual, and almost hermaphroditic male figure. The latter depiction was often the more popular of the two in Antiquity.²⁷ This popularity would

²⁶ Bober and Rubinstein, 105.

²⁷ Bober and Rubinstein, 106.

continue into the Renaissance artists' depictions of Bacchus while the image of the elder figure practically faded from use.

There were several common identifying attributes of the Roman Bacchus. He was regularly shown with vine leaves in his hair, either in the form of a garland or tangled into his curls. Ovid describes the token vines as "grape bunches garlanding/ His [Bacchus'] brow."²⁸ Other identifying props included a pinecone tipped staff, and a jaguar as a companion or a jaguar skin upon Bacchus.²⁹ Another common characteristic of Bacchus is the almost constant presence of his revelers. Ovid describes the god's followers in *Metamorphoses*' "Pentheus and Bacchus":

Bacchus is there. The revellers["] [sic.] wild shrieks
Ring through the fields. The crowds come rushing out;
Men, women, nobles, commons, old and young
Stream to unknown rites.³⁰

The revelers are described as people of every sex, class, and age. They are a loud and raucous bunch, their cries being called "wild shrieks." Other creatures are shown amongst the ranks of his followers as well. *Metamorphoses*' "The Death of Orpheus," there is a line describing Bacchus' entourage. "Around him [Bacchus] thronged his usual company,/ Satyrs and Bacchants..."³¹ While the Bacchants are Bacchus' female followers, Ovid also lists Satyrs amongst the revelers. These revelers are what give Bacchus his power. Without his devout followers, he would have no one to control, and therefore no power.

The tradition of the god of wine always accompanied by his revelers was not just limited to the written word of Antiquity. The imagery carried over into the realm of sculpture, most notably on the reliefs of Roman sarcophagi. These sarcophagi traditionally featured Bacchus accompanied by his jovial revelers who would be dancing, singing, and laughing in their

²⁸ Ovid, 71.

²⁹ Bober and Rubinstein, 106.

³⁰ Ovid, 66-67.

³¹ Ovid, 251.

celebrations. One of the best representations of this is the *Triumph of Dionysus and the Four Seasons* [Figure 5] sarcophagus, which is now located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This mastery of marble relief was crafted between 260 and 270 C.E.³² The sarcophagus shows Bacchus sitting upon a jaguar and serenely watching the crowd of his followers around him. Joining this group of humans and satyrs are personifications of the four seasons and small putti fill in any places which would have otherwise have been blank. The Roman sarcophagi would become major references for the artists of the Renaissance, as they were widely distributed throughout Italy, with a good representation in Rome itself.³³

The inclusion of the imagery of Bacchus' entourage in Antiquity was showing the god's power. By having followers who are both mortal and magical, Bacchus showed that he had power in both the mortal and mythical realms. Bacchus had power over the wealthy and poor, male and female. Having a wide array of followers under his sway, gave Bacchus his power and influence over the mortal.

Another key factor in the identity of the Antique Bacchus was that Bacchus was never shown directly partaking in the revels with his followers. There is always a level of separation between him and his entourage. In visual depictions like the *Triumph of Dionysus and the Four Seasons* show the god sitting apart from his entourage and not actually celebrating with them. He is never shown completely succumbing to the power of any wine, no matter the strength of the vintage. Nor did he ever suffer the ill effects of drinking after his celebrations. This characteristic was another form of his power. Bacchus was above his followers, as his power kept him from

³² "Triumph of Dionysos and the Seasons sarcophagus [Roman] 955.11.5," in *Heibrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-), <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/55.11.5> (October 2009), (accessed 21 January 2011).

³³ Bober and Rubinstein, 106.

becoming a shambling drunk like his mere followers. It separated him and kept him in a position above that of those who were beneath him.

The sobriety also allowed Bacchus to exhibit displays of vindictive power. The story of “Pentheus and Bacchus” in *Metamorphoses* shows just one such example of Bacchus’ ability to exact cruel revenge. When Pentheus refuses to show Bacchus his due respect and recognize his divinity, the god devises Pentheus’ downfall for revenge. Pentheus’ death is not a kind one, with his limbs being torn away from his body and only finally dying when his head is torn off.³⁴

Bacchus would not just exact revenge on his behalf, but on the behalf of his loyal followers as well. When one of Bacchus’ loyal minstrels is killed in “The Death of Orpheus,” the god is disinclined to “permit this crime to pass/ Unpunished, unavenged.”³⁵ Bacchus then strikes down the killers, twisting them and turning them into trees. This tale shows a god who will not hesitate to exact justice on the behalf of his loyal followers.

The Bacchus that would be depicted in Renaissance art is a weak shade compared to the representations in Antiquity. The Bacchus of the Italian Renaissance was commonly a solitary figure, frequently shown with his entourage reduced or completely gone. The Renaissance artists were also inclined to show the god inebriated from the consumption of too much wine. They showed the god with many telltale signs of drunkenness, such as glassy and unfocused eyes or an unsteady and drunken gait. This version of the god succumbed to the power of alcohol, greatly weakening him and reducing his power. This is partially due to the power held by the Catholic Church over the culture of Italy. Such a trend would no doubt promote the idea of suppressing one’s consumption of earthly pleasures such as alcohol.

³⁴ Ovid, 72.

³⁵ Ovid, 251.

The Michelangelo sculpture *Bacchus* [Figure 6]³⁶ is an excellent example of a Renaissance Bacchus made weak through his drunkenness. The marble sculpture, made between 1496 and 1497.³⁷ The sculpture was crafted during the artist's time in Rome, which means he had been directly exposed to the work of the Roman Empire by the time he sculpted the work. The sculpture itself features Bacchus as the main figure. He is closely followed by a young and jovial satyr, the only reveler shown with Bacchus in this piece. While the small satyr makes a meal of grapes falling from Bacchus' bundle, the god is enjoying wine from the cup he holds. Michelangelo shows Bacchus with many of his identifying attributes: vines wrapped through his hair and a jaguar's pelt held in his one hand. Therefore, one can be certain that Michelangelo was very much aware of the traditional representations of Bacchus.

Michelangelo deviates from traditional representations by making Bacchus a drunken figure, however. The god's eyes are glassy and staring off into the distance. Another sign of his drunkenness is his staggering and uneven gait. Michelangelo depicted Bacchus in mid-step to show the god's uncertain step and his struggle to stay upright. Bacchus' pose is poor; his rounded stomach sticks out and his shoulders slump downward. One can see that the god can barely keep his cup upright, and it threatens to fall from his clumsy grasp. The entire statue creates an image of a blissful drunk, one who only worries about his own drink and little else.

The sculpture also includes a sober satyr to contrast Bacchus' drunken state. While Bacchus is so drunk that he struggles to walk, the satyr has no difficulty holding himself up while he sits on the tree stump, even contorting himself into a strange position with ease. Where Bacchus fights to procure his next sip of wine, the satyr easily dines on the grapes in the god's small bundle. The god does not even seem aware of the young creature's thievery, he continues

³⁶ The sculpture can be found at Florence's Museo Nazionale del Bargello

³⁷ Michael Hirst, *The Young Michelangelo: The Artist in Rome; 1496-1501* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1994), 30.

to stare out into the distance with glazed eyes as the satyr enjoys his meal. The very action of the theft shows how little respect the satyr has for Bacchus. He even smiles, treating the entire affair as a joke. This type of treatment marks a loss of respect for Bacchus, and therefore a decrease in this formerly great god's power.

The satyr's presence is not meant to represent the god's revelers. Michelangelo included the spry satyr to contrast with the drunken Bacchus. In Antiquity the god of the grapevine was able to avoid completely surrendering to the thrall of wine and always maintained a more sober state than his followers. However, he is far more drunk than his „loyal“ satyr in Michelangelo's sculpture. The representation is almost a reversal of that of Antiquity, making the god less powerful than the satyr due to their respective levels of sobriety. This action effectively robs Bacchus of the power with which he had previously been portrayed.

Michelangelo's sculpture is important to the depiction of Bacchus in Italian Renaissance art. It would set the precedent of a drunken Bacchus in art. This work would be referenced by artists many times throughout the Renaissance, leading many to follow Michelangelo's lead in depicting Bacchus as a clumsy drunk.

Another drunken Bacchus that would be added to the works of the Italian Renaissance is Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* [Figure 7]. The painting was made between 1520 and 1523 for Alfonso d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, as part of a series of mythological paintings.³⁸ The series was completed by Titian as well as his former teacher Giovanni Bellini and the Ferrara artist Dosso Dossi. The series was meant for the Camerino d'Alabastro of the Duke's palace.³⁹

Bacchus and Ariadne depicts the first meeting between the two title characters. The story of the meeting is told in *Metamorphoses* "The Minotaur," and the eventual marriage that comes

³⁸ Peter Humfrey, *Titian: The Complete Paintings* (New York: Ludion, 2007), 100-104.

³⁹ "Bacchus and Ariadne," in *The National Gallery: Paintings* (London: The National Gallery, 1826-), <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/titian-bacchus-and-ariadne> (accessed 1 February 2011).

from it is recounted in the Greek writer Hesiod's *Theogony*. Titian's work captures the moment Bacchus leaps down from his carriage to greet Ariadne, whom the god fell in love with at first sight. Ariadne looks emotionally torn, as she is both sad that she has been abandoned by her lover and in shock at the grand party advancing upon her. Bacchus ungracefully flails as he bounds down from his cart, jumping from his cart in a precarious manner. The artist did include a large group of revelers with this Bacchus, and they are shown dancing about and seemingly absorbed in their own worlds.

Small details included within the painting reveal that Titian was aware of the details in the story of Bacchus and Ariadne, especially Ovid's description of the god's actions right after embracing Ariadne. The passage in *Metamorphoses* reads:

He [Bacchus] took her crown
And set it in the heavens to win her there
A star's eternal glory; and the crown
Flew through the soft light air and, as it flew,
Its gems were turned to gleaming fires, and still
Shaped as a crown their place in heaven their place in heaven they take
Between the Kneeler and him who grasps the Snake.⁴⁰

Titian painted the crown shaped constellation in the upper left corner in the canvas. Granted, he shows the constellation though the two characters have not even physically touched, yet this detail does illustrate that Titian was aware of this passage in Ovid and that the constellation was created at this meeting.

Titian was not just reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to prepare d'Estes' painting. It is apparent that the artist paid great attention to the details of Catullus' *Carmen LXIV*. The passage describes Bacchus' revelers during their search for Ariadne as they appear in the embroidery of Peleus and Thetis' marriage bed. The passage reads:

⁴⁰ Ovid, 176.

Elsewhere on the island, youthful Bacchus also wanders, seeking Ariadne with raging satyrs and Sileni crying „Evoe!, Evoe!“, where some in the Bacchic prossessions wave thyrsi (branches), toss mangled limbs of animals, gird themselves with wrting serpents, beat timbrels or clash cymbals with uplifted hands.⁴¹

Titian included many of these details when he painted his revelers. To the right of the painting, one can see a cow's limb being frantically waved in the air by one in Bacchus' entourage. The young satyr at the front of the painting's composition drags the dismembered cow's head behind it on a rope leash. Behind this satyr stumbles another reveler who is wrapped in nothing more but several snakes, a clear representation of Catullus' revelers who "gird themselves with wrting serpents." The artist also betrays his familiarity with Antique sculptural representations of Bacchus, as two leopards attend to the god in the painting, and his head is adorned with a wreath of grapevine leaves.

All these details make one presume that Titian was well aware of the classical representations of Bacchus. He would clearly see that Bacchus would be accompanied by his revelers, but not succumb to matching them in their carefree state of drunkenness. He also would know that Bacchus always had control over his revelers, giving the god the appearance of great power in front of Ariadne upon their meeting. However, the artist depicted the god as a clumsy and drunken young man. Bacchus flails his arms wildly as he descends from his cart, possibly having lost the full power to control his limbs after consuming too much wine. Even though his gaze is intently directed towards Ariadne, his eyes are clouded over with a drunken haze and they are not completely focused. The god's drunkenness seems to rob him of his usual calm and bearing and leaves him slack jawed and seemingly disinterested despite the fact that he has just

⁴¹ Amy Golahny, "Narrative in Art," Class Lecture, Lycoming College, Williamsport, PA, February 2011.

met the love of his life and his future wife. Drunkenness robs Titian's Bacchus of power just as effectively as it did Michelangelo's Bacchus.

This version of Bacchus also loses power through his inaction with his entourage. Titian's god does not mind the actions of his revelers and take into account how their actions may further disturb the already distraught woman. Ovid even describes Ariadne as having both "grief and anger"⁴² before finally being consoled by Bacchus and his embrace. As the couple has yet to embrace, it is presumable that she is still lost in this violent turmoil of emotions. In fact, the god's drunken approach seems to put her further on edge. She cannot be blamed for these feelings of wariness; one of Bacchus' satyrs drags a cow's head behind him as he approaches the abandoned woman, and another figure is completely entwined by serpents. By not even trying to control his revelers, Bacchus has surrendered all of his power over them. So even though his revelers are present, this Bacchus exerts no control over them and effectively cuts himself off from any power he may have had.

The final example of a weakened Bacchus in the Renaissance is in Caravaggio's simply titled *Bacchus* [Figure 8]. The painting was crafted between 1595 and 1596, presumably as a gift for the Grand Duke of Florence from Del Monte where it remained in storage for some time.⁴³ Very little is actually known about the painting, as it was unknown until 1913 and it had not been discussed by any of the art writers of the Renaissance.⁴⁴ This painting features Bacchus sitting alone beside a table topped with a bowl of rotting fruit. He appears to take notice of his viewers and either holds up his glass of wine in recognition of them or possibly offers them the wine as a sign of hospitality.

⁴² Ovid, 176.

⁴³ Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983), 39-41.

⁴⁴ Hibbard, 39.

The first attribute that one notices about Caravaggio's Bacchus is that he is very ill. His skin is pale with a sickly yellow sheen. Also, the still life of rotting fruit suggests that both the fruit and the god have seen better days and that both are now fading away. Caravaggio showed the god wearing his traditional grapevine garland, but the leaves of the garland are also yellowed and rotting. One must remember that Bacchus was the god of vegetation and the grapevine. Therefore, Bacchus' very own symbols are withering as he sits in the picture, a sure sign that the god is ill. He has lost his power over them and they now wither away. The god's dark eyes appear heavy, as though he is tired or on the verge of passing out. This could be an effect of large amounts of alcohol in his system, a side effect of his apparent illness, or a sad combination of the two options. Even his limbs betray him; his hand shakes as he offers his wine glass, as shown by the ripples within the liquid. Once again, either he is too drunk to hold the wine correctly, too ill and weak to bear its weight, or some combination of both. All of these symptoms work together to create in Caravaggio's masterpiece the image of a fading deity who is long past his prime.

The second notable aspect of Caravaggio's painting is that the god is completely alone. Unlike the Bacchus created by Michelangelo or Titian, this Bacchus has no one to keep him company within the confines of the work. The only one present is the viewer who Bacchus acknowledges by offering his wine. But his viewer would have been a person of the Italian Renaissance, not a Bacchic reveler. This means that the god of Caravaggio's painting was deprived of any followers, and therefore any power, as a ruler only has power if he has people to rule over.

This painting was not Caravaggio's first one of the god. Caravaggio's first Bacchus painting, entitled *The Sick Bacchus* [Figure 9], was a self-portrait made in 1593.⁴⁵ The painting

⁴⁵ Helen, Langdon, *Caravaggio: A Life*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 68.

shows the god twisting himself to face his audience. His eyes are sunken and his complexion pale, betraying Bacchus as ill and possibly hung-over. His nails are dirty, making this embodiment of the god appear more apt for menial labor rather than ruling over his followers.⁴⁶ And just as in the future painting, the revelers are absent, taking away much of Bacchus' power.

Unlike the later painting, this piece is unique because it functions as a self portrait of Caravaggio. This weakens the god in a level not witnessed in the previous works of Michelangelo and Titian. In their works, Bacchus was still the embodiment of a god, making him on some level distanced from his viewers regardless of what the artists did to weaken him. By using the character of Bacchus as a self-portrait Caravaggio lowers the god's status and uses him as a window into the artist's soul. This removes any remnants of power the god could possibly have had in the painting, lowering him into the status of a symbol for Caravaggio's inner turmoil.

In summation, the Bacchus of the Italian Renaissance was depicted with far less power than the Bacchus of antiquity, following the trend demonstrated Cupid. This Bacchus was shown never directly having power over any of his traditional followers and as being physically affected by drunkenness to the point of physical illness. This Bacchus is a distant shadow of the one depicted in Antiquity, and reveals the Renaissance's tradition to weaken formerly strong gods.

Conclusion

Both Cupid and Bacchus were prominent gods during the age of Antiquity. Cupid's power gave him control over all creatures, both mortal and divine. Apuleius showed that Cupid's power even stretched to Zeus' own heart, therefore giving him power over the world itself. This version of Cupid was powerful, intelligent, and independent. Yet, in the paintings of the Italian Renaissance the god was demoted to a much weaker standing. He was shown as a young child

⁴⁶ Langdon, 69.

who could be blinded by physical means like a blindfold and more abstract methods such as lust and youth. The Italian Renaissance artists took away Cupid's very tools, his bow and arrows. Bronzino showed Venus taking away Cupid's golden arrow. Parmigianino took away Cupid's bow and showed the young god seemingly unwilling to complete its construction, making him powerless until he gets over these stages of distraction.

Bacchus was also represented with great amount of power in Antiquity. He always had his entourage of revelers and always maintained power over them. It was through his revelers that he exercised his power. He was also proud, willing to seek revenge for his dignity. He was never shown completely succumbing to wine or suffering from the ill effects caused by it. He was always in control of himself and his revelers. The Bacchus depicted by the Italian artists of the Renaissance was very different. He was deprived of his followers, the artists showing them in reduced numbers or Bacchus with no true control over them. Also, the god was always shown as extremely drunk, an appearance strongly spearheaded by Michelangelo's sculpture. Caravaggio took this image of the drunken god even farther by making the god show the signs of illness induced from too much consumption.

The reason for these demotions can be found by looking at the culture in which the artists of the Italian Renaissance were living. It must be remembered that even though they were now looking at and depicting ancient gods, the Christian church was still very much in power. Because of this, while it was acceptable for the artists to now depict the ancient gods, they had to do so in a way that would not challenge the ruling Christian power. This was done by showing the gods of Antiquity as a weak lot who were easily robbed of power. This movement was not always conscious, but it was done regardless. This was how gods like Cupid and Bacchus were shown as weaker than their original depictions in the Italian Renaissance.

Collection of Referenced Images

Figure 1: A Roman Copy of Lysippos' Amor Stringing a Bow, 4th century BCE, Musei Capitolini, Rome.



Figure 2: Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, 1482, Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 3: Agnolo Bronzino, *An Allegory of Venus and Cupid*, 1545-1546, National Gallery, London.



Figure 4: Parmigianino, *Cupid Carving his Bow*, 1535, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie



Figure 5: *Triumph of Dionysus and the Four Seasons*, 260-270 CE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.



Figure 6: Michelangelo, *Bacchus*, 1496-1497, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.



Figure 7: Titian,
Bacchus and Ariadne,
1520-1523, National
Gallery, London.



Figure 8: Caravaggio, *Bacchus*, 1595-1596, Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 9: Caravaggio, *The Sick Bacchus*, 1593, Galleria Borghese, Rome.

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