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Art 336W

Professor Golahny

Master of the French Baroque: Nicolas Poussin

Venus and Adonis

Venus with the Dead Adonis

Nicolas Poussin, perhaps the greatest French artist of the Baroque, is vastly under appreciated. His work influenced the further development of European painting, and his interpretations of ancient history and Greco-Roman mythology left their mark on art up to the nineteenth century. Art history has left Poussin devotees confined to a small, yet faithful, circle.

Uncommon amongst major artists, little is known of Poussin before he reached the age of thirty. The years between his birth in Normandy, France in 1594 and his arrival in Rome in 1624 leave art historians with very few accounts. Poussin was born the son of Jean Poussin and Marie Delaisement. Though they were not members of the nobility, the family did have connections to both leading members of the legal profession and people of good social standing. It is known that Poussin was well educated and that he spoke and read French and Italian. Poussin also had knowledge of Latin. He first attended Parish school and then college. Poussin was likely on track to a legal profession, similar to his father. During the course of his education Poussin most likely learned history and mythology and read classic authors such as Ovid. This became evident later when Poussin began producing paintings.

Sometime before the end of 1623, Poussin left France for Italy. At this point in his career he was fairly well established in Paris. His distinct classical-flavored style was different from anything else being produced in Paris at the time, so Poussin looked to Italy. At the age of thirty the artist arrived in Italy, which was both an advantage and a disadvantage. His style was already well developed upon his arrival, making it difficult to pick up new manners popular in Rome. However, Poussin's maturity helped him confront the sudden explosion of "the artistic wealth of ancient and modern Rome."[1] Despite the advantages and disadvantages, it would still take the artist a few years to fully develop his genius.

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[1] Blunt 53

In the years spanning the "Early Roman Period"[2] (1624-1630), Poussin painted two scenes of an ancient Greco-Roman myth. *Venus and Adonis* (1624-5, Kimbell Art Museum, Providence) and *Venus with the Dead Adonis* (c. 1630, Musee des Beaux Arts, Caen, France) come from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book 10). In the first century A.D., Ovid wrote the tale of Venus and Adonis in two parts, entitled "Orpheus' Song: Venus and Adonis" (1 and 2). *Venus and Adonis* is described in Part 1 of Ovid's tale, which is translated from Latin to say:

> 'Take no risks, dear lover, at my expense, or allow yourself to provoke what is well provided with weapons by nature. I would not wish your glory to cost me dear. Your youth, your beauty and all that Venus adores will never discourage the lions, […] I hate and detest the whole breed!' When Adonis asked her the cause of her hatred, she answered: "I'll tell you how I was deeply insulted long years ago […] But all this unwonted hunting has tired me out. Now look, how convenient! Here's a delightful poplar to give us some shade, with a couch of grass underneath. I'd like to rest with you here…" and she lay on the ground to recline on the grass and recline on Adonis, pressing her burning cheek to the naked breast of her lover; then, interspersing her words with kisses, she started her story.[3]

The painting *Venus with the Dead Adonis* is described in Part 2 of Ovid's tale, the translation of which reads:

> Venus was driving across the sky in her light-built chariot, borne on the wings of her swans, and still on her journey to Cypress, when in the far distance she heard the groans of her dying lover. […] She sprinkled the blood of Adonis with scented

[2] Blunt 54
[3] Ovid 409-410

> nectar. Touched by the droplets, the blood swelled up, like gleaming, transparent bubbles rising in yellow mud. No more than a single hour had passed when a deep red flower rose out of the blood […][4]

Poussin may have read Ovid in its original Latin; however, it is much more likely he read it in his native French. Two French additions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, (*L'Metamorphoses d'Ovid*) were published in the 1620s. Other prominent editions of Ovid that Poussin likely knew were by Bernard Saloman and Pieter van der Borcht.[5] These editions were most likely used for their etchings rather than the text. Van der Borcht's in particular is important because it shows Venus's head in Adonis's lap. Both Latin and French sources greatly enhanced and reinforced Poussin's knowledge of the ancient text to which the artist remained loyal. Many artists before and after Poussin tended to stray from the literary sources. For example, Poussin painted Venus lying in Adonis's lap, as the text implies. Artists such as Veronese depicted the opposite, contrary to the text.

Furthermore, Poussin knew of the fifth century A.D. author Nonnos. His book entitled *Dionysiaca* was a work based on Greco-Roman mythology, including the lovers of the goddess Venus, one being Adonis. Yet another poet Poussin likely got his sources from is Bion of Smyrna. In the second century B.C. he wrote the "Epitaph on Adonis," a mythological poem on the death of Adonis and the lament of Aphrodite (Venus). This text was preserved in several late medieval manuscripts of bucolic poetry. The influence of Bion's work is evident in later ancient poets, including Ovid. The "Epitaph on Adonis" in particular influenced European artists during the Renaissance. Also, the cult of Adonis was well known to Poussin; it was discussed at length

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[4] Ovid 418-419
[5] Bätschmann 23-24

in *De Dea Syria* ([*The*] *Syrian Goddess*), attributed to Lucian of Samosata. This work was widely read in the seventeenth century.

The tale of Venus and Adonis was a favored subject of the Renaissance and Baroque; it has been rendered many times by many artists. *Venus and Adonis* is a very early work of Poussin; it was painted within a short time of his arrival in Rome. In the recent past there has been disputation as to the dating of the work. It is consistent with the artist's earliest work in Rome. It is evident that Poussin's mastery was not yet fully developed. The work "has none of the precision of drawing, modeling, and design which marks *The Kingdom of Flora* (1631)." [6] There is an air of mannerism in the work because Poussin was just becoming acquainted with the Caravaggiesque style popular in Rome at the time. Also, the painting has a strong concentration on landscape which appears to have been observed from life due to awkward shapes and realistic undergrowth. According to Walter Friedlander, the themes present in *Venus and Adonis* are "the impossibility of love between gods and mortals, sleep, death, and metamorphosis which also inspired *Apollo and Daphane* (Munich.)"[7]

Within the painting a warm glow emphasized by Poussin's use of highlights gives the painting a content happy feel, but already there is a hint of tragedy in the future. Next to the sleeping child, Amor's (love) torch is left unattended while Adonis's hunting horn is similarly cast aside. The other characters and putti are engaged in "frolicsome pursuit so it appears nothing threatens the happy scene. However, the sleeping child alludes to the tragedy that awaits Adonis."[8] In *Venus and Adonis*, Poussin uses allegorical allusions; although the content is erotic,

[6] Blunt 124
[7] Merot 38
[8] Pepper 372

the artist emphasized detachment within the theme. This again alludes to Adonis's death later in the myth. "The treatment of the two lovers is one of Poussin's frankest inventions."[9]

A peculiar aspect of *Venus and Adonis* is the sleeping baby in the right foreground. This portrayal is known as the "Reni Motif;" this term is defined as "a sleeping child as prefiguration of death connected to the Christ child and Eros in classics."[10] The motif is best seen in Guido Reni's *Charity* (before 1630, Metropolitan Museum of Art), where the sleeping babies are mirror images. Poussin had ample access to Reni's work when studying at Saint Peter's and the Barberini personal collection.

Poussin had a habit of painting several versions of his paintings, as is the case with Venus and Adonis. Each time he rethought the expressive qualities of the picture in the process. Poussin is quoted as saying, "I have neglected nothing"[11] when speaking of his paintings. *Venus with the Dead Adonis* is the second rendition of the subject. It portrays Venus's "divine misfortune."[12] In contrast with Poussin's later works after 1630, *Venus with the Dead Adonis* is not an intellectual scene. The painting is a good deal darker than the earlier *Venus and Adonis* because it is a death scene. The use of dark colors and tones creates a mournful mood.

Within the painting, Adonis is dead, lying prostrate on the ground, and heart-broken Venus mourns for him. Adonis is seen from a slightly aerial view, this position was done purposefully by Poussin because it is reminiscent of Christ.[13] The carriage is suggestive of Pluto, the Roman god of death; therefore, the carriage serves as a symbol of death. The figure asleep behind the carriage is believed to be the river god, Aphaca. Aphaca was a city located in

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[9] Blunt 106
[10] Pepper 372
[11] Wright 32
[12] Bätschmann 24
[13] Hayum 80

the ancient Seleucid Syria, modern Lebanon, where pilgrims flocked to worship Aphrodite. It is also where the river Adonis is located. Legend says the river owes its red color to the blood of the fallen Adonis. The incorporation of Aphaca goes back to Poussin's education and use of intellect. X-rays of the painting reveal that Poussin made numerous changes in the placement of trees and clouds within the composition.

Love is a steady theme in Poussin's paintings from the early 1630s. In *Venus with the Dead Adonis* the scene is one of love, yet it is the opposite of erotic. "They are, indeed, rather elegiac, and the burden of Poussin's song is unhappiness of love rather than its physical charms."[14] In the case of Venus and Adonis, love is interrupted by death. Poussin's choice of subject matter differs from most artists who chose to portray Venus and Adonis. He selects a later part of the myth when Venus pours nectar into Adonis's wounds. Then the scarlet anemone, the flower in which Adonis's memory was immortalized, grows from his blood pool. The majority of Renaissance and contemporary artists depict the scene when Venus happens upon the body of her dead lover, mortally wounded by a boar. Other artists were interested in love tragedy, but Poussin, being different, depicted love interrupted. The scene makes for a deeper and more interesting composition. These are not the fleshy lovers of the Renaissance or that of the 1635 *Venus and Adonis* by Rubens.

The myth of Venus and Adonis is one of love, death, and rebirth. Adonis is reborn as a blood-red flower thanks to the devotion of Venus. The story, in its entirety, symbolizes the death of nature during the winter and its rebirth in the spring. "In both paintings, Adonis is accompanied by Hyacinths, another symbol of resurrection, of whom Ovid writes: 'You are immortal: as often as spring drives winter out and the Ram succeeds the watery Fish, so often do

[14] Blunt 103

you come up and blossom on the green turf.'"[15] During the Renaissance and Baroque the myth itself was reborn: "Venus and Adonis became a widespread image for death and resurrection in general."[16] Ancient religions and mysteries practiced the belief in the transmigration of souls; all of this took on a new meaning when looked at through a Christian point of view. Adonis also became a parallel for Christ because the image of Adonis's rebirth as the anemone flower is similar to that of the resurrection of Christ. This parallel appealed to Poussin's circle of friends, as well as others living throughout Europe who were interested in comparative religion.

In *Venus with the Dead Adonis* there is a hidden meaning. Dead Adonis bears resemblance to Christ in the *Lamentation* by Munich Pinakothek (c. 1628). "The figure of Christ, in reverse, is very nearly identical to dead Adonis. The putti are similar in type and pose; the Venus could almost be a Magdalene; and the landscape with the setting sun has exactly the same character in the two paintings."[17] This similarity not only occurs in Poussin's *Venus with the Dead Adonis*. There is a 1622 French translation of Ovid with an engraving by Crispen de Passe (after Martin de Vos) that is likely meant to depict Venus and Adonis as Christ and Mary Magdalene.

Before Poussin arrived in Rome, he had a short stay in Venice. This trip left a mark on Poussin's soul. Between 1623 and 1629 Poussin studied Titian's paintings in Rome from Alfonso d'Este's studiolo.[18] Venetian art, Titian in particular, influenced him for the rest of his career. For his Ovidian allegorical paintings of the early 1630s, Poussin relies on Titian as a model. His use of light, color, and landscape are all inspired by Titian's *Este Bacchanals*. "Poussin uses more intellect and less poetry, he borrows freely from Titian but puts his own

[15] Blunt 117
[16] Blunt 115
[17] Blunt 114-115
[18] Bätschmann 24

interpretation on what he borrows."[19] Titian's *Venus and Adonis* (1553-1554) variated from Ovid's text by making Adonis a "reluctant lover."[20] Poussin remained true to the original text and furthermore removes Titian's element of tension; Poussin's Venus and Adonis appear to be more carefree. Titian's painting is done in true Venetian form, that of the *colore* tradition.

Sebastiano del Piombo painted *Death of Adonis* in 1530. This painting is particularly important to Poussin because of Piombo's attempt to combine the Venetian *colore* and the Florentine *disegno* techniques. Piombo's *Death of Adonis* is closest to the *disegno* style. However, for Poussin, Piombo and Titian represented an ongoing controversy—a controversy Poussin wished to defeat, and therefore surpass the masters, Raphael and Titian. In both depictions of Venus and Adonis, *Venus with the Dead Adonis* in particular, Poussin painted in a combination of techniques called *exemplum fictum*.[21] He set out to combine the *disegno*, a drawing technique of Raphael and Michelangelo, with the *colore*, the color and painting technique of Titian and the Venetian masters. The *Disegno-Colore* Controversy had been raging between artists since the Renaissance. Poussin proved that an artist could paint in both styles.

Veronese, another Venetian painter was influential to Poussin. He painted two versions of Venus and Adonis in 1562 and 1580. Similar to Titian, Veronese painted in the *colore* style. He painted Adonis lying in Venus's lap, a reversal of the text of which Poussin stays true to. This reversal was common in the Renaissance. Veronese chose to portray the moment before Adonis leaves on the doomed hunt. This is another common choice amongst Renaissance artists. Poussin does something different in that he portrays Adonis's death, a scene that appears later in "Orpheus' Song: Venus and Adonis."

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[19] Blunt 106
[20] Bätschmann 25
[21] Bätschmann 24

Another Renaissance painting that inspired Poussin was *Venus* (ca. 1510) by Giorgione.[22] Poussin's Venus in *Venus and Adonis* echoes that of Giorgione's. It is the most prolific lounging Venus in Italy. The s-curve of the Giorgione Venus and the Poussin Venus are very similar. The body shapes are both idealized and exhibit similar curves and arches. Also, the leg positions are similar.

Moving to the early Baroque, the Italian painter Carracci also paints Venus and Adonis. His *Venus and Adonis* of 1590 portrays Venus startled by Adonis. Two doves are present in the left foreground of his painting. They also appear in Poussin's *Venus with the Dead Adonis* in the left background and *Venus and Adonis* in the middle foreground. Poussin likely got the idea to put the doves in the painting from Carracci due to their similar compositions. The doves are present because they are attributes of the goddess Venus. Venus is classically s-curved in *Venus and Adonis* by both Carracci and Poussin. In other renditions of Venus and Adonis the goddess is twisted, tensed, or slightly bent over. The Venuses painted by Poussin and Veronese in *Venus and Adonis* are none of these. Veronese's Venus, like that of Poussin, is idealized and similar to Giorgione's *Venus*.

Poussin's treatment of the Ovidian love story compared to that of his contemporary, Guercino (*Venus and Adonis*, 1647) is different in terms of sensual elements. Guercino's rendition is a human tragedy told in formal allegorical terms. Venus is terribly distraught as she happens upon her dead, bloody lover. Poussin's version is almost a "religious ritual," but the sensual elements are nearly absent.[23]

In each painting of Venus and Adonis, before and after Poussin, one or both of the lovers are wearing red or are near red drapery. Red signifies love and passion. Due to the fact the Venus

[22] Wright 139
[23] Blunt 105

is the Roman goddess of love, it is a natural and common choice for artists to clothe her in red. Furthermore, the myth of Venus and Adonis is one of true and passionate love, thus the pair wear red.

In closing, Nicolas Poussin remained in Rome for the majority of his career, for Rome fueled his talent as a painter. When he died in 1665 he left no school or lasting influence in Italy. The small group of painters inspired by his work never attained a great deal of fame. In France, at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, the teaching style was largely based on the technique of Poussin until a time in the 1690s. *Venus and Adonis* and *Venus with the Dead Adonis* are paintings that, like their creator himself, deserve more attention than they receive. Anthony Blunt says it best: "If, on one hand, [Poussin] looks back to Raphael and ancient Rome, he points forward on the other to Ingres and Picasso…"[24]

[24] Blunt 358

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Appendix

Poussin, Venus and Adonis, 1624-5, oil on canvas, Kimbell Art Museum

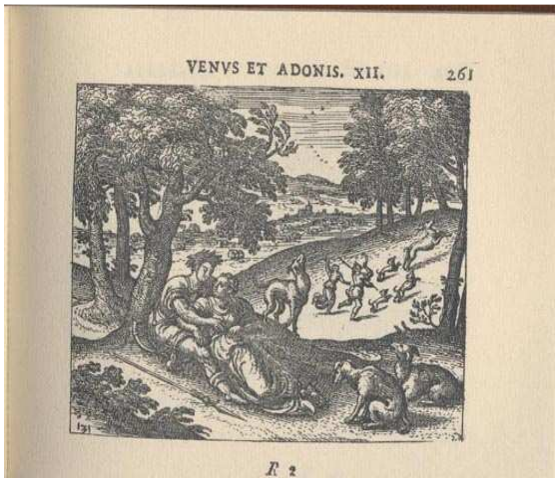
Poussin, *Venus Lamenting Over Adonis*, c. 1630 Oil on canvas, Musee des Beaux Arts, Caen, France

Guido Reni, *Charity*, before 1630, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Charity

Venus and Adonis

"Reni Motif"



Pieter van der Borcht, *Venus and Adonis*, 1591

Munich Pinakothek *Lamentation*, c. 1628

Sebastiano del Piombo, *Death of Adonis, 1530*, Oil on slate, 1511-1512, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, 1553-1554. Oil on canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

Veronese, *Venus and Adonis* c. 1562, Oil on canvas, on canvas, Museo del Prado

Veronese, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1680, oil StaatlicheKunstsammlungen, Augsburg

Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus*, ca. 1510, oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie

Carracci, Venus and Adonis, 1590, oil on canvas, Prado, Madrid

Guercino, *Venus and Adonis*, 1647, Destroyed