Classical Mythology in Renaissance Painting and Sculpture

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The Renaissance was, as you know, a very exciting period of history, in many respects quite different from our own age, but, in some ways, very similar. For instance, it was a period of supreme struggle against the standards of the immediate past, a breaking away from the "establishment," a search for a new and better way of life. It was a period of exploration and discovery -- not trips to the moon and outer space, but a probing of the unknown areas of our own world, which included a search for the distant past.

In art, it all started in Italy, with Florence and Venice as two of the basic centers for artists, and with (of course) all roads eventually leading to Rome. Then Francis I brought the Renaissance into France when he established the elaborate palace at Fontainebleau in 1528. For this project he imported many of the Italian artists, including such names as Benvenuto Cellini and Leonardo de Vinci. Michelangelo turned him down. But with this project the Renaissance became an international movement in art.

The "bathrooms" at Fontainebleau were elaborate creations. It has been suggested that perhaps they were a conscious attempt to emulate the ancient Roman "baths," one of which today is the site for nightly operas, with a stage that can accommodate whole armies or a herd of elephants. At any rate, Primaticcio filled the walls of the bathrooms at Fontainebleau with cheerfully obscene designs of pagan deities, clambering into the tub with one another and with nymphs and satyrs.

Among other mythological decorations in this palace was a large gallery of Ulysses, also painted by Primaticcio. You will never see any pictures of this because it was destroyed in the eighteenth century.

Even a superficial glance at the Renaissance makes evident the extensive use of Classical mythology by the artists of the period. The Renaissance man knew the Roman world earlier than he knew the Greek, and it is strange but true that most of the material used in Renaissance art came from one book -- the Roman poet Ovid's long narrative poem called the *Metamorphoses*.

One of the most prominent features of this period was the emergence of the nude in art. The acceptance of nudity is another feature for which a parallel can be found in our own day. Many of the Classical statues had been nude, but the church fathers of the Middle Ages did not share the pagan's delight in the beauty of the human body in all of its aspects. They were the ones who put the fig leaves (or, to be more accurate, the maple leaves) on the more intimate parts of the Classical statues. Donatello's “David” in 1416 was the first large bronze free-standing nude made since antiquity. But many artists now, like the Pollaiuolos and Michelangelo, started their art work by making an intensive study of human anatomy. One of the Pollaiuolo brothers did several group pictures of nudes, including ”The Battle of the Nudes,” now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

In 1460 one of the Pollaiuolo brothers painted a series of large pictures of the Labors of Hercules for the Medici Palace. The originals have been lost for some time, but two small replicas (c. 6-1/2 by 4 inches each) survived until our own day. These two little pictures have quite a history in our century. They were carried away from Italy by the Germans during World War II, and were missing for some years. Then, just a few years ago a waiter in Pasadena, California, took to an art dealer two little paintings that a teacher in Germany had given him.

These were recognized as the Pollaiuolo paintings, and they eventually found their way back to the Uffizi Gallery, where I saw them in 1965. However, since the flood that did so much damage in Florence a few years ago, I have not been able to find those pictures again, although I have searched for them. Apparently they were among the art works badly damaged or destroyed by that flood. One of them showed Hercules killing Antaeus, and the other one depicted Hercules killing the Hydra.

Michelangelo's whole conscious effort in his early work was directed toward imitation of the Classical style. And he succeeded so well that one of his works, a sleeping Cupid, was actually sold as an antique. And his Pieta (the one in St. Peter's) is a perfect fusion of the Gothic and the Classical. The motif and sentiment are Northern, but the physical beauty of the dead Christ is Greek. In fact, many of the Pieta studies of this period are merely Christianized versions of Classical studies of Venus and the dead Adonis.

The ancient Laocoon statue was discovered in 1506. With this statue, the Apollo Belvedere, and the Etruscan Wolf (which may be the one Cicero mentions as being struck by lightning in 65 B.C., and to which Michelangelo added the two babes, Romulus and Remus) -- this small collection of three ancient sculptures, Pope Julius II formed the nucleus of the Vatican Museum of antiquities during the Renaissance.

The Laocoon statue fascinated Michelangelo by its twisting rhythms, and he used these same body contortions to express both mental and physical agony in many of his works, which are usually concerned with the physical as simply a visible representation of the inner turmoil of a person. He did a relief of the battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs (based, of course, on Ovid), but not a blow has reached its victim to disfigure him. The struggle is rather within the human spirit.

Giovanni Bologna, on the other hand, was interested in the energy of the spiral movement. This is shown in a statue of his which now stands at the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence. It depicts a man grasping a struggling woman, and it is known as “The Rape of the Sabine Women.” Bologna, however, was so unconcerned about the subject matter that, before this name was attached to it, he suggested that maybe it could be Paris and Helen, or Pluto and Proserpina, or Phineus and Andromeda -- all good mythological subjects.

Another statue of his with an extraordinary spirally twisted pose is his well-known statue of Mercury. This is the symbol so often used in modern advertisements, like the Florists' Telegraph Delivery. Mercury's right arm and leg here are extended in one graceful line. Probably the act of weightless flight has never been better portrayed in sculpture.

Some of the other sculptors were not so concerned with motion in their mythological works. Benvenuto Cellini, whom Michelangelo called the greatest goldsmith the world had ever heard of, did several famous nude statues. He worked for nine years on his Perseus holding the Medusa head, which now stands on the same "porch" as Bologna's “Rape of the Sabine Women.” Then he spent the rest of his life trying to get paid for his work. He also took a small fragment that had been found from an ancient statue, and he embedded it into the production of a statue of Ganymede and the eagle. It would be interesting to know what the original statue had been.

But let's move from the general subject of nudes to the more specific subject of the female nude, which until very recent years has always aroused more interest than the male nude. Anyhow, the female nude was a very frequent subject of the paintings of the Renaissance. Name me almost any girl from Classical mythology, and I can find you a nude Renaissance painting of her -- except, for some strange reason, Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman of them all.

Corregio's "Jupiter [as a cloud] and Io" is one of the most vivid representations of the sexual climax ever painted. But it is done with such delicacy that it is not pornographic.

Some of the Renaissance nudes, especially of the Florentine school, were demure creations, like Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." But in the Venetian school the sensuality was more assertive. And the most frequent subjects for pictures of the female nude were Venus (in the early Renaissance) and Diana (in the later years).

Giorgione's dreamlike "Venus" was one of the first classical "reclining nudes in Venetian art, and was the model for many paintings in the following four centuries. This Venus is not realistic; she is rather the spirit of beauty. There are, for instance, no knee nor elbow joints visible.

Another feature of this work relates it to the art of ancient Rome. The idea of "window painting" to give visual depth has many parallels from Classical times. The wall paintings in such places as Pompeii often give the illusion of looking through windows or doors to outside areas. This was important because the rooms were often quite small.

When Giorgione died of the plague at the age of 33, his pupil Titian continued this kind of work. He painted a whole series of Dianas and Venuses, following quite closely the pattern set by his master, including the "window painting." But almost all of Titian's reclining nudes will contain two identifying objects -- a small dog and a bunch of flowers. One of these paintings, called "Venus and the Lute Player" is in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. And Titian's interest in the nude did not wane with age. When 80 years old, he painted a nude study of Diana with Actaeon.

I could go on and on with examples of mythological female nudes by the Renaissance artists. But I shall omit entirely such well-known names as Veronese and di Cosimo, and name just four more examples: Tintoretto's "Leda," to whom Jupiter came in the form of a swan, Vasari's "Andromeda," Titian's "Rape of Lucretia," and Cranach's "Venus and Cupid."

The works of the two Cranachs, father and son, always amuse me, although I feel sure that this is not their intention. Cranach the elder was the German court painter at Wittenberg, and was probably the inventor of the full-length portrait. But these two artists "dressed" their nudes in big elaborate hats, and sometimes beads, as in the painting of "The Judgment of Paris."

As I say, I don't think these were intended to be funny, but Tintoretto shows a distinct sense of humor in his delightful "Venus and Vulcan" (to whom Venus was married). In this painting Cupid's pose is very similar to that of Venus; and, of course, if you look carefully you see another figure in the picture -- Venus' lover Mars is under the bed.

However, by the later years of the Renaissance, only Correggio and Titian still felt that the erotic life of man was a for art. And even earlier the nude had not been universally accepted. The Sistine Chapel had been begun in 1473 from marble quarried from the ruins of the tomb of Hadrian. Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" on the back wall of this room had aroused much complaint about the nudity of the figures, especially from the Pope's master of ceremonies. As a result, Michelangelo had painted a portrait of him into the picture, with a pair of horns on his head, and in the depths of Hell. When the victim of this joke appealed to the Pope, Paul III said, "If the painter had sent you to Purgatory, I would have used all my efforts to get you out, but I have no jurisdiction over Hell." Later popes bowed to criticism and had more drapery applied to the figures by a painter who thereafter became known as the "breeches maker."

This last item leads us to another phase of our discussion -- the use of contemporary figures in these works of Classical art. This also had happened in ancient times. In the Vatican

Museum is a gilded statue of Hercules, from which the head had been removed and the head of the emperor Titus had been substituted.

Likewise, the aristocracy of the Renaissance loved to play the parts of Jupiter and Apollo and Diana for a day. According to tradition, the origin of the Visconti dynasty of Milan was the marriage of Venus and the Trojan Anchises. And a fifteenth century manuscript has an illustration showing Mars presiding over the Montagues and the Capulets (the families of Romeo and Juliet). And ladies of the court vied with each other to be recognized as one of the figures in such a painting as Rubens' “Diana's Nymphs.” Paintings of ladies in their bath or at their dressing table were popular, with mythological names used, of course.

Important personages were frequently painted into these pictures. In Titian's “Feast of the Gods,” on the wall of a palace room in Ferrara. one couple supposedly represents Lucrezia Borgia and her third husband. And c. 1545 Nicola da Modena had painted a mythological portrait of Francis I, containing attributes of Mars, Minerva, Diana, Mercury, and Cupid -- quite a trick. Probably one reason that the late Renaissance turned from Venus to Diana as a favorite subject was to compliment Diane de Poitiers, the mistress of Francis I's son, Henry II, and one of France's most important patrons of art.

Sometimes contemporary figures were transported into the world of Classical mythology [like a Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's court]. A ceiling in the Pitti Palace in Florence, for instance, portrays Cosimo I with Minerva and Hercules. And at the very end of the Renaissance, Rubens painted a series of pictures depicting the education of Maria de Medici, where Minerva is teaching her wisdom, Venus is giving her charm, Juno is training her in women's work, etc. And in 1569 the Dutch artist Mytens painted for Queen Elizabeth I a new version of “The Judgment of Paris,” showing Elizabeth as the person awarding the beauty prize. All of this is reminiscent of the paintings in the dome of our own capitol building in Washington, D.C., where the goddess of grain Ceres is shown riding a reaper, Venus is rising from the sea, holding the Atlantic cable, etc.

Botticelli's use of contemporary allusion in his mythological paintings is especially interesting. Simonetta Vespucci was born at Porto Venere, the legendary site of Venus's rising from the sea. Giuliano de Medici fell in love with her and ordered a lavish tourney held in her honor. He commissioned Botticelli to paint her portrait on a banner which he carried. With this one exception, all the supposed portraits of her were done after she died of consumption at the age of 23. Among these portraits is the Venus in Botticelli's “Birth of Venus,” which we have already mentioned. This was an illustration of a long poem which had been written about Simonetta's tourney. And years later, Botticelli used the memory of this woman's beauty as the model for the Venus figure and for all of the Three Graces in his painting called “Primavera,” or spring.

In his “Venus and Mars,” the wasps around the head of Mars come from the Vespucci coat-of-arms, and the laurel branches behind both Venus and Mars indicate that the peace of Lorenzo will be eternal.

In his “Pallas and the Centaur” (c. 1482) Pallas's tunic is ornamented by the Medici symbol of three interlocked rings; and her arms, head, and breast are intertwined with Lorenzo's laurel branches.

This work illustrates clearly another important aspect of Renaissance paintings. Classical mythology itself is full of symbolism, and the Renaissance use of this material added further symbolism. Since Pallas is the Greek goddess of wisdom, the meaning of ”Pallas and the Centaur• is pretty obvious -- it is wisdom taming brute force. But the intricate symbolism of Botticelli's ”Primavera• has never been fully explained.

Since "the mob" could not interpret these underlying meanings, the possession and understanding of a symbolical mythological painting added to the aristocracy's feeling of intellectual superiority, and it became the "in" thing to own such paintings. A naked Venus and Mars might be shocking to the uninitiated, but of course the educated “knew” that Mars was war and Venus was love, and just as Venus had conquered Mars, so Love would conquer War and bring Peace.

Parmiggianino's “Cupid Carving His Bow” shows Cupid with one foot on some books, indicating Love's conquest over knowledge. One cherub in the painting has been burned but is reaching out for more; to the other, the experience has brought only pain and fright.

Tintoretto, on the other hand, made a painting depicting Minerva with a pursuing Venus, indicating wisdom driving out sensuality.

The important families of the Renaissance commissioned great artists to paint lavish decorations for their homes. We have already referred to the Pitti Palace in Florence and the French palace at Fontainebleau. Also, what has become the Uffizi Gallery in Florence was first commissioned by Cosimo I in 1560 to Vasari, to plan as a government building, since the Palazzo Vecchio was becoming too small. One of the most interesting parts of the new building is the so-called Studiolo of FrancescoI de Medici. Vasari and a group of at least 24 painters and 8 sculptors had decorated this room for Cosimo I. The walls are lined with paintings in two tiers, serving as doors for storage cupboards, showing such mythological scenes as “Medea and Aeson ” and “The Fall of Icarus.”

In Rome are two palaces I must mention. The Villa Rospigliosi has on one of its ceilings one of the best known mythological paintings of all time, This was done by Reni, who was born in 1575 and, therefore, we have to stretch the Renaissance a bit to include him. But his “Apollo and the Hours” is a breath-taking example of the beautiful mythological paintings of this period, with Aurora pushing back the darkness of the night while Apollo and his chariot follow with the brightness of the new day. Today this palace is open for the public to visit only on the first day of every month.

Another interesting palace in Rome is the Villa Farnesina, so called because the Farnese family eventually owned it. But it was built by a rich banker for Imperia, the most celebrated prostitute in Rome. And its decorations are completely pagan, done mostly by Raphael.

One interesting room in the house is the Chamber of Psyche. This shows scenes from the love story of Cupid and Psyche. Two large ceiling paintings show the wedding of Cupid and Psyche, and Psyche being received on Mt. Olympus. The Cupid and Psyche story, though a late addition to Classical mythology, was a favorite theme of this period.

The versatility of the Renaissance gentleman is accepted. Michelangelo was dedicated to sculpture, but he also painted the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel. Leonardo da Vinci was a painter, but he also enjoyed designing costumes for masques. Cellini was a goldsmith who has left us statues. Vasari was a painter, an architect, and the author of a book on the lives of the artists.

This versatility led to an intermingling of sometimes incongruous elements. The Renaissance man drank in the beauties of paganism, but he still could not entirely free himself from the religious bonds of the Middle Ages. The results are sometimes a delightful blend, as in Michelangelo's Pieta in St. Peters. And his use of such personalities as the Cumaean Sibyl and Charon, the pagan ferryboat man to the Underworld, seems completely appropriate in the Sistine Chapel alongside Christ on the cross and God touching man and giving him life.

But this schizophrenia could also produce some strange, if not startling, results. Sometimes beautiful pagan statues had a moral attached to them to justify their existence. One of the more successful acts of this nature involved Bernini's lovely statue of Apollo and Daphne, just as she was being turned into a laurel tree in her desperate attempt to escape him. Maffeo Barbarini, later Pope Urban VIII, added an inscription in Latin to the base of the statue. which said: "The man who tries to grasp fleeting beauty ends with only bitter leaves in his hand." Incidentally, this "moral" would have pleased the ancient pagans as much as it did the Renaissance Christians.

But sometimes the various elements simply will not mix, and the result is a chaotic juxtaposition of pagan and Christian. An eighteenth century artist painted a study of some of the art treasures in the Uffizi Gallery for the British royal family. His museum "room" is fictional, but the effect is true. The room is literally crowded with works of art, and the arrangement follows no logic. Raphael's “Madonna” and Titian's nude “Venus of Urbino” are prominent. The head of a statue representing a naked dancing satyr hides the lower part of another Madonna painting. To this day (unless a change has come within the last few years) the Uffizi Gallery is very much like this, and the Renaissance spirit was like this.

For instance, the triumphal procession of Pope Leo X in 1513 was an elaborate combination of pagan and Christian elements. A large eight-column arch built for this occasion had on it Apollos, Ganymedes, Bacchuses, Minervas, and Venuses, alongside the Christian prophets and apostles.

Robert Browning expresses this strange Renaissance mixture of the religious and the pagan in his poem "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church -- Rome, 15--." In this poem, the dying bishop says:

> Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black --
> 'Twas ever antique black I meant! How else
> Shall ye contrast my friese to come beneath?
> The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,
> Those Pans and nymphs ye wot of, and perchance
> Some tripod, thyrsus, and a vase or so,
> St. Praxed in a glory, and one Pan
> Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,
> And Moses with the Tables...

So here we see the Renaissance spirit, touching life at as many points as possible, and drawing great pleasure from the art and stories of the ancient pagans while still clinging to its religious heritage.

Some of the artists' favorite subjects were Venus and Diana, Cupid and Psyche, the love affairs of Jupiter and Venus, and the Judgment of Paris. I think that almost every artist worth his salt painted at least one "Judgment of Paris." Some very prominent mythological stories, such as those of Atlas and the Trojan horse, were practically ignored. But never before this time nor since has Classical mythology had so many great artists devoting their energies to its material. Nobody has ever made a complete study of this phase of the Renaissance. The world has just been waiting for one of you to come along and do it.