

The Gods Return

by Gail Leggio

The pagan gods did not disappear completely during the middle ages. They were assimilated into astrological systems and allegorized as moral types. Some—notably the Roman goddess Fortuna—became more powerful in medieval Europe than they had been in the pantheons of antiquity. But in the Renaissance, as classical antiquity itself became the object of a cult, the old gods were reunited with their classical bodies, often unclothed, naturalistic yet idealized. Antique art, most often sculpture, was admired, fetishized and copied by artists. Works were usually recovered in fragments, and Renaissance princes hired artists to complete figures, adding an antique head from a different source or creating new limbs. Bernini did first-rate work of this kind. Occasionally, an anonymous female body would be tricked out with the attributes of Minerva, to flatter a patron who saw himself as a sponsor of wisdom and creativity. The Palazzo Altemps in Rome features many examples of these composites.

How did the Renaissance vision of the antique pantheon become dominant in Western culture? We know the stories of the gods from literary sources, Homer, Virgil and Ovid. But where do we get our mental images of Diana the



Andrea Mantegna, *Bacchanal with a Wine Vat*, c. 1470s THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK CITY



Bartolomeo Coriolano,
Sleeping Cupid,
mid-17th century
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huntress, Jupiter in his many guises as seducer, Mars and Venus hoodwinking Vulcan, wing-footed Mercury? Leonard Barkan aptly reminds us that “the vehicle in which antiquity traveled through to the modern world was above all the image....”¹ The Renaissance is the wellspring of that tradition. Knowledgeable about the latest archaeological discoveries and well-read in literature, artists invented their own pictorial versions of myths, often incorporating figures copied from antique sculpture. Printmaking, one of the Renaissance’s most important technical innovations, played a crucial role in the process of dissemination.

Formally exciting mediums in their own right, engravings and woodcuts were portable and inexpensive, allowing artists to share ideas with each other over wider geographic areas and to broaden their audiences. This spring the Metropolitan Museum of Art explored this fascinating topic in “Poets, Lovers and Heroes in Italian Mythological Prints,” an exhibition of more than 100 woodcuts, engravings, etchings, and illustrated books. The scope of the exhibition extended from pioneers Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506) and Marcantonio Raimondi (c. 1480–c. 1534), best known for his compositions after Raphael, to Agostino (1557–1602) and Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), Salvator Rosa (1615–73), Giambattista Tiepolo (1696–1770) and the neoclassicist Anton Mengs (1728–79), among others. These prints, evoking an idyllic pastoral world or narrating pagan tales of heroism and amorous adventure, would help perpetuate the sway of the ancient gods well into the nineteenth century.

The exhibition, organized by Wendy Thompson, Assistant Curator in the Met’s Department of Drawings and Prints, explored the themes of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the loves of the immortals, the legendary history of Rome, and the ancient gods as patrons of the arts. Some of these tropes demand elaborate

compositional strategies, as in Andrea Andreani's (1540/46–1623?) *Rape of the Sabines* (1585), a chiaroscuro woodcut from four blocks on three sheets. The story of how Romulus, Rome's founder, arranged for the abduction of a neighboring tribe's maidens to ensure the future of the city was open to a number of visual interpretations. Here, the artist focuses on a crowded scene, forcing a welter of bodies into claustrophobic architectural spaces. Or pagan myth could yield an image as apparently simple as Bartolomeo Coriolano's (c. 1599–c. 1676) *Sleeping Cupid*, a mid-seventeenth-century chiaroscuro woodcut after Guido Reni. The immediate appeal of the drowsy putto seems to require no cultural gloss, but sophisticated viewers would have recognized an antique visual trope.

One subject that carries a wealth of associations with pagan antiquity—sensuality, artistic inspiration—is well represented, the rites of Bacchus. Mantegna's *Bacchanal with Silenus* stars Bacchus' wise, drunken tutor Silenus. The sheet (c. 1470s) is one of the first Renaissance works in any medium to display full mastery of the classical nude, with convincing musculature and sophisticated spatial relationships within the frieze-like shallow stage. No direct classical source has been found for this inventive multi-figure engraving, devised for the humanist circle in Mantua. But the revelers in this and the pendant composition *Bacchanal with a Wine Vat*—who embody lust and laughter, somnolence and poetry—had a profound effect on other artists. This scene was Dürer's introduction to the Italian Renaissance; he copied the engraving in 1494. Raphael, Rubens and Rembrandt all admired Mantegna's pagan processions.² The trope continued to attract artists right through the Renaissance. The Spanish-born, Naples-based Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652), one of the very few followers of Caravaggio to rival him in power, was seen here in a vibrant *Drunken Silenus* (1628), an etching with drypoint, engraving and burnishing. Ribera's pudgy, unusually youthful Silenus is a paradigm of ribald ease, lounging like a river god while a satyr fills his wine cup and a shaggy-shanked Pan crowns him with a wreath. There are subtle differences from Ribera's stunning painting of 1626 (Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples). The braying donkey is more prominent in the painting. The drypoint eliminates the figure of a young faun and lightly covers Silenus' genitals with foliage.

A good part of the fascination in this exciting exhibition grew out of tracing crosscurrents among artists. Prints were the best vehicle for sharing visual ideas, which exist across the particular mediums that incarnate them in paint, ink or marble. These works, crafted by stellar printmakers or master artists themselves, are remarkable aesthetic objects, formally compelling and sensuously appealing. But they also served a pragmatic function, adding to the art community's iconographic and gestural repertoire. They had an impact on both artists and their audiences, just as photographic reproductions do today. Prints were an important conduit linking the artists of northern Europe with Italian artists, who had been developing separately through technical innovation and humanistic speculation.

The complex pattern of exchange between northern and Italian Renaissance artists makes Jacopo de' Barbari's (1460/70–1516) *Apollo and Diana* (c. 1500–05) an intriguing work. Jacopo traveled to Germany and the Netherlands and was a friend of Dürer; they shared an interest in anatomy, in particular the canon of human proportions. Scholars debate which way the influence was running at various times, but Dürer probably took hints about posture and iconography for his own *Apollo and Diana* engraving from Jacopo.³ Jacopo's deities are planetary forces, the sun god—radiating burin lines—drawing his bow while striding forward over a transparent sphere dotted with stars, while Diana—accompanied by a stag, reminding us of Actaeon—slips over the horizon, her back to us and her flowing hair obscuring her face.

Jacopo's nudes have the fleshiness associated with the northern Renaissance. For Italian classicism, Marcantonio Raimondi represents the height of suavity. The elaborate, multi-figure composition *The Judgment of Paris* (c. 1515–20) is a masterpiece of collaborative creativity, as Marcantonio interprets Raphael's conceptually rich drawings. The story depicted is fraught with possibilities. At the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Eris, the goddess of discord, arrives with an apple labeled "for the fairest." Paris is asked to choose among Minerva, Juno and Venus; his decision sets into motion the chain of events culminating in the Trojan War. The subject attracted a variety of allegorical interpretations; the goddesses symbolized the contemplative, active and sensual ways of life. A more esoteric reading saw in the choice of Venus the transformative power of beauty. In this engraving the goddesses competing for Paris' attention are nude, something of an innovation at the time, and the mastery of the classical figure in this technical tour de force is impressive.

Marco Dente's (?–1527) *Venus Wounded by the Rose's Thorn* (c. 1516), based on Raphael's fresco decoration in Cardinal Bibiena's Vatican apartments, was executed by Giulio Romano from the master's sketches. The incident refers to a legend about how the white rose turned red, but the frankly pagan image suggests the worldliness of the Renaissance cleric. Palm trees and a rabbit, proverbial for sexual activity, add textural interest to this nude in a landscape. Prints were a vital link between the achievements of master painters and other artists and connoisseurs. As Thompson remarks, "many prints reflected monumental works, most commonly fresco paintings in private palaces."⁴ The public museum is a relatively late development, and even today visitors to Rome must seek out masterpieces in small galleries descended from princely collections. Marcantonio's *Apollo and the Muses on Parnassus* (c. 1514–20) offers a version of Raphael's fresco for the papal library, not publicly accessible until well into the seventeenth century. The engraving established the basic composition as a touchstone throughout Europe, although some differences between the finished fresco and Marcantonio's sheet reveal that he was working from Raphael's preliminary drawings. Another version of the subject, Raphael Morghen's (1758–1833) *Apollo and the Muses on Parnassus* (1784), based on a



Agostino Carracci,
Orpheus and Eurydice,
c. 1590–95

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1761 painting in the Villa Albani, Rome, by Anton Raphael Mengs, would have a strong influence on the evolution of neoclassicism. It's a handsome engraving, although Mengs's composition—despite the lavish praise by pioneer art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann—looks formulaic to modern eyes.

The Italian mythological print was rooted in various approaches to the classical nude. At one extreme is the full-blown eroticism of Enea Vico's (1523–67) *Vulcan at His Forge with Mars and Venus* (1543), after Parmigianino. There is no pretense that a moral is being drawn in this cuckolding scene, and the plate was censored and reworked in the wake of the Council of Trent. By the end of the sixteenth century classicism no longer offered reliable cover for perceived indecency. Compare, in contrast, the poignant humanity of the nude figures in Agostino Carracci's *Orpheus and Eurydice* (c. 1590–95), a dynamic, psychologically penetrating engraving. The lovers cling together as she clambers out of the fiery pit, graphically punchy flames licking at her naked body. Their carefully averted faces are eloquent with tragedy. Agostino is in a more playful mood with *Omnia vincit Amor* (*Love Conquers All*) from 1599. Two sets of characters flank a lush landscape stretching back to mountains; the Carracci were pioneers in the emergence of landscape as an autonomous genre. On the

right two unclad but demure nymphs sit at the base of a tree; on the left a strapping Cupid has wrestled an appealingly shaggy satyr to his knees. It's one of those scenes of erotic pastoral that made antiquity a fantasy playground for the Western imagination. A couple of decades later, Pietro Testa's (1612–50) *Garden of Venus* (c. 1631–37) seems to anticipate the Rococo. In this soft-focused etching, a pretty nude reclines in a flowery wood while dozens of putti cavort around her; there is nothing numinous about these beings, which look as rapidly decorative as the décor for a Boucher boudoir. If we go back a century and a half to a work from the beginning of the Renaissance, Francesco Rosselli's (1448–before 1513) *Triumph of Love* (c. 1485–90), we find a richer image. Based on Petrarch's series of poems *Trionfi*, a few lines of which are printed below the image, the engraving has the quaint, mysterious air of a world that has yet to emerge from the middle ages. The Cupid enthroned on the ceremonial chariot, drawn by prancing white horses, is classical enough, but all the other characters—the graceful maidens and other folk led like slaves in the god's triumph, even Jupiter himself riding in the front—wear quattrocento finery. Such anachronisms are part of the medieval world view, which tends to blur distinctions between past and present.

The fully evolved Renaissance view of myth was imbued with a sense of history, as artists and thinkers tried to make antiquity live again. That enterprise entailed antiquarian research and formal experimentation. In some cases antique works were documented through creative copying. It is enthralling to watch artists grappling with the problems of translating three-dimensional sculpture into two-dimensional graphic terms. But invention is as vital to the equation as fidelity: gestures are changed, new settings appear, fantasy elements alter even familiar monuments. The works in this show, drawn from the Metropolitan's own remarkable holdings, demonstrate the power of the past to stimulate artists to think creatively for their own time. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, NY, NY 10028. Telephone (212) 570-3951. On the Web at www.metmuseum.org

NOTES

1. Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 184. See also Barkan's *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).
2. For a good overview, see Jay A. Levenson, Konrod Oberhuber, Jacquelyn L. Sheehan, *Early Italian Engravings from the National Gallery of Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1973), pp. 182–87.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
4. Wendy Thompson, "Poets, Lovers and Heroes in Italian Mythological Prints," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (Winter 2004), p. 50.