

The Birth and Custody of Infant Bacchus

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This article discusses the visual aspects of the birth of Dionysus/Bacchus, the God of Agriculture, Revelry, and Wine, in classical art. It examines the historical and iconographic aspects of the infant Dionysus's custody by two deities, Silenus and Mercury, in ancient classical art, particularly in Roman frescoes and sculptural reliefs, and its echoes in Italian Renaissance engravings.

Keywords: Greek-Roman mythology, birth, custody, Silenus, Hermes/Mercury, Dionysus/Bacchus, Pompeiian frescos, sculptural reliefs

Introduction

In classical art, including Greek and Roman, the origin of the name Dionysus or Bacchus, the legends about the birth of this deity and his care, custody, and protection have been subjects of scholars' contestation and puzzlement. The fusion between the Greek origin and cult of Dionysus and its appropriation as Bacchus in Roman culture further compounds the visual iconography. In Greek, the word *Dionysus* has a twofold etymology. First, it derives from two words: "*do* or *dias*, referring to his father Zeus as the immortal pagan god." (Beekes, 2009, p. 337; Dragatakis, 2020). The second meaning acknowledges Dionysus's metaphysical nature, being born from divinity. The word *dio* also alludes to Dionysus's original dual nature due to his birth, first from the mortal Semele's womb and, after her death, from the immortal Zeus' thigh. The word *dio* also had two other significations. One was associated with the physical location, Mount Nysa, where Dionysus was raised and cared for as a child (Otto, 1986, pp. 52-64, esp. p. 59, 61-62). The other relates to the reference made by Hermes, Messenger of the Gods, to Zeus's awkward gait as a Zeus-limp (*Zeus-nysos*)¹ (Beekes, 2009, p. 337) as the weight on his thigh from carrying his son prevented him from walking freely (Beekes, 2009, p. 337).

In Roman mythology, the etymology of the word *Bacchus* is also complex.² Bacchus shares its roots with the ancient Greek word for Dionysus and carries a similar dual nature. The Greek word for Bacchus is *bakkhos* or *bakkheia*, meaning a state of ecstasy (Euripides, *Bacchae*, line 491, and Gaius Julius Hyginus, *Fabulae*, line 167), and the Latin word *bacca*, which means berry or fruit from a tree or vine, as grapes (Ovid's *Meta.*, bk. 3). The sacred cult and rituals of Bacchus became essential in Roman religion during the third century BCE, integrating the Greek cult of Dionysus with the Roman ceremonies.

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¹ *Nysos* meant limping in the Syracusan language.

² In Roman mythology, there is a switch from the Greek names Dionysus, Hermes, Silenus, Hera, and Zeus to Bacchus, Mercury, Silenus, Juno, and Jupiter, respectively.

Before the sixth century BCE, the literary descriptions and visual representations of Dionysus were vague. But a clear representation of Dionysus as a small child and his birth emerged in poetry in the sixth century BCE (Kuivalainen, 2021, p. 73; Cole, 2007, pp. 327-341, esp. p. 333). In art, however, visual representations occurred a century later. Dionysus (Bacchus) is depicted as an infant or child held or cared for by adult figures—Nysiades nymphs, Silenus, and Hermes³ (Kuivalainen, 2021, pp. 189-197).

The Birth of Dionysus or Bacchus

In Antiquity, the accounts of the birth of Dionysus (Bacchus) are many and confusing, from the time of Homer (*Iliad* 14.323 ff) in the eighth century BCE to the writings of Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 6.78) in the first-century CE (Otto, 1986, pp. 52-64). However, there is a joint agreement among ancient writers that Dionysus was known as the God of Agriculture, Divination, and Revelry during ancient times. These ascriptions continued in Roman Antiquity but used the name of Bacchus. He was born from the union of a female mortal, Semele, and the immortal male god, Zeus. The legendary accounts further narrate that Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus, knowing about Zeus's affair and wanting to destroy Semele, tricked the mortal maiden into suggesting that Zeus reveal himself (Otto, 1986, pp. 65-73). Acquiescing to Semele's request, Zeus, God of Thunder and Lightning, showed himself. His powerful divine light burnt alive the mortal Semele, pregnant with his son Dionysus. Knowing of his wife's ploys and to save his son, Zeus opened Semele's womb, rescued the fetus of his son, and then sewed him up to his thigh. The child gestated there until his full birth (Ovid, *Meta.*, bk. 3). In this atypical manner, Zeus prevented Hera from destroying his son, Dionysus.

Visual Representations

In the classical tradition, three dominant artistic practices incorporated the culture and imagery of the infant Dionysus or Bacchus as a pagan god: the birth of the infant, the deities' care and protection for the newborn, and solo depictions of the infant.

The first practice focused on depicting narrative events related to the birth and protection of the infant Bacchus (Figure 1). Meanwhile, the second tradition visualized the upbringing and education of the young god, while the third, much rarer tradition exclusively featured solo depictions of the infant Bacchus (Figure 2). These imageries are seen in classical art forms such as frescos, mosaics, and sculptures. In addition to these ancient visual traditions—the most common of which is the narrative scene dealing with the dual birth of the child, while the less popular deals with the solo image of the infant (Reid, 1993, pp. 348-349 and 360)—are the depictions of Bacchus, not as an infant, but with his Bacchanalia festivities and his marriage to Ariadne (Figure 3), not considered in this essay.

³ Kuivalainen, *The Portrayal of Pompeian Bacchus*, pp. 189-197, discussing Pompeian frescoes depicting the infant Bacchus cared for by a male or female adult.



Figure 1. Birth of Dionysus (Bacchus), Apulian red-figure volute krater, 4th Century BCE. National Archeological Museum, Taranto.



Figure 2. Roman floor mosaic depicting Infant Bacchus, 3rd Century CE, from via Flaminia, Rome. Now Palazzo Massimo, Rome.



Figure 3. Roman sarcophagus, Bacchus and Ariadne Marriage, 100-200 CE, marble. British Museum, London. Photo credit and courtesy: ©Trustees of the British Museum, London.

The Birth of Dionysus/Bacchus

The early visual depiction in Greek classical art derives from the ancient accounts of Homer (*Iliad* 14.323ff) about the birth of the infant Dionysus/Bacchus from the union of the female mortal Semele and the immortal male god Zeus and its consequences requiring the carrying and protection of infant by two gods, Silenus and Hermes. This Homeric tradition was continued during the Roman era. The art historian and historian Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* (6.78), recounted the birth of the infant from the Greek artistic tradition and its appropriation in Roman art. There are representations of these legendary narratives in fresco and vase paintings, mosaics, and sculptures. For example, the Apulian Red-Figure vase, a volute krater (bowl for mixing wine and water) of the 4th century BCE at the National Archaeological Museum in Taranto, shows the birth of Dionysus from Zeus's thigh (Figure 1). This krater represents Mount Olympus, the sacred residence of the pagan gods, where the infant Dionysus, crowned with ivy, emerges from Zeus's thigh. His written name, Dionysus, appears above his head, identifying him. Zeus, the King of the Gods—seated in the center and crowned with oak leaves, symbols of his power and wisdom—surrenders his son to Semele's sister for nurturing.⁴

Among the gods on Mount Olympus, Zeus entrusted the care and protection of his son to two of them: Hermes, the Messenger of the Gods and the God of Eloquence and Wisdom, and Silenus, the God of the Forest, Divination, and Music. In the krater, these two gods stand by Zeus. Partially naked, Silenus is wearing a panther-skin cloak on his shoulders, carrying his favorite musical instrument, the fluted pipe, and holding a thyrsus, a wooden staff that symbolizes fertility, divinity, and a force of individuation and transformation. Therefore, the various interpretations of the term *staff* revolve around its association with the tree trunk, symbolizing the connection between the divine and human realms (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, pp. 918-919, 1006). Hermes is also depicted as partially naked, wearing a himation cloak that covers his back and winged sandals known as *talaria* (Anderson, 1966). He is holding a caduceus, a unique (magic) wand with two snakes intertwined, symbolizing power and the balance of contrasting cosmic forces (Cirlot, 1962, p. 36). Hermes looks attentively at the infant Dionysus.

We find the story similarly imaged in the first centuries CE in Roman marble reliefs and frescos. A Roman sarcophagus, dating back to 190 CE, now in The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, MD, shows two sequential vignettes on a marble relief. A nurse nymph assists the seated Zeus with removing Dionysus from his thigh;

⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, bk. 1, l. 106.

hence the birth of Dionysus. Hermes stands behind her with his winged *petasos* (hat), awaiting instructions to take custody of the divine infant. The second vignette shows a nude Hermes, with his flying coat, winged shoes, and *petasos*, warmly embracing Dionysus while fleeing, carrying the newborn to safety (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Roman Sarcophagus, *The Triumph of Dionysus*, det. showing the birth of Dionysus, 190 CE, marble. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD. Photo credit: ©Lucas Livingston.

In contrast, another marble relief on a Roman sarcophagus dating back to 150-160 CE, now at The Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, MD, represents another complex scene on the *Birth of Dionysus/Bacchus* (Figure 5). The museum's description notes that this sarcophagus is also known as the *Childhood Sarcophagus* because it is a small coffin, likely made for a deceased child.⁵ The left of the relief shows the newborn pagan god being nursed by Semele's sister, Ino. At her feet is a panther cub, a feline animal that would become Dionysus's favorite beast and companion. Other Nysiades nymphs are preparing a bath for the infant to her left of the scene. Silenus is also present as a future caretaker assigned by Zeus. The right of the relief shows satyrs and maenads, including a now drunken Silenus, celebrating the infant god's arrival.

The ancient accounts relate that, during his infancy, Dionysus was not only nursed by Semele's sister Ino but was also cared for by nurses or Nysiades nymphs in a cave on Mount Nysa (*Homeric Hymn 1 To Dionysus*). They bathed the infant in the Spring of Kissousa (meaning the Spring made of Ivy), "whose water has the color and sparkle of wine, is clear, and delightful to the taste" (Plutarch, *Life of Lysanders* 28.4). This literary account is visualized in Pompeiian frescoes. In *The Education of Dionysus* of 20 CE, now at the Museo Nazionale Romano in Rome, for example, the scene shows the infant Dionysus, crowned with ivy and grapes, being nursed by his mother's sister, Ino, while two elegantly clothed attendants are standing by to assist (Figure 6). The scene takes place in an ancient Roman architectural setting.⁶ In another Pompeiian fresco, in poor condition, *Silenus and the*

⁵ <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/16574/sarcophagus-depicting-the-birth-of-dionysus> (accessed 15 May 2023). The lid on this sarcophagus, decorated with images of a banquet featuring satyrs and maenads adorned with grape and wine vines, is probably not part of the original coffin.

⁶ For the image, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus#/media/File:Römischer_Meister_um_20_001.jpg (accessed 15 May

Infant Dionysus of 30 CE, now at the National Archeological Museum of Naples, the scene shows Zeus, seated on a barrel of wine laid horizontally, with the attributes of Hermes—winged sandals, a winged helmet, a magic rod—and a lyre, Apollo’s attribute, exposing his thigh where he incubated Dionysus. The scene depicts a horned Pan observing the old, bearded Silenus holding the nude infant, Dionysus, who is reaching out for grapes held by a Callipygian nymph sitting next to Silenus. In the scene’s foreground, two animals—a donkey and a panther—look at each other (Figure 7)⁷ (Reinach, 1922, p. 105; Kuivalainen, 2021, pp. 234-235).

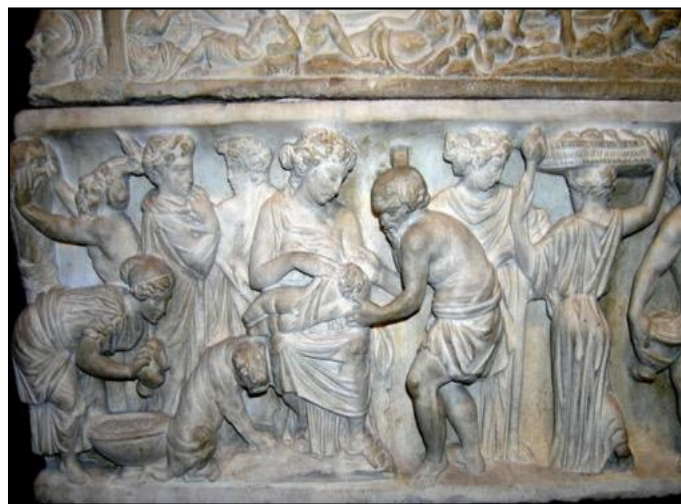


Figure 5. The Birth of Bacchus (Childhood Sarcophagus) Roman sarcophagus, 150-160 CE. The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD.

Credit line: Henry Walters with the Massarenti Collection, 1902.

2023).

⁷ Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de Peintures Grecques et Romaines* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1922), p. 105.3; Kuivalainen, *The Portrayal of Pompeian Bacchus*, pp. 234-235. For the color image, see <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/F27.1.html> (accessed 15 May 2023).



Figure 6. *The Education of Dionysus*, 20 CE, Pompeian fresco. Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome.



Figure 7. Salomon Reinbach's drawing after the original Pompeian fresco, *Silenus and the Infant Dionysus*, 30 CE. National Archeological Museum, Naples.

Credit line: Drawing from Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de peintures grecques et romaines*. Paris Leroux, 1922.

Two other Roman marble reliefs of the first-century CE, perhaps originally from Paestum, now at the National Archeological Museum in Madrid, represent the caretakers assigned by Zeus to protect his infant son: Hermes/Mercury and Silenus. The first relief, *The Childhood of Bacchus, Mercury carrying Infant Bacchus* (Figure 8), shows Mercury wearing a cloak, traveling boots, and a caduceus. He transports the infant to a safe place in the forest of Mount Nysa for Silenus to care for and educate him, as seen in the second scene, *The Childhood of Bacchus, Silenus Educating Infant Bacchus* (Figure 9). The setting of this scene is a rustic landscape, which is different from the previous location, which took place in an ethereal landscape. The set displays several vignettes representing the activities in Nysa's grotto. In the upper left corner, a horned Pan depicted as a satyr holding a rustic rod stands in front of a rocky wall. His pastoral staff contrasts with Mercury's fancy caduceus from the previous scene. Next to this wall is a tree with a grapevine; in front of it is a nude nymph holding a bunch of grapes to tease the infant Bacchus, who is carefully observing her. Sitting on a rocky hill, Silenus is at the center of the relief, depicted as being naked except for his coarse leather boots, which are different from the fancy *talaria* worn by Mercury. Silenus is shown holding a panpipe in one hand and placing the other on a panther's skin, which later becomes an attribute of Bacchus.



Figure 8. *The Childhood of Bacchus, Mercury carrying Infant Bacchus*, marble, Roman relief, 1st or 2nd century CE. National Archeological Museum, Madrid.



Figure 9. *The Childhood of Bacchus, Silenus educating Infant Bacchus*, marble, Roman relief, marble, 1st or 2nd century CE. National Archeological Museum, Madrid.

Although Bacchus's caretakers (Mercury and Silenus) are both loving and paternal toward the infant Bacchus, they provide the child with two different aspects of education associated with divination and fecundity. There are two distinct contrasts (*paragoni*) in their representations. These physical and metaphysical distinctions are personified in the depiction of the figures of Mercury and Silenus. Mercury is depicted as a young, beardless man dressed in refined garments, wearing an open mantle, winged helmet, and winged sandals, carrying a caduceus, and known to play the lyre. As the messenger of the gods, he symbolizes intellect and erudition; he will share informative insights with the infant Bacchus. In contrast, Silenus is shown as a savvy but old bearded man with horns on his head, wearing the skin of a panther and leather boots and holding a tree rod and a panpipe. These crude attributes are associated with Silenus's earthly and physical aspects of the powers of Nature, fertility, and fecundity. In addition, his horns are a traditional symbol not just of divine fecundity but also of creativity or illumination—rays of light (Habakkuk 3:4)—and the wooden rod symbolizes authority as an instrument of discipline and measurement tools that Silenus uses to initiate the infant Bacchus into the cult of magic. In addition, the rod and the panpipe produce magical enchantments, methods of divination and magic that Silenus will teach Bacchus for his dances and bacchanalia—Roman celebrations and festivals with wine, music, dances, merrymaking, and revelry in honor of Bacchus⁸ (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, pp. 514-515, 919, 1077-1078; Otto, 1986, pp. 95-102, esp. 97; McStay, 2024).

The naked infant Bacchus is cuddling on Silenus's chest. The nude infant is entertained by a semi-nude nymph holding a bunch of grapes that form delicious nectar. Below them in the lower left of the scene, another nymph, while kneeling, is covering a wooden washing tub where the infant was bathed earlier. On the right side of the relief is a large stone entrance to the cave, outside of which grows a type of fir tree with large conifers,

⁸ Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, pp. 514-515, on the horn; and pp. 919 and 1077-1078, on the magic rod. See Otto, *Dionysus*, 95-102, esp. 97, on Dionysus being a prophet and a bacchic revel filled with the spirit of divination. See Heather O'Leary McStay, "*Viva Bacco e viva Amore*": *Bacchic Imagery in the Renaissance*. Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, NY, 2024.

symbols of endurance and immortality, which are attributes of Silenus. While growing up in the forest, the infant received musical and prophetic instruction from Silenus. He educated the infant and devotedly protected him from the mischievous actions of Hera, who wanted to destroy him out of jealousy (*Orphic Hymn* 53.1).

Education and Upbringing of the Infant Bacchus

This inspiration from classical literature also led to the creation of some of the most unique artistic depictions of the upbringing of Bacchus. Mercury and Silenus were frequently portrayed as protectors of the youthful deity in these scenes, for example, in sculptures and mosaics that portrayed Bacchus interacting with various gods, particularly Mercury and Silenus. These interactions alluded to the care and education of the infant god. Notably, this can be seen in the Parian marble statue of Praxiteles's *Hermes with the Infant Dionysus*, dated between 200 and 250 BCE, now in the Archeological Museum of Olympia (Figures 10a and 10b). Although the statue was discovered in 1877 at the Temple of Hera in Olympia, it was known in the Renaissance through the writings of Pliny the Elder, who cited this sculpture in his book on *Natural History* (bk. 34, p. 87) (Fowler, 1900; Kuivalainen, 2021, pp. 189-190). The nude figure of Hermes in a contrapposto stance is beautifully carved. He is holding and playing with the infant Dionysus in his left arm. Supposedly, Hermes holds a bunch of grapes aloft in his other hand, teasing the child into reaching for them. Unfortunately, this section of the sculpture was broken off at one time; a reconstructed image seen in a nineteenth-century photograph assists in visualizing the complete sculpture.



Figures 10a. Praxiteles, *Hermes with the Infant Dionysus*, 200-250 BCE, Parian marble.
Archeological Museum of Olympia, Greece.



Figure 10b. 19th Century photographic reconstruction of this statue discovered in 1877 at the Temple of Hera in Olympia, Greece.

Several frescoes after Praxitelean statues were depicted in Pompeiian villas, such as the Casa di Sallustio, Casa degli Amorini, and Casa del Naviglio. S. Reinach's drawings in *Répertoire de peintures grecques et romaines* (Reinach, 1922, p. 97) assist with visual reconstructions of many of the Pompeiian frescos. In addition, in the *Le pitture murali campane scoperte negli anni 1867-79* (Sogliano, 1879, p. 38; Kuivalainen, 2021, p. 97), Antonio Sogliano discussed the compositional image of nude Mercury, whom he referred to as Satyr, which is crowned with ivy instead of wearing a petasos. He plays with the infant Dionysus and teases him with a bunch of grapes, like the Praxitelean statue (compared Figures 11, 12, and 13 with 10b).



Figure 11. Mercury holding the Infant Dionysus, before 79 CE, Pompeian fresco from the west wall of oecus (hall), House of Zephyr and Flora or Casa del Naviglio, Pompeii.



Figure 12. Mercury holding the Infant Dionysus, before 79 CE, Pompeian fresco from the west wall of oecus (hall), House of Zephyr and Flora or Casa del Naviglio, Pompeii.
Photo credit: ©Luca Livingston.



Figure 13. *Mercury holding the Infant Dionysus*, before 79 CE, drawing from original Pompeiian fresco from the west wall of oecus (hall), House of Zephyr and Flora or Casa del Naviglio, Pompeii.

Credit line: Drawing from Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de peintures grecques et romaines*. Paris Leroux, 1922.

Another example from ancient Roman art of this theme is the Antioch floor mosaic of *Mercury and the Infant Bacchus* of the 4th century CE, now at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts (Figure 14). The scene illustrates a naked Mercury wearing a mantle with a winged hat, talaria, and a thyrsus. In haste, Mercury is carrying the infant Dionysus toward the nymphs of Nysa for safety. On the upper right corner, the inscription *DION* identifies the God of Wine as Dionysus (Bacchus). The infant is being embraced under Mercury's cloak and is naked, save for a crown of ivy and grapes. This mosaic was thought to have been in the portico of a bathhouse on the island of the Orontes, near Turkey.⁹

⁹ For the image, see <https://worchester.emuseum.com/objects/16554/hermes-and-dionysos-floor-mosaic> (accessed 15 May 2023).



Figure 14. *Mercury and the Infant Bacchus*, Roman floor mosaic, 4th century, Worcester Art Museum, MA.

The Solo Infant Bacchus in Roman Imagery

Although less frequently represented, the infant Bacchus, a God of Wine in ancient Greek art, was more commonly represented in Roman mosaics and small sculptures. For example, the floor mosaic in Palazzo Massimo in Via Flaminia in Rome from the third century CE shows a portrait of a child with a crown of grapes and ivy leaves. Intricate curvilinear lines beautifully frame the portrait (Figure 2). At least two small known bronzes of the infant Bacchus are remarkable in sculpture. The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles houses a bronze, silver, and copper statuette of *The Infant Bacchus* from 100 CE (Figures 15a and 15b). The statuette shows a nude child crowned with grapes and ivy leaves. He is standing with outstretched arms, suggesting that once he held a drinking or offering cup. Another example of an *Infant Bacchus* dating from 50 to 100 CE is displayed at the British Museum, originally from Pompeii (Figure 16)¹⁰ (Walters, 1899; Kuivalainen, 2021, pp. 221-222). The statue portrays a chubby nude child standing in contrapposto, holding a thyrsus with his right hand. His long hair is held back with a ribbon decorated with the traditional attributes of grapes and large ivy leaves. The child's extended hand likely held a kylix, and the left shoulder and arm are covered by panther skin. The statue's smiling face suggests a happy child, and the exposed genitals may have functioned as a fountain, an

¹⁰ H. B. Walters, *Bronze/Catalogue of the Bronzes in the British Museum. Greek, Roman & Etruscan* (London: British Museum Press, 1899), item 1327. It was a gift by Sir William Temple. This sculpture has been restored, particularly the child's left hand. See Kuivalainen, *The Portrayal of Pompeian Bacchus*, pp. 221-222, for a discussion about the statue, originally located in the Casa del Gemmario (Casa della Gemma) at Herculaneum. Before the restoration, the infant wore boots were decorated with ivy leaves.

example of a *puer mingens* (a boy making water)¹¹ (Campbell & Boyington, 2019; Caglioti, 2022). This theme of the infant Bacchus evolves into another type of iconography in Italian Renaissance art.



(a) (b)
 Figures 15. *Infant Bacchus*, Roman sculpture, 100 CE, bronze, silver, and copper.
 J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 16. Ancient Roman, *Infant Bacchus*, 50-100 CE, bronze. British Museum, London.
 ©The Trustees of the British Museum. Donated by Sir William Temple.

¹¹ James W. P. Campbell and Amy Boyington, "The problems of meaning and use of the *puer mingens* motif in fountain design 1400-1700," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 40, no. 2 (2019): 110-27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14601176.2019.167598>. In Florentine art of the fifteenth century, the gifted sculptor Donatello (1386-1466) beautifully and humorously captured these classical images in the bronze sculptures of the *spiritelli* or *amorini* (young children). See Francesco Caglioti, ed., *Donatello: The Renaissance* (Venice: Marsilio, 2022).

Classical Appropriations

Italian Renaissance artists, working in various media, particularly in engravings, appropriated some aspects of the classical Greek and Roman traditions in their art. One example is Bernard Salomon's woodcuts for *La Metamorphose d'Ovide Figurée* (Figure 17).¹² Salomon focuses on the horrifying moment when Semele's curiosity to see Zeus causes her to burn alive. Zeus watches his lover being immolated in flames because of his powerful lighting nature. He rescues his son from her womb.



Figure 17. Semele immolated by the sky-god, father-figure Zeus, who takes the divine child Bacchus (Bernard Salomon, *La Metamorphose d'Ovide Figurée* [Lyons: Jean de Tournes, 1557], p. 40). Woodcut. Courtesy: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

In contrast, the Bolognese painter and engraver Giulio Bonasone (1531-1576), in *The Loves of the Gods* (*Amorosi diletti degli dei*, 1560)¹³ (Malvasia, 1678, p. 64, 74, 185; Rossoni, 2008), represented the birth of Bacchus from the right side and not the thigh of Jupiter, set in a landscape. A giant eagle, Jupiter's sacred bird, with his large wings, protects two maiden nurses, Semele's sister Ino, and a friend, who assist in the reception and carrying of the newborn. With his quiver and bow, a nude-winged Cupid embraces Jupiter for support (Figure 18).

¹² Published in Lyons: Jean de Tournes, 1557, p. 40.

¹³ Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, 2 vols. (Bologna: Domenico Barbieri, 1678), 1, p. 64, 74, and 185, noting Bonasone's "universal erudition for the vast inventions in his prints." See Elena Rossoni, "Stampe di Giulio Bonasone pittore e intagliatore. Ricostruzione del primo volume della raccolta di stampe della pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna," *Bollettino del Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe della Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna*, No. 1 (2008), pp. 27-44.



Figure 18. Giulio Bonasone, *Birth of Bacchus*, engraving from Bonasone, *Loves of the Gods*, 1560, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Credit Line: Rogers Fund, 1962.

In classical narratives, Mercury and Silenus were frequently portrayed as protectors of the youthful deity. This concept of custody was embraced in Italian Renaissance art, as seen in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Figure 19).¹⁴ In two vignettes, Colonna visualizes a poignant moment when Mercury is charged with protecting and delivering the infant Bacchus to the land of the Nysiades nymphs. In a vast landscape, a large oak tree separates the woodcut scenes, the sacred tree of Jupiter. In the celestial realm, Jupiter hands over the infant Bacchus to Mercury, who is dressed in his classic mythological garb on the left-hand side of the vignette. In the second vignette, on the right, Mercury can be seen carrying infant Bacchus to the Nysiades nymphs' cave in Mount Nysa.

¹⁴ Published in Venice: Aldus, 1499, p. 171.



Figure 19. Birth of Bacchus/Jupiter Has Mercury Deliver the Infant Bacchus to the Care of the Nymphs, The Fountain (font different? of Adonis, woodcut from Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice: Aldus, 1499).

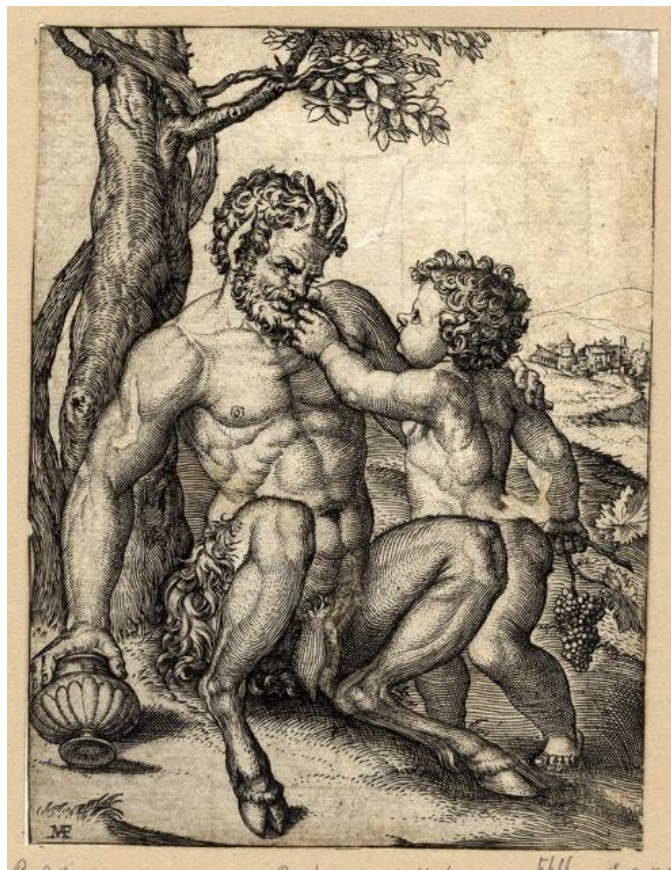


Figure 20. Marcantonio Raimondi, *Silenus and Infant Bacchus*, 1515, engraving. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Credit line: Anonymous Gift, 1929.



Figure 21. Jacopo del Duca, *Silenus with the Infant Bacchus*, 1570-1574, bronze. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (after an original bronze statue of Lysippus).

Another engraving, Marcantonio Raimondi's *Silenus and Infant Bacchus* of 1515, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 20), focuses on the interaction between Silenus and infant Bacchus. The print shows a horned Silenus, seated under a tree in a rustic landscape, nurturing and playing with the infant Bacchus. The nude Silenus is reaching for a drinking cup while the nude infant is teasing him by hiding a bunch of grapes behind his back.¹⁵

This loving interaction is further captured in the bronze sculpture by Jacopo del Duca, *Silenus with the Infant Bacchus* of 1570-1574, commissioned by Ferdinando de' Medici, then a cardinal in Rome, for his villa in the Pincian Hill in Rome (Figure 21).¹⁶ Later, the statue was moved to the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, where it is presently located. Del Duca's life-size bronze statue is a copy of a marble statue discovered sometime before 1569 on the grounds of Cassino Massimo in Rome by Carlo Muti (Haskell & Penny, 1981, p. 307), and which was believed to be, in turn, a replica of the original bronze sculpture of 300 BCE by the renowned Greek sculptor Lysippus.¹⁷ Del Duca's statue features Silenus leaning on a tree trunk adorned with a grapevine, grapes leaves,

¹⁵ For the image, see <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/342631> (accessed 15 April 2023).

¹⁶ For the image, see <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/statue-with-silenus-and-young-bacchus> (accessed 15 April 2023). Credit to Monica Alderotti for description and details.

¹⁷ In *Natural History*, bk. 34, l. 64, Pliny the Elder mentioned without description this statue of a satyr in bronze by Lysippus located in Athens. Several copies were made in marble after the ancient Roman sculpture was discovered in 1569. Two are at the Louvre Museum and the Royal Academy of the Arts in London.

and tendrils. He placed on the base a Latin inscription from Virgil's *Aeneid*, "Wars and peace are my trade: so, under your far-sighted leadership, I will reveal the mysteries of destiny set to come in the future,"¹⁸ referring to Silenus's power of divination, later taught to Bacchus.

Conclusion

The birth and nature of Bacchus are two-fold, as recounted by ancient writers such as Ovid in *Metamorphoses* (bk 3). He is said to have been born first from the womb of his mother, Semele, and then from the thigh of his father, Zeus. This duality is reflected in Bacchus being protected by Mercury and Silenus. Their education grants Bacchus the gifts of both deities: Mercury's invention and wisdom, and Silenus's divination and enjoyment of life.

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¹⁸ The citation is noted in the base of the sculpture, probably requested by Ferdinando de' Medici and referring to his father, the Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo I de' Medici, <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/statue-with-silenus-and-young-bacchus> (accessed 15 May 2023).