Extracted from the book
Art Puposes: Object Lessons for the Liberal Arts
Bowdoin College Museum of Art
Delmonico Books•Prestel
2019

Apollo and Daphne

Jacopo da Pontormo (Italian, 1494–1557), 1513
Oil on canvas, 24⅜ × 19¼ in. (61.9 × 48.9 cm)
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation 1961.100.9

The charisma of Renaissance cities was most memorably expressed by the dozens of carnival, tournament, parade, and feast-day celebrations that punctuated local calendars. Florence was arguably without equal in this regard. Engaging all the senses, the city's festivities were intensely communal affairs, talked about for generations. Carnevale arrived forty days before Easter and amounted to a city-wide party before the sobrieties of Ash Wednesday and Lent. The Carnevale of 1513 carried special significance, as it marked the first such occasion since the return of the Medici after eighteen years in exile. The restoration of the city's *de facto* ruling family simultaneously spelled the end of civic republican rule. Pontormo's pair of small mythological scenes, preserved in the Bowdoin and Bucknell (fig. 1) collections, were jointly conceived for the elaborate ritual as part of a much larger program of painted and sculpted ephemera.[1] Together, the carefully choreographed decorations served to mark a particularly charged political as well as social event.[2] The turn in political fortunes, already signaled during Carnevale, was strongly reinforced just a month later, with the election of Giovanni de' Medici as Pope Leo X in Rome.

Only age eighteen at the time, Pontormo was entrusted with a project of great personal prestige.[3] The commission as a whole was extraordinarily ambitious: to decorate all three wooden cars celebrating the Compagnia del Diamante (Company of the Diamond), overseen by Giuliano de' Medici, duke of Nemours and younger brother to the new pope, as one of the three sons of the celebrated Lorenzo "il Magnifico" de' Medici.[4] Giuliano adopted the diamond as his *impresa*, or personal device.[5]

Pontormo's haunting renditions of the tragic legend of Apollo and Daphne take place in a spectral setting: neither bucolic Arcadia nor Thessaly, but a shadowy nowhere land. Not only are the chiaroscuro forms living sculptures of a sort, but those of Apollo in the Lewisburg canvas and Daphne in its Brunswick partner are about to undergo irrevocable change. From the ancient poets Hesiod, Catullus, and Ovid to Petrarch and Poliziano, Cupid (or Eros) was shown to be an extremely powerful figure—and a terrible troublemaker. His bodily form may appear as smooth and perfect as marble, but he burns with fire. The Lewisburg canvas portrays the dialogue between Apollo and Cupid as described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, just prior to the moment when the slighted Cupid shoots his gold-tipped "love dart" at Apollo in retribution, causing him to fall in love with Daphne at first sight, his eyes "gleaming like stars."[6]

The Bowdoin canvas depicts the aftermath of Cupid's mischief, showing the love-struck Apollo chasing

FIG. 1. Pontormo, *Cupid and Apollo*, 1513. Oil on canvas, 24 × 18⅝ in. (61 × 47.3 cm). Samek Art Museum, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, 1961.K.1618

Daphne—shot with a blunt leaden shaft, inciting antipathy—and losing her forever.[7] Daphne was the most beautiful of the Naiads, the nymphs that inhabited rivers, springs, and waterfalls. Her peaceful pastoral existence is shattered upon her rejection of Apollo. Growing exhausted from his relentless pursuit, she implores her river god father—or, in other accounts, more appropriately her mother, the primal earth goddess Terra (Gaia, in Greek myth)—to save her. The chaste maiden's prayers are answered. Just as Apollo is about to overtake her, she is transformed into a laurel tree. In Pontormo's painting, we witness the initial instant of Daphne's transformation, branches springing upward from her arms, while the rest of her body still retains its human form. The grieving god of music and poetry adopted the laurel as his sacred plant in memory of his beloved, and the crown wreathed with its leaves came to be appropriated in celebration of poets and public triumphs since ancient times.

What would have been the larger significance of the evergreen laurel's symbolism in early sixteenth-century Florence? Its meaning and that of the diamond are, in fact, intimately aligned. A laurel branch sprouting new leaves appears in Pontormo's own *Portrait of Cosimo de' Medici, the Elder*, c. 1519 (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence), signifying the regeneration of the Medici family. If a branch is cut, a new one springs forth—or, if the Medici clan is exiled, it too shall always return! Signifying eternity itself, the diamond is a still clearer reminder of resilience and endurance.

The spectacle glorifying the Compagnia del Brancone (Company of the [Laurel] Branch), staged four days earlier on February 6, was overseen by Giuliano's nephew Lorenzo de' Medici, duke of Urbino.[8] All of the accompanying painted decorations were again entrusted to Pontormo, of which two canvases, now on deposit in Palazzo Montecitorio, Rome, also survive.[9] One might imagine the subject of the Bowdoin canvas to be still more appropriate to the Compagnia del Brancone's decorative cycle, in fact, as Daphne's fateful transformation into laurel (Piero de' Medici's *impresa*) echoes the popular moniker of Lauro for Piero's father Lorenzo—himself a poet worthy of Apollo's laurel wreath.

Sharing the keenly personal, experimental impulses of his early teachers, Leonardo da Vinci and Piero di Cosimo, Pontormo is a tantalizingly evasive artist. The subjective quality of his art extends from his often-veiled meanings, deflecting any one reading, to the originality of his stylistic solutions and ways of working. In his festival decorations, he cleverly chose to adopt the grisaille technique, simulating sculpted relief. Encountering these scenes today, evenly illuminated in their modern museum settings, one is left to imagine their bravura grisaille effects at nighttime, when the Carnevale procession appears to have taken place, by torchlight. The flickering lights and dramatic play of light and shadow would have animated the gesturing figures—accentuating their contradictory sense of stony *rilievo* (relief) and illusion of movement. A chant would have accompanied the moving masquerades, further stimulating the senses.

Intended for temporary use, both canvases are rapidly yet very attentively painted. A number of passages testify to the teenage master's already evident technical resourcefulness, although many of the finer touches no doubt would have evaded the audience's shifting gaze as the triumphal cars passed through the city streets. The positions of the legs of both pursuer and pursued virtually echo one another. Daphne's right hand, turning into craggy branches before one's eyes, is a virtuosic passage in its upward-reaching offshoots. A thin strand of her trailing hair is shown slipping through the outstretched second and third fingers of Apollo's right hand. Other engaging details include the little winged putto head (Cupid himself perhaps?) on the neckline of Apollo's cuirass, and the lower part of Daphne's ambiguously textured tunic: part fabric, part animal skin (note the frayed, uneven ends, and furlike underside), or even part bark.

As the late winter day wore on and the Medici-sponsored marvels of Carnevale passed through the streets and piazze, the people of Florence were encouraged to forget that just months before, their city was still a republic, free of single-family rule. For a moment, we in turn can almost hear the music, the singing, the rolling wheels of passing floats—and the excited whispers of the amazed onlookers crowding all around us.

Dennis V. Geronimus
Associate Professor of Art History,
Department Chair, New York University