



Subjects in the Visual Arts: Dionysus

by Roberto C. Ferrari

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One of the twelve great Olympian gods, Dionysus is the Greek god of wine, revelry, and orgiastic delights. His Roman counterpart is Bacchus. His name appears as early as the second millennium B.C.E. as a fertility deity, but his popularity and association with wine and the harvest date from about the eighth century B.C.E., when the first theatrical productions were held each year in his honor.

Dionysus was the son of the chief god Zeus and a woman named Semele. In a jealous rage, Zeus's wife Hera tricked Semele into asking Zeus to reveal himself in his divine state. The epiphany was so overpowering that it killed her.

Zeus rescued Semele's unborn child from her womb, however, and implanted him into his own thigh, from where Dionysus was born. He was raised by nymphs and disguised in women's clothing to hide him from Hera. This dual-birth of both man and woman and his wearing of women's clothes made him a patron god of hermaphrodites and transvestites.

Three Homeric hymns are dedicated to Dionysus, one of which tells how he was kidnapped by pirates who mistook him for a prince. When they refused to let him go, Dionysus transformed the ship into a vineyard, turned himself into a lion and ate the captain, and changed all of the sailors into dolphins.

Dionysus spared only one sailor because he had recognized Dionysus as a god and pleaded with his mates to release him. Later myths name this sailor Acoetes and claim he was Dionysus's lover and his first high priest.

Nonnus's *Dionysiaca* names the Phrygian boy Ampelos as Dionysus's first lover. When the boy was killed by a bull, the god transformed him into a vine.

Followers of Dionysus often took part in the Bacchanalia, a frenzied festival that incorporated wine with dancing and sexual activity. The animalistic instinct associated with the Bacchanalia empowered his women followers, known as Maenads, who in their release from sanity and inhibitions allegedly would tear apart animals or children and devour the raw flesh.

Such is the case in the fifth-century B.C.E. play *The Bacchae* by Euripides. Pentheus has the stranger Dionysus arrested for impropriety, but when the god manages to tempt the king to don women's clothes and spy on the Maenads, they attack him and tear his body apart.

This complete release of all sense of morality and social mores in favor of animalistic instincts eventually gave rise to the concept of an individual's being "Dionysian," in contrast to "Apollonian," or rational and



An ancient statuette portrays Dionysus (left) with his follower, the god Pan (top). Much later, Michelangelo depicted Bacchus as a drunken youth (above). The photograph of the ancient statuette adapted from Licht, Hans, pseudonym of Paul Brandt. *Sittengeschichte Griechenlands in Zwei Bänden und Einem Ergänzungsband*. Dresden und Zürich: Paul Aretz Verlag. 1925-1928. The photograph of Michelangelo's sculpture of Bacchus courtesy Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

logical. The Dionysian individual values feeling more than intellect and emotion more than rationality.

Early Greek pottery depicts Dionysus as a bearded man, but by the fifth-century B.C.E., he appears as a beautiful youth. He is usually seen holding a thyrsus, a spear with a large pinecone at the tip, and wearing a grapevine on his head and leopard skin around his body. His followers include sexually-charged creatures such as the god Pan, satyrs, nymphs, and fauns.

Dionysus has been extremely popular as a subject in Western art. *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1990s* cites about 600 visual works of art depicting Dionysus or a Bacchanalia festival.

Around 1496, a young Michelangelo carved in marble a homoerotic Dionysus as a nude drunken youth. Titian continued the Renaissance image of the youth in his painting *Bacchus and Ariadne* (ca 1523), where the god is caught mid-rapture by the beautiful Ariadne.

About 1595, Caravaggio painted Bacchus in one of the first Baroque paintings, using the god of wine to tempt the viewer, drawing him into the painting by offering him a glass of wine. This Bacchus is a seductive youth whose robe slides off his shoulder revealing his bare chest.

Interestingly, however, Caravaggio later painted another version of Bacchus that depicts the god as a shriveled, sickly figure victimized by alcohol. This portrayal of the god as an ugly creature continued during the Baroque period, with artists seemingly merging him with another Dionysian figure, Silenus, a fat drunken man who rides a donkey.

In the nineteenth-century, the English artist Simeon Solomon painted at least three versions of Dionysus, the first of which is now lost. An exquisite 1867 oil portrait of Bacchus's face reveals Titian's influence on the artist, but his 1866 watercolor of the same subject is homoerotic in its depiction of a partially nude Bacchus holding the phallic thyrsus in his hand.

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About the Author

Roberto C. Ferrari is the Arts & Humanities Librarian at Florida Atlantic University. His research interests include the late Victorian period and the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic art movements. He created the Simeon Solomon Research Archive (<http://www.fau.edu/solomon>).