



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Priapus

by Martin D. Snyder

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This Pompeian wall painting shows Priapus weighing his penis.

Priapus was a Phrygian fertility god whose cult spread throughout the Hellenistic world. Depicted with enormous genitals, he ensured fertility and good fortune. Priapus was the protector of gardens, vineyards, and orchards; his statue served as both scarecrow and guardian divinity.

He was, moreover, the patron of all in need of luck, especially men and women in search of sexual satisfaction. Although he is generally depicted as heterosexual in his tastes, Priapus numbered among his devotees men who were attracted to other men.

Equally important was Priapus' ability to ward off the evil eye. He threatened potential evildoers with forcible penetration, a painful experience considering the huge size of his phallus. People commonly wore the phallic amulet of Priapus and decorated their dwellings with images of his erect penis.

Priapus is commonly represented nude or holding garden produce in his mantle, which he raises to reveal his tumid penis. A large painting from the House of the Vettii (Pompeii) portrays Priapus weighing his phallus against a sack of coins. The same house contains a fountain statue of Priapus that spurted water from his organ. Such images navigate the humorous inter-space between the sacred and the grotesque.

The mythology of Priapus has two notable tales. In one, Priapus argues with an ass about relative penis size. Priapus wins the contest and beats the ass to death (Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2.23). In the other, Priapus lusts after the nymph Lotis. He tries to rape her as she sleeps, but just as he is about to ravage her, an ass alerts her with his braying (Ovid, *Fasti* 1.391 ff.).

This latter tale is the subject of one of the few post-classical representations of Priapus, Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* (1514), in which Priapus is depicted lifting the skirt of the sleeping Lotis. There is also a drawing of the birth of Priapus by Poussin (1620-1623) and a bronze sculpture of the god by Picasso (1952).

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