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CLASSICAL MYTHS *in* ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PAINTING

This book retraces the development of classical imagery in the visual arts of the Italian Renaissance. Luba Freedman examines poems, letters, and treatises on art that testify to the contemporary desire to depict classical myths in the style and spirit of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and to re-create the artistic patronage of the ancient Romans. This development in art was driven by collaboration among humanists, artists, and their patrons. The extant artifacts of Roman antiquity, in addition to the study of Greek and Latin texts that brought to light descriptions of ancient paintings, were used as models for re-creating the visual culture of antiquity. Paintings of classical myths that were shaped *all'antica*, or in the manner of the ancients, reflected the desire of humanists to link modern Rome with its ancient ancestry.

Luba Freedman is Professor in the Department of the History of Art at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She has published articles in many journals, including *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, *Renaissance Studies*, *Storia dell'Arte*, and *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. She coedited, with Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich, a book of articles, *Wege zum Mythos*, and is the author of several books, *The Classical Pastoral in the Visual Arts*, *Titian's Independent Self-Portraits*, *Titian's Portraits through Aretino's Lens*, and *The Revival of the Olympian Gods in Renaissance Art*.

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To Mama, Dr. Ella Leizerovsky

In memory of Papa, Dr. Yaakov Shapiro

And to the memory of Professor Moshe Barasch

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PREFACE

The present study is the result of my long-standing interest in late-fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century Italian artists' interpretations of Greek myths. In my earlier book, *The Revival of the Olympian Gods in Renaissance Art*, I discussed the sixteenth-century reception of new monumental images of the gods and goddesses of antiquity. *Classical Myths in Italian Renaissance Painting* explores the cultural conditions that motivated large-scale *all'antica* paintings of selected classical myths or well familiar stories concerned with deities; that is, artworks designed to convey the impression that – with respect to subject and form – they had been created in the era of antiquity. This era was imagined by Renaissance humanists.

As my gaze shifted from statues of the Olympian gods to large-scale murals and canvases, I considered a distinct series of questions about the gods as protagonists of poetic accounts rather than as autonomous divinities. The placement of monumental statues of the gods in public spaces provoked marked reactions among the sixteenth-century public. For some, the static Olympian gods evoked the powers they had exercised over their worshippers in pre-Christian Rome. One way to resolve such a potential threat was to incorporate them into fountain decorations (in a time when the major nonsacred public space was the civic or municipal square), another was to place the statues in inner courts of urban palaces and private gardens. By contrast, contemporaneous paintings of the same deities intentionally portrayed them at key moments in their narratives, that is, precisely in a display of their power. The new works expressed through the deities elaborate metaphors of human emotions. They were displayed in urban palaces and suburban villas, whether refurbished or newly built in imitation of ancient Roman residences.

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The astonishing effect of these creations led to their imitation among artists of subsequent generations. To post-Renaissance audiences, the manner in which Italian painters interpreted mythological dramas resembled the way ancient Greek painters portrayed the same stories. It is tempting to compare sixteenth-century paintings on selected classical myths with murals of the same subjects so familiar to us from Pompeii, which are now thought to reproduce Greek originals. Such an approach, though, would be anachronistic and therefore irrelevant to the present study – such Greek paintings, and their Roman reproductions, were unknown during the Renaissance. Instead, during the Renaissance, the visual model for painting episodes from classical myths was sculpture – sculpted panels of sarcophagi and statues that survived from antiquity and, to a lesser extent, the images noted on coins and gemstones. However, most of the subjects on sarcophagi had not yet been identified, and most Greco-Roman statues were mere torsos. The sculptures provided Renaissance artists with ideas of how the ancients depicted the gods and heroes, but not with the specifics of their mythological narratives. In general, therefore, paintings on classical myths were created without much help from antique artifacts.

In their desire to restore a lost category of art – painted images of Greek myths – known to them, through the mediation of contemporary humanists and only from written descriptions in Greek and Latin literature, Italian artists took a new approach to the illustration of familiar stories. The novelty of their approach can be more fully appreciated when we consider how the same stories were depicted by previous generations, primarily in illuminated manuscripts and small-scale domestic articles for which there was no attempt to make the mythological figures resemble images gleaned from ancient statues or sarcophagi. Moreover, only in the Italian Renaissance did the stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* form the subject matter for large-scale easel and wall paintings. These paintings so impressed contemporary literati that they sought to describe the new works with a new term, *poesie*, which, in turn, became a catch phrase referring to paintings on recognizable Ovidian subjects.

Italian mythological paintings, especially those painted in the sixteenth century, served as models for works on the same subjects in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, that is, before the discovery of the paintings of classical myths at Pompeii and Herculaneum, and they continue to be models today, helping to learn about approaches to, and thus imagine, the ancient past.

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