The REVIVAL *of the* OLYMPIAN GODS *in* RENAISSANCE ART

LUBA FREEDMAN

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typefaces Bembo 11/14 pt. *and* Weiss *System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Freedman, Luba, 1953–
The revival of the Olympian gods in Renaissance art / Luba Freedman.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-521-81576-2
1. Art, Italian – Italy – 16th century – Themes, motives. 2. Art, Renaissance – Italy – Themes, motives. 3. Mythology, Greek, in art. I. Title.
N6915 .F74 2003 2002074195

ISBN 0 521 81576 2 hardback

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This book deals with one of the major problems of Western art – the Renaissance representation of the Olympian deities as autonomous life-like figures shaped in the classical style. Familiar as we now are with the general tendency of Cinquecento writers and artists to have their creations compared with classical models, we are not surprised with figures of the Olympian deities rendered *all'antica* ("in the ancient manner"). However, the fact that many of the sixteenth-century renditions of the Olympians resemble their antique prototypes should not be taken so easily for granted nowadays. What really should surprise us, rather, is that in the Renaissance the Olympian deities were rendered as autonomous figures, as they had been in Antiquity. In the present study, we shall consider the literary and visual resources that made it possible to represent the Olympian gods and goddesses as resembling their classical kin.

In rendering the Olympians akin to their ancient autonomous representations, sixteenth-century paintings, prints, and statues might remind their viewers at the time of the honor paid to these gods and goddesses in ancient Greece and Rome. While calling to memory great masterpieces of ancient Greek and Roman art that represented the same deities, these sixteenth-century works might also remind their viewers of images of false deities – the Olympians – as they were worshiped in Antiquity, and whose worship was strictly forbidden with the advent of Christianity. The Renaissance viewers sensed a clash in perception between the representations of the Olympian deities as aesthetically appealing creations, whether antique or modern, and the same depictions as functioning in terms of cult images used in religious practices of ancient pagans.

In contrast to the depiction of the Olympians as autonomous figures, their representation as participants in events narrated in the Greek and Roman fables did not evoke in the Renaissance mind any association with pagan religious

practices that the recollection of these deities might have given rise to. Rather, a rendition in the antique mode of an Olympian deity as the protagonist of a mythical plot conjured up in the Renaissance mind memorable scenes from Greek and Roman tales. When, for example, Apollo was depicted as running after Daphne, he was perceived as an immortal lover, whose story was familiar, then as now, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1, 452–567). However, when the same god was represented alone, as a solitary figure, as seen in his antique statues, his figure might have been linked to pagan beliefs. Seen as involved in the love affair, the god appears humanized, whereas when seen on his own, he evokes allusions to religious sentiments of the pagans. Almost every god or goddess from the group of the Olympian deities was represented in the Renaissance both as an autonomous figure and as a character of a mythic event in a work of art; hence, there are two distinct modes of his or her representation in works of the Renaissance visual arts. However, whereas the first mode (autonomous) gave rise to the association with paganism, the second (narrative) did not.

The difference between the two modes of representation of the same god or goddess may remind the present reader of Meyer Schapiro's distinction, in *Words and Pictures,* between "Themes of State" and "Themes of Action."[1] The first mode of representation – "Themes of State" – is that of hieratically positioned figures; the second – "Themes of Action" – is that of vivid, active figures. In the first mode of representation, the figure is seen as isolated from others; in the second, it is seen as involved in interaction with others. Autonomous representations of Olympian deities belong to the first type, which is the focus in the present study.

The very fact that a figure was shaped into an autonomous creation implies its significance for the viewers at respective historical periods. While in ancient Greece and Rome a divinity of some importance and a dignitary of some administrative power were thus represented, in the Middle Ages, besides Church dignitaries and local rulers, holy Christian figures, mainly Christ and the Madonna, were represented accordingly. In the Renaissance, some saints were also included. Whereas in the Middle Ages no pagan deity was ever represented as an autonomous figure, in the Renaissance, following a craving for the revival of various aspects of Greek and Roman culture, there was also a revival of autonomous representations of the Olympian deities, as this was the form of representation that was adopted for rendering an Olympian deity in ancient Greece and Rome. When revived, these works were used as cultural artifacts, completely devoid of any former significance. Be that as it may, Renaissance audiences were aware of the fact that in Antiquity, autonomous representations of the pagan deities were used as cult objects carried in religious processions and employed in sacred ceremonies. The Olympian deities, being supreme deities in

ancient Greece and Rome, were particularly often represented as autonomous figures in Antiquity. It is, therefore, amazing to see the revival of the Olympians in this form of representation, namely, autonomous, in the Renaissance that inherited from the Middle Ages this form of representation for Christian subjects.

I

A discussion of the Renaissance revival of antique images of the Olympian deities raises at least two issues. One issue, concerning antique statues as models of the represented Olympian gods, is the identification of the specific Olympians among figures carved in antique statues. The other issue, concerning sixteenth-century creations themselves, is the response of sixteenth-century viewers to the Olympians painted and sculpted as autonomous lifelike figures all'antica.

The first issue – the identification of the individual Olympians (Jupiter, Juno, Neptune, Apollo, Diana, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Minerva, Ceres, Bacchus, and Vulcan) – becomes clear when we recall drawings made in the Renaissance as records of antique statues. Although the fragmentary state of antiques is a generally familiar fact, the Renaissance drawings, recording statues as found and unearthed (often as partially broken pieces), nonetheless present us with a picture different from that formed by our visits to present-day collections of Greek and Roman sculpture. In modern collections, unlike sixteenth-century ones as seen in drawings and prints, ancient statues are mainly displayed after being restored. Considering, therefore, that during the Renaissance the majority of ancient statues were known to be in a poor state of preservation, the question arises of how damaged statues could be identified as representations of specific Olympians and used for shaping of their images anew by the artists of the time. So accustomed are we to the sixteenth-century creations, which instantly evoke in our minds the related antique images, that we hardly realize that these paintings, prints, and statues were produced contemporaneously with the identification and interpretation of the Olympian deities in broken statues.

The second issue – the reception of the newly made images by sixteenth-century audiences – arises when we recall the conflicting emotions elicited at that time by the display of the Olympian deities in the social and cultural milieu that was influenced by Christian beliefs and values. Sixteenth-century artists and their patrons were aware of the fact that these same gods and goddesses had been worshiped in Antiquity, and that the ancient Christians had suffered martyrdom because they refused to worship them. The danger of this recollection continued to reverberate in the Cinquecento despite the fact that the pictorial and sculptural representations of the Olympian gods as autonomous figures, both ancient and

contemporary, were used as decorative objets d'art, in the modern sense of the term as used at present.

In Antiquity, the Olympian deities, like some of the other divinities, were believed to have had manifold individual characters. From a wealth of personae with which the ancients endowed the Olympian gods and goddesses, I suggest two that particularly impressed themselves on the Renaissance mind. These two personae are contradictory; they are, roughly speaking, dynamic and apathetic. On the one hand, the Olympians were described as anthropomorphous beings having passions and emotions. On the other, the same anthropomorphous deities were perceived as embodiments of eternal tranquility. The dynamic persona of the Olympians manifests itself in Greek and Roman epics and tragedies, whereas the apathetic one appears in freestanding antique statues. Although in Antiquity the depiction of the Olympians in prose and verse was not one-sided, audiences in ancient Greece and Rome saw the literary depiction of these deities in opposition to their representation in the visual arts, mainly statues, which conveyed authority and idealization. This basic dual view of the Olympians was renewed in the Renaissance.

With the decline and passing of Antiquity, the educated public continued to remember the Olympian deities as active protagonists in Greek and Roman narratives. By the Middle Ages, no statues of the Olympian deities were being produced, and the notion of these deities as beautiful and magnificent divinities had become vague, if not lost entirely. Along with the loss of the conception of the Olympians as epitomizing Beauty and Majesty, lost too was the tradition of rendering the Olympian deities in the antique fashion: namely, as calm and noble figures. Only during the Cinquecento, almost a millennium after the decline of Antiquity, were the Olympians to be conceived once again as beautiful, well-proportioned life-sized or colossal figures, and provided with their attributes. Only then did artists once more begin to shape the Olympian deities consciously and intentionally in imitation as well as in emulation of their representation in works of Greek and Roman art. And only the sixteenth-century painters and sculptors – after the era of Antiquity had long vanished as a historical reality – represented these gods and goddesses *all'antica*. As a result of this sixteenth-century undertaking, the Olympians were rendered in the mode and style of the ancient representations.

The consideration of sixteenth-century works of art representing the Olympian deities all'antica in the era's cultural, social, and religious context leads me to give some thought to my use of the word "Cinquecento." On the

one hand, the Cinquecento can be taken purely as a temporal, chronological concept, meaning the sixteenth century, perhaps with an emphasis on its links to the regions and cities of Italy. However, Cinquecento is also used here in broader terms, transcending the chronological and geographical boundaries. It is here used to characterize cultural, social, and religious phenomena that are generally specific to the Renaissance age, when it is viewed conventionally as a whole. (In reality, this age, like other historical periods, was not a homogeneous whole; similar to other ages, this one was full of conflicts and inner contradictions.) When thus viewed, the Cinquecento appears to be the brightest manifestation of the Burckhardtian idea of the Renaissance as a phenomenon in world history, evident especially in this era's approach to the learning of Greek and Roman art and poetry.[2] It is inevitable, however, that the two major connotations of Cinquecento conflate, especially when we discuss the sixteenth-century Italian representations of the Olympian deities shaped in the classical style. Generally, by preferring sometimes "Cinquecento" over "sixteenth century," I have in mind the aesthetic and cultural ideals of the mature Renaissance expressed in pictorial, sculptural, and graphic representations of the Olympian deities shaped all'antica as autonomous lifelike figures.

In themselves, sixteenth-century paintings, statues, and graphics that represent the Olympian gods and goddesses in imitation of their antique analogues manifest the Renaissance aspiration to revive the intellectual and aesthetic ideals of Antiquity, and to adapt them to the surroundings of early modern Italy. In studying the sixteenth-century works of art, we witness how through the "Olympian" look of the deities, which resulted from imitation of classical art, another side of Antiquity comes into sight, characterized by Aby Warburg as the "demonic scowl."[3] It is the task of the present study to show that despite being aware of the "demonic" side that the Olympian deities were assigned in the Middle Ages, sixteenth-century artists invested efforts in representing them akin to the figures seen in works of Greek and Roman art. Bearing in mind that these gods "came to survive in the Middle Ages as astrological and magic demons," we can better comprehend the Renaissance endeavors themselves in reviving the Olympians as models of Beauty.[4]

We may recall for a moment that in Antiquity, the Olympians constituted a group of distinct deities, each having manifold roles in the beliefs of the ancients. In later centuries, each of these deities had been subjected to cultural transformations, which, in turn, affected the reception and perception of their images. My book, however, is neither about the Olympian deities as divinities in

themselves nor about the contexts in which their rendition had been made possible in Renaissance art. My goal in the present study is to show the framework that surrounded the revival of the antique imagery of the Olympian deities.

In the Cinquecento, one can distinguish two ways of approaching the creations in which the Olympian deities resemble their classical analogues: namely, the way of accepting them as embodying the aesthetic ideas of Antiquity and the way of rejecting them as remnants of paganism.

In the first way, the Olympians were regarded as subjects of masterpieces made by the eminent ancestors of sixteenth-century artists – the great painters and sculptors of ancient Greece and Rome. This attitude formed part of the general concern of Renaissance audiences with the history, religion, and culture of the ancient, mainly Roman, world. This broad concern was a major factor that spurred the rendering of these deities in the mode believed to have prevailed in the visual arts of Antiquity.

The second attitude saw the Olympian gods and goddesses primarily as "false deities." Initially, the view of the Olympians as false deities, even as devils, was fostered by the Church Fathers. This view still had a tenacious hold in the Renaissance, whose audiences, also influenced by the writings of the Church Fathers, acutely sensed the religious gap between themselves and the ancient Greeks and Romans. Not only Olympians but also all the gods of the non-Christians were thought of in this vein. While the revival of the autonomous representation of the Olympians in the classical style was part and parcel of the cultural enterprise of the Renaissance, the era fascinated with Antiquity, the pagan origin of the figures remained antithetical to the Christian character of the world in which these works were put on display.

Throughout the Renaissance, both attitudes coexisted, and in reality there is no doubt that they could have been distinguished. Nonetheless, as is possible to observe on the basis of the surviving documents, by the end of the Renaissance the second attitude came to predominate. This hostile attitude led to the decline in the production of works of art representing the individual Olympian gods and goddesses. With the decline of the Renaissance, the Olympians were rarely represented again as autonomous lifelike figures in the classical style.

The depiction of the pagan gods all'antica in Cinquecento art is all the more striking when we recall that the figures are not simply mythological ones but the particular gods and goddesses that we know as the Olympian deities. "The Olympian Deities," to use the present term, refers to the canonical group of twelve deities – the superior of all the gods and goddesses – believed in Antiquity to have their splendid palaces built atop the airy heights of Mount Olympus. Although in the Cinquecento a distinct category of these deities was never formulated, the era's audiences were aware of the significant roles that each

of these gods and goddesses had had in religious beliefs of ancient Greece and Rome. This awareness entailed the recollection of the violent religious battles fought in the era of early Christianity and, to a lesser extent, these continued also during the era of the Catholic Reformation. Depending on the attitude adapted by a sixteenth-century viewer, the Olympian deities might be either linked to Beauty and Majesty (as Greek and Roman statues generally present them to the eye) or perceived as conjuring up pagan gods and goddesses (as the lifelike figures seen in antique statues). Their representations when deliberately shaped all'antica might either rival great masterpieces of Greek and Roman art or shockingly remind viewers of false beliefs. These works when studied in a group reflect the conflicting attitudes toward the classical heritage evolved at the time.

The way the Olympian deities look in works of sixteenth-century art is usually taken for granted in modern-day discussions. These works, typical of Cinquecento art, eloquently manifest "Panofsky's Law," as Eugene Rice put it when discussing the Renaissance idea of wisdom: that is, the reintegration of a classical motif with a classical form.[5] While this observation is true for the works of Renaissance art in general and particularly for those that we are considering in the present study, it should be tested against the fact that these specific works were created during the very same moment in time when little was actually known about the pictorial and sculptural representations of the Olympian gods and goddesses in Antiquity. The way the Olympians had been depicted in ancient sculptures, paintings, and coins – garments and hairstyles, postures and gestures, objects and creatures that serve as attributes – was learned during the Cinquecento in an ongoing process of exploring, depicting, and sculpting each of these gods and goddesses anew. Seen in this light it is amazing that these sixteenth-century creations fully reflect the results of grasping the visual language of the ancient representations of the Olympian deities.

As the reader may have already noticed, the notion of "classical" inevitably recurs in our discussion. I take recourse to quotation marks in order to distinguish between my two uses of the same concept of the classical. When relating to paintings, sculptures, and coins produced in Antiquity, the word classical will appear here without quotation marks. These works are, after all, Greco-Roman, and in regular parlance are called classical. When the qualification "classical" appears with quotation marks, it refers to those aspects, features, or elements – such as attributes, gestures, postures, hairstyles, and the degree of nudity – which were recognized in the Cinquecento as pertaining to the Olympian deities in their Greco-Roman renditions. The inclusion of elements borrowed from classical art characterizes many works created throughout the Renaissance. However, specifically in the context of the present study, "classical" (with quotation marks) refers to those aspects, features, or elements

that are found in autonomous representations of Olympian deities produced by sixteenth-century artists in deliberate imitation of ancient depictions of the same deities.

Naturally, all the works produced in the postclassical periods have features and elements that are also not "classical," even when the proclaimed goal of their creators is to imitate the classical style. The Olympian gods and goddesses as rendered in sixteenth-century art, of course, are no exception. In each of their representations, nonclassical components are intricately interwoven with "classical" ones. This unique combination resulted from their artists' acute sense of the clash between the two ways of perceiving images of the Olympians, as aesthetic ideals of Antiquity, on the one hand, and as false deities, on the other.

It is the first way of approaching the Olympians in the Cinquecento that forms the focus of my study. I shall argue that it is the sixteenth-century thought regarding the particular features of the classical imagery, as known from available works of art and texts, that determined the character of several nonclassical elements. The startling results of the Cinquecento endeavors to revive the antique depictions of the Olympians as aesthetically appealing creations become more comprehensible when we consider visual and literary sources for the "classical" and nonclassical aspects of their figures.

II

This book, then, discusses paintings, statues, and prints that represent Olympian gods and goddesses as autonomous lifelike figures shaped in the "classical style" as this style was thought of in the Cinquecento. The title of the present book may evoke in the reader's mind a memorable work on the theme, Jean Seznec's *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art* (first published in French in 1940, translated by B. F. Sessions in 1953, and reprinted in 1972 and in 1997). One of the reasons that Seznec called the book *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* was his observation that these gods have always been a part of Europe's cultural memory. In calling my own book *The Revival of the Olympian Gods in Renaissance Art,* I would like to draw attention to the fact that although the gods of Greece and Rome had *survived* in Europe's cultural memory, only *one* category of their images was actually *revived* in Renaissance art: namely, the autonomous representation. Those particular gods and goddesses we now conveniently call Olympian were all individually rendered as autonomous figures in Antiquity, and then again only in the Cinquecento, when each of them was thus rendered. Because their ancient representation was known in the Renaissance, I have chosen here to explore that era's attitude to its artistic revival.

The first part of this book provides the background for comprehending the Cinquecento venture of shaping Olympian deities individually all'antica. Chapter 1 presents the history of the phrase "The Olympian Deities," explains the concept of autonomous representation, and sketches the sixteenth-century depiction of the Olympian deities as a phenomenon characteristic of the Renaissance era. Chapter 2 discusses the types of painters and sculptors who shaped images of the individual Olympians, the types of patrons who owned these works, and the aims pursued by both, as well as the sites chosen for the display of these particular works of sixteenth-century art.

The second part of the book examines the visual and literary sources that were available in the Cinquecento regarding the antique images of the Olympians. Chapter 3 raises the question of identifying the Olympians among the figures carved in ancient statues that were available in the Renaissance. The question gains in relevance when we recall the contemporary lack of any systematic study of the discoveries. Chapter 4 discusses the representation of Olympians in statues and coins, and the interest of the sixteenth-century public in their collection and description. Chapter 5 suggests what Greek and Roman writers could tell the Renaissance reader about the rendition of the Olympians in the visual arts of Antiquity. Chapter 6 examines the impact of this ancient literature on the representation of the same deities in sixteenth-century paintings and statues. Generally speaking, great works of art rendering these gods and goddesses in Antiquity were known about from the ancient texts, whose descriptions influenced the reception given by the sixteenth-century audiences to pictorial and sculptural representations of the Olympians in the contemporary (Cinquecento) art.

In the third part of the book, the sixteenth-century paintings, statues, and prints are presented as grouped around a single deity, that is, around each one of the twelve Olympian gods and goddesses. In selecting the works of art from the sixteenth-century autonomous sculptural, graphic, and pictorial representations of the Olympian gods and goddesses shaped all'antica, I have tried to assemble a representative collection. As the reader of this book is no doubt familiar with most of these works, I confine myself to merely pointing out the "classical" and nonclassical elements of the figures. The goal that I set in Chapters 7 and 8 is to suggest several visual and literary sources of "classical" and nonclassical elements and, whenever possible, some reasons for their inclusion. Chapter 9, the last chapter of the book, discusses the reactions that some of these works, now seen as newcomers in postclassical art, elicited from the Cinquecento audience.

In offering some iconographical sources of the works and their thought-provoking details, I tended to limit rather than to broaden the scope of interpretation. In the relatively brief bibliographical references, found in the notes to

the chapters, I refer to certain studies that may suggest additional interpretations brought about by the analysis of the works of art, or of some of their details. I have not attempted to supply complete bibliographies on the various issues I raise. Not all modern studies cited in the notes are included in the appended bibliographical sources. All ancient and early modern authors, including some select recent scholars, are mentioned in the index, and their studies are referred to only in the notes to chapters, not in the Frequently Cited Modern Sources. The latter list includes studies, as a rule, published for the first time after 1900.

I have tried to choose those sixteenth-century works that best demonstrate the representation of each of the Olympian deities shaped as an autonomous figure in the classical style. I have selected the ancient works from among those documented as available during the Renaissance. These Greek and Roman works, typical images of the Olympians, might have shown the sixteenth-century audiences how in Antiquity each god and goddess was rendered as an autonomous figure. The sixteenth-century paintings, statues, and prints will be discussed as representatives of a particular group of works of art sharing a common subject, that of the individual Olympian deity, as well as forming a specific category of artistic representation, autonomous.

Many of these works of art were created by such notable Italian artists as Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Sansovino, Giulio Romano, Marcantonio Raimondi, Ammannati, and Cellini. Their consideration in the context of their time, when most of the subjects in Renaissance art were religious, not secular, aids in better appreciating the attempts to render an Olympian deity in the mode – autonomous – the very mode that had long been adopted in the Renaissance for the depiction of Christian subjects. Deliberately limiting my study to the discussion of autonomous representations of the Olympian deities, I hope to illustrate the contradictory nature of this challenging undertaking – to shape Olympian gods and goddesses as autonomous lifelike figures in the "classical style," as this style was thought of in the Cinquecento. These works, in contrast to their Greek and Roman models, were created in a milieu religiously antithetical to that of Antiquity. They were created at the time when efforts were invested in identifying the specific Olympian gods and goddesses among figures represented in ancient statues and coins, and in comprehending their imagery. As might be anticipated, the new creations reflect the influence of beliefs and ideas of their era. The discussion of works of art representing the supreme twelve deities of ancient Greece and Rome in a style and form of work that served in the past as a cult object helps, I think, to uncover some of the problems provoked in the Renaissance by the study of Antiquity.