❧ INTRODUCTION

THE CREATION OF paintings with Greco-Roman myths as their subjects by Italian artists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries marks a significant contribution to the development of European secular art. The paintings reflect the fascination of humanistically educated readers (to use Carlo Dionisotti's apt characterization – "lettori umanisticamente educati") with the cultural legacy of classical antiquity.[1]

Not satisfied with the mere retelling of Greco-Roman myths in visual form, humanists also devised new allegories based on those myths. Visual artists realized several of the mythological allegories that were inventions by contemporary humanists. The salient characteristic of the painted allegories is the presentation of each mythological character on its own in a multifigure composition. Images of the pagan gods, forming the main core of Greek and Roman mythology, appear visually isolated from the context of their traditional stories, as seen, for example, in Botticelli's *Primavera* and in Mantegna's *Parnassus*. Or the figures of gods and goddesses appear alongside figures representing personifications of abstract concepts, as, for example, in Dosso Dossi's *Jove Painting Butterflies*, which shows Jove and Mercury next to the Virtue (possibly Flora or Iris),[2] or, more conspicuously, in Bronzino's *Allegory of Love*, in which the central figures of Venus and Cupid are surrounded by several figures representing abstract qualities.[3] The painted mythological allegories differ from painted classical myths by the latter representation of the gods and goddesses in the context of their traditional mythological narratives, which were familiar at the time first and foremost from Ovid.

In the Renaissance, classical myths, or traditionally familiar stories about gods and heroes, were appropriated as subjects for various types of visual arts. The focus of this study, however, is on paintings, and specifically on a selection

1

of masterpieces by some of the foremost painters of the Renaissance: Botticelli, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian, Correggio, and Giulio Romano. The particular manner in which familiar episodes from classical mythology are shown depicted was the result of what we may call the accumulated interest in the art of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Of course, not every artist in Italy aspired to render mythological scenes *all'antica*, that is, in the style of the ancients; here I focus only on some of the works of those who did, including Baldassare Peruzzi, Sebastiano Luciani (Sebastiano del Piombo from 1524),[4] Francesco Primaticcio, Perino del Vaga, and Polidoro da Caravaggio.

During the Renaissance, and primarily in the sixteenth century, several key episodes from classical myths were painted *all'antica* in paintings, among them, Leda seduced by the Swan, Danaë lured by the Golden Rain, Venus mourning Adonis, Apollo ordering the punishment of Marsyas, Jove defeating the Giants, the abduction of Europa, the rape of Proserpina, the encounter of Bacchus and Ariadne, Io embraced by Jove, the fall of Phaëthon, and Galatea rejecting Polyphemus. In formal terms, there were several new features to this enterprise: the creation of paintings as large-scale framed objects or as pictures painted on walls of urban and suburban dwellings; the focus on key scenes in the very familiar narrative; and most noticeably, the physical shape and expressive power given to the figures.

The novelty of this enterprise becomes even more apparent when we recall that Greek and Roman mythology had always been part of the elite culture.[5] Medieval authors, mostly clerics, interpreted stories about the pagan gods,[6] and subsequent generations expressly enjoyed reading Ovid.[7] Thus, there is nothing surprising about the desire, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to reflect on mythological stories. From this perspective, Renaissance practice merely continued the cultural tradition of preceding generations. However, what changed significantly in the Renaissance was the approach to these stories. During the medieval period, that is, in the era historically defined as stretching from the age of Justinian, who in 529 closed the pagan schools on the Athenian agora, to the age of Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304–1374), there was a tendency to see a direct, unbroken connection with a Roman past.[8] Greco-Roman myths were regarded as an integral part of contemporary culture, and their artistic representation, like that of other legends from the past, was based exclusively on literary traditions. In the Renaissance, however, Greco-Roman myths were viewed as something apart, the product of a particular historical period, one characterized by its own distinct forms of verbal and visual expression.

Renaissance artists approached classical culture with a certain reverence; its manifestations were worthy of being studied, imitated, and emulated, even if the results of their endeavors were assimilated largely in their works of religious

2

art. Humanists examined texts with philological acuity, immersing themselves in Greek and Latin texts. They measured ancient edifices, copied carved inscriptions, deciphered images on coins and gemstones, described statues and other articles of sculpture, and identified scenes on sarcophagi. This new, humanistic approach to the Roman past as a historically distinct era encouraged the *all'antica* painting of classical subjects, including familiar mythological tales.

The approach also eventually introduced a distinction among types of legends, that is, classical myths came to be depicted in a style different from that assigned, for example, to stories from chivalric romances. Textual illustrations were no longer the principal vehicle for the visual representation of mythological subjects. Rather, the form of a painting as a framed object or as a picture painted on a wall was once again considered the most appropriate means by which to convey classical myths. Significantly, painting, once reserved to depicting themes and stories from the history of Christianity, was again employed for the portrayal of the artistic and literary patrimony of Roman, or pre–Christian, antiquity. The depicted mythological subjects conjured up in the mind of humanists ancient mural and easel paintings, as they imagined these works from descriptions in Greek and Latin texts. The precise identification of several myths on sarcophagi helped artists determine how the ancients rendered these subjects. As a result of this approach to selected subjects suitable for secular art in Renaissance Italy, *mythological* became conflated with *classical*. Erwin Panofsky aptly termed this approach "the re-integration of classical form and classical subject."[9]

PAINTING *ALL'ANTICA* ✍

The new paintings appealed to those audiences who were familiar with antique sculpture and descriptions of ancient paintings and for whom knowledge of Greco-Roman myths was integral to their education. Raised on the ancient classics, these literate elite were among those who commissioned the new images of familiar classical myths. The paintings themselves were placed in settings designed to imitate domestic spaces as they were thought to have existed in ancient Rome, where works of Greek painters and sculptors were put on prominent display; again, the source of the imaginings was Greek and Latin texts, several of which were printed during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Italian scholars, who learned ancient Greek from Byzantine émigrés, read ancient Greek texts with an eye toward understanding the iconography. As they became engrossed in descriptions of techniques of painting, they began to feel that descriptions of lost paintings should be used as the models for

contemporary paintings. This in itself marked a revolutionary approach to the classical heritage – a reimagining of the ancient past was never adopted by Byzantine scholars. Art, for the humanistically educated elite in Renaissance Italy, was one way of understanding the ancient world; their initial approach to the culture of ancient Rome was through the study of Latin and Greek texts, most of which were unknown to Italian scholars a century or two earlier.[10]

Several paintings based on these textual sources are discussed in the present study. However, because the focus is on selected mythological narratives, and not just mythological imagery, the study does not consider Lucian's description of Apelles' *The Calumny*, which Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) recommended as an exemplary model for an artist's invented allegories (*On Painting*, no. 53).[11] Nor does it discuss Philostratus's two word-pictures of the Cupids and the Andrians, which describe, respectively, cupids gathered at the feast of Venus and the island of Andros, where wine flows like water. (These described paintings were re-created circa 1518 by Titian.[12]) Only those ancient descriptions are discussed that provided Italian scholars with the basis for asking contemporary artists to create *all'antica* paintings of classical myths.

There is little written evidence that patrons requested that any scene from a Greek and Roman legend be painted *all'antica*. Contemporary expectations that a mythological scene be fashioned *all'antica* can be inferred from the very features of the works themselves: the scale of the work, which suggests that it was intended to be displayed prominently, emulating the display of antique statues in contemporary collections; the form of the work as an easel or mural painting, which in ancient Greece and Rome were used for depicting these same subjects; the subject of the work – a familiar mythological scene; and the shape, costumes, and gestures of the figures depicted, often rendered in imitation of figures from antique sculpture. All these features indicate that patrons and artists took as their model the manner in which these subjects were rendered in antiquity. The new paintings themselves are the visual testimony to the new vogue, taken in the representation of classical myths.

The *all'antica* representation of mythological narratives, like every depiction of any theme borrowed from texts of ancient authors, was evidently a product of the combined efforts of visual artists and humanists, the scholars who mediated between the artists and their patrons. Several elements in the paintings themselves provide clues to this collaboration. One such example is the inclusion of an intriguing motif in Raphael's *Galatea*, in which an octopus is held in the mouth of a dolphin. This motif is derived from Oppian's *Halieutica*, a didactic poem on fishing. The Greek text circulated in several fifteenth-century copies and was translated into Latin as early as 1478.[13] The text bore special significance for Agostino Chigi, whose villa included a fishpond. Familiarity

4

with the text allowed visitors to Chigi's villa to appreciate the invention of placing an octopus into the mouth of a dolphin. Consultation of Oppian's text explains this detail in Raphael's painting as an amplification on the theme of Love destroying Lust, hinting at Polyphemus's futile attempts to woo Galatea.[14] This case is typical in that it shows that the collaboration between artists and humanists in creating a specific artwork may be established only by inference, for it must be stressed that textual sources specifically documenting such collaborations are few indeed.[15] Thus, the idea that Renaissance painters attempted to replicate their classical antecedents is based not on written testimony but on the evidence of the humanistic study of the texts that documented the cultural bequest of antiquity.

In the Renaissance, the sources of the visual artifacts of antiquity included not only sculpted reliefs, statues, coins, and gems but also texts that described paintings by Greek and Latin authors. Although the paintings themselves were no longer available, there was never any doubt in the Renaissance mind that ancient authors were describing actual paintings (especially if they mentioned the ground on which a scene was painted); at least, no written contemporary records have yet been found that express such skepticism.[16] Accordingly, I operate from the belief that the ancients were describing actual paintings of mythological tales, or at least that such ancient paintings could be reproduced following those descriptions. In other words, I consider *all'antica* paintings of classical myths as evidence of the power of the Renaissance mind to imagine a distant culture.

The concept that painters and sculptors, as well as poets, elaborated on mythological tales in antiquity was realized only gradually during the course of the fifteenth century. Although sarcophagi had been accessible to practicing artists for centuries, the interest in identifying the subjects of the sculpted panels of the sarcophagi began only in the fifteenth century and increased over the course of the sixteenth century.[17] This is attested to, on the one hand, by descriptions written by humanist connoisseurs of art and, on the other hand, by drawings done by professional artists. Most of the statues so familiar to sixteenth-century artists were, in the fifteenth century, either disregarded or had not yet been excavated. When Vasari praised Donatello for his imitation of the ancient manner, he noted (V–T, 1:323; V–M, 2:419) that in his time, "apart from the columns, sarcophagi, and triumphal arches, there were no antiquities revealed above the earth" (trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, 2:374). A corpus of the "best" antique statues, the imitation of which led to the creation of the *bella maniera* (beautiful manner), was not established until the middle of the sixteenth century; Vasari provides a list of them in the proem to the third part of the *Lives* (V–T, 541; V–M, 4:10). The precise identification of most of the sculpted figures was

5

made more difficult by the lamentable physical state in which they were found: often headless and also limbless, the figures were separated from the objects or animals that would have served as sure clues to their identity. As a result, it took some time for the Renaissance audience to comprehend that verbal and visual images of Greco-Roman myths shared the antique (or classical) style.

Sixteenth-century paintings of classical myths illustrate that Renaissance artists intended mythological narratives to be depicted in a style characteristic of works created in pre-Christian antiquity. The *all'antica* representation of classical myths resulted from the attentive examination of figures and ornaments in ancient Greek and Roman art, which might not need to depict the same subjects that were rendered in contemporary secular paintings. The new style of representation grew out of an understanding that idealized shapes of nude and seminude figures were the forms used in antiquity to portray mythological protagonists. The identification of figures on sarcophagi and in relatively intact statues was facilitated by the meticulous study of ancient coins, which often showed mythological figures and their characteristic objects and animals and often bore legends naming them.[18]

Along with the desire to examine antique artifacts, there emerged the desire to examine ancient codices and study their illustrations. The ancient manuscript of Virgil (codex Vaticanus Latinus 3225), now dated to the fourth century C.E., was reportedly seen by Giovanni Pontano and Angelo Poliziano before it became the most treasured item in Pietro Bembo's collection (see Massimo Danzi, 46–48). When Marcantonio Michiel (1484–1552), Venetian nobleman, humanist, and aesthete, examined the codex in the library of his friend Bembo,[19] he noted that the text of this *libbro anticho* was written in the *lettera antica* (i.e., squared letters similar to letters on carved epitaphs) and that its "illustrations [have figures] dressed in the ancient fashion" ("le pitture sono vestite alantica"; *Notizia*, 31); that is, he saw that the figures in the codex were depicted in a style that he and his humanist friends considered appropriate to the time of Virgil. Bembo kept this codex, along with the ancient manuscript of Terence (codex Vaticanus Latinus 3226), among small-scale antique statues of Jove, Mercury, and Diana. Bembo so treasured these *cose antiche* (ancient objects) that he prohibited his heirs from selling them or giving them away as presents.[20] It is significant that what Michiel found particularly noteworthy about the ancient codex of Virgil in Bembo's library was the congruity between the character of the script and the style of the images.

Paintings of classical myths *all'antica* reflected the study of antique sculpture, which aimed to demonstrate the congruity between the style of the rendered figures and the character of their images. Intentional imitation of classical statues and reliefs was not yet rigidly indoctrinated: training artists to draw by studying

6

plaster casts of selected works from Greco-Roman sculptures was a practice that only later became associated with formal academies. Rather, each artist showed an individual approach to the problem of interpreting ancient statues and reliefs. Beginning in the second decade of the sixteenth century, several Italian artists took as their models the works that Raphael and Michelangelo produced in Rome, which were widely disseminated in drawings and printed reproductions. Nonetheless, even when sixteenth-century artists used contemporary intermediaries, their intention was manifestly to represent subjects from Greek and Latin texts in the appropriate style.

Not every painter intended an *all'antica* depiction of a mythological scene. Whether artists followed the models based on selected statues and reliefs depended on several factors, including the message the patron wished to convey and the intended location of the work. The use as models of ancient depictions of classical myths in works of antique sculpture and described painting reveals not only the painters' interest in how the familiar stories were depicted in antiquity but also their perception of how the cultural legacy of a distant era was visually transmitted through sculpted images.

When speaking of sixteenth-century paintings of classical myths, the phrase *all'antica* should not be interpreted to refer only to the style accumulatively created by leading Italian artists in the process of studying, selecting, and imitating the cherished relics of Greek and Roman civilizations. The phrase *all'antica* refers to the Renaissance tendency to re-create forms of art as they existed in the era of classical antiquity – or at least, as Italian artists and their audience imagined them to have existed. Specifically, the phrase *all'antica* refers to both the technique (the fashioning of the mythological characters in imitation of antique sculpture) and the medium (the choice of a framed painting for a secular topic). The phrase *all'antica* indicates that pictorial content was selected after careful study of visual antiquities and textual descriptions of lost works and that the painting itself was fashioned after the forms of paintings that were used in ancient Rome. Seen in their cultural context, paintings of mythological episodes fashioned *all'antica* demonstrate a new awareness on the part of the Renaissance audience that the stories themselves, which had become an integral part of vernacular literature, were initially expressed both in poetry and the visual arts that flourished in the classical world. For example, the Milanese humanist Angelo Decembrio (1415 to after 1467) cites Juvenal's *Satire* (3:vv. 215–217) as a testimony to "how seriously statues and pictures were taken by the ancients" (trans. Michael Baxandall, 325–326). That such statues and pictures depicted mythological subjects was taken for granted by Renaissance readers of ancient texts.

A brief overview of the history of using subjects and forms of antique art might aid in comprehending the revolutionary approach of the fifteenth- and

sixteenth-century audience to the classical heritage. In the early Christian period, features of certain mythological figures were assimilated into Christian iconography, for example, winged Victory was transformed into a hovering angel, Juno and Ceres were refashioned to express some aspect of the Virgin, and Asclepius and Jupiter provided the iconic model of mature Christ.[21] Subsequently, between the age of Justinian and the age of Petrarch, mythological figures did not play a significant role in the development of the Christian artistic tradition. In the fifteenth century, by contrast, stylistic features, though not yet subjects, of Greek and Roman art were again absorbed into most of the works created at the time; these features included proportionally shaped human figures, elegantly draped clothing, and emphatic gestures. In the sixteenth century, as a result of the study of antique artifacts and texts, secular art recuperated both well-known mythological themes and their saliently characteristic stylistic patterns. At the same time, even though they aimed to depict classical myths *all'antica*, sixteenth-century artists continued to be influenced by the Christian artistic tradition. Yet the depiction of classical myths *all'antica* in itself was the revolutionary approach to the classical heritage.

"TO CREATE ANEW AN ANCIENT TIME" 🐚

I discuss only in passing the topic of the *all'antica* representation of historical subjects, and consequently, I do not propose any far-reaching conclusions as to the real desires and intentions behind the commissioning of *all'antica* paintings of classical myths. Such conclusions may be ventured only when we have available several studies that describe how the Renaissance exploration of the cultural legacy of classical antiquity determined the representation of all subjects and forms of art that derived from Greco-Roman culture. Moreover, we must take into consideration that works of secular art were influenced by the intense production of religious art, which was affected in turn by the examination of the remains of ancient sculptures. Although classical influences on Italian religious art of the Renaissance have often been discussed in relation to individual artworks, as yet no scholar has taken up the theme on a larger scale.[22] It is my hope that the present investigation into *all'antica* representations of classical myths in Italian Renaissance painting will pave the way for such related inquiries.

In terms of pictorial content, the works discussed here are all selected from paintings that fall under the broad category of mythological paintings. To give some sense of the breadth of that classification, we may divide this category into three groups: (1) interpretations of (mostly Greek) mythological narratives (epitomized by the paintings of classical myths discussed in the present

8

study); (2) poetic inventions that represent Greco-Roman gods and goddesses as individual figures, independent of a specific narrative (illustrated by Botticelli's *Primavera* and Mantegna's *Parnassus*, which are discussed only briefly); and (3) allegories that make use of mythological personages to personify abstract qualities (exemplified by Perugino's *Combat of Chastity and Lust*, mentioned in Chapter 1, and by Correggio's *Allegory of Virtue* and *Allegory of Vice*, not discussed).

The present study is primarily concerned with the first group of paintings, the artistic interpretations of mythological narratives. This group requires further delimitation, and I again propose a tripartite division, based on the physical and psychological relationships of the figures represented: (1) relationships between Greco-Roman gods (e.g., Pluto and Proserpina); (2) relationships between the Olympian gods and either demigods or mortals (e.g., Apollo and Marsyas, and Venus and Adonis); and (3) relationships between mortals (e.g., Perseus and Andromeda). I focus on the first and second groups, although the distinctions are not hard and fast; for example, Galatea, one of the fifty daughters of Nereus, was a goddess, according to the tenth-century encyclopedia of ancient lore known as the *Suda* (*Suidae Lexicon*, 1:505, no. 22: "Galateia: onoma Theas"; "Galateia: Name of a Goddess"),[23] and therefore I have included images of Galatea's indifference to Polyphemus among the mythological paintings considered here. I have also selected only those paintings that demonstrate the *all'antica* approach to the depiction of classical myths, that is, works that replicate the standard subjects of paintings known from descriptions written by Greek and Latin authors and found (or thought as found) depicted among extant artifacts. In my view, these works testify to the desire of artists and patrons to respond to the challenge of the artistic ideals that they deemed characteristic of the ancient Roman culture.

The choice of mythological scenes as a subject was sufficient in itself to conjure the image of a revered era of antiquity. It was the style of execution, however, that significantly added to the effectiveness of a work: "by his style, he [the poet] creates anew the ancient times" (after the translation by David Quint; *Stanze*, 2.15.4).[24] The idealized style that was used to portray the figures in paintings of mythological subjects called to mind statues and paintings that had been created in an equally idealized past. It is their common subject (episodes from classical myths) and their distinctive mode of its representation (*all'antica*) that makes it possible to discuss these unique creations as a group. In doing so, my purpose is twofold: first, to reveal the novelty in the Renaissance idea of creating a gallery of paintings similar in form and subject to the pinacotheca (loosely translated as "room of paintings") described by Philostratus in the proem to his *Imagines* and also mentioned by Vitruvius (*The Ten Books on Architecture*, 6.3.8), Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, 35.4 and 148), and Varro (*On Agriculture*, 1.2.10); second, to highlight the significance of these paintings as representing,

9

in their entirety, a new category of secular art. In other words, I combine two approaches: one that sees the works as having been created through the external agency of specific patrons and artists, with the intention of regaining what had been lost since antiquity, and one that sees the works as having their own internal history of development as *all'antica* representations of classical myths, adopted and adapted by subsequent generations of artists.

THE RENAISSANCE IMAGINATION ✍

By far the most influential text of classical mythology was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Beginning in the twelfth century, it was translated into vernacular languages in both prose and verse (often with commentaries that purged it of its salacious details).[25] In the fifteenth century, humanists discovered a new interest in reading texts of Greek and Latin authors in their original language. In 1493, Raffaele Reggio furnished a commentary to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that, for the first time, emphasized not allegorical interpretations but philological glosses. In 1502, Aldus Manutius published the Latin text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in octavo format, without a commentary but with an index of names and the objects into which various characters of the poem were transformed.

Although humanists encouraged the reading of Ovid in the original Latin, the representation of myths in the visual arts was largely based on vernacular adaptations of the *Metamorphoses*, of which Giovanni Bonsignori's prose version (adapted from the earlier prose version written by Arrigo Semintendi, with glosses copied from Giovanni del Virgilio), was the most popular.[26] Compiled between 1370 and 1375, Bonsignori's *Ovidio metamorphoseos vulgare* provided the basis for the text that was printed, with illustrations, in 1497. It is no mere coincidence that this illustrated Ovid was first published in Venice two years before the lavishly and elegantly illustrated *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (*Poliphilo's Struggle for Love in a Dream*, also known as *The Strife of Love in a Dream*), a romance describing in words and pictures the idyllic world of antiquity, where Poliphilo pursues Polia.[27] Vernacular renditions of the *Metamorphoses* were profusely illustrated with miniatures and, from 1497, with woodcuts, thus beginning an artistic tradition that influenced subsequent works of art.[28] (Contemporary Latin editions were also illustrated, often using the same woodcuts as Italian versions of the text.) Details from the illustrated texts were incorporated into commissioned paintings.[29] Over the course of the sixteenth century, the style of the illustrations became more imitative of antique sculpture.[30] The popularity of rendering mythological scenes in the visual arts increased with the development of the graphic arts, which became instrumental in revealing how