Fresco Cycle with the Story of Procris and Cephalus

The nine paintings in this room are the only examples of an Italian Renaissance fresco series in America. Fresco (Italian for "fresh") uses earth pigments that are painted quickly on damp plaster. As the plaster dries, the colors are chemically bonded into the wall surface. Some three centuries after these murals were created, they were removed from their original setting and mounted as panels.

In the early 1520s, a Milanese nobleman commissioned Bernardino Luini, Milan's leading artist during the High Renaissance, to paint the cycle. Luini's frescoes form one of the earliest and most extensive depictions of a classical theme in northern Italy. Derived from mythology, the tale concerns Prince Cephalus and Princess Procris of Attica, whose brief marriage ends when the bride is killed accidentally by her husband. The moralizing subject warns of the dire consequences of jealousy.

Bernardino Luini
Milanese, c. 1480–1532

Fresco, which achieved its highest development during the Renaissance in Italy, demands rapid work before the plaster sets, although details may be added afterward. Bernardino Luini mastered the technique brilliantly, as is apparent in the clear, even lighting and cool, enchanting colors that pervade these pastoral landscapes.

Luini's aristocratic patron, Gerolamo Rabia, owned two residences: a palace in Milan, the Casa Rabia, and a country estate, the Villa Pelucca. Luini frescoed both homes with pagan and biblical subjects during the early 1520s. Although documents are not conclusive as to which house the Cephalus and Procris paintings adorned, the Casa Rabia was famous for Luini's representations of myths and fables. To commission such unusual topics, Gerolamo Rabia must have shared his Renaissance contemporaries' keen interest in classical antiquity.

This story of wedded bliss ravaged by distrust is found in Book VII of the *Metamorphoses* by the ancient Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.–A.D. 17). While some scenes in Luini's frescoes may refer to Ovid's poem, the cycle is actually closer in theme and mood to a contemporary play. First staged in 1487, *Cefalo* was only the second Renaissance drama to be based on classical sources. Niccolò da Correggio, the playwright, freely adapted the antique narrative and added Christian overtones.

This sheet illustrates the nine panels in a likely narrative sequence. In the process of dismantling the frescoes in the early 1800s, however, some elements must have been lost, and several of the surviving scenes are ostensibly fragments, with figures cropped at the edges. Since their original order is unknown, the following arrangement is plausible, if not definite.

Procris' Prayer to Diana, about 1520–1522

Fresco, 2.286 x 1.403 m (90 x 55 1/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.52

In Act I, Cephalus had tested his wife's fidelity by appearing in disguise and bribing her with gifts. Recognizing her would-be seducer as her husband, Procris fled into the wilderness. The first scene in Luini's surviving frescoes is an episode from Act II of Niccolò da Correggio's play.

On bended knee, Procris implores the help of the gods. Hastening down a winding path to answer her prayer is Diana, the goddess of chastity and the hunt. Diana accepts the princess as a follower, clothes her as a huntress, and gives her weapons. By portraying Procris already dressed as a virgin huntress with bow and arrows, Luini condensed time to clarify the narrative.

Cephalus Hiding the Jewels, about 1520–1522

Fresco, 2.216 x 1.502 m (87 1/4 x 59 1/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.53

Regretting his rash actions, Cephalus buries the jewels he used to trick his wife. Possibly combining different narratives from the poem and play, Luini depicted the prince digging in the ground twice.

The Misfortunes of Cephalus, about 1520–1522

Fresco, 1.762 x 1.073 m (69 3/8 x 42 1/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.59

Chaos reigns, and wolves devour a flock of sheep as the gods turn against Cephalus, who appears twice. In the foreground, a shepherd tries to comfort Cephalus, but with head averted and hands raised in protest, the prince refuses his help.

The Despair of Cephalus, about 1520–1522

Fresco, 1.819 x 1.184 m (71 5/8 x 46 5/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.58

On the distant hill, Cephalus throws up his arms in despair over his fate. Then he attempts to strangle himself with a cord, but his suicide is thwarted by the shepherd. Luini added a few final touches to the frescoes with tempera paints on the dried wall; here, some blossoms and leaves lie on top of the plaster rather than within it.

Cephalus Punished at the Hunt, about 1520–1522

Fresco, 2.114 x 1.103 m (83 1/4 x 43 5/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.55

This violent scene of Cephalus using a club to defend himself against dogs occurs in neither the ancient poem nor the Renaissance drama. The goddess Diana, angered at Cephalus' treatment of his wife, urges her hounds to attack him. Procris, hiding in the bushes, seems astonished at Diana's vengeance, while the goddess' nymphs run to join the fray.

Act III of the play, either never included in Luini's frescoes or destroyed when his paintings were removed from the walls, deals with the couple's reconciliation. As a sign of their renewed union, Procris gives her husband a magical weapon bestowed upon her by Diana—a spear that never misses its mark.

Procris Pierced by Cephalus' Javelin, about 1520–1522

Fresco, 1.441 x 1.232 m (56 3/4 x 48 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.56

Following the newlyweds' reunion, Procris becomes jealous in turn. Suspecting Cephalus of infidelity, she follows him on a hunting trip. He hears her and, thinking some wild animal is near, hurls his magic spear. In this vivid illustration from Act IV, the dying Procris reels against the force of the javelin. Ovid's ancient myth ends tragically at this point, leaving Cephalus to wander the earth in lonely guilt.

Here Procris appears considerably larger in scale than most of the other figures in the cycle. Her prominence, appropriate for the story's climax, suggests that this scene was a focal point of the decorative scheme and occupied an important position in the room.

Cephalus and the Nymphs, about 1520–1522

Fresco, 2.280 x 1.245 m (89 3/4 x 49 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.57

Cephalus encounters two nymphs at the end of Act IV. Companions of the hunting goddess Diana, they sleep beside their weapons and dogs. The widowed prince confides his grief to the nymphs. In the distance, Luini depicted a city with church and bell towers capped by Christian crosses.

Cephalus and Pan at the Temple of Diana, about 1520–1522

Fresco, 2.260 x 1.035 m (89 x 40 3/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.54

Act V of Niccolò's drama concludes the story with the young bride being revived by the benevolent goddess Diana. Cephalus, led toward his happy second reunion by the goat-footed satyr, Pan, approaches a temple. Its sacred portal is inscribed "VIRGINITAS" and is topped by a statue of Diana, the spear-bearing goddess of the hunt and chastity.

Luini's imaginary temple shows his profound knowledge of classical architecture; the octagonal structure with Corinthian columns possesses a majestic clarity of proportion. The edges of the building reveal Luini's preliminary outlines scratched onto the wet plaster through his cartoon, or full-scale preparatory drawing, before he began painting.

Procris and the Unicorn, about 1520–1522

Fresco, 2.286 x 1.080 m (90 x 42 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.60

Although related to the joyous events from the fifth act, the final scene is another invention that does not appear in the drama. Procris extends one arm gently toward a unicorn, which kneels in deference to her purity. This fabulous animal does not come from ancient mythology but, rather, is a symbol of virginity in the Christian faith.

The unicorn functions as a metaphor, suggesting that, through her earthly sorrows, Procris has suffered martyrdom and been resurrected. Thus, in translating Niccolò da Correggio's play into painted images, Bernardino Luini followed two Renaissance practices: an interest in reviving classical style as well as a tendency to give moralizing religious meanings to pagan myths.

Four other pictures by Bernardino Luini, all painted in oil on wood panels, normally hang in Gallery 18.

Roman Floor Mosaic from Tunisia *Symbols of Bacchus as God of Wine and the Theater,* 3rd Century A.D.

Marble and glass, 1.784 x 2.547 m (70 1/4 x 100 1/4 in.)
Given to the National Gallery of Art for the American People from the People of Tunisia 1961.13.1

The mosaic, dating about A.D. 200/225, comes from El Jem, the ancient Roman city of Thysdrus in Tunisia, North Africa. Throughout the Roman Empire, pavements made of tesserae of stone and glass were major elements in architectural interiors. This one formed half a square floor, possibly in a bedroom, of a wealthy private residence.

The symbols relate to the cult of Bacchus (the Greek Dionysus). The fruit and drinking vessel refer to him as the god of wine, as do the lightly clad, dancing figures of two followers with platters of offerings. The theatrical masks and panpipes recall Bacchus' role as the god of drama. The birds and flowers in the top row and the peacock feathers that divide the design into compartments are typical decorative motifs, perhaps associated with the rebirth of nature in springtime.

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