

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON

Mythology

SELECTED WORKS OF ART FROM THE TOUR



The Feast of the Gods

1514/1529

(detail, cover)

by Giovanni Bellini and Titian

(pronounced: Joe-vahn-nee Be-lee-nee and Tih-shun)

(Venetian, c. 1430/1435–1516 and c. 1490–1576)

■ This painting illustrates a scene from the *Fasti* by the ancient writer Ovid. Ovid tells the story of a woodland feast attended by several mythological gods and goddesses. These include Silenus, god of the forest, who stands beside his donkey; Bacchus, god of wine, who pours wine from a barrel into a glistening glass pitcher; Mercury, messenger of the gods, who wears a winged helmet; and Jupiter, king of the gods, who drinks from a silver and gold chalice and sits beside his imperial eagle. The revelers have eaten and drunk themselves into a happy stupor. Eager to take advantage of a quiet moment, Priapus, god of fertility, at the right of the composition, makes an advance toward the sleeping nymph Lotis. But Priapus' actions are interrupted by the braying of Silenus' donkey, which wakes the gods and goddesses from their reverie. They laugh at Priapus, who, angry at this turn of events, demands that a donkey be sacrificed to him every year.

The Feast of the Gods depicts the moment just before the donkey brays, when the story's dramatic tension is at its height. In another moment, the pagan deities will disperse and Priapus will be a laughing stock. The painting was the first in a series commissioned by Duke Alfonso d'Este for the decoration of the study in his castle in Ferrara. The duke originally asked Bellini to execute this work. When Titian was hired a few years later to complete the decorative program, he reworked Bellini's composition—creating a mountain landscape where there had been a row of trees. Titian also painted out other landscape features, presumably added by the duke's court painter, Dosso Dossi.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why might Titian have revised Bellini's painting?
- 2 If you were an artist hired to complete a series of paintings, do you think you might be tempted to alter the work of the painter who proceeded you? Why or why not?
- 3 Does *The Feast of the Gods* resemble any picnic you have ever attended? How or how not?

The Fall of Phaeton

(pronounced: Fay-ton)

c. 1604/1605, probably reworked c. 1606/1608

by Sir Peter Paul Rubens

(Flemish, 1577–1640)

■ According to classical Greek mythology, Phaeton was the son of the sun god, Helios, and a human mother, Clymene. Eager to prove his devotion to his son, Helios promised to grant Phaeton a wish. The young man impulsively demanded to drive his father's chariot, the vehicle that drew the sun across the sky during the day. The young man would not reconsider his rash request, despite his father's pleas. An inexperienced driver, Phaeton could not control his father's horses and the chariot ran wild, swerving into the earth and scorching it. In order to prevent the earth's destruction, Zeus, king of the gods, hurled a thunderbolt at Phaeton, knocking him off the chariot and to his death.

Rubens presented the action at its height. A golden shaft of light—representing the thunderbolt directed at Phaeton by Zeus—streams down from the upper right of the canvas. Phaeton recoils from the blow, falling from the misdirected chariot. The powerful steeds that Phaeton could not control bolt from the chariot. Below this scene of celestial chaos, we see the curve of the earth, as glimpsed from above. Red flames indicate the place Phaeton struck during his ill-fated adventure. Entangled with the horses are winged allegorical female figures who represent the Seasons and Hours in a state of disarray.

Rubens' composition contributes to the dramatic intensity of the scene. The action occurs along diagonal lines that echo the direction of the streaming rays of Zeus' thunderbolt. Rubens' bright palette and use of contrasting colors further energizes this depiction of disaster.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Have you ever made a rash decision that you regretted?
- 2 Imagine that you were asked to translate this myth into contemporary terms. How would you do this? Might cars or spaceships play a role?
- 3 What details of Rubens' painting do you find surprising or particularly interesting? Explain.

The Judgment of Paris

1645/1646

by Claude Lorrain
(French, 1600–1682)

■ According to classical Greek mythology, Paris, a handsome Trojan shepherd of noble birth, was chosen by Zeus, king of the Gods, to judge a beauty contest between three goddesses. All three coveted a golden apple marked “For the Fairest” that the goddess Strife had thrown into a crowd of revelers. Each goddess promised Paris a gift in exchange for his vote. Hera, Zeus’s wife and queen of the gods, promised political power. Athena, goddess of war, promised victories. Finally, Aphrodite, goddess of love, promised Paris the love of the most beautiful woman in the world, Zeus’ daughter Helen. Paris selected Aphrodite, who kept her promise. But Helen was already married and Paris’ passion brought upon him the wrath of Greece and led to the Trojan War.

Claude Lorrain, a French painter trained in Rome who was known for his idealized landscapes, portrayed Paris in the midst of making his decision. Each of the goddesses can be identified by an attribute. Aphrodite, at the left of the group of goddesses, is accompanied by Cupid. Hera, in the center, stands just in front of her regal peacock; and Athena sits next to a long spear. Hera’s gesture suggests that she is trying to entice Paris, who sits at left with his shepherd’s crook. Claude illustrates a critical moment in the myth, yet the participating figures occupy only a fraction of the composition as a whole. The story of the Judgment of Paris plays out quietly to the left, while sheep and goats graze quietly at right in front of a harmonious and sunlit backdrop of water and mountains, offering no hint of the dramatic conclusion of this tale.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How would you illustrate the story of the Judgment of Paris if you were given an opportunity to portray it today?
- 2 Suppose you had been Paris. Would you have accepted any of the goddesses promised gifts? Why or why not?
- 3 How would you compare this painting to Rubens’ depiction of the Fall of Phaeton?

Pandora

1910/1912

by Odilon Redon
(French, 1840–1916)

■ According to classical Greek mythology, Pandora was the first mortal woman. She was created as a form of punishment for mankind, who had benefited from tricks masterminded by their champion, the god Prometheus, at the expense of Zeus, king of the gods. Pandora’s outer beauty disguised a devious nature, and enticed Prometheus’ brother, Epimetheus, to marry her. Pandora’s dowry was a box given to her by Zeus with instructions never to open it. Inside the box Zeus had placed the sources of human unhappiness—sorrow, disease, vice, violence, greed, madness, old age, and death—as well as hope. Overcome by curiosity, Pandora opened the container and released its ills. Quickly replacing its lid, she trapped only hope inside.

Odilon Redon shows Pandora contemplating Zeus’ treacherous gift. Around her blooms the eternal springtime said to have been enjoyed by men prior to her creation. The only dark element in the painting is the box itself. Redon heightens the contrast by placing it next to Pandora’s turquoise robes. Her figure, in turn, stands out against the golden glow of the landscape. Not just color, but also line focuses our attention on Pandora and her box. Redon’s painting has a mysterious, dreamlike quality. Only Pandora’s body and the mesmerizing gift are sharply defined. Her struggle with temptation takes on a symbolic significance of its own in Redon’s interpretation of this mythic account of the introduction of evil into the world.

QUESTIONS

- 1 If you could paint any moment in the myth of Pandora, what would you choose? Why? How would you depict it?
- 2 Have you ever encountered your own “Pandora’s box” and been tempted to do something you knew you shouldn’t? Were you able to resist?
- 3 If you could give a gift to human beings, what would it be? Why?

Information

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