

Trajectories of Passion

The lasting impact of classical allegories of love on representations of desire

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Triumph of Love. Miniature from the Codex of Anne de Poignac, c. 1500. Speck Collection, Cologne.

The personae, poses, and visual codes of romantic love, as they are depicted in works by such diverse contemporary artists as Valie Export, Jeff Koons, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Elodie Pong, Mel Ramos, Ulrike Rosenbach, or Cy Twombly are firmly anchored in classical myth. Drawing upon the compelling characters and rich narratives of antiquity first opulently featured in the dramas of desire painted by the Renaissance masters, artists have continued to give shape to the ephemeral notions of love through the ages in the colorful guises of the heroes and heroines of the past.

Our pictures of passion begin in the realm of words. The language of love, as it is still used today to imagine and express the joys and pitfalls of desire, goes back to the very roots of Western culture, springing forth at the juncture where the heritage of antiquity and Christianity converge. It draws inspiration from the allegorical protagonists of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from the Provençal troubadours of the twelfth century who adopted Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and embraced the ennobling power of unrealizable desire following a strictly rhetorical "system of rules"² in their courtly songs, and from the medieval worship of the Virgin Mary, in which the cult of Venus, antiquity's goddess of love and beauty, is deeply embedded.

♥→ Petrarcha's pleasure-pain duality

Liberating himself in the wake of Dante Alighieri's Neoplatonic verses in praise of angelic Beatrice (*La Vita Nuova*, completed c. 1293) and from the increasingly rigid amorous program of the troubadours, in his *Canzoniere* venerating his beloved Laura, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) articulated the psychological scope of passion for the first time. Petrarca made love palpable as a complex, profoundly disruptive state of mind, an emotional rollercoaster ride suspended between heaven and hell. In his seminal homage, which gained vast popularity in subsequent centuries throughout Europe, Petrarca defined the pleasure-pain duality that lies at the core of our modern-day conceptions of love.

♥→ The love cult of the Renaissance

The vogue of Petrarchism rampant in Europe between the mid-fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries not only led to countless lyrical homages being paid to revered women (and occasionally also to men). It also triggered the Renaissance love cult in Italy that became manifest in spectacular festivities, parades, and numerous paintings portraying the beloved ladies of the powerful men of the era.³

This trend was significantly promoted by Lorenzo de' Medici, who attempted to immortalize his love to Lucrezia Donati through commissioned poetry and other works of art. In Milan, Ludovico Sforza, the host of flamboyant festivities, requested Leonardo da Vinci to paint his mistress Cecilia Gallerani. The famous portrait known as *Lady with an Ermine* (c. 1489-90), originally accompanied by Petrarchan poems written by Bernardo Bellincioni, now graces the collection of the Czartoryski Museum in Krakow.



Antonio Canova, Cupid and Psyche. 1796. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

♥→ Following the goddess wherever she goes

Apart from being the hotbed of Petrarchism, which climaxed in the sixteenth century, Renaissance Italy was also the center of the Neoplatonic revival of antiquity in the field of the visual arts. From the mid-fifteenth century onward, Plato's diverging principles of heavenly and earthly love became a driving aesthetic force in the paintings of Renaissance masters such as Sandro Botticelli (c. 1415-1510). Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1482-85, Uffizi Gallery Museum, Florence) has become the epitome of the Neoplatonic rendition of divine love in the guise of female beauty.

The Renaissance love cult with its elevation of worldly beauties to the lofty heights of goddesses citing their classical antecedents both in myth and art, and the concurrent amalgamation of sensuality and spirituality, found its immediate repercussions in the works of Baroque artists such as the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), who endowed his representations of mythical figures with a voluptuous, rosy-skinned vividness, such as in his renditions of the tragic love story of Venus and Adonis.



Peter Paul Rubens, Venus and Adonis, c. 1614. The State Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

♥→ Omnia vincit amor

In the eighteenth century, neoclassicism's focus on both the myths and the aesthetics of antiquity was embedded in the gallant, frivolously buoyant love rites of the Rococo with their Arcadian settings and penchant for lightness, gaiety, and charm. The Italian sculptor Antonio Canova (1757-1822) fused classicist ideals with the flowing forms and gracefulness of the Rococo. In his rendition of the mythical couple *Cupid and Psyche* (1796, The State Hermitage, St. Petersburg), he keenly evokes the fervency of romantic love, depicting Psyche enveloped in the tender embrace of winged Cupid, symbolizing love's power to conquer all adversities in the marriage of earthly and heavenly love.

♥→ Passion's polarities in times of crisis

Judith E. Bernstock has outlined that the inherent dualism in the imagery of antiquity is one of the major factors that specifically resonates with the modern sensibility, perceiving a particular leaning in contemporary art towards classical myths "in times of social and political disorder."⁵

In the twentieth century, artists borrowed from mythology for many different reasons. Thus, in the years following the trauma of the First World War, the proponents of Surrealism plumbed the canon of classical mythology using it as an allegorical database from which to draw archetypal images. Not long after, artists probed into the tradition of the Greek tragedy to reflect the ravages of the Second World War and the terror inflicted during the Nazi era.

From the late 1960s to the early 1970s classical myth is a dominant theme in the works of the proponents of Arte Povera in Italy. Classical motifs also abound in the graffiti-like paintings and works on paper of the American artist Cy Twombly (1928-2011), who went to Italy in the late 1950s. Many of his ciphers, oscillating between pictorial symbols and writing, are dedicated to heroes and heroines of antiquity, among these Venus and Adonis, Cupid and Psyche, or Leda and the Swan.



Cy Twombly, Untitled (Venus and Adonis), 1978. Speck Collection, Cologne.



Jeff Koons, Bourgeois Bust – Jeff and Ilona, 1991. Tate / National Galleries of Scotland.

♥→ Cupid's targets in consumer culture

With the rise of the mass media and the acceleration of the consumer and entertainment industries in the economically driven Western societies from the late 1950s, early 1960s onward, the mythological tales and personae have been increasingly usurped into the cultural mainstream. Employed as marketing tools, the classical allegories and codes of love survive as a "sunken" cultural repository of images that serve as a kind of shorthand for expressing the gestures or, in Aby Warburg's terminology, "pathos formulas" of passion. Replacing Cupid's arrows with commercial campaigns to strike potential consumers through the eyes into the heart (and pocketbooks), the mythical personifications of love and beauty have been recycled as vehicles of product placement to stoke the desires of potential customers, targeting these with projections of wish fulfillment.

♥→ The rebirth of Venus in the media age

In his reinterpretations of famous nude paintings produced from 1972 onward entitled *A Salute to Art History*, Ramos translates the figures and love stories of classical mythology into the contemporary idiom of pin-up aesthetics derived from mass media sources such as *Playboy* magazine. The mythical protagonists are retrieved from the treasure trove of art history, where they have already undergone various transmutations and adaptations in the works of other artists. Thus, in *David's Duo* (1973, Leta and Mel Ramos Collection, California), borrowing from Jacques-Louis David's *Cupid and Psyche* (1817, Cleveland Museum of Art), Ramos revisits the popular art-historical motif, portraying himself as the self-assertive partner of a contemporary Psyche reclining on a butterfly-ornamented bed in post-coital repose.

In a similar spirit, the French artist, theorist, and activist Jean-Jacques Lebel (b. 1936), known for his Happenings and performance works, created his multi-piece *Reliquary for a Venus Cult* (1998 and ongoing, Private Collection, Paris). The work contains a multitude of images of modern-day Venuses ranging from pin-up girls to movie stars and female figures of art history, derived from magazines, publicity photos, postcards, and other media sources.

♥→ Subverting the images of mythology

Casting himself and his former wife, the porn star Ilona Staller, as the stars of a group of paintings, sculptures, and installations entitled *Made in Heaven* (launched in 1989), post-Pop artist Jeff Koons (b. 1955) blended myth and pornography, transposing the tradition-steeped celebration of love into a high-gloss, sexually explicit spectacle. Designed to evoke "the eternal nature of art,"⁶ the group includes the sculpture *Bourgeois Bust – Jeff and Ilona* (1991, Tate / National Galleries of Scotland) featuring Koons and Staller in the neo-Baroque, neoclassical lovers' pose of a latter-day Venus and Adonis, paying homage to a real-life love story and to the sources that inspired it.

The contemporary appropriation of the lore and personnel of antiquity, and the themes of love, submission, aggression, and liberation accompanying these, also incorporates a critique against the male-dominated gaze informing the history of art and culture through the ages. Thus, in her photographic work *Venus Humanitas* (1976), the Austrian media artist Valie Export (b. 1940) superimposed her self-portrait upon the image of the Venus figure depicted in Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* (c. 1485, The National Gallery, London), cutting off the male counterpart of the goddess in her rendition, while the Swiss artist Elodie Pong (b. 1966) reenacted Botticelli's scene of the goddess's birth in her video *Untitled (Venus)* (2004), posing in the classical *Venus pudica* stance in a shell-shaped basin at a public pool.



Mel Ramos, David's Duo, 1973. Leta and Mel Ramos Collection, California.

♥→ Enduring attractions: the modernity of antiquity

In keeping with the metamorphoses of which they tell, the ancient allegories traveling via the troubadour-Petrarca-Renaissance axis along the trajectories of desire into our time, have constantly shifted and undergone transformations. Extending into the present, the classical personae, poses, and visual codes of love proceed from the sublimation of sensual longing in the verses of the medieval poets and the Neoplatonic revival of antiquity in Renaissance art to their commercialization and erosion in the twentieth century, and to new forms of celebrating love today.

In a reversal of the motto, "Is modernity our antiquity?," which the artistic director of documenta 12, Roger M. Buergel, chose as a leitmotif for his edition of the international art exhibition in Kassel in 2007,⁷ one might thus claim, not only in terms of the verbal and pictorial languages of love, that antiquity is in fact our modernity, from which we continue to draw the images that constitute our culture and visualize our passions.

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Elodie Pong, Still from: Untitled (Venus), 2004. Courtesy the artist.



Valie Export Venus Humanitas, 1976. Courtesy Charin Gallery, Vienna.

1. Rougemont, Denis de. *Love in the Western World*. Transl. into the English by Montgomery Beligion. New York et al.: Harper & Row, 1974. p. 75
2. Cf. Walter, Ingeborg/Zappari, Roberto. *Das Bildnis der Geliebten. Geschichten der Liebe von Petrarca bis Tizian*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2007. pp. 32-40.
3. See: http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_Ein03/hm3_3_1_9d.html (accessed Sept. 11, 2014).
4. Bernstock, Judith E. *Classical Mythology in Twentieth-Century Art: An Overview of a Humanistic Approach. *Arbeits et Historiae**. Vol. 14, No. 27 (1993), pp. 153-183, p. 157.
5. Amanshauser, Hildegund, Jeff Koons. *Pornographic Scenes of a Normal Married Life*. Transl. into the Engl. by Klaus Feichtenberger. *Camera Austria International*. No. 39, 1992, p. 36.
6. See: <http://www.documenta12.de/leitmotiv.html?&L=1> (accessed Sept. 28, 2014).