

**COEXISTENCE OF MYTHOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ELEMENTS**

**AND NARRATIVES:**

**ART AT THE COURT OF THE MEDICI DUKES**

**1537-1609**

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## Introduction

This paper suggests that we may enrich our understanding of the sixteenth century mythological imagery in Florence by detecting and bringing together into a separate category works of art depicting parallel narratives into the same iconographic frame. Scholars usually interpret the figures shown in mythological scenes first as mythological characters and, on a second level of meaning, as contemporary historical personalities. Without denying that this could be the case in many works of art, I wish here to investigate another eventuality: the co-existence of distinct mythological and historical representations in the same pictorial space. This is a kind of portrayal of scenes, which probably developed in the court of the first Medici dukes (1537-1609) during the Cinquecento and the first years of Seicento, and continued through the Baroque period.

Dealing with the interpretation of Renaissance mythological imagery we should first think about the place of classical mythology in the Italian culture. Throughout the Middle-Ages, the Church through their scholars had uttered protests and warnings against those who kept alive the memory of the pagan deities.<sup>1</sup> Reluctantly, and 'looking backward and forward', Boccaccio was dragged to accept king Hugo's commission for a compilation of mythical divinities, which was to become the chief link between the mythology of the Middle-Ages and that of the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Seznec 1981, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> In his preface to the work, Boccaccio appears fully aware that the ancient gods and goddesses had been severely condemned as false deities, even as devils, by the Church Fathers who 'railed against the unpropitious religion and drove it to extinction'. Considering, however, the task assigned to him as a kind of 'mythical theology', he set his pen to writing the *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* and to explaining the meaning that 'wise men had hidden under the outer layers of these fables'. Boccaccio – Solomon 2011, v. I, I, 9-15.

In the Quattrocento, when the classical form rejoined the classical subject,<sup>3</sup> learned men and artists still sensed the clash between the ancient deities as embodying the aesthetic ideas of Antiquity and the same figures as remnants of a paganism in direct opposition to the Christian morals and beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Rembrandt Duits furthermore touches on one of the central factors in the survival of the pagan gods beyond the demise of their religion- that the characters of ancient mythology were not just religious entities, but also had become attached to many practical aspects of life, such as the days of the week and the stellar constellations.<sup>5</sup> In any case, it is the first time in history that the gods and heroes of an ancient and different culture are represented in great numbers of works in a society which does not believe in them.<sup>6</sup>

The Renaissance fascination with the Greek and Roman deities and myths was indeed made manifest in a wide range of works by celebrated artists, from Botticelli to Raphael and Jacopo Sansovino. These artists, however, distancing themselves from the religious connotations, chose to depict the pagan gods and heroes as vehicles conveying allegorical meanings.<sup>7</sup> Taking into account that any identification with the true God would have been a blasphemy,<sup>8</sup> the sixteenth century rulers for their part commissioned works of art with mythological subjects which allowed them to be associated, through allegorical interpretations, with the virtue of pagan gods and heroes. In fact, the members of the Medici clan fully exploited the possibilities of the mythological vocabulary in their propaganda, especially after 1537 when the seventeen year

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<sup>3</sup> Panofsky – Saxl 1933, pp. 264, 266. Today, however, this concept put forward as a hallmark of the Renaissance is applied to individual works. Duits 2009, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Freedman 2003, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Duits 2009, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Dr Paul Taylor discussed this topic in his lectures on Iconography at the Warburg Institute.

<sup>7</sup> An eloquent example of such an approach is the reply of Vasari to the seventeen-year-old prince Francesco de' Medici during an imaginary conversation in the train of which he explains his elaborate mythological frescoes in the Sala dei Elementi in the Palazzo Vecchio. To the question of his young interlocutor 'who is this one, wearing wings and holding the caduceus of Mercury?' the court artist points out that 'she is the Mercurial virtue whom all princes must know so that they may favor all the fine arts, as our duke does'. Drapers 1973, p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> Mamone 2009, p. 340.

old Cosimo was elected by the patricians of the Florentine Senate to succeed the ill-fated first duke of Florence Alessandro de Medici.

Cosimo was a Medici from both his parents. His father was the famous condottiere Giovanni delle Bande Nere, a descendent from Cosimo il Vecchio's brother Lorenzo, and his mother Maria Salviati, a granddaughter of Lorenzo il Magnifico. He proved an astute and successful ruler who managed to survive imminent precarious events, to stabilize the political situation, to revive the economy, to double the state's territory and to establish a dynasty that would last for two hundred years. Besides, the duke quickly learnt to use the Florentine cultural vitality in order not only to promote the idea of the great Tuscany, but also his own astrologically predestined rule and personal imagery.<sup>9</sup> The art produced for Cosimo and his immediate successors, Francesco and Ferdinand, over six decades by their equipes of humanists and artists, included numerous mythological scenes following the general concern of the period with the culture of the ancient world.

We may distinguish three classes of mythological representations in the imagery of the Medici dukes who are the focus of this essay:

In the first group we have images of the Medici appropriating exempla of 'virtutis' and freedom, such as *Cosimo I as Orpheus* (Fig. 1) by Agnolo Bronzino (1539), Francesco I as Hercules in the *Hercules and Fortuna in the Garden of the Hesperides* (Fig. 2) by Alessandro Allori in the Medici villa del Poggio a Caiano (1578) etc.

In the second class of images, the Medici are associated with mythological figures through their symbols and imprese as in *The First Fruits of Earth Offered to Saturn* (1555-57) by Vasari in the Sala degli Elementi in the Palazzo Vecchio (Fig. 3). In this fresco Cosimo is identified with Saturn by the presence of Capricorn, the duke's astrological ascendant, as well as of his 'festina lente' impresa depicting a tortoise and a sail (Fig. 4).<sup>10</sup> An interesting detail is the red ball that Capricorn is holding between its legs. As Cox-Rearick points out, in this scene the duke actually becomes Saturn, while Capricorn is

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<sup>9</sup> Cox-Rearick 1984, p. 278. Capricorn was actually the most auspicious feature of Cosimos' horoscope, which he shared with Augustus and the emperor Charles V.

<sup>10</sup> Impresa of the sovereign referring to his prudence.

combined with 'corpo di mondo', the emblem of imperium which accompanies the Capricorn on Augustian coins.<sup>11</sup>

I shall be concerned with a third category of imagery blending historical and mythical themes, which appears in Florence during the reign of the first Medici dukes. While no one is surprised by the presence of historical characters in a religious scene, the coexistence of historical and mythological narratives in paintings, drawings, reliefs and prints seems to be an innovative conception in the context of the aesthetic code of the *maniera*. The distinct narratives are usually connected by a common link, quoted directly or hinted.

### **Greek and Roman examples of coexisting themes**

Yet, the co-existence of both subjects, historical and mythological, in the same monument goes back to the classical times. It may be traced at the temple of Athena Nike built on the Acropolis of Athens between 427 and 424 BC. There, a frieze decorated with relief sculpture ran along all four sides of the temple, the east section depicting an assembly of the Olympians (Fig. 5) and the other three historic battle scenes, such as the Marathon battle between the Greeks and the Persians (Fig. 6). The representation of the deities in the east frieze of the temple dedicated to Athena Nike, Victorious in war, has certainly a religious character.

On the other hand, the scene would remind the Athenians the Homeric descriptions of the assemblies of the gods during the Trojan war, a mythological event for them also. The myths that the poets of the 5<sup>th</sup> century 'imitate' in their tragedies touch the most profound layers of human psyche. The mythical world, however, belongs to the remotest past of the Greeks and its traditions often are not in harmony with the democratic values and the official religion of the polis.<sup>12</sup>

Another example of coexistence of a mythological with a historical subject is the Domitius Ahenobarbus altar, from ca.100 B.C. In this case the theme of the celebration of the marriage of Neptune to Amphitrite (Fig. 7) is

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<sup>11</sup> Cox-Rearick 1984, p. 278.

<sup>12</sup> Kakrides 1986, v. 1, pp. 252-53.

combined with the first known Roman historical scene (Fig. 8): the census performed with a view to enrolling young men in the Roman army and the sacrifice of a bull, a ram and a pig to Mars (Suovetaurilia).<sup>13</sup>

## 1. Cosimo's Triumphal Propaganda

It seems, however, that only in the Cinquecento the mythological and the historical narratives conflate within the same iconographic frame. This happens in one of the first works of art ordered by Cosimo after his elevation to power in 1537, *The Battle of Montemurlo and the Rape of Ganymede*. As mentioned above, along with the power the young Medici had inherited explosive problems and first of all an imminent threat of military assault by the Florentines who were exiled during the short but cruel rule of Alessandro de Medici. The prominent politician Francesco Vettori, who had played a leading role in the election of the young Medici as Head of the Florentine Republic, tried to dissuade the leader of the fuorusciti, Filippo Strozzi, from taking military action. In spite of the warnings, Filippo, a fabulously wealthy banker and patriarch of one of the most distinguished Florentine families, marched against Cosimo and suffered a heavy defeat at Montemurlo on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, 1537.

After being exposed to the insults of a furious mob in the streets of Florence, the other leaders of the exiles were publicly executed,<sup>14</sup> while Filippo Strozzi allegedly committed suicide. Cosimo was credited with saving Florence from a new wave of factional violence that had plagued the city since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, satisfied with the determination and the relentless cruelty with which the young Medici faced the crisis, the emperor Charles V extended to him the title of duke –with a right to male succession– which he had conferred to Alessandro in 1532. Recognizing that the victory achieved in Montemurlo was decisive in securing his position and consolidating his regime, Cosimo

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Vickers argues that Mantegna's *Triumphs of Caesar*, but also his Bacchanals and the *Battle of Sea-Gods*, contain numerous references –from direct quotations to discernible echoes– to the friezes of Domitius Ahenobarbus Altar, providing conclusive evidence that the Quattrocento artists must have known the monument via sketches. Vickers 1976, pp. 824, 826-835.

<sup>14</sup> Cochrane 1973, pp. 34-35.

proceeded methodically to the reproduction of the event in works of art, in direct or indirect ways and in various media.

### ***Franco's Battle of Montemurlo and the Rape of Ganymede***

In fact, the Venetian artist Battista Franco was called immediately after the exiles were routed to depict *The Battle of Montemurlo* (Fig.9) which was to take enormous dimensions in the Medici mythology. As a young man, Battista had gone to Rome in order to perfect his art and was so enchanted by Buonarroti's works that there remained no painting, no sculpture, no drawing, 'not even anything copied by Michelagnolo that he had not drawn'. Early in 1537, Battista entered the service of Cosimo and as Vasari narrates, he depicted 'with beautiful invention a scene of the battle (of Montemurlo), mingled with poetic fantasies of his own, which was much extolled, although there were recognized many things copied from the drawings of Buonarroti'.<sup>15</sup>

The 'things', which catch the eye at once, are two motifs copied from Michelangelo's drawings for Tommaso de' Cavalieri: *The Dream* or *the Dream of the Human Life* (Fig. 10) and *The Rape of Ganymede*. In addition to these, Franco interpolates into the narrative of the battle a third element, also extraneous to the theme, a banquet scene (Fig. 11) with references to Raphael's *Wedding Banquet of Eros and Psyche* (Fig. 12) at the Loggia di Psyche of the Villa Farnesina.

Always inventive in interpretations, Vasari goes on explaining that Battista painted the battle in the distance and placed in the foreground the Ganymede carried by the Jove's eagle to heavens 'in order to use it to signify that the young Duke had risen by the grace of God from the midst of his friends into Heaven' and he adds rather embarrassed 'or some such thing'.<sup>16</sup> Vasari's embarrassment may be due to the fact that in his time the very word 'Ganymede' could refer to an object of homosexual desire.<sup>17</sup> Benvenuto Cellini

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<sup>15</sup> Vasari – De Vere 1996, v. 2, pp. 498, 500-01.

<sup>16</sup> Vasari – De Vere 1996, v. 2, p. 501.

<sup>17</sup> London 2010, p. 120.



used the word in the same sense in a sonnet he wrote while sentenced to prison, for sodomy.<sup>18</sup>

In his *Ragionamenti*, however, Vasari is ready to advance a political exegesis of the same motif depicted in tapisserie: 'Ganymede was seized by Jove and became cup-bearer to all gods. This denotes that in his youth the duke was named by his citizens the destined prince of this city, and was carried into heaven by the emperor –that is the eagle– and confirmed duke'.<sup>19</sup> The fact that in Franco's painting Cosimo is clearly associated with Ganymede proves that the artist's intention, probably on the suggestion of Pierfrancesco Riccio<sup>20</sup>, was rather to create an image of elevation –with political connotations– along the lines of the moralized exegeses of the myth established in the Middle Ages and still wide-spread in the Renaissance.<sup>21</sup> Besides, according to the Neo-platonic interpretation that Michelangelo propagated when he sent Tomaso the drawing as a moral exemplum, the abduction of Ganymede represented the elevation of the soul when fired by divine love, *furor divinus* or *furor amatorius*.<sup>22</sup>

More demanding, however, is the interpretation of the semi-reclining man in the lower right corner of Franco's picture, a borrowing from the central figure of Michelangelo's composition *The Dream*, as referred by Vasari, or *The Dream of Human Life*, a title widely used today. The original drawing represents a young man, sitting on a box and leaning on a globe, who is startled out of his sleep by a trumpeting angel. While all scholars agree that in the Buonarroti's drawing a dream is depicted, a remarkable range of interpretations have still been proposed. Erwin Panofsky's reading that the key for its understanding is the Platonic idea of the soul, placed between the unreal life on earth and the

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<sup>18</sup> '(...) Stentato ho qui duo mesi, disperato/ chi dice ch'io ci per Ganimede;/ altri, che troppo aldace i' ho parlato'. Cellini – Tassi 1829, v. 3, p. 428.

<sup>19</sup> Draper 1973, pp. 176-77.

<sup>20</sup> Pierfrancesco Riccio was Cosimo's artistic advisor the first years of the Principato. Cox-Rearick 1984, p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> In moralized editions of Ovid, Ganymede prefigures Saint John the Evangelist, while his eagle assumes the role of Christ. Panofsky 1972, p. 214.

<sup>22</sup> Panofsky 1972, pp. 214-16. London 2010, p. 118-120.

celestial realm whence the awaking inspiration descends, was mostly accepted in later scholarship.<sup>23</sup>

Deprived of its original context, what may be the meaning of the nude youth in Battista's painting who, with head flung back, contemplates the defeated exiles taken prisoners and Ganymede carried away by Jupiter's eagle? Stephanie Buck 'following the logic of the picture' finds that he would be interpreted as one of the gods depicted in the upper left corner, where Ganymede was to be carried to serve as Jupiter's cupbearer.<sup>24</sup> It seems to me, however, that it is more consistent with the 'non-rational' character of a painting displaying a unique combination of allegorical, historical and mythological components, that this unrelated figure maintains his original content. In spite of the fact that the translation of Michelangelo's monochrome figure into a colored image is not successful, the form having lost much of its plasticity and liveliness, it still echoes its ecstatic origin.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the enigmatic nude may invite us<sup>26</sup> to share his vision and to experience the battlefield of Montemurlo as a dream, as a theatrical performance or as a meditation on the non-reality of the life on earth.

### ***Horatius Cocles Defending the Pons Subicius***

Among the Louvre's holdings of drawings by sixteenth-century Italians artists, two drawings of very high quality have also been attributed to Battista Franco by a number of scholars. Among them, Catherine Monbeig Goguel traces in the sheets Franco's 'extremely precise, almost frigid style which Vasari

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<sup>23</sup> London 2010, pp. 101-03.

<sup>24</sup> London 2010, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> Michelangelo may have drawn inspiration for *il Sogno* from the semi-reclining figure of Bacchus in sarcophagi depicting triumphal processions of Bacchus and Ariadne. One of them, now in the British Museum, was a major attraction for the Renaissance artists who copied single figures or groups from it for the best part of two centuries. Bober – Rubinstein 1986, p. 116, fig. 83. Remarkable is also the similarity of Michelangelo's reclining figure with the torso of Dionysos, now at the Musei Capitolini.

<sup>26</sup> 'Then, I like there to be someone in the *historia* who tells the spectator what is going on (...) or by his gestures *invites* him to laugh or weep'. Alberti – Grayson 1972, *De Pictura*, 42, p. 83.

deplored' and associates them with paintings, such as *The Battle of Montemurlo and the Rape of Ganymede*, the artist executed for Cosimo I in Florence the period 1537-39.<sup>27</sup> In the same train of thought, Eduardo Batarda Fernandes points out that the drawing show the same fine technique, the same decorative and architectural exuberance displayed in other works of Battista.<sup>28</sup> The attribution has, however, been questioned by Anne Varick Lauder on the ground that these drawings reveal a more talented artist than Franco.<sup>29</sup>

It seems to me that the possibility of attributing the two drawings to Franco might be strengthened by taking notice of their complicated iconography combining historical events with mythological scenes. These works could be Franco's contribution to the decoration of the Palazzo Medici on the occasion of Cosimo's marriage with Eleonora of Toledo in 1539.<sup>30</sup> According to Vasari, this decoration was 'a most sumptuous decoration all full of stories; On one side of the Greeks and Romans, and on the other sides of deeds done by the illustrious men of the Medici house'.<sup>31</sup> These drawings could also be prepared in the early 1540's perhaps in competition with Salviati, who was finally commissioned by Cosimo I to paint the fresco cycle with episodes of the life of the general of the democratic Roman period Marco Furio Camillo in the Udienza della Signoria of the Palazzo Vecchio.

In any case, the outsize sheet (0,46 x 0,76 cm) with the title *Horatius Cocles defending the Pons Subicius* (Fig. 13) narrates the heroic deeds of Horatius Cocles, another officer in the army of the ancient Roman Republic, during the war between Rome and Clusium in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The artist represents Cocles assaulting the Etruscans, while the bridge on which he stands is starting to crumble under the back hooves of his horse. The figure of the riding Cocles is a copy of the galloping emperor from the Trajan frieze on the Constantine Arch

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<sup>27</sup> Monbeig Goguel 1985, p. 780.

<sup>28</sup> Batarda Fernandes 2006, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Varick Lauder 2009, p. 314.

<sup>30</sup> I would like to thank Dr Lauder for pointing out that the Louvre drawings may be connected with Florentine apparati.

<sup>31</sup> 'un sontuosissimo apparato pieno di storie; da una parte di Romani e Greci, e dall'altre di cose state fatte da uomini illustri di detta casa Medici'. Vasari – Milanese 1878, VI, p. 87.

and the naked men in the right corner rushing towards him obviously derive from Michelangelo's *Archers*.

A bull and next to it a naked man turning his back, but not his face, to a woman, also full-naked, are shown hovering above the battle scene (Fig. 14). The latter is holding a sandglass<sup>32</sup> probably measuring the moments left until the bridge collapses dragging along all the fighting soldiers. It should be noted that the figure of the woman is clearly taken from the edges of sarcophagi with representations of Nereids, such as the Nereids and Tritons sarcophagus at the Giardino della Pigna at the Vatican (Fig. 15, 16).<sup>33</sup> Navigating with unrivalled nonchalance and sensuous abandon on the backs of tritons, hippocamps and sea-centaurs, the daughters of Nereus and of the Oceanid Doris held a special popularity in Greek and Roman funerary art, since they symbolized the passage of the liberated soul to eternal happiness in the Isles of the Blessed. It was this sense of floating into a new life that led Ghiberti to transform the shape of a bold Nereid into a woman worth entering the gates of the Paradise. As Kenneth Clark points, Ghiberti's Eve is the first, perhaps, of all the naked beauties of the Renaissance.<sup>34</sup>

It is, also, tempting to speculate that above the head of the legendary Roman hero we have an epiphany of Jupiter in two forms, as a man and as a bull, guises that from the god's point of view may not differ enormously. In any case this is not first time that the father of gods and men is represented in two forms in visual imagery. An example from the Roman times is a fresco in Pompeii, from 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, in which a youthful Jupiter sits comfortably aside, having given an enterprising Eros the task to pour the golden rain into Danae's lap. A prominent Renaissance counterpart is the representation of the Rape of Europa (Fig. 17) by Baldassare Peruzzi in the Loggia di Galatea of the Villa Farnesina. Seated majestically on a cloud, Jupiter watches Europa adorn with flower garlands the horns of his alter ego, the white bull. In the context of the decorative programme of the Loggia, this Jupiter is still associated with the signs of the zodiac: Jupiter in Aries and Taurus. In a majolica from Faenza (Fig.

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<sup>32</sup> I would like to thank Dr Rembrandt Duits for discussing with me the Louvre sheets and for drawing my attention to this detail.

<sup>33</sup> Bober – Rubinstein 1986, p. 131, fig. 99.

<sup>34</sup> Clark 1990, pp. 279-87.

18), however, Jupiter is shown to embrace Europa, the bull sitting obediently behind him.

Is the Louvre drawing also a representation of Jupiter embracing the royal virgin he has abducted from the midst of her friends in the guise of a bull, white as the snow with horns brighter than pearl?<sup>35</sup> In fact, next to the turned backwards head of the male figure, we may detect the face of a young girl looking intently at the viewer. Besides, the bull sitting peacefully on god's feet is adorned with ribbons flying in the wind a reference probably to Ovid's citation that the handsome animal offered his horns to twine with garlands.<sup>36</sup> If the above reading is tenable, the king of the gods, even engaged in his affairs, keeps an eye on the world of men, as he did during the Trojan war, when he observed from the peak of the mountain Ida the battle raging below. Before leaving behind this drawing, we may now take a quick look at a powerful bearded old man leaning on a rock under the cracking bridge. He is a representation of Tiber following the Hellenistic type of a river-god favored in the Renaissance. His presence is setting the scene – quite literary by establishing the location.<sup>37</sup>

### ***The Sacrificial Death of Marcus Curtius***

The second drawing in the Louvre depicts *The Sacrificial Death of Marcus Curtius* (Fig. 19). After an earthquake in 362 BC, a deep pit opened in the Roman Forum. The Romans being unable to fill it consulted the oracle which answered that the gods demanded their most precious possession. Marcus Curtius, a young soldier, believing that arms and courage were the most precious possession of Rome, jumped with his horse and his arms into the gap, which closed. For the rendering of the hero, Franco again borrows the figure of the emperor from the Trajan freeze with a difference, his armed right hand is not raised, a variation also noticed in other riding figures of the same freeze.

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<sup>35</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II.833-75.

<sup>36</sup> 'Modo cornua sertis/ inpedienda novis'. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II.867-68.

<sup>37</sup> McGrath 1994, p. 73. Bober – Rubinstein 1986, p. 99.

Nevertheless, of greater interest is the iconography of the mythological scene depicted at top left (Fig. 20). The semi-reclining male figure is clearly a representation of Dionysus as he is not only holding grapes, his most common attribute, but is also accompanied by a panther.<sup>38</sup> His origin is again found in Roman sarcophagi depicting processions of Bacchus and Ariadne, such as the one now at Woburn Abbey (Fig. 21).<sup>39</sup> However, his consort in the drawing we are examining is obviously not Ariadne. As far as iconography is concerned, the nude woman, who twists and turns towards Dionysus revealing her back to the viewer, most probably derives from the much admired Roman relief *Letto di Policleto* (Fig. 22) which has inspired the figure of Aphrodite in Titian's *Venus and Adonis*.<sup>40</sup>

I shall argue that this sensuous woman is also a representation of Aphrodite.<sup>41</sup> Although Dionysus with Aphrodite seem a natural pair, representing two joys of life, love and wine, the god's chief amorous attachment remains Ariadne. With Aphrodite are made a couple only for the parentage of the fertility god Priapus and the god of marriage Hymen.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, here Dionysus and Aphrodite seem to illustrate Terence's famous quotation: 'Sine Cerere et Baccho friget Venus'. Although all nude, surely this Venus is not going to freeze. Not only Bacchus is lying next to her, but she is also holding an oenochoe filled with fine wine.

Venus was originally an Italian deity, whose name meant beauty. By the Roman period, however, she was associated with the cult of Aphrodite as the mother of Aeneas, Rome's greatest hero. Thus, she not only became the subject of numerous representations, but also had a temple on the Capitoline hill dedicated to her. The presence likewise of Dionysus in a work depicting a historical scene from the Roman democratic period would not have been a

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<sup>38</sup> Panthers are associated with Dionysus. Two panthers are also driving the god's chariot in Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*.

<sup>39</sup> Bober – Rubinstein 1986, p. 116, fig. 82.

<sup>40</sup> Bober – Rubinstein 1986, p. 127, fig. 94. This type of nude turning her back to the viewer often appears in Nereid sarcophagi, such as the one at the Cortile della Pigna in the Vatican, which could also have been the visual source of Franco.

<sup>41</sup> Her velificatio forming half an orbit above her associates also the goddess with the planet Venus.

<sup>42</sup> *Orphic Hymns*, 45.1-3 and 54.7. Oxford Guide, v. 1, p. 112.

surprising choice. The Bacchus of Roman mythology was borrowed from the Greek tradition of Dionysus who merged with Liber, the Italian vine god, worshiped in Republican Rome with a temple dedicated to him.<sup>43</sup> Ceasar was credited with the 'return' of Dionysus and exploited god's many faces in his personal propaganda, while Marcus Antonius liked to present himself as 'Neos Dionysos'.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Oxford Guide, v. 1, pp. 348-49.

<sup>44</sup> Fabre-Serris 2009, pp. 285-86, 288.

## 2. Francesco's parallel narratives in a personal space

In the art produced after 1541 for the reigning Medici branch, another Zodiac animal, the Ram, joined Cosimo's Capricorn. Duke's first son and heir Francesco was born on 25 March. This was a most fortuitous date not only because coincided with the first day of the Florentine year, but mainly because Florence was supposedly founded under the Zodiacal sign of the Ram.<sup>45</sup> The last time the two astrological signs appear in the same decoration context was in Francesco's Studiolo commissioned to Vasari sometime in the winter 1569-70 and completed in 1575, a year after the death of both Cosimo and Vasari.

### The Studiolo

The idea of the Studiolo (Fig. 23) came from the prince-heir, who after his marriage with Joanna of Austria, sister of emperor Maximilian in 1565, moved to Palazzo Vecchio, the historical seat of the Florentine government.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, Francesco had evolved into an avid collector. His collection was so vast that one day did not suffice to view it. His scientific and alchemical pursuits were even more impressive and led him to create workshops for all the arts, in which he actively participated himself.<sup>47</sup> The Studiolo next to his bedroom was therefore to function both as a sophisticated study chamber that integrated his passions for alchemy and natural sciences and as a storage room for the most precious pieces of his collection.

The artistic adviser for the project Vincenzo Borghini, prior of the Ospedale degli Innocenti and Cosimo's representative in the newly founded Accademia del Disegno, realized that the rare and precious objects to be stored in the studiolo 'were neither all nature nor all art but made up of both'. Thus,

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<sup>45</sup> Cox-Rearick 1984, p. 283.

<sup>46</sup> The space for Francesco's small rectangular room was created in 1563, when Vasari, who was also appointed architect for the renovation of the Palazzo Vecchio, removed the old staircase and replaced it with a two-branched imperial one entering the Sala Grande through one central entrance. Schaefer 1976, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> Rossi 2004, p. 175.



Borghini's *invenzione* for the tondo in the center of the ceiling was the relationship between Nature and Art, the latter represented by Prometheus, 'the inventor of precious stones and rings, as described by Pliny'.<sup>48</sup>

I assume, however, that the prior's theme for the central panel of the ceiling was expanded, probably by the prince himself, into a depiction of Nature handing a rough stone to Prometheus (Fig. 24). This imagery would effectively reflect the strongest passion of the prince and the key-idea<sup>49</sup> that runs through the iconography of the studiolo: the Opus Magnum, the alchemical Great Work. In it, a chaotic material called material prima containing conflicting forces is gradually guided towards a state of perfect harmony and is transformed into a lapis philosophorum.<sup>50</sup>

This central image was further related to the Pythagorean tetrad of the four elements, earth, air, fire and water. Bronze statuettes placed in eight niches continued the iconography of the four elements of the ceiling into the walls of the studiolo so that each wall to be devoted to one of the elements. Francesco's 'cose rare et pretiose' were deposited in cupboards set in two registers along the four walls and covered with 'visual labels', that is paintings on wood and slate narrating thirty four historical, mythological or religious *historie*.<sup>51</sup> Finally thirty one of the young members of the Accademia del Disegno participated in the decoration programme of the Studiolo demonstrating all the artistic trends then current in Florence.<sup>52</sup>

Borghini began his *invenzione* with the wall designated for the Earth. Two bronzes, Domenico Poggini's *Plutus* and Bartolomeo Ammanati's *Ops*, both deities of the riches of the Earth, were placed in the niches. On the lower earth wall beneath the bronzes and Zucchi's depiction *The Gold Mine*, Sebastiano Marsilli's *The Race of Atalanta*, Andrea del Minga's *Deucalion and Pyrrha* and

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<sup>48</sup> Pliny, XXXIII.4, and XXXVII.1. Schaefer 1976, p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> As Vasari remarks in his *Ragionamenti*, the theme of the central panel of the ceiling is 'chiave e conclusione' to the decoration of the entire hall. Draper 1976, pp. 389-90.

<sup>50</sup> Roob 2001, p. 123.

<sup>51</sup> The upper register was made of rectangular panels depicting themes relating to the individual elements, while the oval cabinet covers in the lower register depicted scenes relating to the objects kept behind them. Schaefer 1976, p. 258.

<sup>52</sup> Feinberg 2002, p. 48.

Bartholomeo Traballese's *Danae and the Rain of Gold* were installed. In his notes, Borghini listed the pioggia d'oro alternately on the fire and the water wall, finally assigning it to the earth wall.<sup>53</sup>

### **Marsilli's *Race of Atalanta***

In Marsilli's painting *The Race of Atalanta* (Fig. 25) two themes, one mythological and one historical, are interwoven. The indisputable source of the mythological subject is Ovid. In his *Metamorphoses* the poet narrates the story of the beautiful virgin Atalanta,<sup>54</sup> who ran faster than swift-footed men. Frightened by an oracular utterance that her husband would be her harm, Atalanta declared that she would only marry the man who could outstrip her in a foot race, while her vanquished suitors would be put to death.

Enchanted by her beauty, Hippomenes, a great grandson of Neptune, decided to contest her in the race. Before entering the course, the youth prayed to Venus to help him in his daring. Moved by his supplication, the goddess gave him three golden apples, which she had plucked from a tree 'with gleaming golden leaves' growing in Cyprus, and taught him how to use them. Thus, during the race Neptune's scion threw one by one the golden apples in an oblique direction to the side. Atalanta turned out of her course picking the rolling gold and she was outstripped.

In perfect bliss Hippomenes led his prize away forgetting to pay tribute to his benefactress. Their passion instigated by the revenging Venus, the lovers entered a sacred cave near the temple of the Mother of the Gods and desecrated it. Scandalized, the tower crowned Cybele turned them into lions to draw her chariot and as such they are depicted in a cloud at the top of the picture. The episodes of the myth appear in continuous narrative, since Marsilli – or rather his advisor Vincenzo Borghini- obviously followed the iconography of woodcuts of the story in illustrated Ovid's *Metamorphoses* edited by Bonsignori, Lodovico Dolce and Bernard Salomon.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Feinberg 2002, p. 60.

<sup>54</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X.560-637.

<sup>55</sup> Conticelli 2007, p. 196 fig. 49-51.

The main scene showing Atalanta picking one of the golden apples and Hippomenes passing her in the race is depicted in the foreground. Just behind, in the middle ground, a company of riders headed by Cosimo, wearing the newly acquired grand-ducal crown, are approaching (Fig. 26).<sup>56</sup> All, but two servants, seem unaware of the mythological race unfolding in front of them. The Grand Duke mounts a magnificent white stallion bearing on his chest the Medici stemma, adorned with six Palle and held by two miniscule victories. A severed tree trunk with a florid branch which appears behind Hippomenes is also an adaptation of the Medici *Broncone*.<sup>57</sup>

From very early the Medici Palle were associated with the pomi d'oro. The patriarch of the Medici, Cosimo Pater Patriae apparently had an impresa showing a tree with golden apples. The conceit of the mala aurea – mala medica also occurs in Pontorno's *Vertumnus and Pomona* in the Poggio a Caiano, Pomona being a goddess of fruit trees (poma). In 1578 likewise, when Allori was commissioned to paint opposite to Vertumnus and Pomona the fresco *Hercules and Fortuna in the Garden of the Esperides* (Fig. 2), he noted in his preparatory study of the scene: The golden apples guarded by Hercules and the nymphs, called by many Medici apples. Besides, the *invenzione* of Allori's *historia* is again attributed to Vincenzo Borgini, while Hercules is a portrait of Francesco de Medici, who like his father uses the image of the Greek hero in his art to enhance his image.<sup>58</sup>

In the Cinquecento, Hercules' mala aurea were considered as symbolic of hero's virtue, e.g. the three apples carried by the bronze Hercules of the

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<sup>56</sup> In December 1569, the dogmatic pope Pius V conferred to Cosimo, who in a bid to mollify Rome had extradited his friend Pietro Carnesecchi to the Inquisition, the title of Grand Duke of Tuscany. Two months later Cosimo I entered Rome on horseback to receive the crown from the pontiff. The grand-ducal title elevated the Medici above all Italian nobility and marked the birth of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. Van Veen 2006, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup>The Medici *Broncone* was an impresa of Cosimo used especially in the early years of his reign. The political message is that in spite of the failure of the primary branch, the assassination of Alessandro, another branch, that of Cosimo, flourishes. Simon 1982, pp. 117-19.

<sup>58</sup> 'I pomi d'oro guardati da Ercole e da le Ninfe chiamati da molto mala medica'. Cox-Roerick 1984, p. 145.

Capitoline were regarded as chastity, temperance and prudence.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the pomi d'oro as related to the Medici 'il senso nostro', as the adolescent Francesco expresses it in Vasari's *Ragionamenti*, stood for the virtue of the Prince.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, it is not fortuitous that in Marsilli's picture the scene of the Venus plucking the golden apples is located above Cosimo's head. The garden is therefore, to be understood as both Venusian and Medicean, since its fruit symbolize both the mala aurea and the mala medica. I might, therefore, argue that the themes of the panel were Cosimo's political virtue –attested by the title of the Grand Duke of Tuscany– as well as the Medici Palle, which associated with the mala aurea of Venus, proclaimed a new Golden Age under the rule of the Medici dynasty.

This multi-layer interpretation could probably have covered the theme, had not Francesco been depicted staring fixedly at the viewer at the far right of the picture (Fig. 26) reminding him that the Studiolo mirrored his own interests and pursuits. As a matter of fact, for Renaissance alchemists gold represented more than material gold, more than political or moral virtue. According to the microcosmic-macrocosmic law of correspondences, gold was the metallic equivalent of the sun, the very image of the sun buried in earth.<sup>61</sup> They also claimed that they were able to transmute base metals into gold by means of the philosopher's stone. Valentina Conticelli, furthermore, mentions that in 1570 the very name of the Greek heroine acquired alchemical connotations and by 1618 found a place as *Atalanta fugiens* in the alchemical emblems of Michael Maier.<sup>62</sup>

There is still a small enigma to be solved. Who is the young man next to Francesco who with his raised left hand is showing to Cosimo something lying further from the mythological scene in the space of the viewer? Shaefer argues that this mounted figure could be Joanna's father the emperor Ferdinand or her brother Maximilian, who succeeded him in July 1564, six months before the marriage of Francesco with Joanna of Austria. I think that both candidatures are

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<sup>59</sup> Cox-Rearick 1984, p. 150.

<sup>60</sup> Draper 1973, pp. 193-94.

<sup>61</sup> Abraham 1998: p. 87.

<sup>62</sup> Conticelli 2007, p. 198.

not convincing. Emperor Ferdinand should be excluded because he was over sixty when Cosimo negotiated with him the marriage of his heir with the sixteen year old Joanna. Valentina Conticelli, on the other hand, does not accept the identification of the figure with emperor Maximilian I, because, to her opinion, he is represented in a subordinate position in relation to Cosimo.

Furthermore, I assume that a visit to Florence of either of these majesties would have been a dynastic occasion celebrated with erudite large-scale apparati and documented in letters and literary descriptions by chronographers and literati. Something like this seems not to have taken place. Nevertheless, we know that in 1569, when actual work on the studiolo had begun,<sup>63</sup> Charles Archduke of Austria, a younger brother of Joanna, was formally received by the Senate and the Magistrato Supremo in the Palazzo della Signoria of Florence. Music and other festivities were part of the homage that 'this Lovely City went to pay such distinguished persons'.<sup>64</sup> Born in 1540, Charles was twenty nine years old at the time of his visit, age corresponding to the youthful appearance of the figure depicted between Cosimo and Francesco. As far as his resemblance to the emperor Ferdinand, noted by Schafer,<sup>65</sup> is concerned it may simply be due to their relation of father and son.

We see, therefore, that in Marsilli's painting two parallel stories are depicted, one historical, enhancing the image of the Medici dynasty, and one mythological mainly alluding to Francesco's alchemical pursuits. The two narratives are, however, related through the topos *mala medica – mala aurea*, enriched and expanded by the alchemistical perception of the gold as the image of the sun buried in earth.

### **Trabalesi's *Danae***

As mentioned above, Vincenzo Borghini was rather perplexed as to where to assign Bartolomeo Trabalesi's *Danae and the Rain of Gold* (Fig. 27), listing it finally in the earth wall of the studiolo. The same spirit of doubt seems

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<sup>63</sup> Schaefer 1976, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> Van Veen 2006, p. 150.

<sup>65</sup> Schafer 1976, p. 348, n. 3.

to have harassed the modern scholars. Thus, Scott Schaefer and Larry Feinberg located the panel on the west air wall, supervised by Bronzino's portrait of Eleonora. Corinne Mandel –on the ground that Borghini's difficult decision was calculated to evoke the ancient notion that a woman's womb is like the earth– relocated the panel on the earth wall to the east, overseen by a portrait of the duke Cosimo in equestrian armour. In the same train of thought, Valentina Conticelli argued that the material used by the masons, depicted in the foreground, to build the walls surrounding Danae's tower, that is stones, mud and lime, corresponded to the element of earth and consequently, the panel belonged to the earth wall of the room.

I think, however, that the name of the mythological heroine may help us to find the proper place for the painting *Danae and the Rain of Gold*. Δᾶ is a doric word standing for Γῆ, that is earth in Greek. As such was used by the tragic poets Aeschylus and Euripides, but also as an oath, οὐ δᾶν, no, by the earth.<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, Danae is the mythological name of the earth and Danaoi, those born from the earth.<sup>67</sup> Borghini was a philologist obsessed with etymology, as it is evident in his notebooks housed in the National Library of Florence,<sup>68</sup> he could, therefore, have come across the doric equivalent Δᾶ for Γῆ, that is earth.

Danae was a great granddaughter of the Phoenician god Baal that the Israelites worshipped in the form of a golden calf substituting it for the Lord when Moses delayed to come down from the mountain.<sup>69</sup> Her myth was established at an early date, but the first relatively complete account that has come down to us is written by Apollodorus, who has incorporated in his *Library* passages from the lost narrative of Pherecydes, Athenian mythographer of the fifth century B.C.

In the second book of the *Library*, Apollodorus recounts that the king of Argos Acrisius –his name meaning that he lacked judgment– had only a daughter, Danae. When he inquired of the oracle how he should get male children, the god said that his daughter would give birth to a son who would kill

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<sup>66</sup> Hecataeus of Miletus also refers to Danae as Dana seduced by Zeus. Stephanus 1954, v. III, p. 893.

<sup>67</sup> Liddell – Scott 1897, p. 321, 324.

<sup>68</sup> Mandel 1995, p. 71.

<sup>69</sup> Exodus, 32:1-15. Kerényi 1988, v. 2, p. 40 ff.

him. Fearing that, Acrisios built an underground brazen chamber and there guarded Danae. Some say that Zeus had intercourse with her in the shape of a rain of gold which poured through the roof into Danae's lap. When Acrisios learnt that she had got a child, Perseus, he would not believe that she had been seduced by Zeus, and putting Danae with the child in a box, he cast it into the sea. The box was washed ashore on Seriphus and Dictys took up the boy and reared him.

The myth reached the west mainly through Ovid. The poet combines the story of Danae, who was shut in a brazen tower, with the banishment of Bacchus from the walls of Argos. Acrisius, however, soon lamented that affront to Bacchus and that he had not acknowledged his grandson.<sup>70</sup> While Ovid presents Danae as a woman helpless to resist Jupiter's invasion of her tower chamber, Ovid's contemporary Horace accuses her for having accepted the god's love in the form of gold. He writes that Danae has been secured by oaken portals, a brazen tower and savage watch-dogs, but Jove and Venus knew that the way would be smoothed when the god changes to gold. Gold can indeed pass the sentry and strike deeper than thunder.<sup>71</sup> The image of Danae as a venal woman had, furthermore, the full endorsement of many Christian writers. Thus, Saint Augustine notes that the story of Danae teaches us that women's virtue is corrupted by gold, while Fulgentius comes to the conclusion that the maiden was not corrupted by rain, but by money.<sup>72</sup>

Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Gods* follows the narrative of Apollodorus, except that Danae's place of imprisonment is a tower instead of an underground chamber.<sup>73</sup> Having heard of her beauty, Jupiter desired her and as a drop of gold flowed into her lap. In his interpretation of the myth, however, the Italian poet spread not only the view that gold was the key which opened the door of her prison, but also that the girl entered into a relationship with the god in order to avoid the eternal imprisonment.<sup>74</sup> Jupiter, however, did not make use of his pioggia d'oro to impregnate Danae only. As Pindar narrates, when Athena leapt

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<sup>70</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV.612-14.

<sup>71</sup> Horace, *Odes*, 3.16.1-16.

<sup>72</sup> Kahr 1978, p. 44, n.9

<sup>73</sup> Hyginus, who lived in the second century BC. was one of the sources of Boccaccio. In his *Fabulae*, Danae is shut in a stone-walled prison. Hyginus, *Fabulae*, LXIII.

<sup>74</sup> Boccaccio – Solomon 2011, pp. 245-49.

from the top of her father's head, 'by the skills of Hephaestus with the bronze-forged hatchet', the relieved king of the gods showered the place with golden snowflakes.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the attacks on her reputation, the tradition of the chaste and innocent Danae did not eclipse. Thus in *Fulgentius Metaforalis*, composed by the Franciscan John Ridewall in the middle of the fifteenth century, Danae is presented as Pudicitia.<sup>76</sup> The relevant text is accompanied by an illustration showing Danae on top of a tower, guarded by soldiers, while a dense rain falls on her. Likewise, in the *Defensorum inviolatae virginitatis Mariae*, the Dominican Franciscus de Retza argues 'If Danae was impregnated by Zeus, why Virgin not to be by the Holy Spirit?'<sup>77</sup>

In the first edition of Retza's treatise in Basel in 1490, this passage is illustrated with a woodcut showing Danae enclosed in a tower with her hands crossed on her chest, a gesture appearing often in the Annunciation iconography of Virgin Mary (Fig. 29). The golden rain being transformed into a celestial phenomenon and particularly into the very source of light, the maiden turns her head to the rays of a huge sun.<sup>78</sup> This type of representation closely corresponds to Giotto's *Allegory of Chastity* (Fig. 30) at the lower Church of Assisi, a work surely known to Borghini.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the learned adviser for the Studiolo, a priest himself, would choose an image highlighting Danae's virtue and not the 'modern' imagery of the naked sensuous maiden, reclining with languorous glance in luxurious beds, that Correggio, Titian and Tintoretto introduced into the Italian art of the Cinquecento. Accordingly, Traballese's miniscule Danae (Fig. 31), imprisoned in a crenellated tower and looking upwards, dutifully accepts the golden rain into her lap. Besides, as Mandel has noted, Danae's

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<sup>75</sup> Pindar, *Olympian* 7.34-37.

<sup>76</sup> Ridewall aspired his treatise to be a renewal of Fulgentius, but he actually drew from the most divergent sources. Seznec 1981, p. 94.

<sup>77</sup> 'Si Danae aurea pluvial a Jove pregnant claret, cur Spirito Sancto gravida Virgo non generaret?'. Settis 1985, p. 212.

<sup>78</sup> Lissarrague 1996, p. 122.



tower evokes the emblematic towers of Florence, of the Bargello and of the Palazzo della Signoria (Fig. 32).<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, in her effort to explain the unusual iconography of the painting, which depicts, among other uncommon details, naked builders in the process of constructing bulwarks flanking the bronze portal of Danae's tower, the above author puts forth the view that the scene refers to a historical event: the erection of fortifications surrounding the Piazza della Signoria ordered by the duke of Athens who was elected 'Capitano di Popolo' in September 1342. Walter of Brienne attempted to govern as an absolute lord, but the Florentines rebelled and turned him out in June 1343. Later, the fortifications were also dismantled.<sup>80</sup> Conticelli, however, argues that the iconographical source of Traballesi's panel simply is a woodcut from *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* representing –besides Danae, Acrisius and two soldiers– some builders constructing a wall or a new tower next to the one Danae is occupying. It is worth noting that in another woodcut again from the illustrated edition of the *Hypnerotomachia* published in Venice in 1499, Danae is shown in a triumphal chariot pulled by unicorns, symbols of virginity.<sup>81</sup>

The Danae of Francesco's studiolo, although deriving from the medieval tradition of the chaste maiden, has not escaped criticism for having accepted the god in the form of gold. Thus, e.g. Conticelli notes that the particular place of the panel beneath Poggini's sculpture of *Plutus*, the god of riches equipped with a receptacle for gold, a vase now lost, may allude to another 'tradition which made Danae a symbol of the desire for wealth'.<sup>82</sup> According to C. Jung, however, mythology belongs to the great realities of the spirit and the mythological motifs are structural elements of our collective psychic substratum which finally moulds the empirical world around us.<sup>83</sup> Thus, ancient gods and heroes have always been used as symbols for physical entities, the mythological Danae

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<sup>79</sup> Mandel 1995, p. 55.

<sup>80</sup> Mandel 1995, pp. 55-56.

<sup>81</sup> Kahr 1978, p. 44.

<sup>82</sup> Conticelli 2007, p. 185, n. 35.

<sup>83</sup> Kerényi 1996, p. 13. Jung 1996, pp. 83-90

corresponding to our Earth.<sup>84</sup> Who may then blame Earth for receiving the golden rays of the Sun?

The mythological narrative seems to continue on the left side of Traballesi's oval panel. There, with crossed legs and a silky dog close to him,<sup>85</sup> a melancholic Acrisius raises his left hand as if he wishes to stop the builders from raising the wall surrounding Danae's tower. Does he feel sorry for having repulsed Bacchus and not acknowledged his grandson?<sup>86</sup> Be that as it may, with the king's presence the story of Danae comes to an end. The figures standing behind form around him an ellipse which repeats the oval shape of the panel and seems not to be connected with the mythological narrative. We have, therefore, a separate independent picture within the picture, since the persons within the ellipse live in other times and have their own stories to tell.

A number of scholars agree that these figures are portrait-likenesses of contemporary personalities (Fig. 28). Conticelli notes that the identification of two persons belonging to the group, the man with the short beard, just behind Acrisius, and the youth next to the old man with the long beard, present a problem that for the time being has not been solved.<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, Alessandro Nesi, after comparison with other portraits of the patron of the Studiolo in the same cycle, and particularly with his portrait in Stradano's *The Alchemists*, finds that the man with the short beard may be identified with Prince Francesco.<sup>88</sup>

Corine Mandel suggests a princely also descent for the beardless young man who wears a dark suit with a white collar: he is, 'unquestionably' Cosimo's fourth son Ferdinando, in his early twenties at the time Traballesi was painting the Golden Rain. After the sudden death in 1562 of his elder brother Giovanni, groomed for the Church, Ferdinando had received the purple hat of a cardinal at the age of fourteen and six years later began to reside in Rome. Moreover, it was

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<sup>84</sup> Liddell – Scott 1897, p. 321.

<sup>85</sup> There is very little resemblance between this quiet animal and the savage watch-dogs that according to Horace secured Danae's brazen tower.

<sup>86</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV.607-13.

<sup>87</sup> Conticelli 2007, pp. 186-87.

<sup>88</sup> Nesi 2008, p. 103.

said that Ferdinando's astrological chart at birth had predicted that he was destined to rule Tuscany.<sup>89</sup>

Recognizing that the identification of portraits is a perilous business, Mandel carries on arguing that the elegantly draped figure, lifting his left hand in the manner of a king at the far left, has the distinct features of Cosimo. The receding hair line, the moustache and beard, and the aquiline nose all point to this identification. Cosimo was presented in such a manner in Vasari's *Triumph of Cosimo at Montemurlo* (Fig. 33). Furthermore, she identifies the elderly gentleman with the long beard, next to the young cardinal, with Ottaviano de' Medici (Fig. 34). Ottaviano was an avid art collector and a friend of Vasari.<sup>90</sup> Besides, he was Cosimo's uncle and had supported his election as successor to the murdered Alessandro. Vasari depicts him in the entourage of the duke in the above mentioned *Triumph of Cosimo at Montemurlo* and directly beside Cosimo in the fresco celebrating his election as 'head of the city of Florence and her dominion' in the Sala di Cosimo in the Palazzo Vecchio. Ottaviano, however, died in 1546, roughly twenty five years before the works at the Studiolo started.

I think that Mandel's reading is not convincing since Ottaviano lacks not only the gentleness exhibited by the person depicted in Traballese's panel, but also the close association with the patron of the Studiolo. Accordingly, I will argue that this venerable man bears the features of Agnolo Bronzino, who had been the painter of many dynastic portraits of Cosimo and his family for more than thirty years. Francesco himself, from his early age, had been the subject of a number of portraits by the court artist such as *Eleonora of Toledo and Her Son Francesco* (Fig. 38), in which the Duchess with a gesture of her left hand indicates the prince-heir.<sup>91</sup>

Bronzino had also worked with Alessandro Allori, Santi di Tito and other members of his workshop along with Vasari's group of artists at the Studiolo. The portraits of Cosimo and Eleonora destined for the same chamber may be

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<sup>89</sup> Butters 2002, p. 67.

<sup>90</sup> Vasari had addressed to Ottaviano a famous letter in which he explained the iconography of a full-sized portrait of Alessandro he had just completed. The stool on which the duke sits is round to show his unending dominion – a prophecy to be belied soon. The human figures who decorate the stool's legs represent the Florentine people, who need neither arms nor legs, for they exist to obey etc. Hale 2001, p. 123.

<sup>91</sup> Cox-Roerick 2002, p. 146.

among his last works. Cosimo's portrait was placed in the crowning lunette of the earth wall, suggestively right above the painting *Danae and the Rain of Gold*.<sup>92</sup> This arrangement may have inspired Traballesi to include the portrait of the old master in his work (Fig. 35).

Bronzino died in 1572 while the Studiolo was being decorated. He had always an acute sense of the artistic family forged by the bonds between master and pupil. Proof of this was the affection in which he held the aging Pontormo as well as his 'artistic son' and heir Alessandro Allori. In the *Martyrdom of St Lorenzo*, his final work and a kind of last will, he inserted his self-portrait next to Pontormo in turn next to Allori's (Fig. 36). This representation in combination with another self-portrait in his *Deposition* (Fig. 37), in which the artist is also depicting himself as an aged man with a long beard, and his portrait in Allori's *Christ among the Doctors* render the physiognomy of the painter recognizable.<sup>93</sup> It seems, therefore, to me that Bronzino's face, framed by white hair and beard, is reflected in the traits of the imposing elderly man with the high forehead and the deep-set thoughtful eyes that Traballesi introduces in the group of persons behind Acrisios, probably as an act of commemoration of the recently deceased 'dotto pitor'.<sup>94</sup>

And what may be the central theme of *Danae and the Rain of Gold*, a picture which as shown above conflates mythology and contemporary personalities?<sup>95</sup> I shall propose as the key theme of Traballesi's panel the 'Aurum Potabile', the gold in a liquid form prepared and used by the alchemists. It is of particular interest for our subject that the first use of the miraculous drink in the western tradition is associated with Danae's great-grandfather, the god Baal. As we read in the Bible, Moses after receiving the Ten Commandments came down from the mountain and saw his people dancing and worshiping Baal in the form of a golden calf. His anger waxed hot, and taking the golden calf he

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<sup>92</sup> The pendant portrait of Eleonora was located on the opposite Fire-wall.

<sup>93</sup> Brock 2002, pp. 13-16.

<sup>94</sup> Bronzino was known for his wide literary knowledge. Not only wrote poetry himself, but he had memorized all Dante and a very great part of Petrarch as Benedetto Varchi testified in a letter addressed to him in 1539. Brock 2002, pp. 11-12.

<sup>95</sup> It seems that Borghini followed this sophisticated method in the iconography of some of the pictures of the Studiolo.

burned it in fire. Then, he ground it into powder, sprinkled it upon water and made the children of Israel drink it.<sup>96</sup>

Marsilio Ficino, who translated for Cosimo il Vecchio the alchemical texts of Hermes Trismegistus in 1463, connected Moses with the beginning of Alchemy. It is therefore not fortuitous that Santi di Tito's *Moses parting the Red Sea* was the only panel with a religious subject which found a place in Francesco's Studiolo. In certain alchemical texts Mose's division of the Red Sea was in fact seen to symbolize the division of the prima materia into the four differentiated elements of earth, air, water and fire.<sup>97</sup>

In any case, gold in form soluble in water had been searched for centuries. Success in this was achieved in the eighth century by the Arabian alchemist Jabir ibn Hayan. The secret of its preparation reached Europe in a manuscript of Paracelsus in which he reported about a mysterious life elixir with unbelievable curative qualities known as 'Aurum Potabile'. It was made from pure gold, liquefied in a secret way and processed in the laboratory for a couple of months. Thanks to Paracelsus during the early Renaissance the use of potable gold was diffused.<sup>98</sup>

Given Francesco's obsession with the manipulation of precious metals, the search for effective medicines and magical potions, the production of the gold elixir<sup>99</sup> endowing eternal youth might have been an experiment he was actively involved. Besides, he might have considered it an effective treatment for melancholy, or chronic depression from which Francesco was known to suffer.<sup>100</sup> He would, therefore, be actuated by a strong motivation to insert into the decoration of his stanzino the story of Danae impregnated by the rain of gold. In the context of the Studiolo, with its program entailing many miraculous and alchemical transformations, the pioggia d'oro would be easily identified with the liquefied pure gold, the first material for the 'Aurum Potabile'.

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<sup>96</sup> Exodus, 32:19-20.

<sup>97</sup> Feinberg 2002, p. 54.

<sup>98</sup> Charlier – Poupon 2009.

<sup>99</sup> Roob 2001, p. 30.

<sup>100</sup> The Venetian ambassador to Florence Andrea Gussoni characterized Francesco as 'complessime malinconica'. Schaefer 1976, p. 189.

Deceases from gold intoxication were, however, reported even in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The 'Drinkable Gold' was also known in the French Court. In 2008, the skeleton of Diane de Poitiers, the favorite of king Henry II, was excavated in Anet. She had died in 1566, but the exact circumstances of her death remained unknown. Analysis of her hair showed a great concentration of gold, a symptom of chronic gold intoxication. Diane, being 20 years senior to the king, was known to have undergone a long course gold treatment believing that it was an elixir of youth.<sup>101</sup>

Likewise, in a report written on Francesco de' Medici's death in October 1578, it was noted that he had been regularly consuming large quantities of 'elixir of life' and other precious materials and that this habit caused all his troubles.<sup>102</sup> The most probable, however, cause of the death of Francesco and his second wife, less than a day apart, may have been the succession war raging for years between the Grand Duke and his cardinal brother.

When Trallesi painted the portraits of the two brothers behind Acrisios, if Nesi's and Mandel's readings are tenable, Francesco was still married with Joanna of Austria, daughter and sister of two successive Hapsburg emperors. Their marriage in December 1565 was celebrated by majestic events invented by Vincenzo Borghini, including a parade of Olympian gods, as presented in Boccaccio's *Genealogia degli Dei*. One year earlier, however, Francesco had started an affair with the Venetian Bianca Cappello married to a penniless Florentine. Their relationship continued until the death of Joanna in childbirth in 1578. Less than two months after the tragic event, the Grand Duke married his also windowed mistress.

Bianca and her brother in law, cardinal Ferdinand, had a problematic relation, but things worsened after the death of Joanna's son and prince-heir don Filippo in 1582. The cardinal, who had never taken his final vows of priesthood expecting to succeed his older brother, was filled with indignation seeing that Francesco and Bianca made arrangements for Antonio, their

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<sup>101</sup> Low doses of 'Aurum Potabile' were still considered beneficial, because gold being indestructible, would keep the body also indestructible. Charlier – Poupon 2009.

<sup>102</sup> 'Ma tutto era causato da vecchi disordini di troppo continova beuta d'Elisir Vitae e suo aquerello, et acqua arzente da mezzi minerali alchimiata, e da immoderata e nociva familiarita di spirito d'olio di vetriolo'. Berti 2002, p. 44-45.

illegitimate –ante matrimonium– son to succeed Francesco as grand duke of Florence. Paving the way for such a succession, they even commissioned Alessandro Allori to paint a double portrait of Bianca and Antonio (Fig. 39) similar to the dynastic portrait of *Eleonora of Toledo and Her Son Francesco* (Fig. 38) by Bronzino mentioned above. In Allori's painting Bianca imitates, in a less suggestive way, Eleonora's gesture indicating the prince-heir.

His lavish expenditures having outstripped his generous income, financial strains were added to Ferdinando's worries about the future of the Medici dynasty. It was estimated that his debts at the time added up to a sum between 60.000 and 100.000 ducats.<sup>103</sup> Thus, the cardinal visited Francesco and Bianca in the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano the first days of October 1587 in order to discuss with them the anxieties that occupied his mind. On 9 October Ferdinando wrote to his niece Eleonora de Medici, duchess of Mantua, informing her of the grave illness of the Grand-duke and his consort.<sup>104</sup>

Eventually, Francesco and Bianca died in agony ten days later. According to contemporary sources and recently discovered physical evidence, they may have been poisoned. And Ferdinando had the most to gain from their death. In any case, Francesco was not loved by the Florentines. He preferred to work in his laboratories than governing and his reign represented a low point in Medicean history.<sup>105</sup> The presence of the cardinal at Poggio Caiano the 20 October 1587 allowed him to take over the reins of the principato 'con molta pace e quiete et con grandissima affezione di popoli'.<sup>106</sup> In this quiet way, Ferdinando set aside Antonio and secured for himself the grand-ducal crown.

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<sup>103</sup> Butters 1992, p. 172.

<sup>104</sup> Morell 1991, p. 161, n. 44.

<sup>105</sup> Musacchio 2008 p. 38-39.

<sup>106</sup> Morell 1991, p. 162.

### 3. Ferdinando's mythological dream

The much coveted crown lies on the table beside Ferdinando, dressed perhaps for last time as a cardinal, in Allori's version of the *Cardinal Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici* (Fig. 41) painted 1587-88. He was soon to renounce the purple in order to marry Christine of Lorraine, granddaughter of the Queen of France, Catherine de' Medici,<sup>107</sup> and to father dynastic successors. The Medici had only become dukes a generation earlier and were anxious to enhance their status through marriages to European nobilities. As daughter of a French king, Christine projected the relationship of the Medicean dynasty with one of the greatest European courts.

In the twenty four years spent in the papal court, Ferdinando had in fact gained remarkable experience in the management of state affairs and occasionally in the ruthless political maneuvering. Nature had also endowed him with a high degree of political astuteness and –in sharp contrast with Francesco- with natural cheerfulness. Like his father Cosimo, Ferdinando was a builder by inclination. During his ecclesiastical career, his three Roman properties –particularly the villa Medici (Fig. 40) next to the walls of Rome– as well as La Magliana, located between Rome and Ostia, exemplified his sophisticated taste. High-ranking guests were entertained at La Magliana on hunts that rivaled those organized by the Medici pope Leo X, a renowned huntsman. He also maintained a large stable with high-breed horses he used for hunting, racing etc.

Like generations of Medici before him, Ferdinando was spending large amounts of money for his collections of antiquities, oriental porcelain and majolica as well as for all sorts of exotic items. A painted coffer from India and four 'denti di cavallo marino' were the last gifts of Ferdinando to his ailing father. As a patron of arts, the Medici cardinal exploited the talents of Florentine artists, like Ammanati, Alessandro Allori and Jacopo Zucchi.<sup>108</sup> In the vita of

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<sup>107</sup> Catherine de' Medici, daughter of Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino, and of the French princess Madeleine de la Tour d' Auvergne, married Henry II in 1533 and became queen of France in 1547.

<sup>108</sup> Suzanne 2002, pp. 67-73.



Taddeo Zuccherò, Vasari notes that on a visit in Florence the artist took great courage seeing him to execute forty four great pictures for the ceiling of the Sala Grande in the Palazzo Vecchio with the assistance only of his disciples Giovanni Strada and Jacopo Zucchi. The latter, a young man of twenty five years proved very proficient in the design and in the handling of colours. He worked again with Vasari in the Studiolo of Francesco, where he was also represented by a work of his own, *The Gold Mine*, the centre-piece of the earth wall's upper register<sup>109</sup>

Jacopo Zucchi moved to Rome in 1572 and had been working ever since for Ferdinando. According to Alessandra Baroni Vannucci, in 1575 his patron commissioned him a set of paintings with mythological subjects to be incorporated in a decorated cabinet, also referred as 'studiolo'.<sup>110</sup> Before the creation of his Studiolo in palazzo Vecchio, Francesco had ordered in 1564 to the genius artist Bernardo Buontalenti such an elaborate piece of furniture to store precious objects. Vasari's description of this 'studiolo' may give us an idea of how this sort of cabinets looked. The prince's cabinet was made with a beautiful architectural design and with compartments of ebony and columns of heliotrope, oriental jasper and lapis-lazuli. Its surface was filled with most lovely ornaments and beautiful little figures of silver and gold in the round... Vasari stops abruptly his narrative, because 'to describe all would make a very long story'.<sup>111</sup> Raffaello Borghini refers also in *Il Riposo* to Francesco's ebony studiolo noting that 'there are several portraits of the most beautiful Florentine gentlewomen, a very charming thing to see'.<sup>112</sup>

### ***Zucchi's Fishing of the Coral or Realm of Amphitrite***

Edmont Pillsbury identified the painting commissioned to Zucchi by Ferdinando as *The Fishing for Coral* (Fig. 42) mentioned by the painter and writer Giovanni Baglione, who saw it to ornament a piece of furniture in the

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<sup>109</sup> Vasari – De Vere 1996, v. 2, pp. 615-16, 883.

<sup>110</sup> Baroni Vannucci 2002, pp. 180-81.

<sup>111</sup> Vasari – De Vere 1996, v. 2, pp. 881-82.

<sup>112</sup> Borghini 2012, p. 297.

villa Medici in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to the best known version in the Borghese Gallery in Rome, Pillsbury had traced two other versions of the same theme all identical in size, 55 x 45 cm, in support, oil on copper, and autograph. These paintings belong to a private collection in Milan and to the State Gallery in Lwow, Ukraine. All versions are now thought to have been painted at different times.<sup>113</sup> Morel maintains that because of the number 159 that came to light in the Ukraine version, the picture was painted in the early 1590s. Pillsbury, however, who first published the above version, assigned all versions to the mid 1580s, the Ukraine picture being the first, on the ground of the overall spatial construction, figure style and coloring,<sup>114</sup>

Leaving for the moment open the question of the dating, we notice that all three pictures depict the same strip of land extending into a sea dotted with rocky islets where men and women fish for coral, pearls, seashells and shellfish. Some fish from small rafts with long reed poles, others with their hands or using strings tied to turtles. Two dark-skinned males strangely armed with bows and arrows- one of them is also holding a parrot- stand out from the throng of coral fishers in all versions but the Ukraine one. It is worth noting that Zucchi used the torso Belvedere (Fig. 47) for rendering the muscular nude body of the seated African (Fig. 46).

On the foreground half naked sea nymphs form a semicircle around a majestic female figure wearing a crown and holding with her right hand a coral and with her raised left a seashell. According to Baglione, they are portraits of various beautiful Roman ladies of the time.<sup>115</sup> The nymphs are accompanied by a sea god bearing corals on his head, a monkey bedecked in pearls and two putti. Conches, oysters, corals and pearls are strewn in front of them.

With so many symbols alluding to femininity, Morell interprets the crowned central figure as Poseidon's consort Amphitrite and the beautiful women surrounding her as Nereids. Accordingly, he gives the work a title that

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<sup>113</sup> A fourth version was discussed by A. Vannugli in 1994. Baroni Vannucci 2002, p. 181.

<sup>114</sup> Pillsbury 1980, p. 209.

<sup>115</sup> 'Ritrati di varie Dame Romane di quei tempi assai belle e degne'. Pillsbury 1980, p. 212.

suits better to this theme: *The Realm of Amphitrite*.<sup>116</sup> It is worth mentioning that the sea goddess was also represented in Francesco's Studiolo by Lorenzi's bronze statuette which adorned one of the two niches on the water-wall. The Florentine Amphitrite, as her younger sister in Rome, is also holding a branch of coral and a seashell.

As Pillsbury has shown, the woman seated in the center of the *Realm of Amphitrite* represents Ferdinando's friend, Clelia married to Giovan Giorgio Cesarini in 1570. She was an illegitimate daughter of the cardinal Alessandro Farnese, grandson of pope Paul III, portrayed in Titian's famous painting *Pope Paul III and his nephews*. Montaigne, who visited Italy in 1580-81, described Clelia 'without comparison the most lovable woman in Rome'<sup>117</sup>. Her close relationship with Ferdinando was public knowledge<sup>118</sup>. It seems, therefore, that the cardinal ordered Zucchi, who was considered as 'il piu famoso ritrattista de' suoi giorni', to paint, besides the mythological paintings, the bust *portrait of Clelia Farnese* (Fig. 45) now in the Galleria Nazionale d' Arte Antica, in Rome.<sup>119</sup>

Many versions of Clelia's portrait, by Jacopo Zucchi and his circle, were circulated and they can be dated between her marriage in 1570 and her widowhood in 1585 because the Farnese and Cesarini arms are depicted on her elaborate necklace. One of these versions was given as a gift to Bianca, by this time married to Francesco.<sup>120</sup> Bianca was not happy to receive a portrait of Clelia, a Medici mistress who could guarantee succession through Ferdinando's bloodline. In fact, Clelia gave birth to Ferdinando's son in 1586, a year after the death of her husband.<sup>121</sup>

Comparison of Clelia as depicted in her portrait with the figure of 'Amphitrite' in the Fishing for Coral shows that Zucchi, the author of both works, used the traits of the Roman beauty in a poetical and idealized way in order to

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<sup>116</sup> Morel 1999, p. 300.

<sup>117</sup> 'Sans comparaison la plus aimable femme qui fut pour lors a Rome, ni que j' y sache ailleurs'. Pillsbury 1980, p. 204.

<sup>118</sup> Even a popular pasquinade referred to it. Musacchio 2008, p. 37, n. 84.

<sup>119</sup> Baglione confirms that Zucchi made for Ferdinando a number of praiseworthy portraits. Pillsbury 1980, p. 204.

<sup>120</sup> Musacchio 2008, p. 37-38.

<sup>121</sup> A letter in Roman archives confirms the birth of the child. Morel 1991, p. 161, n. 42.

render the mythological queen of the sea.<sup>122</sup> Not only rulers but also members of certain elite groups were often represented in the disguise of pagan gods and heroes in the Cinquecento. However, as Butters puts it, nothing has prepared us to see a half-naked cardinal intervening in the plot of a mythological narrative in the midst of a company of beautiful noblewomen. And that exactly happens in the Ukraine version (Fig. 43) of the *Fishing for Coral* or better the *Realm of Amphitrite*.

As mentioned above, Pillsbury maintains that the painting in the State Gallery in Lwow is the oldest version, which might have served in Ferdinando's studiolo. In this picture, the place of the blackamoor seated in the center is taken by a fair-skinned man in his thirties, armed with a bow and arrows, his quiver being suspended from a decorated belt, which runs across his half-naked chest. He looks fixedly at the viewer holding in his extended right hand a seashell similar but smaller than the one 'Amphitrite' demonstrates with her raised left hand (Fig. 44).

Pillsbury points out that this man's physiognomy, full chin, small downturned moustache and curly hair, may be compared with that of the portrait of Ferdinando as a cardinal by Scipione Pulzone (Fig. 41). Nevertheless, one may still wonder why the cardinal chose to be shown armed with a bow and arrows in a scene representing the fishing of coral. To this plausible question, two possible explanations come first to my mind. Probably because he had a passion for hunting, bow and arrows being the archetypical equipment of a huntsman, or because he took the place in the picture of the African who carried the same weapons in the Borghese and Milan versions.

In the Ukraine version, after the elimination of the sitting figure, only one of the two Africans remains. Silhouetted against the blue of the sea, his dark skin, curly hair and nakedness lent an exotic air to the scene. Nevertheless, his presence may also allude to a horrific phenomenon of the age: the slave trade. As Jill Burke notes, alongside travelers accounts, exotic animals and objects, the Portuguese voyages also brought African slaves in increasing numbers over the fifteenth century. Florentine merchants were further involved in bringing the slaves from Portugal to Italy. Naked, in chains and screaming as their families

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<sup>122</sup> Morel 1999, p. 304.

were split up, they were sold to 'merciful' Christians ready to save them from their paganism and their beastly ways. In fact, even Renaissance thinkers would take Africans nakedness and different ways of behaving as signs of bestial passion and lasciviousness.<sup>123</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the cardinal's secretary Pietro Usimbardi used the same characterization for his boss: 'Non mancava d'inclinazione alla lascivia', adding that he still acted in such matters with respect and decorum.<sup>124</sup> It seems, however, that Ferdinando did not always succeed in displaying the required respect and decorum and pursued women sufficiently openly to earn him the nickname of Sardanapalus, the Assyrian king who excessively enjoyed the company of women.<sup>125</sup> The cardinal used slaves in the gardens of his Roman villa in Pincio<sup>126</sup> and would have probably observed 'naked bodies belonging to nameless, over-sexualized people to whom shame could not allegedly attach'.<sup>127</sup> It is intriguing to think that Ferdinando, sharing with them some 'inclination in lasciviousness', would allusively replace the African archer –who safely kept his back turned to the ladies in the other versions– in the center of Zucchi's picture, behind his mistress.

My guess is therefore that another version of Zucchi's painting, probably the Borghese, preceded the Ukraine one enriched with the provocative element of the semi-naked cardinal. This composition was probably made later in order to ornament a private room of the Villa Medici. Hermann Voss had indeed argued that the studiolo of Ferdinando was a very private chamber similar to Francesco's Studiolo at the palazzo Vecchio and not a piece of furniture to store 'così di meraviglia'. In any case, taking into account that Ferdinando was born in 1549 and that in Zucchi's painting is shown in his thirties, the Ukraine version can be dated in the 1580's with terminus ante quem October 1587, when he left Rome never to return again

It was, however, suggested that Zucchi painted the Ukraine version in the early part of the 1590s and that Ferdinando was shown together with his

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<sup>123</sup> Burke 2013, pp. 727-28.

<sup>124</sup> Pillsbury 1980, p. 215.

<sup>125</sup> Butters 2002, p. 73.

<sup>126</sup> Butters 1992, p. 178.

<sup>127</sup> Burke 2013, pp. 734-35.

wife Christina di Lorena and their first two children born in 1590 and 1591.<sup>128</sup> The hypothesis, however, that the artist introduced in the scenery of the Fishing for Coral the grand-ducal family portrait is, to my opinion, not convincing. Not only the physiognomy of Christine of Lorraine, as portrayed by Scipione Pulzone in 1590 (Fig. 49), does not correspond to that of the 'Amphitrite', but also Ferdinando as Grand Duke had been advancing another image of himself. His portrait (Fig. 48), part of the same 'courtly series' by Pulzone, shows him richly dressed with his right hand on a gilded helmet as Cosimo is depicted by Bronzino in 1543.<sup>129</sup> Ferdinando's portrait of 1590 is an image of princely magnificence confirming the astrological prediction at his birth that he was destined to rule the Tuscan state and to secure the future of the Medicean dynasty.<sup>130</sup> His semi-naked appearance in Zucchi's painting belonged to his insouciant Roman days.

As Pillsbury points out, the general subject of the painting, although not strictly a representation of the fishing of coral, reflects Ferdinando's interest in this unique substance. Pliny in his *Historia Naturalis* describes coral and cites forty-three natural remedies, which originate in it. According to him, coral is a valuable green 'shrub' whose white berries are 'soft while under water, but the moment they are removed from it, they become hard and red'.<sup>131</sup> This description keeps up with coral's mythic origin in the *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's account, Perseus having cut off the head of Medusa fled to Ethiopia and found king Cepheus' daughter Andromeda tied on a rock. Her mother Cassiopeia had boasted that she was more beautiful than the Nereids and the angry Poseidon sent a flood-tide and a sea monster. In response to an oracle, Andromeda was set out as food for the ketos.

After having killed the sea-dragon and rescued Andromeda, Perseus 'spread soft leaves and tender twigs that in the water grew/ And laid Medusa's

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<sup>128</sup> Morel 1999, p. 300. Baroni Vannucci 2002, p. 181.

<sup>129</sup> *Cosimo I in Armor* remained for years the official portrait of the duke. Ferdinando had himself also portrayed in armor in 1588, the year he renounced his cardinalate.

<sup>130</sup> Butters 2002, p. 67. In order to glorify the Medici dynasty, Ferdinando also initiated the Chapel of the princes, next to San Lorenzo, which acquired international fame for its sumptuous decoration. Florence 2002, p.169.

<sup>131</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXII.2.

head thereon. The twigs, yet being new/And full of juicy pith, full lightly to them drew/The nature of this monstrous head; for both the leaf and bough/Full strangely at touch thereof became both hard and tough./The sea-nymphs tried this wondrous fact in divers other rods (...) for still like nature ever since is in our coral found/ That, look how soon it toucheth air, it waxeth hard and sound/And that which under water was a stick, above is stone.<sup>132</sup> Vasari had faithfully translated Ovid's narrative into a visual representation for the water wall of Francesco's Studiolo.

In the sixteenth century coral was still thought to be a plant that transformed into a precious stone highly valued for its apotropaic powers. Corals were often employed as amulets<sup>133</sup> to ward off evil and protect from lightning, storms, hail even from demons, since their branches 'frequently form a cross'<sup>134</sup> According ancient recipes, corals after being ground to powder, mixed with other ingredients and sprinkled with water could be used as a potion that relieves rheumatism, arthritis, pains, any sort of bleeding etc.<sup>135</sup>

These years, coral was mainly selected off the African coasts. Some coral reefs could also be found along the Italian coastline and the shorelines of Provence and Tuscany. Each year, from April to September, hundreds of small boats went to sea.<sup>136</sup> The Milanese engineer Camillo Agripa, in the service of the cardinal, had particularly developed a new method for the fishing of the coral for which pope Pius V granted him a pattern. Furthermore, coral harvest was processed and manufactured on a large scale at the Florentine port of Livorno.<sup>137</sup>

Ferdinando shared with his father and brother the same fascination with naturalia and artificialia. A copy of the most famous medieval book of secrets attributed to Aristotle, the *Secretum Secretorum*, which provided information

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<sup>132</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV.908-20.

<sup>133</sup> As depicted by Bronzino in 1545 *Giovanni de' Medici as a child* is wearing around his neck a gold chain with a coral to protect him from harm.

<sup>134</sup> Kelley 2014, p. 123.

<sup>135</sup> Conticelli 2007, p. 247, n. 304.

<sup>136</sup> Kelley 2014, p. 11.

<sup>137</sup> Shaefer 1976, p. 423.

on stones, alchemy and matters magical, was in his library.<sup>138</sup> In 1569, Benvenuto Cellini in a last effort to resuscitate his flagging career, he dedicated to Ferdinando his *Treatises on Goldsmithing and Sculpture*. Displaying his great knowledge on metallurgy and his access to secret recipes, he hoped to attract the patronage of the new generation of the Medici.<sup>139</sup>

Rare in nature, objects of lucrative trade, masterly employed in jewelry as well as in the decoration of the *pietre dure* tables produced in the cardinal's Roman palace workshops, corals received his special attention. Besides, Ferdinando had inherited the Medici disease which caused painful swellings in joints and suffered frequently from assaults of gout.<sup>140</sup> He would, therefore, be tempted to try the curative qualities of the coral potion prepared, as mentioned above, in accord with recipes of reverend ancient doctors such as Galen and Dioscorides. All the above factors in combination with Ferdinando taste for the antiquity probably motivated his commission of *The Realm of Amphitrite* or *The Fishing of the Coral* or rather of a painting merging both themes. After all, he was following a tradition which started with his father Cosimo.

### **Reaching Apotheosis**

In fact, it was under Ferdinando that the glorification of Cosimo reached its peak. Etruria, older than Rome itself, came back to life with Cosimo who was crowned by the pope in 1570 as *Magnus Dux Etruriae*. Besides his monumental equestrian statue on the Piazza della Signoria by Giambologna, Bernardino Poccetti represented him on the ceiling of the Sala di Bona (Fig. 50) in the Palazzo Pitti in a form totally unlike any other made of him or any other Medici until then. It is an apotheosis.<sup>141</sup> Cosimo is shown in heroic nudity seated in a cloud. In his left hand he holds a pair of compasses, in his right a T square.<sup>142</sup> On

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<sup>138</sup> Butters 1996, p. 238.

<sup>139</sup> Rossi 2004, pp. 173-75.

<sup>140</sup> Butters 2002, p. 68.

<sup>141</sup> Langedijk 1987, v. 1, p. 162.

<sup>142</sup> Fifty years ago, Vasari had already depicted the Duke holding a pair of compasses and a T square in his fresco *Cosimo I surrounded by his Architects, Engineers and Sculptors* in the Sala di Cosimo of the Palazzo Vecchio.



his right side sits Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, and on his left an allegorical female figure holding a pyramid. The Pyramid and the instruments in his hands associate Cosimo with the platonic architect, who designs the building and directs his workmen by his knowledge. Furthermore, the measuring implements indicate the correct, just judgment of the prince<sup>143</sup>

As Butters points, Ferdinando wanted largesse to be a prominent feature of his reign and his court seemed to be that of a king. The magnificent celebrations he ordered in 1600 for the marriage of the daughter of Francesco and Joanna, Maria de Medici, to the king of France Henry IV illustrate his dynastic ambitions and his intention to impress the princes of Italy and Europe.<sup>144</sup> Another Medici was now placed on the throne of France. And when a Medici has in her service Rubens' *ars et ingenium*, she may confer on an equal basis with Jupiter on the highest peak of Olympus, while Athena and Apollo are driving away the vices from her kingdom (Fig. 51).

## Conclusion

I have examined above a category of paintings and drawings in which historical and mythological themes coexist in the same work. The distinct narratives are usually connected by a common link –quoted or hinted– which expands and enriches the meaning of both. The fact that for a long time historical characters had been inserted in religious scenes might have an impact on the perception of mythological imagery and would facilitate the exploration of new associations.

This type of visual art seems to have developed in late Renaissance Florence under the rule of the first Medici Dukes. It is probable that Cosimo I and his immediate successors, Francesco and Ferdinando, would encourage their court artists to add a diachronic dimension to the themes of art they commissioned by connecting them with antique myths. Besides, the intellectual and visual culture of the time was closely linked with Mannerism, a style of excess, abundant in inventions, with preference for variety than unity, open to

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<sup>143</sup> Plato, *Politikos*, 258-60. Langedijk 1987, pp. 158-64.

<sup>144</sup> Butters 2002, p. 73.

unexpected combinations. Mannerist works were, furthermore, addressed to the viewers of a 'more cultured age' capable of recognizing allusive scenes and deciphering obscure references. Mannerism has in fact been described as an art for connoisseurs.<sup>145</sup>

I believe that the continuation of the research will further broaden our knowledge of the use of eclectic iconography in the Cinquecento and bring to light a greater number of art works in which the timeless mythological past and the historical 'present' are mirrored on the same pictorial surface.

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<sup>145</sup> Shearman 1967, p. 135 ff.

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