

**ASPECTS OF NUDITY IN PROFANE ART AND LITERATURE IN  
FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURY ITALY**

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE MEANINGS OF NUDITY FROM CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

In order to understand how nudity was interpreted and used in the arts and iconography of the Renaissance one has to take into consideration the different meanings of nudity in the preceding ages that ultimately influenced its conception in the Italian arts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In the first phases of Greek art, in the Geometric period, both men and women were mainly depicted naked. Generally art seems to follow everyday life, as it gathers its inspiration from it, however as underlined by Hallett, it seems that in the case of nudity it is its prevalence in the arts that 'preceded the acceptance of nudity in Greek life'.<sup>1</sup> The male nude is a central image in Greek art, such as the *kouros*, whilst the women appear to be always depicted clothed, as testified by the *kore*. This is probably due to the fact that men, in certain contexts of everyday life were more often naked than women.<sup>2</sup> Athletes would compete nakedly and thus in art nudity was used to underline their strength and perfection.<sup>3</sup> Stewart instead argues that nudity was used, especially from the eighth century, as a differentiating device between the sexes, the naked male as the natural human norm and the clothed women as the index of the socialized, normalized and controlled woman.<sup>4</sup>

With the development of narrative painting in ancient Greece, artists finally had a lot more opportunities to make a logical use of nudity than previously. In other words, men could be painted naked in situations where their nudity was justified by the narrative context, for example in erotic scenes or scenes related to athletics.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly though the artists do not seem to use this 'logical' or 'realistic' nudity in a consistent manner. Nudity in Greek art did not have one meaning, but many, and its significance was determined by the context and by the message that the artist wanted to transmit.<sup>6</sup> There was democratic and civic nudity that was used to identify the patriotic citizens that were willing to sacrifice their life for the *polis*.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher H. Hallett, *The Roman Nude. Heroic Portrait Statuary 200 BC-AD 300*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 5

<sup>2</sup> Nikolaus Himmelmann, *Ideale Nacktheit in der griechischen Kunst*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), p. 33

<sup>3</sup> Tucidides, *Historiae*, I, 6, 5

<sup>4</sup> Andrew F. Stewart, *Art, desire, and the body in Ancient Greece*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 40-41

<sup>5</sup> Hallett, *The Roman Nude*, p. 8

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey M. Hurwit, 'The Problem with Dexileos: Heroic and Other Nudities in Greek Art', *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 111, No. 1 (Jan., 2007), pp. 35-60 (57)

Pathetic nudity was instead used to symbolise defeat, death and vulnerability and was typical of war scenes. However, at the same time in battle scenes the naked figures could also identify the victors, since the so-called 'heroic nudity' was the chosen costume for heroes and deities. There was the nudity of occupation or status, used to identify slaves. Finally there was the nudity that characterised the uncivilised beasts and brutes.<sup>7</sup> Nudity therefore was not a fixed attribute, but a multifaceted 'state', the significance of which varied according to its context. Furthermore, what distinguished Greek art from that of other contemporaneous cultures is that in Greece the idea of the nude itself was born. The nude intended a representation of the human body with the sole purpose of showing its shape and beauty. There was at the same time both a religious justification, as beauty was one of the characteristics of divinity, and a philosophical one since the concept of beauty was central to the Greek philosophical thought that equated beauty with goodness.<sup>8</sup>

In Roman times the attitude towards nudity changed. The Romans had a big taboo regarding nakedness in public, and this was applicable to both sexes. In the imperial period nudity was accepted only in certain contexts, such as the baths or the slave market.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the Romans were so modest that even when they used the term *nudus* to describe nudity they often did not intend integral nudity, except when acceptable or necessary.<sup>10</sup> In fact, nudity was often linked to negative conditions; for example, the defeated soldiers were stripped publicly to disgrace them thus symbolizing the defeated army's total helplessness after the surrender.<sup>11</sup> Women, in Rome as in Greece, had to remain always clothed in public, except for the slaves or prostitutes.<sup>12</sup> The first Roman art was strongly influenced by the Etruscan one that had embraced the Greek attitude towards nudity. In addition, the Romans were then directly exposed to Greek art as early as the fourth century BC.<sup>13</sup> Male divinities began to appear nude on Roman coins around 112/11 BC, the goddesses however were never portrayed naked, and even Venus was initially portrayed half-dressed. Following the syncretism between the Greek and Roman pantheon, it became common to depict deities naked, in fact in the language of the Roman public monuments, nudity at once identified the realm of the Gods.<sup>14</sup> Despite a sharp distinction between nudity in life and in art, there were many

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 57

<sup>8</sup> Marco Bussagli, *Il nudo nell'arte*, (Florence: Giunti, 1998), p.18

<sup>9</sup> Hallett, *The Roman Nude*, pp. 60-61

<sup>10</sup> Emilio Peruzzi, *Origini di Roma*, (Florence: Valmartina, 1970), pp. 77-83

<sup>11</sup> Hallett, *The Roman Nude*, pp. 67-69

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*, pp. 83-84

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*, pp. 87-93

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem.*, p.89

contradictions in the Roman attitude towards nudity. For example, Octavian, in honour of the victory of Naulochos (36 BC) had himself portrayed naked in a colossal statue that was displayed in the centre of Rome, in order to underline his heroism in battle. Yet he was the one that prohibited women to participate as spectators to the athletic games of the Actian celebrations because of the naked athletes. It was one thing to be portrayed naked as a god-like figure and another to go out in public naked.

With the rise of Christianity in late antiquity, the relation to the human body changed; this however did not mean that nakedness and the unclothed body were shunned. Winckelmann and the first founders of the modern art history have praised the idealised classical naked body and simplified and reduced to very little the depictions of nudity in the Middle Ages. In recent years however it has become clear that this simplification is unacceptable, especially in the light of the many complex and multivalent iconographic contexts in which naked, or partly naked, figures appear in this period.<sup>15</sup> As stated by Lindquist ‘like any representation, the nude embodies, manifests, personifies, objectifies the ideas and attitudes projected upon by its creator(s) and/or viewer(s)’<sup>16</sup> therefore also in medieval art, the naked body is associated to a varied and large number of emotions and meanings. Nudity ranged from purity, to innocence, to sacrifice, to humiliation, to shame, to erotic desire, as testified also by the biblical stories. In some cases nudity was ‘realistic’ as it was a part of the narrative, in others, it was used allegorically to underline a certain aspect or characteristic of the figure depicted, as for example in the personifications of *Luxuria*. Pierre Bersuire in the *Dictionarii seu repertorii moralis*, which was published various times up to the end of the sixteenth century, distinguished four kinds of nudity. Firstly there is the *nuditas naturalis*, which is the natural and ‘adamic’ state of man and that symbolises humility. Secondly there is the *nuditas temporalis* that symbolises the lack of terrestrial goods and is equated to the virtue of voluntary poverty. Thirdly there is the *nuditas virtualis* that is granted by the sacraments and is a symbol of innocence. Lastly there is the *nuditas criminalis* that symbolises the lack of virtue, vanity and debauchery.<sup>17</sup>

The nude body of Christ on the cross is undoubtedly at the centre of medieval Christian iconography and became a symbol and model of virtuous humility and poverty that the devout

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<sup>15</sup> Sherry C.M. Lindquist, ‘The meanings of nudity in medieval art: an introduction’, in *The meanings of nudity in medieval art*, (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), p. 1

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 7

<sup>17</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconography. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, (Colorado, Oxford: Icon Editions, 1972), p. 229

Christian had to imitate.<sup>18</sup> His nudity emphasized his humiliation, while enabling the artists to show the idea that sufferance and pain were necessary to reach salvation. The naked male body that in Antiquity had been used to represent the valiant hero and the strong athlete was now used to symbolise the spiritual exercise of the ‘athlete of the soul’. Thus, nudity became more and more a symbol of inner characteristics.<sup>19</sup> So, for example, Daniel was usually depicted naked in the lions’ den to emphasize the heroic nature of his spirit. It symbolised the spiritual discipline, the control over the flesh and the pursuit of sanctity. This is why often martyrs were depicted or described as naked. In many *Acta* for example, female martyrs faced their martyrdom without clothes, as did Blandina, Perpetua and Felicitas.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Perpetua she also had a dream regarding her martyrdom, in which she faced her execution naked and in a male body.<sup>21</sup> St. Hildegard of Bingen, in the *Liber divinorum operum* emphasised the centrality of the naked body of Christ,<sup>22</sup> hence the famous phrase of St. Jerome ‘naked I follow the naked Christ’ (*nudus nudum Christum sequi*).<sup>23</sup> Nakedness is intended positively and it becomes the slogan of both late classical and medieval ascetics that become ‘daily martyrs’ and that are naked as they strip themselves of all the passions and belongings. Nudity was also used to represent and identify what is incorporeal, as the soul is. For example in the church of San Marco in Venice in the mosaic with God and the Creation of Adam (1212-1215), Adam is depicted naked and so is his soul, a naked little body with butterfly wings.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, however, nudity also had a negative meaning as it referred to Original Sin and the expulsion from Eden, since after the Fall of Man nudity symbolised shame. Yet it is important to note that it is not the fact of being naked that causes shame, but the awareness of being so, because it is a symbol of the disobedience of Adam and Eve.<sup>25</sup>

However nudity was not restricted only to the biblical and religious context since it had also survived in the pagan and profane world, with a vast range of meanings. As testified by the interpretation given, in the twelfth century, to the statues of the *Dioscuri* in the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* are identified as Phidias and Praxiteles and thus were depicted naked since the

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<sup>18</sup> Lindquist, *The meanings of nudity in medieval art*, p. 9

<sup>19</sup> Bussagli, *Il nudo nell’arte*, p. 30

<sup>20</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing. Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston, Mass. : Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 56-63

<sup>21</sup> *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité, suivi des Actes*, ed. J. Amat, (Paris: CERF, 1996), pp. 136-139

<sup>22</sup> St. Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum*, ed. A. Derolez, P. Dronke, (Turnholt: Brepols, 1996)

<sup>23</sup> St. Jerome, *Homilia in Lucam*, XVI, 19-31

<sup>24</sup> Bussagli, *Il nudo nell’arte*, p. 34

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 30

terrestrial knowledge was standing naked and open in front of their eyes.<sup>26</sup> Or as seen in the 1330 *Fulgentius Metaforalis* that describes Neptune as an allegory of *Intelligentia* and *Prudentia* and therefore has to be represented naked as it suits *Prudentia* to recognize the misery of man.<sup>27</sup> Ridewall is clearly referring to the edifying concept of Bernard of Clairvaux from the *De consideratione*.<sup>28</sup> Another famous example of allegorical nudity is the *Nuda Securitas* in the fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena.<sup>29</sup> In medieval times therefore, the nude is seen both in a realistic and in allegorical sense, conveying many different meanings.

The aim of this study is to analyse the various allegorical and symbolical meanings of nudity in both the literature and the Italian artistic production of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The first chapter will investigate how and why the use and concept of the nude evolved and how it was interpreted and defined in the artistic literature of the time. The second chapter shall address the use of nudity in Italian profane art as an iconographical attribute and allegory, and how its interpretation varied from one context to another. The chosen approach is a thematic one, which allows obtaining a clear and structured view of a topic that is itself vast and diverse since different allegorical meanings have been attributed to nudity and to the naked body.

Throughout this work the terms ‘nude’ and ‘naked’ will be used in an interchangeable way, as the distinction between the two synonyms is a peculiarity of the English language that does appear neither in Italian nor Latin, which instead only use the terms *nudo* and *nudus*. Since the publication of the influential study by Kenneth Clark in 1956, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, it is however necessary to take into consideration the different meanings that have been associated to the two synonyms. Clark asserts, ‘to be naked is to be deprived of clothes’<sup>30</sup> and that this state implicates embarrassment. The nude on the other hand ‘carries in an educated usage no uncomfortable overtone’<sup>31</sup> and conveys the image of a ‘balanced, prosperous and confident body’.<sup>32</sup> He furthermore states that the body cannot be translated into art directly

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<sup>26</sup> *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, ed. F. M. Nichols, pp.18-19

<sup>27</sup> *Fulgentius metaforalis* in Hans Liebeschütz, *Fulgentius metaforalis : ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der antiken Mythologie im Mittelalter*, (Berlin: Teubner, 1926), p. 95

<sup>28</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Consideratione libri V*, 2, 18

<sup>29</sup> Nikolaus Himmelmann, ‘Nudità ideale’, in *Memoria dell’antico nell’arte italiana. T.2, I generi e i temi ritrovati*, a cura di Salvatore Settis, (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1985), pp. 201-278 (226)

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: a study in ideal form*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), p. 1

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 1

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem.*, p.1

but that it has to be idealised, perfected.<sup>33</sup> John Berger in *Ways of seeing* instead argues, ‘to be naked is to be oneself’ whilst ‘to be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not be recognized for oneself’. Furthermore he states, ‘a naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become the nude’.<sup>34</sup> I don’t intend to solve or resolve the issues that imply the use of one word or the other because I will look at nudity in a different way. In this study nudity will be analysed as a ‘type of dress’, as an iconographical attribute and symbol that defines or adds layers of meaning to what is represented.

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<sup>33</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, pp. 5-6

<sup>34</sup> John Berger, *Ways of seeing, based on the BBC television series with John Berger*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 56-57

## NUDITY AND ART LITERATURE

The centrality of the naked human body in Italian Renaissance art is evident not only in the numerous artworks themselves but also in the many treaties devoted to art written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This chapter will analyse how the nude body is described and interpreted in these works, by tracing the evolution of its interpretation up to the end of the sixteenth century.

From the early 1400s the nude became an autonomous artistic subject that could be inserted in an *istoria*, or narrative, according to the context. It increasingly became a suitable subject to demonstrate the expertise and technical skill of the artist and stands as one of the main requirements of the client, as a reflection of its image of prestige and sign of his social status and education.<sup>35</sup>

Leon Battista Alberti's *Della Pittura*, published in 1436, has as main objective to outline the rules and systems that governed the arts.<sup>36</sup> The second book of the *Della Pittura* is dedicated to the method of painting and it is in this part that Alberti discussed the artistic use of the naked body. Here, he taught the procedure, already in use at the time, to draw figures nude at first, starting with the position of the bones, tendons and muscles, and to dress them afterwards.<sup>37</sup> However he carefully specified that the naked bodies, when present in an artwork, always had to 'serve modesty' and that it is better to cover shameful parts with a veil, drapery or other parts of the body.<sup>38</sup>

A work that was completed soon after Alberti's is Angelo Decembrio's most ambitious work *De politia litteraria*, completed in 1462, in which pictorial nudity is discussed in part 68. The book is constructed as a series of dialogues in the circle of Leonello d'Este and his teacher Guarino, however towards the end the style changes and it becomes neither a dialogue nor an argued treatise, but 'a sort of Ferrarese common place book with dramatized episodes' as noted by Baxandall.<sup>39</sup> There is one fundamental difference between Alberti and Decembrio.

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<sup>35</sup> Elena Lazzarini, *Nudo, arte e decoro: oscillazioni estetiche negli scritti d'arte del Cinquecento*, (Ospedaletto, Pisa: Pacini, 2010), p. 15

<sup>36</sup> Julius R. von Schlosser, *La letteratura artistica: manuale delle fonti della storia dell'arte moderna*, (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1964), p. 123

<sup>37</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *Della pittura*, ed. L. Mallé, (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1950) p. 88

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*. p. 92

<sup>39</sup> Micheal Baxandall, 'A dialogue at the Court of Leonello d'Este: Angelo Decembrio's De Politia Litteraria Pars LXVIII', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, Vol. 26, No. ¾ (1963), pp. 304-326.

As we have seen, Alberti recommended the use of nudity discretely and as a starting point to construct a human body. For Decembrio however pictorial nudity was how the painter could exercise his skill on the same subject as Nature in order to elevate his own art and to conform to Nature itself.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, painting nudes and enjoying artworks depicting nudes was for him both a sign of sexual restraint and a liberation of artworks from unnecessary ornaments that were seen as an artistic immorality. Unlike fashion and clothing, the human figure does not change in time and therefore will never seem ridiculous to future generations.<sup>41</sup>

Leonardo da Vinci's writings, although unavailable to the public until their first publication in 1651 and in spite of their heterogeneous nature, are crucial in showing the profound changes that took place in the artistic field in the transition between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century, also in regards of the naked body in painting. Moved by an impulse of universal knowledge that equated the mind of the painter to the divine, Leonardo considered part of the universality of the artist being able to represent the whole variety of forms belonging to the naked body.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore Leonardo stated that nudity was more effective and remarkable if associated to movement, while distinguishing three different types of nudes: the *nudo magro*, the *nudo grasso* and the *nudo muscoloso*.<sup>43</sup>

In 1539 Pietro Andrea Mattioli wrote a description of the palace of the prince cardinal of Trento Bernardo Cles entitled *Il Magno Palazzo del Cardinal di Trento* in which he discussed the use and presence of nude figures in the pictorial decoration. The cardinal had commissioned the decoration of the palace to Girolamo Romanino, Dosso, Battista Dossi and Marcello Fogolino between 1531 and 1532.<sup>44</sup> In each description, the author strived to provide both an adequate representation of the splendour and quality of the various decorations and a detailed explanation of their iconography. He rejected that the adequacy of the decorations had to be evaluated only in terms of subject and location and on numerous occasions defended the legitimacy of profane and mythological representations solely based on their intrinsic aesthetic qualities.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Angelo Decembrio, *De polittia literaria libri septem : multa & uaria eruditione referti: ante annos centum scripti, & nunc tandem ab infinitis mendis repurgati, atque omnino rediuiui ... : accessit quoque rerum & verborum memorabilium index.*, ch. 68, p.164v

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 163r

<sup>42</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *Trattato della pittura*, (Lanciano: Carabba, 1924), ch. 64

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem.* ch. 109

<sup>44</sup> Lazzarini, *Nudo, arte e decoro*, pp. 32-33

<sup>45</sup> See also: Thomas Frangenberg, *Decorum in the Magno Palazzo in Trent*, *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1993, pp. 352-378



The discussion also touched upon the male nudes painted in the spandrels of the vault of the loggia that are strongly influenced by the *ignudi* painted by Michelangelo and that have no narrative function. Describing their value and significance as such Mattioli defined them only as *corpi ignudi*, that is naked bodies, and their value and significance was solely based on the fact that they showed the skill and technique of the artist. Even though he understood why some would criticise them for being indecent and inappropriate, he justified them on the basis of their artistic finality.<sup>46</sup> The artist, with his ‘divine brush’, has been able to compete with nature thus the role of the artist is now that of a creator of images and therefore this kind of nudity is interpreted as honest and decent.

It is possible to find traces of this new figurative trend, according to which the nude body is a symbol of the artist’s skill and talent, also in the correspondence between artists, writers and patrons, from the early decades of the 1500s. Significant examples are two letters between Giorgio Vasari and Pietro Aretino, dated 1536 and 1540. The first letter was sent from Vasari to Aretino. In it he described a preparatory cartoon depicting Ptolemy, king of Egypt, who in the midst of the battle had swum towards the shore to save the *Commentarii* by Julius Caesar. It clearly shows Vasari’s position on the use of the *ignudi* since he stated that he had depicted a group of naked men exclusively to show the ‘study of art’.<sup>47</sup> The second letter was written to Vasari by Aretino in December 1540 and talked about a drawing by Vasari, now lost. Aretino’s words give us a clear and tangible perception of the power of the nude and its impact on the viewer. He described a nude figure who leans on the floor and shows its nudity while twisting with ‘forced ease’ thus attracting the viewer’s gaze and dazzling him, until he turns his gaze elsewhere. It is therefore the most prominent element of strength and attractiveness of the entire image. The many ‘wonderful’ figures and the ‘beautiful vases *all’antica*’ do justice to antiquity because of their shape whilst the nude is instead praised for its ability to attract and retain the viewer’s gaze regardless of its narrative function.<sup>48</sup>

However, it is from the first edition of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives* of 1550 that the nude, for the first time in the artistic literature, became the object of a comprehensive theoretical development that identified it with the idea of perfection and autonomy of art. For Vasari, in fact, the major difficulty in art corresponded to the ‘difficulty in the arts of the nudes’ (*la*

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<sup>46</sup> Pier Andrea Mattioli, *Il Magno Palazzo del Cardinale di Trento*, (Trento: 1858), p. 24 – 25

<sup>47</sup> *Il carteggio di Giorgio Vasari*, ed. K. W. Frey, (Arezzo: Zelli, 1941), p. 47

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 107

*difficoltà nell'arte degli ignudi*)<sup>49</sup> as also testified by the description of Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Sacrifice of Isaac*.<sup>50</sup> In the two versions Vasari delineated a profile of the artistic tradition between the fifteenth and sixteenth century in which the male nude depicted in movement became the main element of attractiveness in an artwork. The ability to create nude figures was the sign of the painter's virtuosity that was based on his capacity in creating compositions of nude figures that were always imaginative, by devising new and various pretexts that ranged from the profane to the sacred. Furthermore the nude also became the subject that better represented the social esteem and moral and intellectual stature of the client.

The beauty of the nude and the infinite possibilities of variations it offered for gestures, features and attitudes in the dynamism of motion meant that on it were focused the most daring and original attempts at formal experimentation and manipulation; in many cases regardless of every principle of adherence to the rules of *decorum*. Such a conception of the nude opens up many possibilities in the representation that resulted in the identification of the nude depictions with the concept of *ornament* in art. Separated from the main story in narrative terms, but inextricably connected to it in aesthetic and visual terms, the nude stood out as a freestanding additional work and at the same time constitutive of its beauty.<sup>51</sup>

In Vasari's *Vite* it is possible to retrace, through the works of artists like Antonio Pollaiuolo, Luca Signorelli, Rosso Fiorentino, Perin del Vaga and Michelangelo, the path of an innovative and revolutionary art, which from the direct selection and imitation from life of a particular and concrete physical model – the naked body – is able to create an ideal form – the *ignudi* – that is the product of the *ingegno* and imagination of the artist. When describing Antonio del Pollaiuolo's work Vasari reported his modernity, as he, differently from previous painters, was one of the first to study the human anatomy in order to depict the muscles in his naked figures correctly.<sup>52</sup> Luca Signorelli is defined as an excellent painter because of his ability in representing the *fatiche* of the *ignudi* and made them look alive.<sup>53</sup> Rosso Fiorentino was praised for his study of art, as he, according to Vasari, would draw everyday a nude from life.<sup>54</sup> Perin del Vaga was also commended and described as one of the best draftsmen in

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<sup>49</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (1550), ed. R. Bettarini, P. Barocchi (Florence: S.P.E.S., 1966-1987), p. 351

<sup>50</sup> Vasari, *Vite*, p. 109

<sup>51</sup> Lazzarini, *Nudo, arte e decoro*, p. 59

<sup>52</sup> Vasari, *Vite*, p. 196

<sup>53</sup> Vasari, *Vite*, p. 204

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 310

Rome due to his great ability in depicting the muscles and the *ignudi*.<sup>55</sup> Finally with Michelangelo the nude became a poetic element able to marginalize from the depiction any other element. The nude male body was responsible for expressing all the creative potential of the artist, as it became the privileged instrument of every possible experimentation and aesthetic communication. Thanks to the naked body in motion, Michelangelo's inventive genius was able to create spectacular and difficult compositions. Vasari exemplified this creation of beauty and imaginative power by the nudes, described as 'divine figures' in the cartoon of the Battle of Cascina.<sup>56</sup> These nudes draw the line between the beautiful nudes of the fifteenth-century tradition and the *ignudi bellissimi* of the Sistine Chapel.<sup>57</sup>

Described by Vasari before any other depiction from the vault, the *ignudi* impose themselves to the viewer due to their colossal size and the dynamic tension that they establish with the stories and the painted architecture. The decoration of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel stands above all the other works described in the *Vite* as an unattainable masterpiece because Vasari determined its perfection historically: it finds no comparison with the works of both the ancients and the contemporaries. Therefore this series of nudes aroused in the viewer feelings of loss, alienation or, as Vasari states, amazement.<sup>58</sup> Michelangelo entrusted to the nude in movement the role to emphasize and amplify the stories painted on the ceiling, without any narrative role or any significance, as reported also by Condivi in his *Life of Michelangelo*.<sup>59</sup>

The concept of the nude in the *Vite* is underlined also by the elements that Vasari chose to praise regarding the nudes painted in his time. All the author's attention is directed to the beauty of the bodies, to the power of motion and to the variety of the gestures. The bodies and the gestures, moving more and more away from their narrative function, become abstract and beautiful products of the artist's imagination. The words Vasari used to describe them all define the technical perfection and their beauty regardless of their narrative function. In comparison to fifteenth-century premises, the author of the *Vite* therefore reached a purely aesthetic consideration of the nude, in which the naked male body in movement coincides with the concept of beauty itself, free from the norms of *decorum* and of function.

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<sup>55</sup> Vasari, *Vite*, p. 351

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 368

<sup>57</sup> Lazzarini, *Nudo, arte e decoro* p. 74

<sup>58</sup> Vasari, *Vite*, p. 965

<sup>59</sup> Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1964), p. 50

By following Vasari's idea, Giovanni Andrea Gilio identified the nude as an art form capable of establishing, thanks to its beauty and expressive potential, a strong relationship with the narrative context and thus creating the basis for a rich and fruitful exchange of values and meanings with what was painted. From Gilio's *Dialogo sulla pittura* emerge two fundamental issues that would have a huge impact on the development of the artistic production in the seventeenth century. Firstly it is clear that even amongst the more uncompromising moralist writers the depiction of a naked body was still seen as a beautiful element of great attraction, however only if justified by the narrative context – a major difference with Vasari. For example when describing the depictions of Christ he stated that He is to be painted naked in occasion of the Baptism in order to show on the one hand the secrets of art and the perfection of the *ingegno* of the artist and on the other hand to show Christ's own beauty, perfection, decorum, sanctity and virtue.<sup>60</sup> Secondly Gilio underlined that the nudes in painting still have to be submitted to the rules of *decorum* and to be faithful to history. Chastity is the virtue that needs to transpire from the painter's brush because even painting could cause scandal.<sup>61</sup> Therefore Gilio did not completely discard nudity but tried to relegate it to appropriate contexts. Consequently Gilio was able to bring together, more than others before him, the aesthetic predilections of the Renaissance with the Counterreformation and its dictates.<sup>62</sup>

Gilio however, was not the first to criticise the use of naked figures in paintings, as also Ludovico Dolce discussed the appropriateness of nakedness in paintings in his 1557 *Dialogo della Pittura*. He stated that, it was not appropriate to paint, for example, Christ or Saint Paul unclothed and that the painter had to find the appropriate attire for the scene depicted.<sup>63</sup> Dolce agreed with Vasari that the ability to paint nude figures could lay open the artist's technical ability. However unlike the author of the *Vite* he criticised Michelangelo by stating that in some occasions it was disrespectful to paint nudes, as it would offend the sanctity of either the subject depicted or the location in which it is placed.<sup>64</sup> Gabriele Paleotti shared a similar view. In his *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* of 1582, he harshly criticised painters that painted nude figures only to bring fame upon themselves because they thus committed a

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<sup>60</sup> Giovanni Andrea Gilio, *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'isotie con molte annotazioni fatte sopra il giudizio dei Michelagnolo et alter figure, tanto de la nova, quanto de la vecchia Capella del Papa. Con la dichiarazione come vogliono essere dipinte le sacre immagini*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1961), II pp. 1 -115 (21).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 40

<sup>62</sup> The controversy regarding the images had actually sparked with the Reformers, see: Giuseppe Scavizzi, *The Controversy on Images from Calvin to Baronius*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1992)

<sup>63</sup> Ludovico Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1961), I, pp. 141-206 (11)

<sup>64</sup> Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura*, p. 23

great offence against the profession of art.<sup>65</sup> The table of contents of the third book, which was never published, and its description in the preface, demonstrate that the author intended to examine the licentious and dishonest images that he considered an abuse and that he intended to explain their origin, their nature and their effects on the human nature.<sup>66</sup> This same condemnation of the use of nudes in paintings is also evident in the 1582 *Lettera agli Accademici del Disegno* by Bartolomeo Ammannati. Although painting and sculpting naked figures in his youth, the artist had later acquired an intense religious sentiment, which made him disown the mythological nudes he had previously created.<sup>67</sup> Since good Christians only create good and beautiful figures,<sup>68</sup> moreover he banned naked figures not only from churches but also from private contexts.<sup>69</sup> In 1590 Ammannati wrote another letter, in this case to the Archduke Ferdinand I of Tuscany in which he asked not to demand him to sculpt or paint naked things.<sup>70</sup>

In conclusion, what has emerged from this survey of treaties is a technical vision of the nude, strongly related to the artistic practice and to the showcasing of the artist's talent and *ingegno*. This becomes once again evident in Paolo Pino's 1548 *Dialogo della Pittura* in which he suggested that artists should add at least one naked figure *scorciate*, mysterious and difficult to showcase the 'perfection of art' (*perfezzion dell'arte*).<sup>71</sup> As shown above, Michelangelo entrusted the nude figures in movement the task to emphasise and amplify the stories painted on the ceiling because, by his own statement, 'the figures do not like other carvings around'.<sup>72</sup> When interpreting the *ignudi* of the Sistine Chapel, Vasari identified what became one of the characteristics of the naked bodies in the artistic production late sixteenth century: the *ignudi* that carry an ornamental function. He did so by recovering the conceptual value of the ornament as Alberti had conceived it in the *De re aedificatoria* when he distinguished between beauty and ornament, defining the latter as an attribute and additional accessory

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<sup>65</sup> Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1961), II, pp. 117-517 (164-165)

<sup>66</sup> Paleotti, *Discorso*, pp. 3, 164

<sup>67</sup> Bartolomeo Ammannati B., *Lettera di Messer Bartolomeo Ammannati, architetto e scultor Fiorentino, gli onoratissimi Accademici del Disegno*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1961), III

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 4

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem.*, p.3

<sup>70</sup> See: Johann W. Gaye, *Carteggio inedito d'artisti dei secoli XIV, XV, XVI*, 3 vols, (Florence: G. Molini, 1840) III, p. 387

<sup>71</sup> Paolo Pino, *Dialogo della Pittura di Messer Paolo Pino nuovamente dato in luce*, in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1961), I, p. 93-139 (105)

<sup>72</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Il Resto Delle Vite Degli Artefici, L' Appendice Alle Note Delle Medesime, L' Indice Generale E Le Opere Minori Dello Stesso Authore*, 2 vols, (Passigli e socj., 1838), p. 836

while regarding beauty as an intrinsic quality.<sup>73</sup> Condivi also amply confirms such an interpretation of the *ignudi* when with regard to the Sistine he wrote that the *ignudi* had nothing to do with the main story.<sup>74</sup> The nudes depicted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, widely imitated by his successors in both paintings and sculptures, can no longer be understood as a description of reality, but as an artificial system and as the result of the artist's creativity that no longer has to follow the fifteenth century adherence to nature and to the rules of *decorum*.

However, the *ignudi*, and the naked human figure in general, cannot be reduced to the mere role of ornament, used by the artist to enrich the depiction by adding beauty and artistic substance. This is because, even though not directly related to the main story, and therefore with a sort of ornamental role, they are still a powerful trigger that creates a chain reaction between the work and the viewer and therefore add meaning. This is a result of the fact that in the Renaissance the nude had a strong allegorical and symbolic connotation, which varied according to its context. Vasari himself stated in the *Ragionamenti* that he painted Lombardy as a naked woman because she had been 'stripped' by the invading soldiers.<sup>75</sup> In addition, also Gilio justified the nakedness of Christ as a symbol of his virtues and Dolce harshly criticised Michelangelo's use of the nude in inappropriate contexts. This is the aspect that will be addressed in the next chapter, the other face of the nude: nudity as an iconographic attribute, as a symbol and allegory of virtues and vices, and consequently functional and essential to add layers of meaning to the visual narrative of profane art.

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<sup>73</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, (Florence: Nicolaus Laurentii, 1485) Book VI, p.448. For Alberti's interpretation of ornament see also: Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *A history of six ideas*, (The Hague ; London : Nijhoff, 1980), p.166

<sup>74</sup> Condivi, *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, p.33

<sup>75</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Ragionamenti di Palazzo Vecchio*, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2007), p. 168

## 2. MEANINGS OF NUDITY IN PROFANE ART

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the different symbolic-allegorical meanings of the nude in profane art. It is divided into five main parts that follow a thematic approach. Firstly nudity will be examined as an allegory of the erotic domain, as a symbol of lust, love and beauty, used to characterise gods such as Venus and Cupid. Secondly nudity will be investigated as a symbol of irrationality and drunkenness, as reflected for example by the interpretations of Bacchus and representations of the Bacchanals. The third area taken into consideration will be the natural world. Fourthly nudity will be addressed in relation to personifications of truth and wisdom, as in the case of the *nuda veritas* and as an iconographical attribute of the different areas of knowledge. Finally the nude will be investigated as a token of the idealised and supernatural domain.

The naked human body, even if in works of art, can inevitably bring to mind the erotic and sexual domain and therefore throughout history it has often been associated with divinities and ideas that are connected to the world of carnal passions and love, embodied in classical Antiquity by Venus. The pagan goddess of love and sex was associated to these same ideas in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, as testified amongst others by Giovanni Boccaccio<sup>76</sup> and Vincenzo Cartari.<sup>77</sup> The iconography of Venus varied according to what scene regarding her life was depicted, even though certain attributes such as the shell, the apple and the mirror are a constant.<sup>78</sup> So is her nudity, be it partial or full, since she is described by the sources as being born naked from the sea.<sup>79</sup> The first fully naked images of Aphrodite started to appear in Greek art in the fourth century BC,<sup>80</sup> while in Roman art Venus was initially portrayed half dressed.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Geneologia degli Dei*, ed. Giovanni Betussi da Bassano (Venice: Vomino da Trino, 1547), Book III, p. 59r

<sup>77</sup> Vincenzo Cartari, *Le imagini con la spositione dei Dei degli antichi*, (Venice: Francesco Marcolini, 1556), p. CXIr

<sup>78</sup> Luba Freedman, *The Revival of Olympian Gods in Renaissance art*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.154-155

<sup>79</sup> See for example Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*. X, 31-32

<sup>80</sup> Margaret Walters, *The nude male: a new perspective*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 34

<sup>81</sup> Hallett, *The Roman Nude*, p.89



Fig. 1 - *The Ludovisi Cnidian Aphrodite*, after Praxiteles, Musei Capitolini, Rome

Therefore nakedness can be defined as a ‘classical’ attribute that is her characteristic since Antiquity. However, what is interesting is how the writers justified and explained this nakedness from the 1300s. In the third book of the *Genealogia* Boccaccio stated that Venus was depicted naked by the ancients, as the ones who imitated her, thus acting lasciviously, would do so naked.<sup>82</sup> Albricus Philosophus instead limited his description of Venus as a beautiful and naked girl, without any further symbolical explanation.<sup>83</sup> Conti in the *Mythologiae* did not comment on her nudity but strongly associated her to lust and procreation.<sup>84</sup> Cartari on the other hand described at length why Venus is to be depicted naked by explaining that her nudity symbolises the fact that he who follows lust will be then stripped and devoid of all good, as lust debilitates the body. He added that Venus was depicted this way, as carnal sins cannot be hidden,<sup>85</sup> thus giving an allegorical interpretation of her nudity. It is clearly a negative image of Venus that in these cases is seen as symbol

of lust and wantonness.

The sources however, also justify her nudity in a positive manner. Venus is also the goddess of beauty and her nakedness is therefore a way to showcase her beauty and perfection, as for example emerges from Cartari who in turn quotes Apuleius.<sup>86</sup> This aspect of Venus also influenced the nude portraits that start to appear in sixteenth-century Italy, such as Leonardo’s lost painting of the *Nude Gioconda*. These models eventually spread to France, in particular in the school of Fontainebleau, strongly influenced by Italian art.<sup>87</sup> The portraits of women celebrated for their beauty, which are disguised as deities from classical antiquity show them completely or partly naked, as a way to show their perfect bodies. Works from this period underline the importance of beauty and its positive meaning as it was regarded as a moral

<sup>82</sup> Boccaccio, *Genealogia*, Book III, p. 59r

<sup>83</sup> Albricus Philosophus, *De deorum imaginibus libellus* in *De Romanorum magistratibus* written by Andrea Domenico Fiocco (Floccus), using the pseudonym Lucius Fenestella, (Rome: Bartolommeo di Libri, c.1492) leaves 44-55

<sup>84</sup> Natale Conti, *Mythologiae*, ed. J. Mulryan, S. Brown, (Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), pp. 314-330

<sup>85</sup> Cartari, *Le imagini*, p. CXIIv

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 584

<sup>87</sup> *La Dame à sa toilette*, (Dijon: Musée des beaux-arts de Dijon, 1988) p. 18



virtue. The appearance of the body could be interpreted as a measure of spiritual beauty and a reflection of the spiritual condition infused by God into the souls of men.<sup>88</sup> This is due to the Neo-Platonic philosophy, as in the works of Baldassarre Castiglione and Marsilio Ficino, in which God was seen as the source of all beauty and Man being created in God's image, in order to be the closest approximation of God on Earth had to be as ideally beautiful as possible.<sup>89</sup>

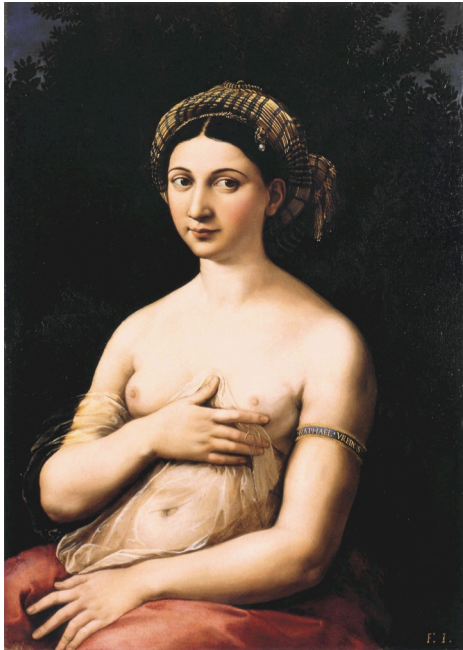


Fig. 2 – Raphael, *La Fornarina*, 1518-1519, Galleria Nazionale di Arte Antica, Rome

At the same time however, nudity became one of the iconographical elements, such as the roses or the mirrors, which link the figure of the sitter to Venus, as happens for example in the case of the *Dame à sa toilette* of Dijon. Also, often, the women in question replicate the famous pose of *Venere pudica*, as in the case of the *Fornarina* by Raphael. This is a seemingly modest gesture, which in fact draws the eye of the spectator to the unclothed body of the women. Furthermore, Ripa in his *Iconologia* described the personification of Female Beauty as a naked woman wearing a garland of lilies and privets holding a mirror in one hand and an arrow in the other, yet again similar to how Venus was described and portrayed at

the time.<sup>90</sup>

Numerous artworks of the period also demonstrate Venus' strong connection to nakedness. Many paintings depicting a naked Venus can be seen as proof starting from the *Birth of Venus* by Botticelli, to the famous *Venus of Urbino* by Titian. Despite the different interpretations of Titian's painting known as *Sacred and Profane Love* I would like to focus my attention to the interpretation given by Charles Hope who sees it as a marriage picture, following Panofsky's observation that the clothed woman is wearing a myrtle crown, which is associated to marriage. The painting therefore depicts Laura Bagarotto, the bride of Niccolò Aurelio, who commissioned the painting. The naked woman is Venus, benevolently looking at the young

<sup>88</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *El Libro dell'amore*, ed. S. Niccoli, (Florence: Leo O. Olschki, 1987), pp. 91-93

<sup>89</sup> Joanne Snow Smith, 'Michelangelo's Christian neoplatonic aesthetic of beauty in his early oeuvre: the nuditas virtualis image' in Ames-Lewis F., Rogers M., *Concepts of Beauty in Renaissance Art*, (Aldershot, Hants, England; Brookfield, Vt., USA : Ashgate), pp. 147-162

<sup>90</sup> Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, (Rome: Per gli eredi di Gio. Gigliotti, 1593), p. 29

bride, who instead appears to be wearing a typical Venetian wedding dress.<sup>91</sup> The fact that the bride seems oblivious to Venus' and Cupid's presence could be explained by Philip Fehl's observation regarding the presence of supernatural beings in the company of mortals, who seem not to be aware of the former's presence.<sup>92</sup>



Fig. 3 – Titian, *Sacred and Profane Love*, c.1514, Galleria Borghese, Rome

I believe that the nudity of the woman identified as Venus well supports the interpretation of it being a marriage picture, as we have seen that one of Venus' most recognisable iconographical attributes is nudity.



Fig. 4 – Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *The Judgment of Paris*, c.1514-1515, Villa Mylius-Vigoni, Menaggio

Venus is also one of the protagonists of the episode concerning the Judgment of Paris, which is a particularly interesting episode in the visual arts in relation to the nudity of the figures depicted. The incident, recounted by Homer in the *Iliad* has as its main characters Venus, Juno, Minerva, Mercury and the young Paris.<sup>93</sup> The same episode is also narrated and enriched with details by both Ovid in the

<sup>91</sup> Charles Hope, 'Problems of Interpretation in Titian's Erotic Paintings' in *Tiziano e Venezia: convegno internazionale di studi*, (Vicenza: N. Pozza, 1980), pp. 111-124 (116-117)

<sup>92</sup> Philipp Fehl, 'The hidden genre: a study of Giorgione's *Concerte Champetre* in the Louvre', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XVI, 1957-58, pp.153-168

<sup>93</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, 24. 25-30

*Heroides* is by Lucian of Samosata in the *Dialogue of the Gods*.<sup>94</sup> In Renaissance art, the three goddesses are often shown naked, as in the case of the engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael's version. In the case of Venus, as we have seen, nudity is the legacy of the classical world while the naked representations of Minerva and Juno are an unprecedented infringement of the classical iconography and are therefore the product of the medieval tradition. In fact, even the models on Roman sarcophagi used by Raphael to represent this event show the goddesses dressed.<sup>95</sup> The same scene depicted by Botticelli, with the goddesses shown dressed is closer to that which was the classical iconography of this scene. Neither Ovid nor Lucian described the goddesses naked, while Apuleius described Venus being naked without specifying the clothing of the other two.<sup>96</sup> While Boccaccio in the *Genealogia Deorum* wrote that the three goddesses showed themselves naked to Paris, due to his closeness to the medieval tradition.<sup>97</sup>

The medieval iconographic precedents for this type of representation are most likely the illuminations of the Venetian manuscripts of the *Historia destructionis Troiae* by Guido delle Colonne, dated around 1350-1370. Moreover Buchtal believes that these images are the earliest representations of this theme in medieval art.<sup>98</sup> Yet this is not the first time that goddesses such as Minerva and Juno are depicted naked in spite of their classical iconographic tradition. In fact, the nakedness of the ancient gods extends throughout the Middle Ages, a very early witness of which is an illumination in *De*



Fig. 5 – Rabanus Marurus, *De Universo*, 1023, Montecassino, Lib. XV. Cap. VI. – De diis gentium (Hercules, Mars, Apollo)

*Universo* by Rabanus Maurus, dated to 1023. Seen in the miniature, besides the naked Minerva and Juno there is also Diana and in the previous one male gods, including Apollo

<sup>94</sup> Ovid, *Heroides*, XVI, 65; Lucian of Samosata, *Dialogues of the Gods*, 20

<sup>95</sup> Himmelmann, *Nudità ideale*, p. 257; Clark, *The nude*, p. 355

<sup>96</sup> Apuleius, *Met.*, X, 30-31

<sup>97</sup> Boccaccio, *Genealogia*, Book VI, p. 112r

<sup>98</sup> Hugo Buchtal, *Historia Troiana. Studies in the History of Medieval Secular Illustration*, (London: Brill, 1971), p. 37



and Mars. The text by Rabanus Maurus, together with illustrations, was continuously copied in the Middle Ages and can therefore have influenced all the subsequent images.<sup>99</sup> The illustrations were carried out in close contact with the text, as testified by the attributes that characterise the deities that are also mentioned in the text, whereas only the nakedness of Mars is explained allegorically.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, nudity in this case generally served to mark the paganism and the demonic character of pagan gods.<sup>101</sup>

Returning to the Judgment of Paris there is another source that shows that the Renaissance thought as obvious the representation of the Judgment of Paris with the naked goddesses. It is a passage of the aforementioned treaty *Politia litteraria* by Decembrio. In the dialogue Leonello d'Este cited as current examples of nude or semi-nude statues of deities such as Venus, Diana and Minerva; in this period, the latter, therefore, was also represented naked even in scenes that did not have anything to do with the Judgment of Paris. What is noteworthy is the fact that Decembrio believed to describe the goddesses according to the ancient tradition, while he was describing what was in accordance with the medieval tradition. In this case, nudity as an iconographical attribute is interpreted as a sign that the art of the Renaissance had actually recovered the forms of classical antiquity.<sup>102</sup>

Another deity, strongly connected to the domain of love and sex, that was always depicted naked is Cupid. The child god of heavenly and earthly love has a complex and varied genealogy, as he was said to be the son of either Venus alone or of Venus and Mars according to Boccaccio, who also stated that he was of incredible beauty and of lascivious customs.<sup>103</sup> Francesco da Barberino, who has also inspired Petrarch's *Trionfi*, described Cupid as a naked and blind youth because his virtues have a spiritual nature.<sup>104</sup> Petrarch described him in the *Triumphus Cupidinis* as a young naked man with coloured wings,<sup>105</sup> named him *Amore* – love – and stated he was born from sloth and wantonness.<sup>106</sup> The *Mythographus II* explained Cupid's nudity as Fulgentius had explained Venus's one: since the depravity of love is always

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<sup>99</sup> Guglielmo Cavallo, *L'universo medievale: il manoscritto cassinese del 'De rerum naturis' di Rabano Mauro*, (Ivrea: Priuli & Verlucca, 1996)

<sup>100</sup> Rabano Mauro, *De Universo*, in *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne, 221 vols, (Paris: Migne, 1841-1865), CXI, c. 430

<sup>101</sup> Himmelmann, *Nudità ideale*, pp. 258-259

<sup>102</sup> Decembrio, *De politia litteraria*, ch. 68, p.162v

<sup>103</sup> Boccaccio, *Genealogia*, Book III, p. 59v; Book IX, p. 158r

<sup>104</sup> Francesco da Barberino, *Documenti d'amore*, ed. F. Egidi, (Rome: Società filologica romana, 1905-1927), p.

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<sup>105</sup> Francesco Petrarca, *I Trionfi. Triumphus Cupidinis*, I, 23-27

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem.*, I, 76-84

obvious and can never be hidden.<sup>107</sup> The *Mythographus III* reported the same general characteristics and added a few humanistic details.<sup>108</sup> Lillio Giraldi described him as a naked and blind child with a bow.<sup>109</sup> Cartari, in the *Imagini*, gave a brief description of the most common image of the God: a child with a blindfold, a bow and arrows.<sup>110</sup> In fact, as he then specified, this is only one of the many images of Cupid, and this one is the most common in the Middle Ages and handed down by the mythographers of the time and used until the fifteenth century. The representation without the blindfold gradually replaced this ‘blind Cupid’ image during the sixteenth century.<sup>111</sup>



Fig. 6 – Piero della Francesca, *Cupid*, 1452-1466, Basilica di San Francesco, Arezzo

The typical Renaissance depiction of Cupid is exemplified by Piero della Francesca in San Francesco in Assisi, where there is a return to the classical type.<sup>112</sup> Cupid is naked, and is to be depicted naked, as he symbolises the fact that love, and more precisely carnal love and lust, like in the case of Venus, ‘strip men of their garments, their possessions, their good sense and wisdom’. Once again nudity symbolises a negative concept.

However, in the case of the Three Graces, who are strongly connected to Venus, nudity appears to have a positive meaning. In fact, the sources state that the nudity of the Graces is due to the fact that they symbolised friendship. In the relations of friendship, men must behave without deception, and have an open and pure mind, and it is for this that the Graces are depicted nude, as reported by various sources, from Boccaccio over Giraldi to Cartari.<sup>113</sup> Cartari also reported, citing Pausanias, that the Graces were depicted dressed in

<sup>107</sup> *Mythographus Vaticanus II*, 46; Fulgentius, *Mythologiae III*, I, p.40

<sup>108</sup> *Mythographus Vaticanus III*, 15,22

<sup>109</sup> Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, *De Deis Gentium*, (Basel: Per Ioannem Oporinum, 1548), p. 560b

<sup>110</sup> Cartari, *Le imagini*, p. LXXXIXr

<sup>111</sup> Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, pp. 95-128

<sup>112</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 114-15

<sup>113</sup> Boccaccio, *Geneologia*, Book V, pp. 102r-102v; Giraldi, *De Deis Gentium*, p. 576; Cartari, *Le imagini*, p. CXXv

Antiquity; and in fact both Seneca<sup>114</sup> and Horace<sup>115</sup> described them as dressed. In Renaissance iconography the Graces are characterised by nudity, as in the case of the *Three Graces* by Raphael, or with transparent clothes as in the case of Botticelli's *Primavera*. The work by Raphael was inspired by the Hellenistic group depicting the Three Graces, known by various copies of Roman and other reproductions via fresco.<sup>116</sup>



Fig. 7 – Raphael, *The Three Graces*, 1505, Musée Condé, Chantilly

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<sup>114</sup> Seneca, *De beneficiis*, I, 3, 5

<sup>115</sup> Horace, *Carmina*, I, 30

<sup>116</sup> Anna Coliva, 'Raffaello da Firenze a Roma' in *Raffaello da Firenze a Roma*, (Milan: Skira, 2006), pp. 35-66 (40)



Cesare Ripa's descriptions of Licentiousness, Desire and Lust in his *Iconologia* are also characterised by nudity.<sup>117</sup> In the case of the first two Ripa described them as naked women while the third should be represented as Venus riding a ram, which as we have seen is herself characterised by nakedness.<sup>118</sup> In the case of Licentiousness Ripa added that the



Fig. 8 – Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* : *Lussuria*, 1600

woman has on her head a garland of vine, as drunkenness leads men to do unseemly things.<sup>119</sup> Another entry in Ripa related to this same domain is *Senso*, or Sensation, that was described as a naked and fat young man because sensations he makes men go naked of the goods of the soul and the body, as when men think only about the present pleasures they do not worry about future calamities.<sup>120</sup>



Fig. 9 – Antinous as Bacchus, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples

Drunkenness is another aspect that is often associated to nudity in the visual arts. Mythology ascribed to the Greek god Dionysus the discovery of wine, which quickly became his iconographical attribute.<sup>121</sup> One of the most ancient testimonies of the iconography of Dionysus is the so-called *François Vase* where the god is depicted wearing a himation and chiton, with a beard as a symbol of his woodland nature.<sup>122</sup> Successively this representation of the god was substituted by a more effeminate and hairless one, as the one seen the basement of the Parthenon, that was due to both a more philological approach to the myth and to a loss

<sup>117</sup> As we will see later, nudity in Ripa is used as an attribute several times without having a fixed, single meaning; as it can have both a negative and positive meaning.

<sup>118</sup> Ripa, *Iconologia* (1593), pp. 153, 59,155

<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem.*, p.153

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem.* p. 252

<sup>121</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, 406; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, III, 62-63

<sup>122</sup> Virgil, *Georgics* II, 385-390; Thomas Carpenter, *Dionysian Imagery in 5th century Athens*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp.93-97

of interest in the religious aspect.<sup>123</sup> In Rome, Bacchus maintained the mythological identity of Dionysus and the same iconography.<sup>124</sup> The roman God was often shown with a crown of ivy or vine and holding a thyrsus.<sup>125</sup> A good example of this is a roman statue representing *Antinous*, Hadrian's young lover, half naked and with the features of the god.

Bacchus was often depicted naked in the Renaissance and starting from Boccaccio the sources identified him with wine and interpreted his nudity allegorically. In the *Genealogia Deorum* Boccaccio explained that Bacchus is naked since the drunk manifests everything and since it has led many into poverty – and on a more practical note because it makes one warm. He is young because lascivious drunks are just like boys whose intellect has not been formed yet.<sup>126</sup> Cartari similarly to Boccaccio stated that Bacchus is to be depicted naked as drunkenness and wine uncover what is hidden and reports the proverb *in vino veritas*.<sup>127</sup> Whilst Conti did not report on his nakedness but referred to him as horned as horns, like alcohol, cause trouble.<sup>128</sup>

The painting *The Bacchanal of the Andrians* by Titian, made for the alabaster Studio of Alfonso d'Este depicts a miraculous epiphany of the god Bacchus. It is an interesting example because it allows investigating the relationship between drunkenness, eroticism and nudity. At the origin of the painting there are two passages, from Flavius Philostratus and from Pliny the Elder.<sup>129</sup> In the painting there are some naked characters and others wearing *all'antica* garments. The many figures in the painting all reference drunkenness and lasciviousness. Starting from the figure of a nude woman in the foreground characterised by a very sensual pose, next to which there is a child who is raising his vest to pee. To their right, in the background there is a group of inebriated nude men and in the centre of the composition a naked young man who is putting his hand under the skirt of the young woman in front of him – yet another erotic reference. Eroticism, music and dance are the joys brought by Bacchus to mankind through the gift of wine, which is the true protagonist of the work if one keeps in mind the amount of beverage vessels containing it.

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<sup>123</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, IV, 5, 2-4; Carpenter, *Dionysian Imagery*, pp. 93-103

<sup>124</sup> Silvia Malaguzzi, *Arte e vino*, (Florence: Giunti, 1997), p. 6

<sup>125</sup> Homer, *Hymns*, 26, 1 ; Ovid, *Fasti*, III, 767; Horace, *Odes*, II, 19, 9

<sup>126</sup> Boccaccio, *Genealogia*, Book V, p. 99r

<sup>127</sup> Cartari, *Le imagini*, p. LXXXIIv

<sup>128</sup> Conti, *Mythologiae*, p. 419

<sup>129</sup> Philostratus the Elder, *Imagines*, I, 25; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, II, 231; XXXI, 13





Fig. 10 – Titian, *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, 1523-1526, Museo del Prado, Madrid

The scholarly tradition has noted that this episode is a pretext to represent the effects of wine on people, which vary according to age, in the wake of a text of Aristotle quoted by numerous Renaissance authors. In the *Problemata*, there are numerous references to the distinction between the different ages of man and the effects of wine were believed to be different depending on age.<sup>130</sup> As seen in the central group and the beautiful woman in the foreground wine causes a sensual behaviour, in children, as demonstrated by the only child, it has diuretic effect while in the elderly, as witnessed by the old man in the background it has a soporific effect.<sup>131</sup> This interpretation works also very well with the moralistic interpretation given by Cartari.<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, drunkenness and sleep are associated with the wine even in the *Pittura* by Anton Francesco Doni of 1564 where wine is in the company of the enemies of Vigilance: Sleep and Drunkenness.<sup>133</sup>

Nudity is also present in the visual arts in scenes set in natural settings or in those alluding to Arcadia. The bucolical genre flourished in the third century BC in Theocritus' poetry,<sup>134</sup> whose work was held in high regard in the Renaissance. Furthermore the *Eclogues* by Virgil, were always known and praised through the Middle Ages and influenced the allegorical and

<sup>130</sup> Aristotle, *Problemata*, XXX, 1

<sup>131</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, mostly iconographic*, (New York: New York University Press, 1969), pp.101-102

<sup>132</sup> Cartari, *Le imagini*, Ch. XII

<sup>133</sup> Anton Francesco Doni, *Pitture del Doni academico pellegrino. Nelle quali si mostra di nuoua inuentione: amore, fortuna, tempo, castita, religione, sdegno, riforma, morte, sonno & sogno, huomo, republica, & magnanimita; diuise in due trattati, Libro primo*, (Padua : appresso Gratoso Perchacino, 1564), p. 7

<sup>134</sup> *Theocritus*, ed. A.S.F. Gow, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950)

pastoral poetry.<sup>135</sup> Virgil was the first one to locate the kingdom of happiness in Arcadia and Ovid in the *Fasti* had identified Arcadia with the Golden Age.<sup>136</sup> However, it was the classical description of the golden age from Ovid that both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance accepted as canonical.<sup>137</sup> The theme of Ovid penetrated everywhere pictorial iconography of the Renaissance.<sup>138</sup>

There seems to be a difference between the visual depictions of Arcadia and of the Golden Age and the literary sources, most likely since the Renaissance had little testimony of how the Ancients actually represented in painting the world of the god Pan. In classical painting and sculpture the pastoral theme derived mainly from different associations and sources of inspiration than poetry.<sup>139</sup> In the Renaissance, Arcadia was characterised as a mythical land of gods and goddesses and as a fabulous land in which man lived in perpetual happiness.<sup>140</sup> Both aspects were represented visually, the former mainly by Florentine artists of the end of the 1400s, the latter by Venetian poets of the 1500s. Given the vastity of the subject I will consider two paintings that are emblematic of the two different interpretations of Arcadia and that will enable me to investigate nudity as symbol of the natural world: the lost painting by Luca Signorelli entitled *The Court of Pan* and the *Concentre Champêtre* by Giorgione.

Luca Signorelli painted *The Court of Pan* for Lorenzo de Medici, as reported by Vasari, who described it as ‘a painting with some naked Gods’ (*una tela con alcuni Dei ignudi*), which was very much appreciated.<sup>141</sup> This painting was conserved at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Germany, from 1873 to 1945, and rumour has it that the Director of the National Gallery of London, Sir William Boxall, refused to buy it because ‘it was rather undressed for the British public’.<sup>142</sup>

*The Court of Pan* is set in Arcadia, the land of poetic dreams, because according to the literary tradition, Pan met his disciples on the summit of one of the Arcadian mountains.<sup>143</sup> For Signorelli and the Neo-Platonists Arcadia was not only the land of Pan but also the land

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<sup>135</sup> Rudolf Wittkower, *Arcadia e Giorgionismo*, (1960), p. 10

<sup>136</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*, II, 424

<sup>137</sup> Wittkower, *Arcadia*, p. 9

<sup>138</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10

<sup>139</sup> Luba Freedman, *The classical pastoral in the visual arts*, (New York: P. Lang, 1989), p. 31

<sup>140</sup> *Ibidem.*, p.110

<sup>141</sup> Vasari, *Vite*, p. 366

<sup>142</sup> Susanna Avery-Quash, ‘The Growth of Interest in Early Italian Painting in Britain’, in D. Gordon, *National Gallery Catalogues: The Fifteenth-Century Italian Paintings*, vol. 1:1400–1460, London, pp. xxiv–xl (xxxiv)

<sup>143</sup> Freedman, *The classical pastoral*, p. 111

of a particular kind of shepherd that did not take care of his flock but mainly meditated and dedicated himself to music. The shepherd depicted without his flock, like the ones present in this painting, is therefore a higher type of shepherd, either one that belongs to the *thiasos* of Pan or one whose simple appearance is actually a disguise for an Olympic deity temporarily on Earth to seduce a young mortal maiden.<sup>144</sup> The principal sources for this painting, as noted by Roger Fry, were most likely Macrobius's *Saturnalia* and Servius's commentary on Virgil *Eclogues*.<sup>145</sup> Various figures are depicted in the painting, however Pan, is the only figure that we are able to identify with certainty.



Fig. 11- Luca Signorelli, *The Court of Pan*, c. 1490, Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin (destroyed 1945)

Servius' description explained the special features of Pan, which differ from the usual description and representation typical of classical antiquity.<sup>146</sup> In fact, Pan did not have a such a high position and was nothing like the god that we find idealised in the painting by Signorelli, but he was a rather horrid and jovial herdsman, despite that the lower legs of a goat are always present. Thus, it is in

Servius' description that we find explained the various attributes as the reddish skin, his curious baton, the moon as horns, the stars on his mantle and the peculiar effect of light due to the union between the moon, sun and stars. Also, the musical instruments in this case would symbolise the universal harmony of the spheres.

The complex iconography of this painting has been widely discussed by scholars in the last century. From it being a depiction of the four stages of life;<sup>147</sup> to it being a tribute to the Neo-

<sup>144</sup>Freedman, *The classical pastoral*, p. 110

<sup>145</sup> Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, I,19 ; Servius, *In Vergilii Aeneidem commentarii*, in the note on the second *Bucolic* of Virgil, line 31.

<sup>146</sup> As for example in *Homeric Hymn, 19* dedicated to Pan, who is described as long-haired and unkempt.

<sup>147</sup> Roger Fry, 'The symbolism of Signorelli's School of Pan', *The Monthly Review*, December 1901, pp. 110-114

Platonic Academy of Careggi of Lorenzo de Medici and Marsilio Ficino;<sup>148</sup> to it being a reference to masturbation;<sup>149</sup> to it being a complex political allegory of the Florentine Republic;<sup>150</sup> to it representing the four ages of man;<sup>151</sup> to it being either a meditation on the passing of time<sup>152</sup> or on artistic creativity.<sup>153</sup> Due to these many different interpretations and to the fact that no literary source has been found that perfectly reflects what the painting depicts it is likely that, as in the case of other paintings created for the Medicis, the *Pan* may have been deliberately obscure.<sup>154</sup>

However, how can the nudity of the characters in this painting be interpreted? And most of all, can their nudity be interpreted allegorically in relation to the natural setting that surrounds them and that characterises Pan's world? I believe that the nakedness of the figures depicted has to do with two principal reasons. On the one hand their nudity serves to underline their strong relationship to Pan and the natural world and on the other hand to emphasise the 'out of time' and supernatural setting where the action is taking place. In the literary sources Pan is strictly associated to the natural world. The meaning of his name, which was wrongly believed to signify 'all' in Greek, also corroborates this association.<sup>155</sup> Boccaccio reported that Pan is to be identified with nature and that the way he was depicted was due to the fact that in his image the ancients tried to condense all of the symbols of the natural world.<sup>156</sup> Cartari, by quoting Macrobius, explained the symbolical meanings of the various body parts and attributes of Pan and reported the same identification with the natural world.<sup>157</sup> In the *Discorso sopra la Mascherata della Geneologia degl'Iddei de' Gentili*, Baldini stated that with Pan the ancients meant to symbolise the universe. He furthermore compared the various attributes and physical characteristic to aspects of nature.<sup>158</sup> In the *Iconologia*, nature and

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<sup>148</sup> Hans H. Brummer, 'Pan Platonicus', *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, XXXIII (1964), pp.41-86 1964; Arnold Hauser, 'Luca Signorelli's Pan: Kunst als Sublimierung von Liebe', *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* LXVIII.4 (1999), pp. 250-69

<sup>149</sup> Robert Eisler, 'Luca Signorelli's school of Pan', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1948), pp. 77-92 (84-88)

<sup>150</sup> Warman Welliver, 'Signorelli's Court of Pan', *Art Quarterly*, XXIV (1961), pp. 334-345

<sup>151</sup> Freedman, *The classical pastoral*, 1985, p. 153

<sup>152</sup> Philippe Morel, 'Le Regne de Pan de Signorelli', in ed. R. Duits, F. Quiviger, *Images of the Pagan Gods: Papers of a Conference in Memory of Jean Seznec*, (London, Turin: Nino Aragno, 2009), pp. 309-208

<sup>153</sup> David McLellan, 'The Great God Pan reborn in Renaissance Florence', *Spunti e ricerche*, 14 (1999), pp.75-85 (76)

<sup>154</sup> Tom Henry, *The Life and Art of Luca Signorelli*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 81-85

<sup>155</sup> His name does not actually derive from the Greek *pan* (all) but from the contracted form of *pa-on* which means herdsman, pastor. See: John Boardman, *The Great God Pan. The Survival of an image*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), pp.26-27

<sup>156</sup> Boccaccio, *Geneologia*, Book I, 9r-10v; Book IV, 68r-105v

<sup>157</sup> Cartari, *Le imagini*, p. XXIXv

<sup>158</sup> Baccio Baldini, *Discorso sopra la Mascherata della Geneologia degl'Iddei de' Gentili*, (Florence: Appresso i Giunti, 1565), p.101

nudity are also seen in a close relationship as the personification of Nature is described as a naked woman.<sup>159</sup>

Another painting that reflects the other interpretation of Arcadia is the famous *Concert champêtre* by Giorgione. The painting shows in the foreground a group of two clothed men sitting on the ground playing music as well as two naked women. The atmosphere is of serene tranquillity yet tinted with wantonness because of the nakedness of the women. In the distance, a lonely shepherd is taking care of his flock. It is possible to distinguish between the two kinds of shepherds that we also find discussed in the aforementioned Neo-Platonic circles. In this case we have the typical shepherd in the background, which is juxtaposed to the two men playing music, which embody the second type of the ‘pastoral’ life.



Fig. 12- Giorgione, *Concert Champêtre*, 1509, Musée du Louvre, Paris

How can the two naked women that seem to be perfectly at ease in this natural setting be interpreted? There is no trace of their garments, a part from the white mantles they are loosely wearing and that do not cover their bodies fully, and the two men do not seem surprised by their presence or appearance. Therefore, as also suggested by Fehl, I believe that these women are not mortals but nymphs that are ‘magnificently clothed in their nudity’.<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, one of the two women is seen pouring the water from a pitcher into the well and is not collecting it, and being a nymph this would be her natural occupation. According to Greek

<sup>159</sup> Ripa, *Iconologia* (1593), p. 175

<sup>160</sup> Fehl, *The hidden genre*, p. 157



mythology, Nymphs had the appearance of young girls and their name comes from the term used to designate the maidens of marriageable age.<sup>161</sup> Nymphs were not always considered to be immortal and divine, but often only semi divine. In fact, they did not live on Mount Olympus but on Earth where they were imagined in natural landscapes, especially near water, rivers and springs in the woods and at isolated trees, mountains and meadows. Generally they were givers of fertility and life, they took care of the plants and animals and were thus considered as benefactors of mankind.<sup>162</sup> In the mythographical texts of the Renaissance, as in Boccaccio and Cartari for example, nymphs were described as beautiful women.<sup>163</sup> However their iconography is not fixed at the time, as testified by the fact that the nymphs' iconography is often very similar to the one of the Three Graces as seen in the 1647 editions of the *Imagini* by Cartari.<sup>164</sup>

Thus, the physical appearance of the nymphs is described as beautiful and youthful and they had no special features or attributes. In the visual arts of Antiquity they were represented as normally dressed like the young girls of their age, nude only when it imposed a special occasion such as the bathroom or the plaything of love with the satyrs. In Greek votive reliefs however, there is a type of half-naked nymph, holding before her a cup or a large shell as in the case of the relief of *Nymphai Nitrodes* of Ischia. Graceful in appearance, they were often imagined dancing and they were primarily associated with divinities such as Aphrodite, Apollo, Hermes, but, given their nature, especially with Artemis, Dionysus and Pan, their lord with whom they were revered. Fehl suggests they are personifications of the song that is being played, probably on love, eternal beauty and youth. This hypothesis is also corroborated by the fact that the nakedness of the two women is not functional to what is happening in the painting. There is no need for them to be naked, as it would happen in scenes from the Loves of Zeus or Bacchanals. It is not surprising to find beings from different worlds in the same setting, and a way that often is found to distinguish between the mortal beings is by depicting the immortal ones without clothing, as a way to underline their divine and idealised nature. Therefore, Giorgione sees Arcadia as the land of youth and beauty, and the two naked women embody this concept.

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<sup>161</sup> See: Arthur D. Nock, 'Nymphs and nereids', *Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph*. 37. 1961.

<sup>162</sup> Hermann Sichtermann, *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica* (Treccani, 1963), Lemma: Ninfe,

<sup>163</sup> Boccaccio, *Geneologia*, Book VII, pag. 128v

<sup>164</sup> Caterina Volpi, *Le Immagini degli dèi di Vincenzo Cartari*, (Rome: De Luca, 1996) p. 284

The idea of the Golden Age that is present both in the descriptions of the ancient Greek and Latin poets<sup>165</sup> and in the descriptions of Eden in the Old Testament, is characterised by simple life in a luscious natural setting, and its visual representations reflect this view perfectly.<sup>166</sup> The nudity of some of the characters usually present seems to be one of the characteristics of the representations, in this case with a positive meaning. The depictions of Arcadia, as we have seen, are set in a realm out of time and transmit the idea of perpetual happiness related to the love of simplicity. They represent the pure and rustic life and an escape from the artificial intellectualism of the city, in which nudity has to be seen as a positive attribute that identifies the predominance of the natural and uncorrupted element.

Nudity in the Renaissance was also the distinctive attribute of the personification of Truth. Up until the fourteenth century personifications of virtues were of a strictly ecclesiastical character. As discovered by Panofsky, the *nuda veritas*, or naked truth, appears for the first time in 1350 alongside the draped *miser cordia*, mercy.<sup>167</sup> It is in the *Quattrocento* in Italy, that the concept of naked Truth is also applied to secular contexts thanks to Alberti. In the *Trattato della Pittura* Alberti described the *Calumny* as painted by Apelles and described by Lucian by following the Latin translation given by Guarino da Verona in 1408, entitled *Calumniae non temere credendum*. Lucian had not described the appearance of Truth, neither did Guarino, but he described Repentance as ‘weeping and full of shame’.<sup>168</sup> Alberti instead reported that after Repentance, now only described as dressed in black, arrived Truth, a ‘shameful and bashful’ (*pudica e verecunda*) young woman.<sup>169</sup> Therefore, since in Alberti’s description it is Truth who is to be considered shameful it is most likely that he already imagined her as naked, since this would strongly emphasise her shamfulness.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, Truth’s bashfulness in this case could be used to enhance her being the opposite of Calumny, which is instead described by Guarino as appearing ‘to be too attractive’ (*ad excessum usque speciosa*).<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, IV, 85-89; XV, v.403-414; Hesiod, *Works and days*, 176-201; Virgil, *Eclogues*, IV; Horace, *Epode*, XVI; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I, 129-150; Seneca, *Medea*, v. 301-309; Tacitus, *Germania*, XLVI; Plutarch, *The life of Solon*, VIII-IX

<sup>166</sup> *Genesis*, 3:7

<sup>167</sup> Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, p. 157

<sup>168</sup> Guarino da Verona, translation of *Calumniae non temere credendum*, London, British Museum cod. Arundel 138, fol. 336

<sup>169</sup> Alberti, *Trattato della pittura*, p. 53

<sup>170</sup> Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, p. 158

<sup>171</sup> Guarino, *Calumniae non temere credendum*, fol. 336

Truth in Apelles' allegory embodies the perfect human actions and thoughts. Other examples of the classical comprehension of Truth, and naked Truth, can be found in Euripides and Seneca.<sup>172</sup> In the Renaissance, Truth was described in many different ways, and had different meanings. Ficino described it as both the food of the soul and the substance the soul is made of, and Giordano Bruno saw it being as incorporeal.<sup>173</sup> Sometimes, in giving a visual representation to Truth, Christian iconography would be used, as in the case of Dürer where Truth holds the *sol iustitiae*.<sup>174</sup> More often however, she is depicted in the nude, becoming simultaneously an image of vulnerability, openness and moral perfection. Her nudity came to be understood as a symbol of truth in a general philosophical sense. Truth was therefore interpreted as an expression of inherent beauty as opposed to mere accessory charms. Furthermore with the rise of the Neo-Platonic movement, it came to signify the idealised domain and the intelligible as opposed to the physical and sensible world.<sup>175</sup> The figure of the *nuda veritas* became one of the most popular allegories of the Renaissance; a very good example of its visual representation is in Botticelli's allegorical painting *The Calumny of Apelles*.



Fig. 13- Sandro Botticelli, *The Calumny of Apelles*, 1494, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

<sup>172</sup> Euripides, *Phoen.* 2.3. 479, Seneca, *Ep.* 49

<sup>173</sup> Ficino, *El Libro dell'amore*, pp.79,154; Giordano Bruno, *Degli eroici furori*, in Giordano Bruno, *Dialoghi filosofici italiani*, ed. M. Ciliberto, (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), p. 917

<sup>174</sup> Patricia A. Slote, *An Iconographic Study of Albrecht Durer's Sol Iustitiae : Master's Essay*, (University of Michigan, 1975)

<sup>175</sup> Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, p. 159



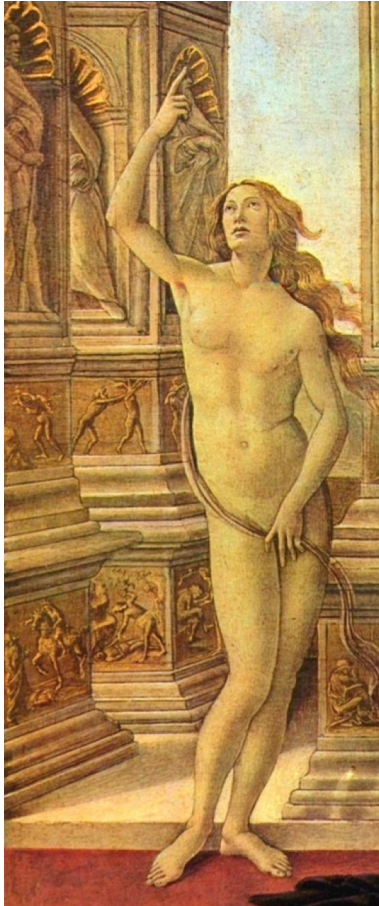


Fig. 14 – Botticelli, *The Calumny of Apelles*, Truth (detail)

On the far left of the composition a woman symbolising Truth, whose physical appearance recalls the description found in Alberti, is seen pointing and looking up at the sky. It should be noted, however, that the naked woman with long blond hair that represents Truth in Botticelli's painting is physically different from the other women usually painted by him. Unlike Venus, from the *Birth of Venus*, for example, the figure of Truth is much drier and elongated, with an almost androgynous body. The plump body and sensual curves that characterise the goddess of beauty and love are nowhere to be seen in this depiction of Truth. In my opinion it is a deliberate choice made by the painter to emphasize the symbolic significance of the figure. The nakedness of Venus, as we have seen, was usually used to underline her beauty and her close ties to the erotic world and thus she had to be depicted according to the beauty canons of the time, as described by Agnolo Firenzuola in his *Dialogo sulla bellezza delle donne* of 1452, in which the ideal

body type was somewhere between lean and fat, plump and proportionate.<sup>176</sup> Truth instead being 'modest and bashful' should not arouse any erotic thoughts in the viewer and therefore her physical appearance is less appealing in order to mitigate this idea in the spectator's mind. One however must not forget the moment in which Botticelli painted this, in 1496. Influenced by Savonarola, Botticelli was undergoing a spiritual and religious crisis and his style became more severe, aimed at denying the style for which he was distinguished in the contemporary Florentine art scene. His style was therefore characterised by a heightened expressiveness of the poses and characters, a more pronounced plasticity of the figures and a stronger use of *chiaroscuro*.<sup>177</sup> Nonetheless, her gaze lifted to the sky, as well as the gesture of the hand, emphasize the fact that the viewer's eye should not rest on her body but on the idea that she embodies; an idea which relates to God, the Good and the Beautiful, as in the Neo-Platonic philosophy.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>176</sup> Agnolo Firenzuola, *Dialogo sulle bellezze delle donne* in *Opere di Messer Agnolo Firenzuola Fiorentino*, 2 vols, (Florence 1763), I, p. 307

<sup>177</sup> Ronald Lightbown, *Botticelli*, 2 vols, (London: Paul Elek, 1978), I, pp. 122-126

<sup>178</sup> As in Ficino, *El Libro dell'Amore*, p. 25

In this same painting, there is another naked figure, the slandered Apelles, who is wearing nothing but a purple veil that covers his groin. Apelles' nudity should be read differently than Truth's one, as in this case it most likely refers to his helpfulness and discomfiture. It should be interpreted as the so-called pathetic nudity that was also a characteristic of the Greek and Roman art, as explained before.

Cesare Ripa in the *Iconologia* includes four entries for Truth, three of which are described as naked whilst the first one he mentions is richly dressed in white and has golden hair.<sup>179</sup> When Truth is naked it is described as a young girl with a beautiful body adorned with white veils that do not cover it completely, because truth must remain uncovered.<sup>180</sup> In the third entry, that is the second on naked Truth, it is holding the sun in her right hand and in her left a clock, in this case linking it to the theme of time and the fact that with the passage of time, the truth is made known.<sup>181</sup> Even in the third description naked Truth is associated to time since even in this case in the left holding a clock while in the right a plant he calls *Persica* with a leaf. Ripa believed the *Persica* to be the ancient hieroglyph of the heart while the leaf symbolised the tongue, thus conveying that one must always speak the truth.<sup>182</sup>



Fig. 16 – Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia : Verità*, 1603

Other instances of iconographical nudity appear in Ripa's *Iconologia*, some of which have already been mentioned. Further ones have yet to be analysed, some of which are all relatable to the idea of knowledge or to some areas of it, and in these cases nudity is a distinctive feature that conveys a positive meaning. Philosophy is described as a beautiful young woman dressed with tattered clothes that show her naked body, in the wake of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* in which he wrote, 'Poor naked and you go Philosophy'.<sup>183</sup> Ripa explained Philosophy is badly dressed as men dealing with philosophy have no interest in outward appearances. Even Mathematics, as covered by a transparent veil, it should be included in this category. The

<sup>179</sup> Ripa, *Iconologia* (1593), p. 284

<sup>180</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 284

<sup>181</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 285

<sup>182</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 285

<sup>183</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 86

transparent dress symbolises how open and clear it as a science.<sup>184</sup> *Chiarezza*, or clarity, is described as a young naked woman who shines and holds the sun.<sup>185</sup> We find here a striking similarity with some depictions of Truth, as in the case of the image by Dürer previously mentioned. Then there is Readiness, *Prontezza*, a highly valued trait in the Renaissance, which is described as naked and winged as it signifies fast thinking and therefore must be free



Fig. 17 – Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* : *Chiarezza*, c. 1600

of obstructions.<sup>186</sup> The same association between nudity and swiftness is made in the 1603 edition of the *Iconologia* in which *Ingegno*, intelligence or talent, is described as a naked winged young man to signify his speed, quickness in his speech and diversity of the inventions.<sup>187</sup> Both *Sapienza Umana*, or human knowledge, and *Vita Contemplativa*, the contemplative life, were described as the former

being a young naked boy with four ears and four hands and the latter as a naked young woman looking at the sky.<sup>188</sup> There is no explanation regarding why they are to be depicted naked, however it could be due to the fact that so often nudity in Ripa is associated to knowledge.

In the visual arts, since classical Antiquity, nudity was also associated with the heroic and the ideal. The so-called heroic nudity is a concept used to refer to the use of nudity in a classical art to indicate that a seemingly mortal human being is actually a hero or a semi god because it enables the artist to show the ideal, youthful, powerful body of the hero, which is the source of his beauty and *arete*.<sup>189</sup>

<sup>184</sup> Ripa, *Iconologia* (1593), 163-164

<sup>185</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 42

<sup>186</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 222

<sup>187</sup> Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, (Rome: Appresso Lepido Facii, 1603), p.220

<sup>188</sup> Ripa, *Iconologia*,(1593) p. 247; p. 295

<sup>189</sup> Hurwit, *The Problem with Dexileos*, p. 46

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defined heroic and divine virtue as an overabundance of virtue that transcended the common man and attributed this high degree of perfection to the heroes of mythology, which were elevated to the rank of demigods.<sup>190</sup> Heroic virtue, according to the Greek philosopher, must therefore be considered as a particularly high category of virtuous behaviour, a superhuman feature that creates a sense of distance between the common man and the hero. With the revival of the Aristotelian studies between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries this concept of heroic virtue penetrated in the medieval ethics and theology, becoming a fixed term. It was combined with Christian theology, as in St. Thomas Aquinas, where there is a union between the heroic and divine virtue with the theological problem of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the literature of the *Cinquecento*, heroic virtue was defined as the highest level of virtue that the Christian can reach through his efforts and with the help of divine grace.<sup>191</sup> As noted by Weisbach, the heroic was an essential element of the Renaissance. It was celebrated as an ethical value and aesthetic ideal, which was characterised by a series of qualities, all inspired by classical antiquity; it entailed the apotheosis of physical beauty with a series of ethical and spiritual qualities.<sup>192</sup>

Nudity, as an attribute for heroes and for the ideal, was also used in Renaissance art. From the late 1400s it played an important role in the representations of the ancient and mythological world and was often chosen to characterise the pagan gods and heroes, even to the detriment of what was the classical iconographic tradition.<sup>193</sup> This fact is due both to the rediscovery of classical art and to the medieval interpretation of nudity as a symbol – even if negative – of the pagan world, as witnessed by *Kaiserpokal* of Osnabrück, in which Idolatry personified is shown worshipping a nude statue of a deity.

Nakedness is therefore chosen as the visual mark to differentiate the hero or god from the common and mortal man. The fact that nudity was seen as a characteristic mark of ancient art is testified also by Boccaccio in the *De Claris Mulieribus* in which he told the tale of a painter named Martia, and stated that in antiquity figures were for the most part rendered as nude or half nude.<sup>194</sup> Consequently, it is easy to imagine that the Renaissance artists in some cases resorted to nudity to characterise pagan deities, mythological figures and legendary heroes.

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<sup>190</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. R. Crisp, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 119

<sup>191</sup> Georg Weise, *L'ideale eroico del Rinascimento e le sue premesse umanistiche*, (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1961), p. 80

<sup>192</sup> Werner Weisbach, *Der Barok als Kunst der Gegebenreformation*, (Berlin: Pail Cassirer, 1921), p. 24

<sup>193</sup> Himmelmann, *Nudità ideale*, p.

<sup>194</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *De claris mulieribus / On famous women*, tr. V. Brown, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 276

Furthermore, writers from the 1500s were aware of the fact that in antiquity nudity was a symbol of this domain, as testified by Cartari in the *Proemio* of his *Immagini*. Cartari reported that the ancients used to depict their gods and kings naked in order to honour and praise them, since this way they could show that everyone knew their strength. In addition it also was meant to symbolise their sincere and naked soul, which was not tarnished by vices or covered by lies.<sup>195</sup> Another indication, found in both Giraldis and Cartari, that nudity was well fit to represent the most valiant and respectable human beings and the gods is found in their description of Jupiter.<sup>196</sup> Jupiter, described as the most important deity of the ancients, was depicted in various ways, one of which showed him as naked from the waist up. Cartari interpreted this nudity as a positive attribute that actually symbolises the fact that God shows himself to the divine intelligences.<sup>197</sup> Furthermore, as in the case of Venus and the allegorised female portraits, nudity was used in these instances to showcase the strong and energetic bodies that reveal the strength of the hero depicted.



Fig. 16 – Antonio Pollaiuolo, *Hercules and Antaeus*, c. 1478, Galleria degli Uffizzi, Florence

The classical hero *par excellence* is Hercules and interestingly enough he was often depicted naked. The images of the naked Hercules dating from the Middle Ages have a positive meaning, in fact already in the literature of late antiquity his nakedness is interpreted as a moral allegory and later placed in parallel with Christ.<sup>198</sup> Hercules interpreted allegorically is also seen in the visual arts, as testified by a Neapolitan miniature made for Roberto d'Angiò in which Hercules, indicated with the inscription *Fortitudo*, is shown with other virtues. Medieval art therefore intended the nakedness of Hercules as an expression of his virtue and strength, as heroic nudity. This positive interpretation of Hercules with an accentuated allegorical connotation is still

present during the Renaissance, mainly in the mundane context – as demonstrated by continuous fondness for the character of Hercules at the Italian princely courts as the embodiment of *virtus politica*.<sup>199</sup> Furthermore, by the late 1500s he was so closely associated

<sup>195</sup> Cartari, *Le imagini*, p. 7r

<sup>196</sup> Giraldis, *De Deis Gentium*, p.104

<sup>197</sup> Cartari, *Le imagini*, p.XXXv

<sup>198</sup> Himmelmann, *Nudità ideale*, p. 226

<sup>199</sup> *Ibidem.*, pp. 230-232



to the idea of virtue that Ripa in the *Iconologia* when describing both *Valore*, or valour, and *Virtù heroica*, or heroic virtue, seems to be actually describing Hercules' typical iconography: a naked man wearing a lion skin and holding a club.<sup>200</sup>

Heroic nudity however was applicable to women too. One of the heroines of the past, that retained her popularity during the Renaissance, was Lucretia, who became a symbol of chastity and marital loyalty.<sup>201</sup> In some Renaissance paintings the heroin is shown either naked or partially undressed, such as the *Portrait of a Woman* by Lorenzo Lotto, in which she is shown naked in the monochrome drawing the woman holds in her hand. I believe her nudity in this case should be interpreted as heroic or idealised since Lucretia was seen as a legendary figure and a symbol of virtue. Surely her partially naked body also serves to remind the indignity that she was faced with which is the cause of her suicide.



Fig. 18 – Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Woman inspired by Lucretia*, c.1530-1532, National Gallery, London

<sup>200</sup> Ripa, *Iconologia* (1593), p. 280, 290

<sup>201</sup> Valerius Maximus, *Facotum et Dictorum Memorabilium*, VI.1

Examples of heroic and ideal nudity are also the idealised portraits of contemporary men that chose to be portrayed as divinities. As noted by Himmelmann, nude or partially nude portraits that often appear in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries have no medieval precedent. They therefore depend on the revival of classical forms that characterised the early Renaissance.<sup>202</sup> These representations have to be interpreted as ‘ancient-heroic’, like for example Andrea Doria as Neptune and Cosimo I de Medici as Orpheus, both by Bronzino. The heroic and ancient aspect is extremely clear in both portraits. Not only, do they look and are accompanied by the typical attributes of the two deities, but they are also portrayed naked, thus strengthening the message. Orpheus was chosen for Cosimo I as it alluded to his pacific character and to his love for the arts, whilst Neptune for Andrea Doria clearly alluded to his victories at sea.<sup>203</sup> This trend was also present within the bourgeois, as evidenced by the portrait made by Vasari, of Alfonso di Tommaso Cambi, naked and with guise of Endymion.<sup>204</sup>



Fig. 19 – Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of Cosimo de Medici as Orpheus*, c. 1537-1539, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

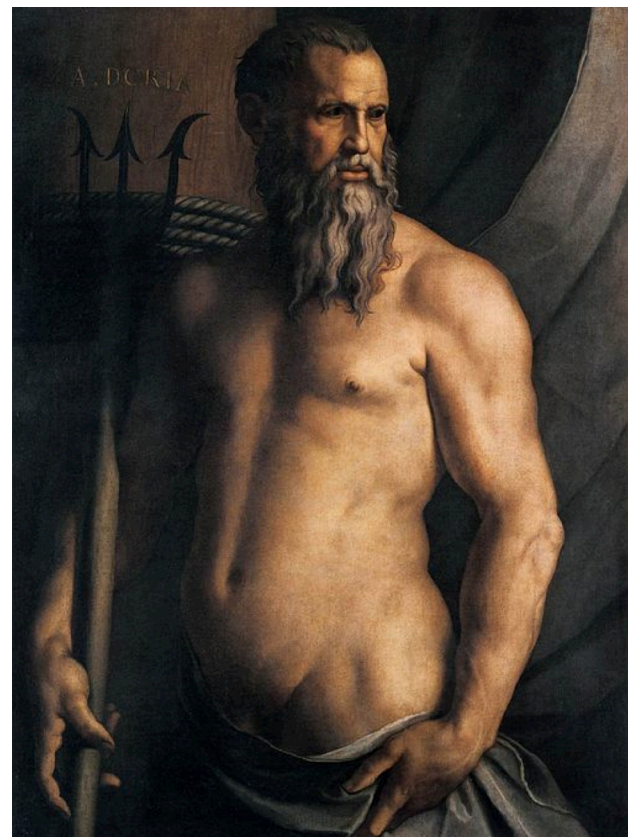


Fig. 20 – Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of Andrea Doria as Neptune*, c. 1530, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

<sup>202</sup> Himmelmann, *Nudita ideale*, p. 266

<sup>203</sup> Maurizia Tazartes, *Bronzino*, (Milan: Rizzoli/Skira, 2003), pp. 108 and 156

<sup>204</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Opere di Giorgio Vasari: pittore e architetto aretino*, 6 vols, (Firenze : S. Audin, 1822-1823), V, p. 552

There are other instances in which nudity is associated with a specific allegory that however do not fit in the thematic division addressed in this study. In Ripa's *Iconology* for example, Death is described as naked as it strips man of all his possessions;<sup>205</sup> Merit is naked because it is free from passions, affections and wicked thoughts;<sup>206</sup> Sin is naked and black because it deprives man of grace and of the candour of virtue.<sup>207</sup>

In other cases, such as Doubt, Favour, Judgment, Occasion, Satirical Poem, Calumny, Resurrection and Stupidity,<sup>208</sup> Ripa does not give any explanation about their nudity. It is interesting to try to understand why in these cases nudity is not justified by any allegorical explanation. As we saw in the first part of this study, the naked human body, in the artistic literature of the period, was the ideal starting point for the creation of a human figure worthy of respect. The image of the naked body as a *tabula rasa* also appears in the literature, for example in *Ars reminiscendi* by Giovan Battista della Porta. In the chapter 'How to forget about mental images' (*Come dobbiamo noi dimenticarci delle immagini fatte*), the author explained that to forget a picture it is necessary to imagine 'all the people naked and with arms drooping or covered in white sheets'.<sup>209</sup> Therefore I believe that, if the naked human body could also be considered as a blank slate then it was ideal for any application. In fact, by being devoid of meaning it could become a symbol of anything, especially in the light of the medieval tradition that was still alive during the Renaissance thus facilitating and allowing allegorizations and symbolical multifaceted meanings.

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<sup>205</sup> Ripa, *Iconologia* (1593), p. 171

<sup>206</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 167

<sup>207</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 197

<sup>208</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 65, 77, 105, 185, 217, 38, 238, 266

<sup>209</sup> Giambattista Della Porta, *Ars Reminiscendi*, ed. Raffaele Sirri, (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1996), pp.74-75



## CONCLUSION

From the beginning of the *Quattrocento* to the end of the *Cinquecento*, the considerations on the use and importance of nudity in the visual arts evolved substantially, especially in the artistic literature. Starting from the *Della Pittura* by Alberti and culminating in Vasari's *Vite*, the depiction of nude bodies became the preferred solution chosen by artists to demonstrate their technical virtuosity. Despite the criticism on this practice during the Reformation and Counterreformation, these depictions, as long as following the rules of *decorum* and modesty, were deemed acceptable in certain contexts. As shown for profane and pagan representations nudity was a way to reconnect with the forms of classical antiquity, the reference model for Renaissance artists. However, nudity was likewise used as a 'symbolic dress' to represent different, even diametrically opposing, concepts. As emerged from this work, nudity can symbolise sex and wantonness, beauty, friendship, drunkenness, the natural world, the personification of Truth and of certain areas of knowledge, the heroic ideal and in general was used to characterise those figures from classical Antiquity. Therefore, naked bodies allowed artists to flaunt their skills and at the same time to convey ideas and represent allegories through their work, thus adding layers of meaning. These two aspects of the nude are two sides of the same coin that complement and foster the notion of each other.

The different meanings attributed to nudity were already a feature of classical antiquity. They were then filtered through the medieval sensibility and Christian theology before finding a way in the literature and the visual representations, in which they survived and flourished in the Renaissance. Fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italian artists and writers regarded the depiction of nudity as a prerogative of ancient art and therefore it was justified by what they believed to be the classical culture. Yet, what has emerged from this analysis is that, often, it is the medieval interpretation that influenced the way nudity was either interpreted or used in the visual arts in the fifteenth and sixteenth-centuries. Undoubtedly the development of an artistic style characterised by a greater naturalism that better reflected the classical models would seem to allude to the classical culture, but the allegorical interpretations of the nude are derived from sources and interpretations with medieval roots, given the strong influence of Christianity in Renaissance culture.

Furthermore, this work has shown a strong connection of nudity to social history. Nudity in classical antiquity seemed to be a focus of the male world. This was due to the fact that women were regarded as second-class citizens. In the Renaissance however, nude images of

women had become more present, and in private contexts acceptable, as testified by the ideal portraits of courtesans in the guise of Venus. This aspect is a result of the medieval ideas rooted to the poetical movement of the *Dolce Stil Novo*, which celebrated the celestial beauty and infinite virtue of the angelical woman. Conversely, this idea originated from a particular movement of the Renaissance, the Neo-Platonic philosophy. In the writings of Ficino and Castiglione, beauty was regarded as a virtue that was linked to goodness and to God himself. As a way to express these concepts nudity served also as a symbol of female beauty and virtuosity.

In conclusion, the Italian Renaissance utilised nakedness by referring to the shapes of classical antiquity, however it is certainly an interpretation of the Renaissance itself based on the previous medieval tradition. The depictions of the naked body acquired more importance also thanks to the artistic literature, which encouraged artists to show their expertise through it. Therefore, the Renaissance did not develop an entirely new concept or a new way to utilise the nude and nakedness in the arts and literature, but it elaborated upon themes that had already appeared both in classical Antiquity and in the allegorical medieval artistic and philosophical tradition. The nude in the Renaissance is thus a multifaceted concept in which the various meanings that already characterized it in antiquity were joined with ideas and concepts of the Christian medieval tradition and with the ideas proper of the Renaissance.

word count: 15,685

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