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Erotica veneziana: Paris Bordone's *Athena Scorning the Advances of Hephaestus*

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BORN IN TREVISO IN 1500, Paris Bordone moved to Venice just after his father died in 1507, and in 1518 he is described as a painter there. He was briefly a pupil of Titian, but left his shop because, as Vasari explains, Bordone felt the master was not giving him enough instruction.¹ After leaving Titian, Bordone began to imitate the style of Giorgione and later fell under the influence of Mannerist painting. In 1538 he seems to have made a brief visit to France where he worked for King Francis I at Fontainebleau. He seems to have made another trip to France from 1559 to 1561, this time to work for King Francis II. He died in Venice in 1571.

Subjects drawn from the literature of ancient mythology seem to have been a favorite of Bordone, possibly because they allowed him to paint in what has been described as an “overtly erotic” manner.² That is to say, with mythological themes he could exploit the erotic possibilities of nude and semi-nude figures.³ The interest of Renaissance patrons and artists in monumental paintings with mythological subjects can be traced to the last quarter of the fifteenth century and the works of Botticelli and Mantegna, especially. The desire for this kind of subject matter continued into the sixteenth century, and the growing demand was met by such artists as Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese, among others, all of whom created major works in this vein. Many of these paintings were erotic in content. Indeed, works of art with mythological themes were one of the most important vehicles for the artistic expression of sexuality in the Renaissance. Bordone's mythological paintings, including a signed work of ca. 1555 - 1560 in the Samuel H. Kress Study Collection, Museum of Art and Archaeology (Fig. 1), are no exception, for they are richly sensuous and strongly erotic in flavor.⁴

To our left in the painting (Fig. 1), we see a male figure next to a forge, in which there is a fire. Here, too, are a blacksmith's tools — anvil, hammer and two kinds of pliers. Wearing a purple and pink apron, which exposes his torso and buttocks, the figure is turned away from the viewer. He holds an arrow in his left hand and a bundle of arrows are visible just below his seat. He turns to



Paris Bordone, Italian, Venetian School, 1500–1571. *Athena Scorning the Advances of Hephaestus*, ca. 1555–1560, oil on canvas, acc. no. 61.78

look intently at a female figure whose arm he holds with his right hand. Surrounded by clouds (or perhaps smoke, for the blacksmith's forge is a smokey place), she is heavily armored with a helmet, a dark green breastplate trimmed in bright red and a vivid crimson shield, which she carries on her back. With her left hand, she grasps the handle of a sword. She looks at the male figure with an expression that is difficult to read, but her knitted brow suggests frustration or anger. Her crimson and gold skirt divides to expose her milky white, right thigh, the smooth, soft flesh of which serves as a contrast to the muscular back of the male figure.

Some scholars have argued that Bordone's painting illustrates a story told by Homer in *The Iliad* (XVIII).⁵ Upon the death of his friend Patroclus at the hands of Hector, Achilles swears vengeance and is furious to enter the Trojan battle. His mother Thetis reminds him that he has lost his armor, for he has given it to Patroclus. She begs him to be patient while she asks Hephaestus to create another suit of armor especially for him. Upon Thetis' arrival at the forge, she is greeted by Charis, the wife of Hephaestus. Charis interrupts her husband, who is busy making tripods, which could move of their own volition. When he learns of Thetis' arrival, Hephaestus drops his work to ask what favor she wants, treating her with great respect. Thetis then explains that her son Achilles is in need of a shield, a helmet, greaves, and a corselet. Hephaestus immediately sets to work, producing the armor with great care and intricacy. Once the work is completed, Hephaestus lays the pieces before Thetis, who carries them to her son.

Clearly Bordone's picture does not represent Homer's scene. In his painting the male figure has stopped work at his anvil, where he has been making tips for arrows, not ambulatory tripods as in Homer. The female figure bears a small shield on her back, holds a sword, and wears a helmet, but nowhere do we see the other items requested by Thetis in *The Iliad*, i.e., the greaves and corselet. Homer says the shield for Achilles was large and heavy and the helmet was also large and made specifically to fit the warrior's head. If Bordone's female figure is Thetis, we would expect that the helmet, fashioned for Achilles, would not conform so perfectly to her head. In addition, Homer says Hephaestus laid the armor before Thetis, but says nothing about her donning the individual pieces for transport. In fact, the female figure's bearing and demeanor suggest that the objects are her possessions, not gifts she is carrying to someone else.

If we consider them in relation to Homer's story, the poses of Bordone's figures are puzzling as well. The male figure seems to rise, while at the same time clutching the woman in an apparently vain attempt to draw her near to him or to prevent her from leaving. The look on his face is one of pained desperation as his eyes search the woman's face, and his mouth is open as if he is speaking to her. The woman seems strong, as she wrenches herself away from him, and in the next moment will be free of the man's grip. Clearly this is not the Hephaestus who hands over gifts to an old and respected friend; nor is this the grateful Thetis, worried for her son. Rather, the scene is full of the tension of a violent encounter, one figure grabbing at the other, who wishes to flee.

Another story, originating in antiquity, has also been proposed as a source for Bordone's painting. This story was circulated in Natale Conti's *Mythologiae*, the first complete edition of which appeared in Venice in 1568.⁶ Conti, a poet whose mother was Venetian, lived in Milan and occasionally Venice. According to this story, Hephaestus agreed to produce some armor solicited by Athena in exchange for a sexual favor, and she agreed to his desire, only to trick him by putting on the armor and fleeing before making payment.⁷ The fact that the female figure in Bordone's painting wears armor and seems to wish to elude the male figure's grasp would suggest that the artist might have illustrated Conti's retelling of the ancient myth.

There is, however, one detail of the painting — namely, the woman's exposed thigh — which signals the possibility that another myth, told by a number of ancient authors, is a more likely source for the subject matter of Bordone's painting. According to one version of this story, recounted in the *Bibliotheca* (187–188) attributed to Apollodorus of Athens, who was born ca. 180 B.C. Athena went to Hephaestus seeking pieces of armor.⁸ Hephaestus, who had been abandoned by his wife, Aphrodite, became aroused by Athena and, though lame, chased and attacked her. As she struggled to resist his grasp, he ejaculated on her leg. Athena then took some wool and brushed the semen away to the earth, impregnating it. Eventually Gaia (Mother Earth) produced a child, the boy Erichthonius. Refusing to acknowledge the child, Gaia handed Erichthonius over to Athena to be reared. The boy grew up to become a king of Athens and established a cult of Athena there. Thus, Athena retained her virginity, and the royal line of her city could lay claim to her as its progenitor.⁹

Bordone's painting seems to depict the most "overtly erotic" moment in this story of Athena and Hephaestus. The female figure displays the customary

attributes of Athena, i.e., helmet, breastplate, shield and sword, and she briskly moves away from the male figure, who seems to be about to grab her and at the same time struggles to get to his feet. He is certainly Hephaestus beside his forge, wearing his usual apron, which in this case both covers and reveals his nudity. His nudity as well as Athena's action and her exposed thigh help to establish the sexual relation between the two figures as they connect with one another, eye-to-eye, male hand to female arm, leg-to-leg. Indeed, Athena's lovely thigh and the prominence Bordone has given it relate directly to the pivotal action in the version of the myth given by Apollodorus, the spilling of Hephaestus's seed there. In addition, just as his passion burns, the fire glows in the forge, and if the arrows he has made are those of Eros (Cupid), they hint at the blacksmith's lust and help us to understand his amorous aggression.

Unfortunately, the painting's surface is somewhat damaged from over-cleaning and abrasion, preventing us from experiencing the full impact of Bordone's sensuous colors and their textures in relation to the sensual subject matter. The thinned surface, however, helps us to understand somewhat Bordone's creative process in this picture, for the worn paint exposes a third hand and wrist emerging from Hephaestus on his left side and a portion of a shoulder on his right. In other words, the exposed underpainting suggests that Bordone, like many Venetian painters, including Giorgione and Titian, worked directly on the canvas, composing and perhaps even inventing his subject matter as he painted. This way of working almost ensures that the artist will make changes to his composition as the work progresses. Bordone, then, at one point seems to have wanted Hephaestus's right arm to stretch across the front of his body and his right hand to move toward the forge. Had he allowed the arm to remain in that position, there would have been less direct contact between the figures of Hephaestus and Athena and much of the implied, psychological and physical tension between them would have been lost. Apparently, the artist therefore decided to make Hephaestus's gesture of grabbing Athena the focus of the action. Significantly, Hephaestus's grip on Athena's arm is just above her thigh, an arrangement that suggests a link between his aggression and the outcome of the story.

Regardless of its present condition, Bordone's painting is a pleasure to behold. Not only do the vibrant colors delight our eyes, we enjoy the charming figures, which seem to float in a harmony of balletic movement across the picture. Moreover, the erotic tension between the two figures finds release in

the viewer's imagination, for the painting invites us to participate in it. We are asked to imagine that in the next moment the divine blacksmith will arise and a struggle between the two figures will begin. Thus, our experience of this sensuous and poetic painting echoes the eroticism of its subject matter. #

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NOTES

1. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini, 6 vols., Florence, 1987, 6: 170.
2. The phrase, which expresses a widely held opinion, is used by Giordana M. Canova in *The Genius of Venice 1500-1600*, eds. Jane Martineau and Charles Hope, London, 1983, 154.
3. For a convenient discussion of Bordone's style and development as an artist, see Sydney J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500 to 1600*, Baltimore, 1975, pp. 349-352 and 536-538.
4. The painting is signed O[pus]. PARIDIS BORDONO in the lower left. For more information and bibliography concerning the work, see Fern R. Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools XVI-XVIII Century*, New York, 1973, 36. See also, *Paris Bordon e il suo tempo: Atti del convegno internazionale di Studi*, Treviso, 1985, 10 and 146.
5. Jean Paul Richter, "Ausstellung Alter Meister in Burlington House," *Kunstchronik*, 17 (1882), 286 was the first to identify the subject as an illustration of Homer.
6. Wilhelm Suida suggested Conti's tale as a source in *Preliminary Catalogue of Paintings and Sculpture*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1941, pp. 27-28, no. 474. Seemingly, there was a shorter version of Conti's book published in Venice as early as 1551. For this, see Roberto Riccardi, "Conti, Natale," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Rome, 1983, 28: 455. For the ancient version, see Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Harmondsworth, 1992, pp. 96-97.
7. Natale Conti and M. Antonio Tutonio, *Mythologiae and Mythologia*, reprint: New York, 1979, 517.
8. Other versions of the myth may be found in, for example, Euripides's *Ion* (260-282), and Hyginus's *Fabulae* (166) and *Poetica Astronomica* (2, 13). In

Hyginus's version, Hephaestus, having been granted permission to marry Athena, attacked her and in the ensuing struggle, spilled his seed directly on the ground.

9. See Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Keith Aldrich, Lawrence [Kansas], 1975, 83.