RECENSIONI

Luba Freedman. *The Revival of the Olympian Gods in Renaissance Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. v, 279, 79 b/w ill., index, bibl. ISBN 0-5218-1576-2. £ 60.

One of the main characteristics of the Italian Renaissance was the fascination with the cultural aspects of Classical Antiquity. In this extensively researched monograph, Luba Freedman examines the representations of Greek and Roman gods in Renaissance Italy. She particularly focuses on the sixteenth-century, when fascination with classical deities led to a phenomenon that had not occurred since pagan antiquity: the portrayal of the Olympians as autonomous figures in painting and sculpture. While tending to ignore minor deities, sixteenth-century artists chose to focus instead on the elite family of Greek gods who lived on Mount Olympus. Yet even among these illustrious deities certain figures were more popular than others; Hestia, the modest Goddess of the Hearth was seldom depicted, while Bacchus the flamboyant God of Wine was a popular subject.

Freedman organizes her book into three parts. Part One outlines the terms, concepts and components of the phenomenon; Part Two discusses the impact of the discovery of various artifacts; Part Three focuses on both classical and non-classical elements in Cinquecento art and the conflict that arose in the various schools of thought about the revival of classical pagan models.

Freedman pinpoints the sixteenth-century in particular, because it was then that artists had access not only to statuary (which was mostly fragmented or missing head and limbs) but also an increasing supply of ancient literary works describing the pagan gods. Especially important was the development of Numismatics, because images showing the Olympians and their attributes—the symbols and figures associated with them, were frequently depicted on ancient coins. This range of sources had not been available to earlier Renaissance artists.

Freedman also concentrates on the way in which these resources were used. She found that, despite the fact that they often closely copied the ancient artifacts, Renaissance artists and sculptors did not simply slavishly replicate original works, but also brought to their subjects elements of their own sixteenth-century culture. The result was a unique and fascinating blending of Classical and Renaissance artistic styles, as artists vied with each other to show the mastery of their craft through the depiction of pagan deities.

While the pagan gods had also been acknowledged and portrayed in the art of the Middle Ages, medieval society had viewed them with great suspicion. Denied their autonomy and depicted only in a group setting, the Olympians were seen as demonic figures from a distant and dangerous pagan culture supplanted by Christianity. As such, they were never depicted in the independent splendour they had merited in antiquity. The phenomenon of the sixteenth-century was that the Olympians were once again given autonomy both in paintings and in statues as figures in their own right, surrounded by their pagan attributes.

The problem for artists, especially those living in the late Cinquecento when the Counter-Reformation Church was particularly sensitive to issues of idolatry, was to find a method to portray these gods in such a way that they did not offend the Catholic Church's sensibilities. They devised subtle but ingenious methods in order to achieve this. By changing facial expressions, dress and the actual posture of the deities, the artists deliberately downplayed their majestic qualities. No longer objects of worship, the gods became instead icons, that could be accepted and incorporated into Christian society; nevertheless, Freedman sees sixteenth-century society as ambivalent in its efforts to understand the concept of the past glory of the ancient world, especially its reverence for gods who often displayed the worst characteristics of man. Therefore artists made the gods more palatable to their audience by adding non-classical elements to their works. Just as saints were portrayed with their attributes (the emblems of their sainthood) so did representations of the Olympian gods include the animate or inanimate attributes with which they were traditionally associated. For example, Aphrodite was usually shown with Eros and an apple but, like the other gods and saints, she could also be accompanied by shared attributes. Thus, as well as having her own distinguishing emblems, she shared nautical symbols with Poseidon and her curious horned hairstyle (so appropriately adopted by sixteenth-century Venetian courtesans) with the god Apollo.

Freedman notes the remarkable similarity in the depiction of pagan gods and Christian saints: the important difference being that the gods were depicted in such a way that they lacked the authority of the saints. Representations of certain pagan gods became so closely associated with Biblical figures and saints that they shared an almost symbiotic relationship in the artist's perception. In art and sculpture, Aphrodite, as Goddess of Love, became similar to and associated with Mary Magdalene with her long loose hair and her revealing dress suggesting her former profession, while Apollo, the Sun God, came to be associated with both Christ and in (his capacity as Archer God) with Saint Sebastian. Among the audience and patrons of artists, these connections did not always meet with approval. In his painting the *Last Judgment*, Michelangelo outraged some of his critics when he modeled his Christ on the Apollo Belvedere and depicted him as young, muscular and beardless.

Freedman reveals that artists and sculptors of the sixteenth-century saw the depiction the figures of the Olympian gods as autonomous figures as an important way to show off their talents. The gods provided an opportunity to display the naked or semi-naked form, which revealed the skill of the artist in a more dramatic way than was possible with clothed figures. This was a window of opportunity that artists seized and that prominent citizens, secular princes and cardinals encouraged by their patronage. This meticulous work will be of great interest to scholars and students of the Art History of the Renaissance.

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