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Though certainly a masterpiece of western art, the painting known as *Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, by Agnolo Bronzino, invites as much mystery as the Sphinx. Most of the peripheral figures in the composition stray from conventional western iconography; they instead seem as exotic and enigmatic as hieroglyphs carved in stone. Their visages lack the poignancy of many painted portraits.

Indeed, the figures crowding about the sensual kiss of Cupid and Venus evidence many of the mysteries of ancient Egyptian art and religion; namely, the melding of human and beast, and the reduction of the human visage to an almost funerary mask. Along with the scattered masks at the bottom right of the painting, the figure in the upper left of the composition—variously identified as Truth, Night, Oblivion, and Fraud—seems little more than an animated feminine guise. Her eyes are hollow; the back of her

head vanishes into the ether. And then beside these masks, one sees counterparts to the Sphinx and the Jackal-headed gods of Egypt. The cherubic girl in the green dress—identified as Pleasure, Pleasure and Pain, and Fraud—reveals leonine and serpentine features.

More subtly, the agonized ochre-colored figure crouching behind Cupid—identified as Jealousy, Despair, or even Syphilis—manifests a bestial form. The figure's face seems directly lifted from the Leonardo drawing of a hollering warrior, sketched in preparation for his Florentine fresco *The Battle of Anghiari*. In this fresco, and as aptly embodied in the head that emerges again in Bronzino's painting, Leonardo expressly hoped to portray the animalistic proclivities of man.

But one would be remiss, of course, to align Bronzino, the Italian mannerist par excellence, with the distant sculptors and scribes of Egypt. The similarities are coincidental. The painting—so alluring, so brilliantly enigmatic—invites innumerable interpretations. Art historians play the part of Oedipus in solving the Sphinx-like riddle of the painting. Like Oedipus, their efforts prove at once beneficiary and destructive. The critics Erwin Panofsky, Michael Levey, Graham Smith, Charles Hope, J.F. Conway, and Margaret Healy line up to decode the riddle. They provide the Rosetta Stone, as it were, in translating Bronzino's idiosyncratic allegory into a language for all to understand. Yet the critics confront gaps while translating the painting. When the art historians lack a cogent literary or artistic precedent and gaze in bewilderment at the allegory, they pause briefly, and then awkwardly fill in the lacunae by way of supposition.

On a greater level, the actual act of translation may be seen as treacherous. The critics fail to truly translate, for they change the essential nature of the allegory by over-

analyzing it. As Paul Barolsky recognizes in his article, “The ‘pleasurable deceits’ of Bronzino’s so-called London Allegory,” ambiguity rests at the heart of the painting. When critics attempt to resolve the ambiguity or to remove it from the painting by explaining it in detail, they ironically miss the point of the work itself.

Barolsky stands alone in this position. All of the other critics read the painting in terms of earnest allegory, with Erwin Panofsky’s translation the most classic and conservative, and Margaret Healey’s the most daring and risqué. Even though Panofsky’s analytical ekphrasis, along with a cursory recollected description by Vasari, serve as the basis for all of the following critiques, Panofsky ultimately stands alone in Barolsky-like isolation. Critics (and eventually Panofsky himself) have discredited his appellation of the ghostly visage in the upper left corner as Truth. Despite Truth’s previous iconic pairing with Time—the old man with the hourglass who draws the blue-green veil in the upper right corner of the *Allegory*—the figure in its rendering resists the title. It is too nocturnal, too deceitful in its quasi-human appearance. Beyond this peripheral misstep, Panofsky evades the obvious sexuality of the main figures by claiming they represent Luxury. He alone fails to assert the eroticism of the overall embrace; the Venus and Cupid engage in an act specifically different than sinful luxury. They unveil love and beauty in a perilous sexual communion.

Michael Levey and Charles Hope rightfully restore the theme of sensual love in the painting, as they accurately describe the embrace of Venus and Cupid. Both authors note that the act of love seems complex and hardly reciprocal, hence the duplicitous fingers of Cupid’s left hand in Venus’s crown, and in turn Venus’s removal of Cupid’s arrow from the bow. Though they fail to fully explicate the actions of Cupid—his

particularly impossible serpentine pose, and his strangely fumbling fingers, one in the crown and the other around the aureole of the Venus's nipple—they convincingly describe Venus and her actions. Levey states that beauty disarms love, while Hope states that Cupid's eager love will not be returned, his arrow far from piercing her skin. In this way, Hope heightens the connotations of Bronzino's *Allegory* to literature. Bronzino follows his dual muse down the thematic path of unrequited love; a path well trodden by Italian poets, but most famously by Dante and Petrarch. Only Hope notices the laurel leaf in the upper-left corner of the painting, an icon of poetry, adorned by Dante and made human in the figure of Petrarch's elusive love, Laura.

However convincing their conclusions, Levey and Hope ultimately produce less than salutary critiques. Despite their inclusion of love in the critique, they do not quite convey the lurid eroticism of the embrace; the bulbous buttocks of Cupid, the squeezed nipple of Venus. They also weaken their analysis of the embrace by failing to go into more detail about the shadowy, peculiar figure behind Cupid. By its unusual, non-generalized characteristics, and its unique coloring, the figure obviously plays a principle role in the composition.

Among the critics who see this figure as Jealousy, *La Gelosia*, only Graham Smith devotes an appropriate amount of attention to the figure and its central place in the provenance of love. He uses the lectures produced by Bronzino's friend, Benedetto Varchi, to strengthen Vasari's original supposition that the tormented figure is indeed Jealousy. Varchi argues, "That to love truly, one cannot be without jealousy." Surely Bronzino would have attuned himself to this popular discussion in Florentine literary circles. In effect, Jealousy is the unsavory hidden handmaiden of love; she thus

materializes in close proximity behind Cupid. By Bronzino and Varchi's time, the idea of jealousy as a partner in love already had a long lineage.

Surprisingly, Smith does not mention popular medieval texts such as *The Art of Courty Love*, by Andreas Capellanus. Here, Capellanus argues the same thesis as Varchi: Love cannot exist without jealousy. In the Middle Ages, authors lobbed this argument to show the folly of sensual love, as it always creates jealousy, a condition deleterious to the soul. Imagine the wounded beast of Bronzino's painting materialized within a man in the throes of love. As Capellanus argues, one should replace sensual love, the metaphoric pagan love of Venus, with the celestial love of religious piety—love for God. Applying this clear reasoning to Bronzino's painting, the pagan aura surrounding the embrace dims. In its stead, the viewer—remarkably—has an allegory steeped in religious Christian piety. Bronzino needs neither gold leaf nor halos to craft this highly peculiar altarpiece. Because religious writers frequently used elaborate allegories to espouse their ideas, this scenario proves tantalizing.

However, one gap remains in an otherwise irrefutable argument: *La Gelosia* is a man. Because the Italian word for jealousy is feminine, Bronzino would have to follow the standard practice of personifying ideas according to their gender (*il tempo*, the masculine Italian word for time, could never appear convincingly as a female in Italian art). Unfortunately, Smith commits the worst sin possible in art criticism—he fails to look closely at the painting. Clearly, Bronzino knew how to render females. This figure's physique—as J.F. Conway and Margaret Healy accurately conclude—is masculine. Biceps bulge, and one cannot see the swell of breasts that could easily define the figure as female in spite of the figure's haggard appearance. Notably, in the woodcuts of Envy,

included by Smith to substantiate his identification of the figure as Jealousy, the female figures have particularly pendulous breasts. Bronzino does not follow the graphic tradition set by these figures. As mentioned previously, the face of Bronzino's figure is quite similar to the head of a well-known warrior in Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari*: its tilt, features, and expression—eyes clinched and mouth agape in a leonine roar—are all uncannily the same. If Bronzino used the Leonardo figure as a model, then he assuredly would have had a male form in mind.

Recognizing the critical importance of the anguished figure behind Cupid, Conway and Healey assert that he is not Jealousy, but rather a syphilis victim. In this way, the painting becomes an allegorical warning against the danger of illicit love, its message amplified by the beauty of Bronzino's technique. Yet the authors also fail to properly address a notable absence in their clinical description: the figure lacks the swellings that mark a figure with syphilis. As breasts signify a female, these bumps signify syphilis. Again, in woodcuts provided by Conway and Healy to illustrate visual depictions of syphilis sufferers, three of four show the victims riddled with hideous bumps. The swellings riddle the neck, arms, and face of the sufferers. Bronzino exposes all of these regions on his wailing figure, yet his skin remains smooth—a bronzed companion to the silver-pink marmoreal flesh of the Venus and Cupid.

In the end, Paul Barolsky's assertion that Bronzino deliberately made his allegory difficult to understand proves the most difficult to refute. He notes that ambiguity and wit were of concern to writers and artists in Bronzino's time, and indeed the *Allegory* resonates with impish, mercurial, and playful undertones. Bronzino could paint clear allegories, as his far more comprehensible Budapest *Allegory with Venus and Cupid*

testifies. Even a casual observer can see that the London *Allegory* revels in contradiction, ambiguity, and complexity. Time's passing makes Bronzino's enigmatic allegory even more difficult to comprehend.

One can only suppose how Agnolo Bronzino's patrons and contemporaries viewed the painting. Father Time—ironically the sole recognizable peripheral figure in the composition—has metaphorically cracked his hourglass. Its sand spills out, further removing the painting from its original context. Hurriedly, the art critics search for their Rosetta Stones to translate the exotic image into something more recognizable. Yet a device for clear translation remains elusive, buried forever in the sands of time.