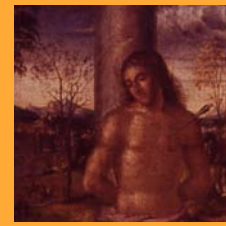


**BNG**

# decoding the european COLLECTION

curated by Christina Storey, PhD.

ICONS



PORTRAITURE:  
17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY



MYTHOLOGY



IDENTITY



SATIRE



PORTRAITURE:  
18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY



LANDSCAPES



# ICONS

1.

Bartolomeo di Giovanni

Italian (Florentine), active 1465-1511

**Saint Michael Slaying the Dragon**, c.1500

tempera on wood panel

8<sup>1/2</sup> x 5<sup>1/2</sup> inches

Collection of the Bermuda Government

Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest



2.

Circle of Giovanni Antonio Bazzi ( Il Sodoma )

Italian, b.Verncelli, 1477-1549

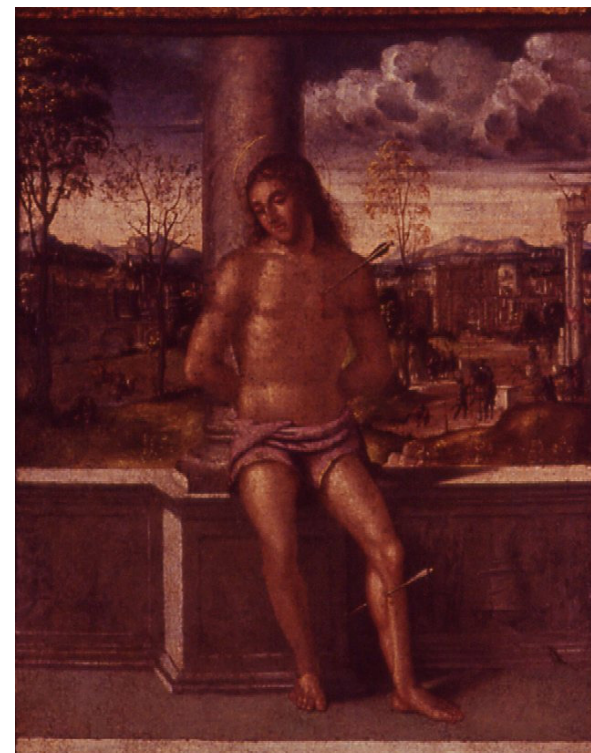
**Saint Sebastian**, c.1530

oil on canvas

18<sup>1/4</sup> x 13<sup>3/4</sup> inches

Collection of the Bermuda Government

Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest



One of the most notable features of late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century art is the mixing of the sacred and the profane. In these three paintings we can see a progression in the course of only a few decades from a traditional religious representation, “St. Micheal Slaying the Dragon” by Bartolomeo di Giovanni to a secular one “Venus and Cupid (The Honey Thief)” by Lucas Cranach the Elder. However, all three retain a didactic or instructive function.

The archangel St. Michael is one of three angels mentioned by name in the scriptures. The most dramatic reference to the soldier-saint is found in the book of Revelation (12:7 to 9): “Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels waged war upon the dragon... and the great dragon was thrown down, that serpent of old called the devil and Satan.” Because of this victory, St. Michael is revered in Roman Catholic tradition and liturgy as the protector of the church. One interesting aspect of this painting is the youth and serenity visible in the face of St. Michael— a serenity that is in direct contrast to the violence of killing the dragon. A sixteenth-century viewer would have read the saint’s face as an indication of his righteousness and the justification of violence against evil.

Likewise with the painting of St. Sebastian, attributed to the circle of Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (“Sodoma”), in which the saint’s pose of acceptance and his expression of tranquility serve to underscore his innocence and emphasize the sin of his persecutors. St. Sebastian was one of the most popular saints depicted during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The physical characteristics and iconography of paintings of the saint developed after 1348 in response to his role as a protector against the plague. While in reality Sebastian had been a middle aged bearded soldier, Renaissance manifestations of the saint emphasize his youth and health, with the representation of an unblemished beautiful male body indicating the saint’s spiritual purity. San Sebastian was actually clubbed to death so the presentation of his suffering at the hands of archers is meant to highlight for the viewer a moment of overcoming death, with the saint’s facial expression indicating a state of grace in the face of such unjust

# ICONS

## 3.

Lucas Cranach, the Elder  
German, b. Cranach, 1472-1553

***Venus and Cupid***  
***(The Honey Thief)***, c. 1540

oil on panel

18<sup>3/4</sup> x 13 inches

**On long term loan to the  
Bermuda National Gallery**

**Private collection**



suffering. Furthermore, St. Sebastian's status as a homoerotic image was already established for contemporary viewers who would have read the subtext of this painting as well as a modern viewer can. San Sebastian's state of passive penetration by phallic arrow shafts juxtaposed with his posture of acceptance and the suggestion of pleasure in his face allow the painting to be read in an alternative, profane, language.

In the Venus and Cupid painting there is a tension between the presentation of the erotic female nude form and the explicit didactic function of the work. While the viewer is invited to enjoy the sight of a beautiful naked woman, that enjoyment is inscribed within the message of the work, which is reinforced by the inclusion of text:

*As Cupid was stealing honey from the hive  
A bee stung the thief on the finger  
And so do we seek transitory and dangerous pleasures  
That are mixed with sadness and bring us pain*

The text makes it clear that the painting is to be read, at least on the surface, as an allegory against greed. However, the viewer cannot help but be aroused, as with St. Sebastian, by the idealized human form. A contemporary viewer would have felt such a tension and it would reinforce the lesson of the work; the painting created both the experience of desire for youth and beauty, and the warning of the consequences of such desire.

# PORTRAITURE: 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

## 4.

Cornelis de Vos

Flemish, b. Hulst 1585-1651

**Portrait of a Lady**, c.1610-40

oil on panel

47<sup>3/4</sup> x 36 inches

Collection of the Bermuda Government

Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest



## 5.

Alonso Sanchez Coello

Portuguese/ Spanish b. 1531-1588

**Charles Emmanuel I, The Duke of Savoy**,

c.1585

oil on canvas

73<sup>1/2</sup> x 39 inches

On long term loan to the Bermuda National Gallery

Collection of Desmond Fountain



Although to our eyes these portraits show us real people, at the time the subject of the paintings were as much the clothes as anything else. An Early Modern (c.1500 – 1650) viewer would have read the wealth and status of the sitters in the quality of the material of their clothes. In the twenty-first century age of mass produced, easily affordable clothing it is difficult to recall that in the seventeenth century articles such as shoes and stockings were expensive and rare; likewise with the jewelry that both these sitters are wearing. In the case of the female subject we can observe her bracelets, which are made of rare red coral. Coral of such quality then, as now, costs more than gold. Her gloves are also very fine.

Both the subjects are wearing cloth of gold, into which was woven threads of actual gold. Both are wearing ruffles around the neck, which signified their aristocratic status. If we observe their hands we can also see codified signifiers of idealized refinement. The Early Modern viewer drew a parallel between worldly wealth and spiritual status; the idea being that wealth was granted to those that deserved it. Likewise, wealth indicated being in a state of Godly grace.

In the case of the female sitter, the sobriety of her expression and pose indicate her marriageable status. She is presented as refined and educated yet sufficiently submissive. She looks directly at the viewer yet her expression is one of acceptance, not challenge. In the case of the Duke of Savoy it is possible that this portrait was also created for marriage market. For many years the Duke attempted to wed Elizabeth I and a portrait such as this was meant to convey aspects of his character as well as his person. His expression and pose serve as counterpoints of gentility and sophistication to the more manly and aggressive elements suggested by his heavy cross and sword.

In both these portraits we see a greater concern with communicating external realities rather than internal ones. There is much less emphasis on the psychological make-up of the sitters and much more on the status and position they occupied. This reflects the concerns of the age.

# MYTHOLOGY

6.

Jacopo Palma, Il Vecchio ( Jacomo Negretti)

Italian, b. Serimalta (nr. Bergamo) 1480-1528

**Chastity**, c.1515

oil on panel

36 x 30<sup>1/2</sup> inches

Collection of the Bermuda Government

Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest



In these paintings we can see the importance of allegory to sixteenth and early seventeenth-century viewers. Although one has a biblical subject and the other a secular subject, both rely on the viewer's ability to decode the content of the paintings and to therefore take away the 'message'.

In Giovanni Donducci's portrayal of "Rachel at the Well", the painter presumes that the viewer is sufficiently familiar with the biblical story. It shows the first meeting between Jacob, son of Isaac, and his cousin Rachel, a beautiful shepherdess. When Jacob saw Rachel for the first time, he fell immediately in love with her. He removed the heavy stone covering the well where she and other journeymen had come to rest and feed their animals, and he helped her to water her flock. The inclusion of contemporary architectural features on the left hand side of the painting invites viewers to contemplate the continued relevance of the story, which centers on the relationship between beauty and virtue. Rachel's physical beauty is understood to reflect her inner virtue. Jacob's actions indicate his worthiness as a husband, and the fiery red of Jacob's cloak symbolizes his passion.

Jacopo Palma's "Chastity" likewise relies on the viewer's association of beauty with virtue. In this work there is an obvious tension between the sensual, voluptuous woman and her status as a representative of chastity. To today's viewers it may seem entirely contradictory to present chastity as such a clearly desirable woman. Yet this is one of the points of the painting; she is desirable to others yet she herself remains chaste. The suggestion is that chastity is a virtue most needed by those who are desired. Furthermore, the whiteness of both her flesh and the sleeves of her robe suggest her purity. She clutches the green velvet curtain that frames her and leans against a parapet. Both of these gestures are symbolic of her steadfastness. A white animal, thought to be a unicorn, can just be made out in the background landscape. According to Genesis, when Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise, the unicorn went with them, and thus became an earthly symbol of purity and chastity.

10.

Giovanni Andrea Donducci ( Il Mastellata )

Italian (Bolognese), b. Bologna 1575-1655

**Rachel at the Well**, c.1620

oil on canvas

36 x 48<sup>1/2</sup> inches

Collection of the Bermuda Government

Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest



# IDENTITY

7.

## Italian Renaissance Cassone

15th Century  
walnut  
47<sup>3/4</sup> x 36 inches

Collection of the Bermuda Government  
Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest



8.

Andrea Schiavone (Andrea Meldolla)  
Italian (Venetian), b. Zara, Dalmatia c.1510-1563

## Crowning of Esther, c.1560

oil on panel  
12 x 38 inches

Collection of the Bermuda Government  
Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest



9.

Andrea Schiavone (Andrea Meldolla)  
Italian (Venetian), b. Zara, Dalmatia c.1510-1563

## Dismissal of Queen Vashti, c.1560

oil on panel  
12 x 38 inches

Collection of the Bermuda Government  
Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest



During the Renaissance the vast majority of public art served either a religious or civic function. Domestic art, however, provided a fertile ground for experimentation and for the expression of other social values. Cassone, or wedding chests, were an important vehicle for such art. Cassone were used to hold the bride's trousseau and they were painted with appropriate subject matter.

Here we see a pair of paintings by Andrea Schiavone (Andrea Meldolla), one that serves as a warning and other as an exhortation. The subject is derived from the Old Testament book of Ester and tells the story of King Ahasuerus' search for the perfect wife. In one panel we see the story of Queen Vashti, who disobeyed the King and was therefore exiled from court. In the other we see the crowning of Ester, a humble and submissive woman who stands in contrast to the independent Vashti. The message of the paintings is very clear; the new bride must endeavour to emulate the virtues of Ester and avoid the vices of Vashti. A good wife must at all times obey and respect her husband's wishes or risk being put aside and banished.

One interesting aspect of both paintings is the nature of the landscape visible on the right hand side of each panel. We are now so used to the idea that nature is to be enjoyed and consumed that it can be difficult to recall how threatening nature was to sixteenth-century life. There was a constant fight to domesticate the land. The paintings present a cultivated landscape that serves to reinforce the idea of man's dominion over nature. In one there is clearly a town upon a hill and in the other there is a hunt. Both signify male power and reinforce the message of the paintings, which is female submission.

# SATIRE

## 11.

Francisco Jose Goya y Lucientes  
Spanish, b. 1746-1828

***Tu Que No Puedes (Those who cannot)***  
***from Los Caprichos (Whims), c.1793***

etching  
8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
Private collection



## 12.

Francisco Jose Goya y Lucientes  
Spanish, b. 1746-1828

***Ensayos (Trials) from Los Caprichos***  
***(The Whims), c.1797***

etching  
8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
Private collection



These etchings by Francisco José Goya y Lucientes are representative of a genre that emerges in the seventeenth century and finds its height of expression in the eighteenth century, namely moralizing satire. After a major illness in 1790, Goya began to develop a more caricature-like style, with which he created numerous satirical illustrations based on observations of human weakness and his own fanciful imaginings. This was epitomized in his series of eighty etchings, “Los Caprichos (The Whims)”, executed c.1793-98, and issued in 1799. The primary themes in the series of etchings are condemnation of superstition, denunciation of the decadence of the Church and the corruption of the Monarchy, and the exposition of the brutality of the uneducated.

Here we see two examples. In the first, “Ensayos (Trials)”, Goya tackles the subject of witchcraft and, by association, the religious superstitions that informed the discourse surrounding wise women. We see a young witch performing before the watchful gaze of a large, horned beast. She grins as she delves her hand inside the head of a man who is thus caused to levitate. The man hovers above numerous instruments commonly associated with witchcraft and spell casting: two cats, a cauldron, a skull, two broomsticks and a dead animal, tied together by its feet. The title of the work suggests that the girl is being assessed, as does Goya’s comment on the print: “Little by little she is making progress. She is already making her first steps and in time she will know as much as her teacher.”

The second, “Tu que no puedes (You who cannot)” comes from the series of plates involving asses and donkeys in which Goya uses the historically rich practice of engendering animals with human characteristics to poke fun at education, the nobility and doctors. In each case the satire is very straightforward with the ass representing the target in question. Here we see Goya uniting the trope of the topsy-turvy world and the practice of symbolising humans as donkeys to target the nobility metaphorically riding on the backs of the hard working poor.

# PORTRAITURE: 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

## 13.

Sir Joshua Reynolds

British, b. Plympton, Devon 1723-1792

**Lady Monnoux, nee Elizabeth Riddell,**  
1761

oil on canvas

29<sup>1/2</sup> x 24 inches

**Collection of the Bermuda Government**

**Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest**



## 14.

Thomas Gainsborough

British, b. Sudbury, Suffolk 1727-1788

**Thomas John Medlycott, c. 1763**

oil on canvas

87 x 57 inches

**Collection of the Bermuda Government**

**Hon. Hereward T. Watlington Bequest**



In contrast to the sixteenth-century portraits we have seen, this pair of eighteenth-century portraits shows the evolution of interest in communicating internal realities rather than the earlier focus on externalities such as wealth and status. In both Reynolds's and Gainsborough's work we are invited to reflect on the personalities and psychological characteristics of the sitters. Certainly there remains a desire to place the subjects within their correct social and economic classes but the purpose of the portraits is to demonstrate who the sitters are rather than what they are.

It is interesting to compare the Sir Joshua Reynolds portrait with that by Thomas Gainsborough. In both cases it is highly likely that they were produced in the context of imminent marriage. Lady Monnoux, however, has nothing of the submissive coding that the earlier portrait shows. Here we see a woman who is in full possession of herself. Both her posture and her direct gaze indicate that she expects to be addressed as an individual with sentiments and beliefs particular to her. While Reynolds paid attention to the details of her dress and decoration, these are not as heavily coded as earlier portraits. The emphasis remains on showing the viewer that this woman is both sensitive and self-contained.

In the Gainsborough we see the same concern with communicating aspects of the sitter's personality rather than his social or economic status. We are invited to reflect on the sentiments of the dog towards his master and to conclude from the dog's expression that this is a man to be admired and looked up to. His posture tells us that this is a man at ease with himself and the world. He looks into the distant landscape with an expression of reflection and sensitivity. Within the context of eighteenth-century ideas about the emotional impact of the landscape, a contemporary viewer would have noted with approval the fact that the sitter seems able to appreciate and be moved by his natural surroundings, indicating that he possesses a noble soul and sophisticated intellect.

# LANDSCAPES

## 15.

Richard Wilson

British (Welsh), b. Penegoes, Powys 1714-1782

**Classical Landscape with  
Diana and Actaeon**, c.1760s

oil on canvas

40<sup>1/2</sup> x 54 inches

Collection of the Bermuda Government  
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## 16.

Theodore Weber

French, 1838-1907

**North Sea Fishing Lugger  
Leaving Harbour**, c.1882

watercolour

10 x 15 inches

Collection of the Bermuda National Gallery  
Gift of Nea Willits



In these two paintings we can see that by the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century the natural world has become a subject in and of itself. It has taken several hundred years for the background to become the foreground, and in the case of the landscapes presented here, it still requires the placement of mythological figures within the landscape to justify the subject. Yet the shift is significant. In both paintings we can see that industrialization and technology have domesticated both the land and the sea. Whereas prior to c. 1800 both elements—land and sea—represented grave dangers that had to be confronted and fought against, by the start of the nineteenth century man's mastery of both was well established.

In the landscape by Richard Wilson the visible figures tell the story of Diana and Actaeon. According to the myth, the goddess Diana was bathing with three of her maidens when she noticed Actaeon spying on them from behind the trees. Outraged, Diana turned Actaeon into a stag, and set her hounds on him. Wilson chose to paint very small figures, with the result that the drama of their actions is absorbed into the immensity of the landscape. While the inclusion of these figures pushes the painting towards a form of idealized representation, it is also clear that the vista is taken from reality. The emotional impact of the landscape, created mostly through Wilson's handling of light, reflects the eighteenth-century interest in internal psychological experiences and corresponds to the development of new genres in poetry which explore the same theme.

Although nearly a century separates Theodore Weber's seascape from Wilson's work, we can see many of the same elements at play. There is no doubt about the power of the ocean as evident in the waves and sea spray. The subject is, however, man's mastery in the face of this the most unstable and dangerous of the natural environments. The fact that the jetty stands solidly in the surging water testifies to man's technological advances and although the figures are clearly being buffeted by winds, there is no sense of danger or anxiety. We know it is cold but we sense that these ships will return. The emergence of the sea as a subject also reflects the vastly increased number of people who, by the late nineteenth century, would have made some kind of sea voyage themselves. In the age before flight travel, by sea was the viable means of globalization, a process that predates the twenty-first century by hundreds of years.

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