CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN MEDIAEVAL ART[1]

By ERWIN PANOFSKY AND FRITZ SAXL

The earliest Italian writers about the history of art, such for instance as Ghiberti, Alberti, and especially Giorgio Vasari, thought that classical art was overthrown at the beginning of the Christian era and that it did not revive until, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy, it served as the foundation of what is usually called the Renaissance. The reasons for this overthrow, as those writers saw it, were the invasions of barbarous races and the hostility of the early Christian priests and scholars.

In thinking as they did the early writers were both right and wrong. They were wrong in so far as the Renaissance was connected with the Middle Ages by innumerable links, many of them being implicit in the very name Middle Ages, which is a Renaissance term based on the old Italian conception of cultural evolution. Classical conceptions survived throughout the Middle Ages—literary, philosophical, scientific, and artistic—and they were especially strong after the time of Charlemagne, under whose reign there had been a deliberate classical revival in almost every cultural field. The early writers were right in so far as the artistic forms under which the classical conceptions persisted during the Middle Ages were utterly different from our present ideas of antiquity, which did not come into existence until the "Renaissance" in its true sense of the "rebirth" of antiquity as a well-defined historical phenomenon.

During the Middle Ages in the western European countries it was inconceivable that a classical mythological subject should be represented within the limits of the classical style, as it was in Raphael's picture of Jupiter and Venus in the ceiling of the Villa Farnesina (fig. 1). Although there are monuments of Byzantine art, such as the so-called rosette caskets with reliefs of the Labors of Hercules and other similar themes (fig. 2),[2] which, in so far as they represent classical subject matter in classical (or at least pseudo-classical) forms, are comparable to Raphael's fresco, we find nothing that is comparable to them in the Western countries during the "high" Middle Ages. Even in the Venice of the dugento, closely connected as it was with Byzantium, an antique relief of Hercules could not be imitated without changing its mythological subject (figs. 4, 5). The lion's skin was replaced by a fluttering drapery, the boar became a stag, the terrified Euristheus was left out, and the hero was made to stand upon a vanquished dragon. As the human soul was often symbolized by a stag, the result of these changes was that the classical hero had been transformed into the Saviour conquering evil and saving the souls of the Faithful. From this example we learn that mediaeval Western art was unable, or, what comes to the same thing, was unwilling, to retain a classical prototype without destroying either its original form, or, as here, its original meaning.

[1] This article is a revised version of a lecture delivered for the first time to the teaching staff and students of the Department of Fine Arts of Princeton University. It resulted, however, from the common endeavor of the two authors, who in their research were assisted by the Hamburg students of art history. Furthermore I feel indebted to Mrs. Margaret Barr for her participation in the English wording. E. P.

[2] Still, Goldschmidt and Weitzmann in their recent publication of these caskets pointed out that the Byzantine ivory carvers were far from really understanding the subject matter of the classical groups and figures, which they generally used as mere ornaments, finally transforming all the figures into putti, as is the case in our figure 2 (Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, fig. 35). As for figure 3, compare note 26.

One of the essential characteristics of the western European mind seems to be the way in which it destroys things and then reintegrates them on a new basis – breaking with tradition only to return to it from an entirely new point of view – and thus produces "revivals" in the true sense of the word. Byzantine art, on the contrary, never having lost its connection with antiquity, was incapable of finding its way to what we may call a modern style. Since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it has contented itself with mere assimilation of the Western attainment to its own tradition of evolution.

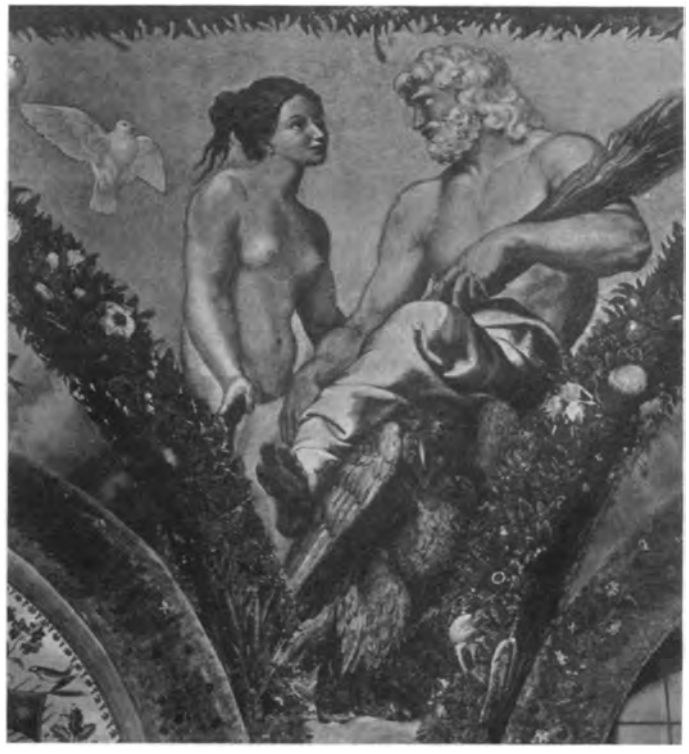

FIG. 1. VENUS IMPLORING JUPITER, BY RAPHAEL
VILLA FARNESINA, ROME

Thus we can see that what may be called the problem of "renaissance phenomena" is one of the central problems in the history of European culture. With this as his point of departure the late Professor Aby Warburg of Hamburg conceived the fruitful idea of directing his scientific research at the way in which classical thought continued through the post-classical era. To this end he built up a library devoted exclusively to that subject. In doing this, so far from confining himself to what is usually called art history – for that would have made his research impossible – he found it necessary to branch out into many fields until then untouched by art historians. His library, therefore, embraces the history of religions as well as that of literature, science, philosophy, law, and what we may generally call superstition, together with their various streams of tradition. In the present essay it will be our endeavor, while examining a single problem, to demonstrate the methods of research developed by Aby Warburg and his followers.

Our problem, then, is the rôle of classical mythology in mediaeval art. In examining it we shall pay no attention to the innumerable examples, like the Venetian relief we have mentioned, in which a classical mythological

figure has been deprived of its original meaning and invested with another.[3] We shall, on the contrary, consider the way in which mediaeval artists represented classical mythological figures as such. In doing this it will be necessary for us to distinguish sharply between two different traditions of work. In one, which we shall refer to as the "representational tradition," the mediaeval artist had before him a series of versions of his particular subject which had come down to him as integral unities of subject matter and form. In the other, to be referred to as the "literary" or "textual tradition," the mediaeval artist had before him only a literary text describing a mythological subject, for the illustration of which he had to work out new types or forms having no visual connection with those of classical times.

FIG. 2. HERCULES FIGHTING THE LION
IVORY CARVING FROM A ROSETTE CASKET
BYZANTINE, XI CENTURY
MUSEO NAZIONALE, FLORENCE

I

Our first problem is to find specimens of the representational tradition. We find them, obviously enough, in representations of astronomical and astrological subjects. For the modern man it is a matter of course to speak of the constellations as Andromeda, Perseus, Orion, etc., since we have come to identify the various groups of stars with certain mythological figures. This practice has come about as the result of a complicated evolution, and in early times was unknown. Primitive man naturally singled out some of the more easily recognizable groups of stars in order to get his bearings on land and sea, and, to remember them, he gave them the names of certain terrestrial objects – animals or tools or human beings without mythological connotation – such as the Bear, the Hyades, the Wain, etc. The primitive Oriental peoples did this and so did the pre-Homeric Greeks. The important thing, however, was that the Greeks did not confine themselves to this. Just as they "mythologized" terrestrial objects such as trees, springs, and mountains, so they gradually invested the constellations with mythological meanings. As early a poet as Homer speaks of mighty Orion and Boötes.

FIG. 3. ORPHEUS, FROM BIBL. NAT. MS. COISLIN 239
BYZANTINE, XII CENTURY

This practice increased until, by the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., a considerable number of the constellations had been mythologized. An example of this is the group of constellations associated with the myth of Andromeda, namely Andromeda herself, Cepheus her fa-

[3] Even if we do not count the fundamental phenomenon that Early Christian art borrowed its leading types from antique models (assimilating Christ to Roman emperors, Alexandrian shepherds, Greek philosophers, or Hellenistic Orpheuses and developing the types of the Evangelists from the portraits of classical authors), individual transformations analogous to that observed in the Venetian Hercules are much too frequent to be enumerated. A few interesting cases were discussed by Schlosser in "Heidnische Elemente in der christlichen Kunst des Altertums," originally appearing as a supplement to the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 26, 27, 31, 1894, nos. 248, 249, 251, and reprinted in *Präludien*, 1927, pp. 9 ff.

ther, Cassiopeia her mother, Perseus her rescuer, and Cetus her dragon. Other constellations, however, were still called simply the Balance or the Swan, and that which we know as Hercules was still called Engonasin, the Kneeling Man. In passing, it is worth noting that the signs of the zodiac were not connected with mythological ideas until rather late.

FIG. 4. HERCULES CARRYING THE CALEDONIAN BOAR
ANTIQUE RELIEF SET IN THE WALL OF
ST. MARK'S CHURCH, VENICE

FIG. 5. ALLEGORY OF SALVATION
XIII CENTURY RELIEF SET IN THE WALL OF
ST. MARK'S CHURCH, VENICE

This was the state of affairs when Eudoxos of Knidos, a Greek astronomer of the fourth century B.C., drew up a catalogue of the constellations which was meant to be as complete as possible. He did this for purely scientific purposes, but he could not help calling the constellations by their mythological names in so far as they had them. He says, for example, "beneath the tail of the Little Bear there are the feet of Cepheus, forming an equilateral triangle with the point of the aforesaid tail." Thus in the treatise of Eudoxos the two principal tendencies and capacities of Greek thought manifested themselves. The rational power of scientific systematization is shown by the very aim of Eudoxos's work. The irrational power of mythical imagination is shown by his nomenclature. These same tendencies are shown again by the fact that when about a century later Aratos, a Hellenistic poet, used the catalogue of Eudoxos for a purely poetical description of the firmament, Hipparchos, whose ideas about the procession of the equinoxes brought about a new epoch in the study of astronomy, not content with furiously criticizing Aratos, went on scientifically to perfect the catalogue so that it became a solid basis for astronomical observation in the modern sense of the word.

Aratos, in his elegant poem, often alluded to the stories of the constellations, and, whenever they had them, to their mythological meanings. He confined himself, however, to the names and stories as given by Eudoxos, and never went on to mythologize on his own ac-

count. Sometimes he frankly said he was not able to give more than a mere description, as when he wrote that "not far from it [the Dragon] there revolves a figure that resembles a hard-working man, bent on his knees and spreading out his arms, but nobody knows what he is trying to do and thus they call him simply the 'Kneeling Man.'"

This intermediary phase is illustrated by the Farnese Globe (fig. 6),[4] the most famous classical astronomical representation that has come down to us. With the exception of the figure of Atlas, which was added in the Renaissance, it is a Roman copy of a Greek original. The Greek original must have been rather closely connected with the poem of Aratos, for in the Farnese Globe the constellations, both those that have been mythologized and those that have not, correspond to the descriptions in the poem. Orion and Perseus, for example, are characterized by their mythological attributes (Perseus is represented with his sword and Medusa's head), but the Kneeling Man is still nothing but a kneeling man, without the club or the lion's skin of Hercules, and the constellation Eridanus is only a simple river represented as a curved ribbon.

In the Hellenistic literature, however, the process of mythologization went much further. Eratosthenes (284-204 B.C.) completed the work which the previous generation had left unfinished. He wrote a poem called *Catasterisms* in which each of the constellations is given a mythological meaning that is explained in a long-winded commentary. He interpreted the Kneeling Man as Hercules fighting with the dragon of the Hesperides. He even mythologized the signs of the zodiac, connecting the Bull with the Rape of Europa, and identifying the Lion with the Nemean Lion. He said that the Crab was sent out by Juno to bite the heel of Hercules when he fought the Hydra. The Scales was the only one for which Eratosthenes found no mythological explanation, and so he tersely said, "The sign of the Scorpion [which he interpreted most acutely] is very big and therefore is divided into two separate signs, one of which is called the Balance."[5]

Thus the poem of Eratosthenes turned out to be a didactic poem on mythology rather than one on astronomy, and it is a significant fact that one of his numerous followers, an Augustan poet named Hyginus, whose chief work is the *Fabulae*, was originally a mythographer in the narrower sense of the word.

The transformation of the firmament into a rendezvous of mythological figures was very important for the representational evolution. There were at least two reasons for this. Firstly, the adulatory scholars and poets, bustling about the various Hellenistic courts, were given courage to invent new constellations to please their patrons. Thus it happened that imaginary constellations actually invaded the astronomical pictures, e.g., the Hair of Berenice. Kallimachos in his delightful poem told how Berenice, the Queen of Egypt, had sacrificed her hair to Venus so that the goddess might protect the queen's husband during a war. The astronomer royal promptly discovered that the hair had been transformed into a constellation, which although previously unknown was thereafter represented in many an astronomical picture.[6] Secondly, and much more important, once all the constellations had been identified with well-known mythological figures such as Hercules or Eridanus, which were represented in innumerable reliefs and paintings that had nothing to do with astronomy, the artists who illustrated the astronomical writings could not help remembering and arbitrarily making use of these non-astronomical types. Thus after the constellation the Dragon had

[4] Cf. Boll, *Sitzungsber. d. bayr. Akad. d. Wiss., Philos.-philol. Classe*, 1899, pp. 110 ff.; Thiele, *Antike Himmelsbilder*.

[5] Cf. Ovid *Met.* II. 196: "Scorpius . . . Porrigit in spatium signorum membra duorum."

[6] Cf. Pfeiffer, *Philologus*, vol. LXXVII, part 2, pp. 179 ff.

been interpreted as the dragon of the Hesperides, these artists added a tree to the constellation Hercules, because this tree was held to be an integral part of the story. Also the constellation Eridanus was visualized in the usual form of a reclining river god with urn and reed, instead of as a plain uninteresting ribbon.

Thus what had originally been a scientific astronomical treatise by degrees developed into a kind of semi-mythological picture book, which usually began with representations of the celestial globe as a whole and continued with full-sized pictures of the single constellations. Often mere pictorial enthusiasm so much prevailed over scientific interest that the stars which originally constituted the bases of the figures were replaced by an arbitrary amassing of dots, and sometimes they were entirely omitted.

The prototype (or rather the prototypes) of these illustrated manuscripts, usually called "Aratea," must have been established as early as in the later centuries of the Roman Empire, because they were imitated in early Byzantine and early Islamic art as well as by the Carolingian illuminators. Figure 8, for example, shows a representation of the celestial globe in a Byzantine manuscript of the fifteenth century (Cod. Vat. graec. 1087) obviously copied from a ninth-century prototype (such as Cod. Vat. graec. 1291), which in its turn derived from a late antique prototype. It is a curious kind of projection. The northern and southern hemispheres are not represented in two separate drawings, divided by a horizontal section through the equator or the ecliptic, but the whole globe is flattened out, so to speak, into one panorama, consisting of five concentric circles. The inner circle represents the northern arctic circle, then follows the northern tropic, then the equator, then the southern tropic, and finally the southern arctic, the constellations of which appear, of course, in a grotesque distortion.

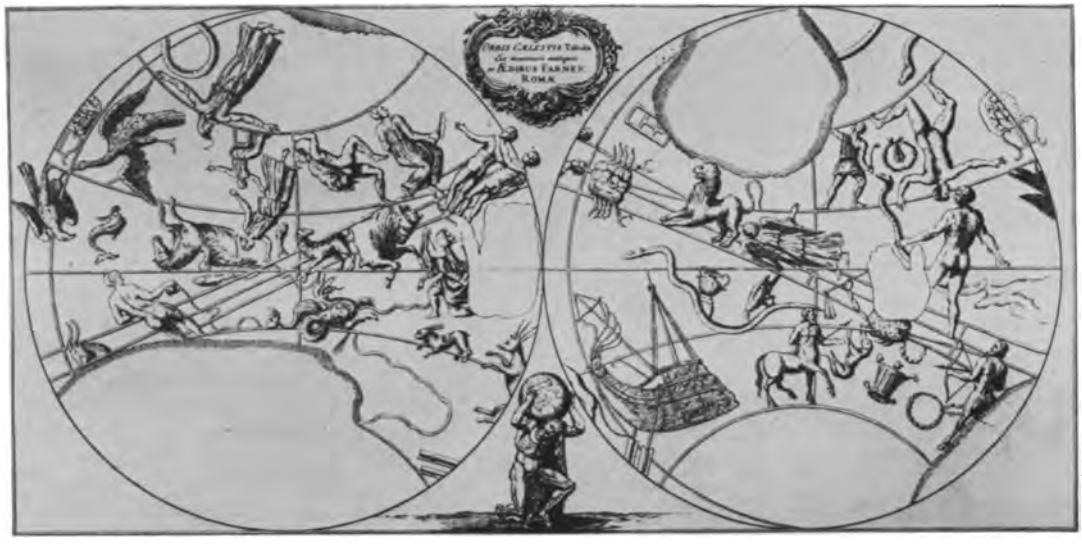

FIG. 6. THE FARNESE GLOBE, FROM AN XVIII CENTURY ENGRAVING

The painter who was commissioned to depict the constellations in a hemispherical dome in Ḳuseir ʿAmrā, a castle built by an Arabian prince in the eighth century (fig. 7), executed his commission by simply enlarging a miniature like this. To us this Arabian monument is interesting for two reasons: firstly, because it shows the transmission of the antique astronomical pictures to the Islamic world; secondly, because it reveals a most essential difference

between mediaeval and modern principles of decoration. A modern painter representing the constellations in a dome would try to suggest to the spectator the actual aspect of the firmament, that is to say, he would show in the dome those constellations which a spectator could really see in the sky.[7] The author of the Ḳuseir ʿAmrā fresco, however, did not even not content with a mere planimetrical scheme of the celestial spheres, represented the firmament as it can be seen. Instead of designing complete celestial maps, these painters represented only those constellations which were visible at Florence at a certain day and hour, and thereby, from an aesthetic point of view, identified the stone hemisphere of the dome

FIG. 7. THE FIRMAMENT AS REPRESENTED IN THE DOME OF THE VIII CENTURY ḲUSEIR ʿAMRĀ. RECONSTRUCTION BY F. SAXL

think of that and simply transposed to the ceiling the conventional and extremely unrealistic celestial maps shown in the illuminated manuscripts.[8]

The requirements of the modern mind are met for the first time in the second quarter of the fifteenth century, that is to say, at a time when perspective had been acknowledged as a requirement of artistic representation, in two monuments at Florence. The painters of the frescoes in the smaller dome of the Pazzi Chapel and of the somewhat earlier fresco in the Sagrestia Vecchia of San Lorenzo (fig. 9), with the immaterial hemisphere of the firmament. Thus these early Florentine frescoes are the first specimens of what we usually call the

[7] This contention can be proved by Lodovico Seitz's frescoes in the dome of the so-called Torre di Leone XIII in the Vatican, mentioned by Zola in his famous novel *Rome*: although the painter intended to glorify the Pope by putting the constellation of the Lion (the celestial coat of arms of "Papa Lione") in a place as conspicuous as possible and even distinguished it by fifteen electric bulbs, he could not but adapt the whole of his composition to the actual aspect of the firmament as visible at Rome.

[8] Cf. Saxl, in Creswell, part I, pp. 289 ff.

"illusionistic" principle in the decoration of a ceiling, in that they suggest to the beholder a prospect into the open air. We only need to replace the astronomical sky, filled with stars, by a meteorological and theological sky filled with clouds and heavenly beings, and we have "illusionistic" decorations of the kind created by Mantegna, Correggio (fig. 10), and the baroque painters.

FIG. 8. CELESTIAL MAP, FROM COD. VAT. GRAEC. 1087. BYZANTINE, XV CENTURY

Now that we have looked at the Byzantine tradition as it had been transmitted to the Arabian East, let us come back to the Middle Ages in western Europe.

The Carolingian Renaissance differed from the "Rinascimento" of the fifteenth century in many respects. Where the latter was based on the irresistible feeling of the whole people and was brought forth in popular political and spiritual excitement, the earlier was the result of the deliberate efforts of a few distinguished men, and thus was not so much a "revival" as a series of improvements in art, literature, calligraphy, administration, etc. Because of this we should do better if we called it, as its contemporaries did, a "renovation" rather than a renaissance. It is our opinion, however, that the

more modern theory, according to which the efforts of Charlemagne and his collaborators resulted in little more than a continuation of Merovingian tendencies, is even less correct than the traditional conception of the Carolingian movement as being a renaissance. We must not forget that it is chiefly due to the deliberate endeavors of the Carolingian leaders and to the diligence of their scribes, who systematically copied the profane writers of antiquity, that we today have the opportunity of reading such classical poets as Horace and Ovid and such classical scientists as Pliny and Vitruvius. In the same spirit the Carolingian illuminators endeavored to copy the illustrations in the ancient astronomical picture books, of which we have explained the development. They conscientiously, and sometimes most successfully, imitated their prototypes in style and technique as well as in mythological subject matter. Thus, for example, the miniatures in the Codex Leydensis Vossianus lat. 79 (cf. fig. 22) and, still more eloquently, those in the magnificent Harley MS. 647 (cf. fig. 11), which have hitherto been totally disregarded by the art historians, impress us as being closer in spirit to the Pompeian frescoes than anything else made in the West in mediaeval times.[9]

FIG. 9. THE FIRMAMENT AS REPRESENTED IN THE DOME OF THE SAGRESTIA VECCHIA OF SAN LORENZO, FLORENCE. ABOUT 1440

[9] The Leydensis Vossianus (a more complete copy of this manuscript is to be found in Boulogne-sur-Mer, Bibl. Municipale, Cod. 188; tenth century) was edited *in extenso* by Thiele. As for its origin, Byvanck (pp. 65 ff.) seems to agree with Swarzenski, who attributed it to the school of Reims (*Jahrbuch d. königl. preuss. Kunstsamml.*, vol. XXIII, part 2, pp. 88 ff.), while Professor Morey of Princeton rather believes it to be connected with the school of St.-Denis. The Harley MS. 647, the miniatures of which strike us as the most classical elaboration of mediaeval Western painting, in our opinion was executed in a continen-