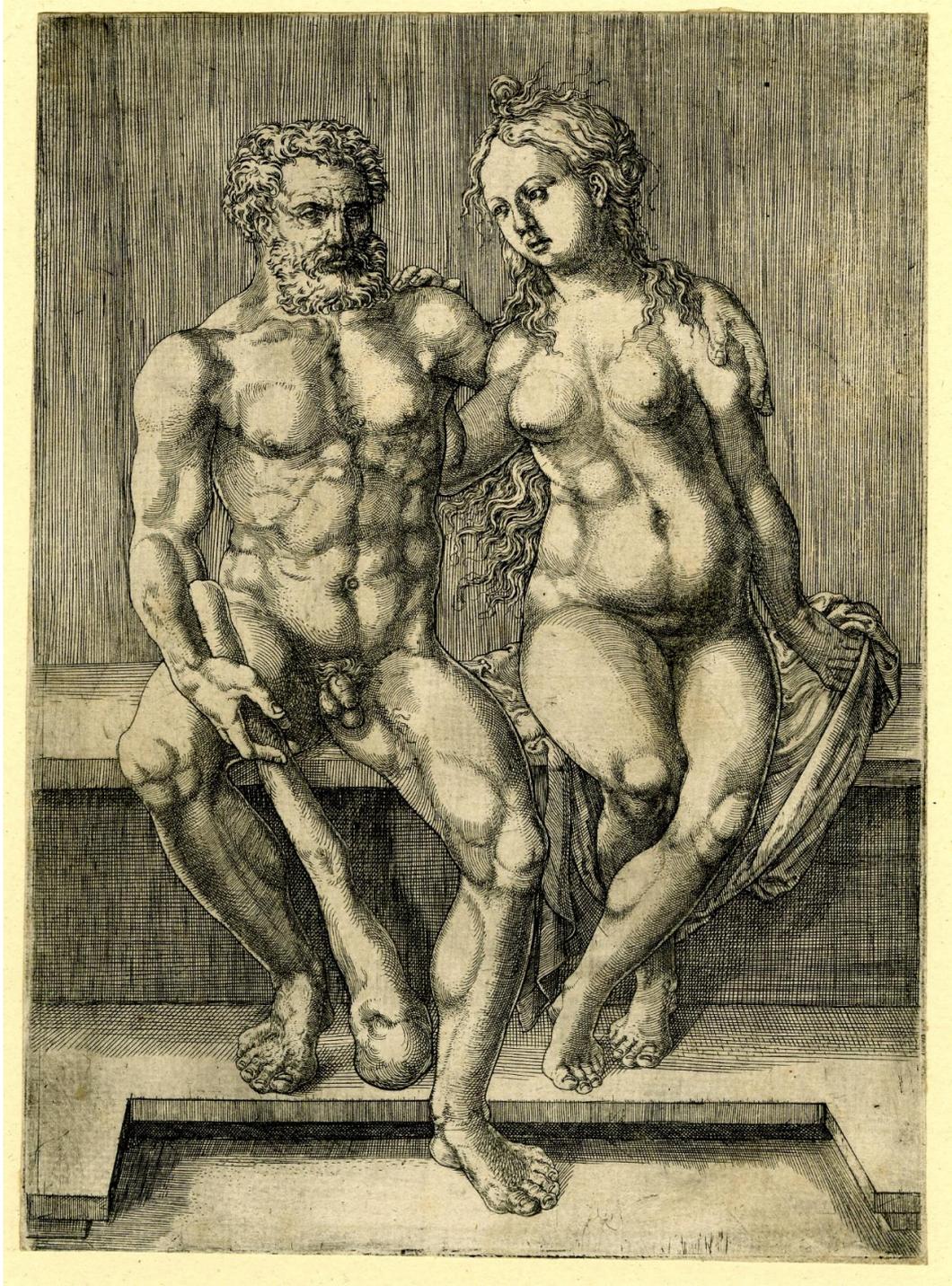


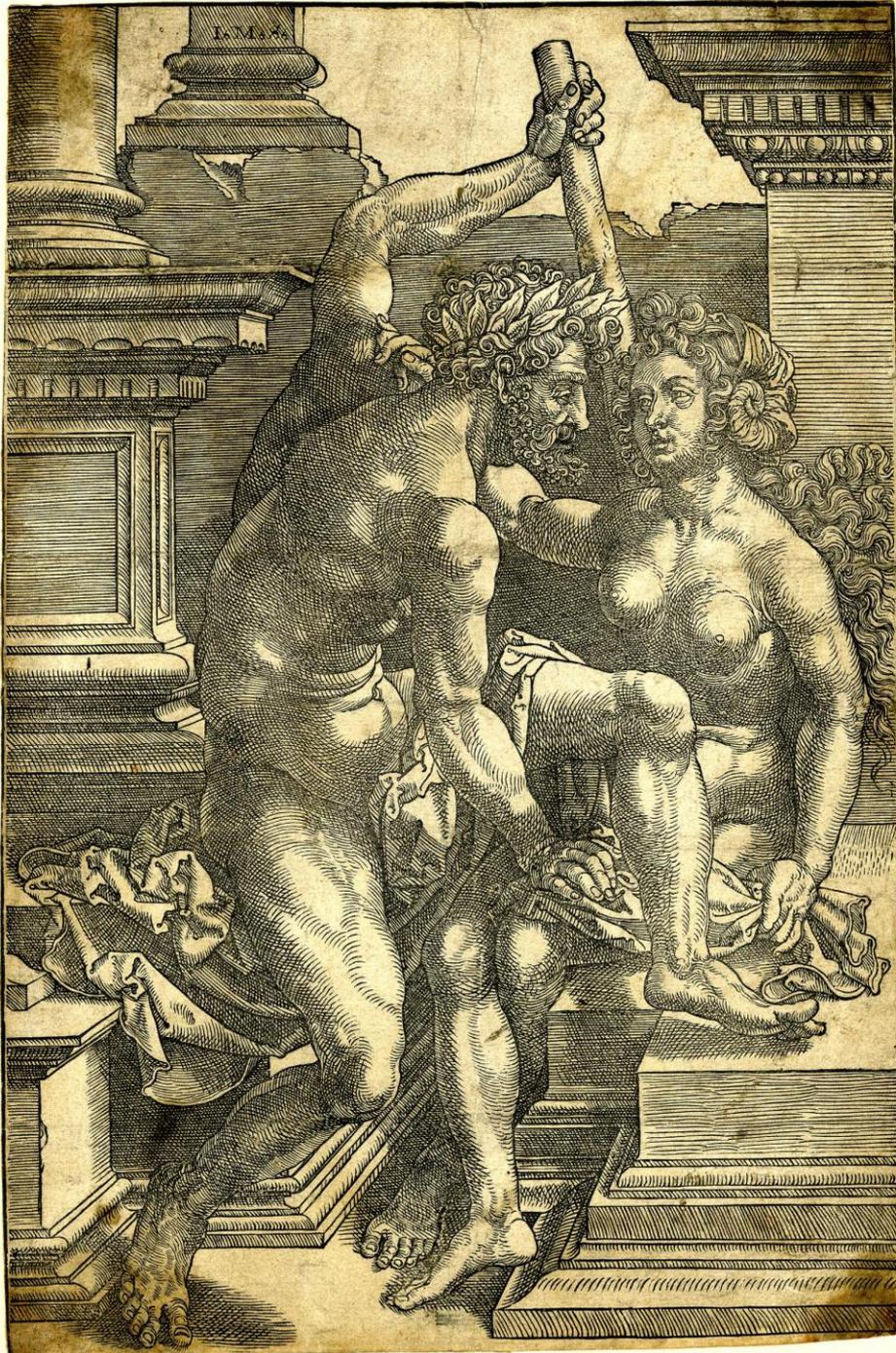
Jean Gossart (Jan Gossaert): Mythology and the Renaissance nude



Hercules and Deianira, Jan Gossaert, 1517, oil on panel, 36.8 x 26.6cm.
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



Hercules and Deianira, Jan Gossaert, 1517-23, woodcut, 258 x 171mm.
The British Museum (No. U,5.233), London.
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Hercules and Deianira attributed to Jan Gossaert, 1520-30, engraving, 192 x 140mm. The British Museum (No. 1866,1013.908), London.
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Transcript

Hello and welcome to this Tuesday Talk, part of a series of podcasts given by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, the art gallery and concert hall on the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus. My name is Helen Cobby, I'm the Assistant Curator, and today we are looking at the Barber's early 16th-century painting by the artist Jean Gossart. The work, painted in oil on wooden panel, depicts Hercules and his wife, Deianira, and is one of the highlights of the collection at the Barber. This talk will explore the artist's portrayal of these mythological figures, and attitudes towards the nude in Renaissance art, including differences between northern and southern European approaches. It will also consider the significance of Hercules for Gossart and his circle, especially his patron, Philip of Burgundy.

Two nude figures sit side by side. They lean into each other with almost perfect symmetry, their hands clasping across one another's backs and their legs knotting together in a tight reciprocal embrace. Their limbs form a complicated love-knot, a shape which is echoed in the woman's loosely swept up hairstyle. The man's hand presses tenderly into her waist, an understated detail that affirms the sensual tactility of the scene. Shadows ripple over their skin, accentuating the contours and the soft roundness of their flesh. The couple's smooth bodies are also set off by a crumpled white silvery cloth, which is reminiscent of a tousled bed sheet. Several sight lines in the composition end at the woman's open mouth, which further heightens the eroticism of the scene. They gaze into each other's eyes, securing their emotional connection; this is not just a physical embrace.

They are clearly lovers sharing a private and intense moment, yet they are not an average couple. The inscriptions on the panels above them assert their divine identities - this is the demi-god Hercules and his wife Deianira. Hercules casually holds a spiked club to one side, this is his characteristic weapon and a rather phallic symbol of his power. We are further reminded of his strength by the images of some of his celebrated Twelve Labours on the reliefs running along the side of the ledge on which the couple sits. These Labours include, from left to right, his

wrestling match with Antaeus, the killing of the Nemean lion, and the bearing of the globe by Atlas.

Although they both occupy prominent positions within the composition, Hercules appears to be in charge. He asserts his presence with an extended foot, as though creating a protective barrier between his wife and the outside world. His body is certainly shown to be a pillar of strength and he seems comfortable in his own skin - the club does not obscure his body and the ivy sprig only just hides his genitals. His wife appears almost equally assured, the only item that she wears is a pearl fillet entwined in her golden locks. The wave-like forms are depicted in a way that is reminiscent to Leonardo. The pearl fillet is a symbol of wealth and status, as well as purity and chastity. Her modesty is, after all, preserved by a well-placed pale leg.

However, this is not just a scene of marital bliss. Deianira rests her left hand on a simple silvery-white tunic, which will, unknowingly, bring about Hercules' death. According to Ovid's epic Roman poem *Metamorphoses*, Hercules shot a poisoned arrow at the centaur Nessus in order to rescue Deianira from his grasp. Before dying, the centaur gave her his tunic, deceitfully claiming it would secure Hercules' love and fidelity. When she offered Hercules the tunic and he put it on, he was enveloped in flames and killed. In despair, Deianeira committed suicide. This tragic tale recalls the 'Power of Women' *topos*, a popular medieval and Renaissance artistic and literary notion that women have sexual power over men and abuse it to destroy even the strongest man. The tale also resonates as a mythical parallel with the Biblical subject of Adam and Eve, which also concerns a woman bringing death to her husband after being deceived by a beast.

Gossart seems to deepen this tragedy by portraying Hercules as being completely enraptured by his wife. Perhaps this suggests that if only Deianira had not doubted her husband's love, Hercules would have lived. However, the inevitability of the tale is also cemented into the composition, not only by the deadly tunic but also by the architectural setting. This shallow classical niche has a tomb-like quality, as though encasing the lovers in a final embrace. The carved sheep skulls lining the

top frieze act as a reminder of the certainty of death. They can also be interpreted as bucrania, an architectural ornamentation which originated in the marble altars of Ancient Rome and was commonly employed in Classical architecture. In this way, they are also linked to the Labours.

So this painting presents a momentous mythological moment, yet also one full of intimacy and erotic intent. This begs the question, when and why was this work made, and who dared to paint it? A monogram signature and date is included at the bottom of the painting in a trompe-l'oeil effect, as it looks as though it is carved into the stone floor. The signature was painted out until the work's recent conservation; the signature must have been obliterated some time ago considering the work was misattributed to Dürer in the 18th century and sold as such. Now exposed, they tell us that the work was made in 1517 by the Netherlandish painter Jean Gossart, who would have been about 39 years old. He called himself Jan Mabuse, after his birthplace, Maubeuge in Haunaut, now in France. He was a prolific painter of portraits, mostly of men in positions of great wealth and power, and was sought out for his ability to capture a lifelike appearance of individuals. He was also a painter of religious imagery, making a limited variety of biblical and devotional themes.

He is often regarded as one of the most innovative artists of the Northern Renaissance and was the first to sign his work extensively. He was certainly an artist of 'firsts', as he also was the first Northern artist to paint nudes on a monumental scale - and to depict them in physical contact with each other. He was admired during his lifetime and is said to have earned the praise of Dürer. Despite this fame, both in his own time and ours, he remains a mysterious artist. Very little is known about his training and his early years as a practising artist are obscure. In 1503 he joined the St Luke's Guild in Antwerp and worked in the style of the Antwerp Mannerists, which is characterised by cluttered compositions, fantastic architecture, exaggerated poses and excessive embellishments. The incomplete record of his career and the characteristics of his art suggest that he depended upon various court patrons, for whom he worked for most of his life.

One of his most prominent patrons, and who probably had the most influence over his work, was Philip, Duke of Burgundy, admiral of the Netherlands and the powerful illegitimate son of Duke Philip the Good. His great interests were antiquity, mythology and erotic art. Gossart accompanied him on an informative trip to Rome in 1508 and sketched famous sacred monuments of antiquity, like the Colosseum. During the Renaissance, Rome was the capital of Western civilisation and the achievements of ancient Rome were highly admired. Gossart was the first northern artist to visit Rome and make sketches of Roman antiquities 'from life'. The trip also gave him the opportunity to absorb a wealth of Italian paintings and frescos first hand. This experience changed the course of his career and, by extension, the direction of Netherlandish painting. Indeed, according to Vasari, Gossart was the first northern artist to import the subject of nudes and mythologies to the Netherlands. He combined these subjects and portrayed his figures with heightened eroticism, capturing great feeling and dynamism in all of his work.

The patron of the Barber's painting is unknown, but it is likely to have been Philip of Burgundy or one of his humanist friends. Philip commissioned various mythological paintings from Gossart, his first is thought to be the painting of a nude Neptune and Amphitrite made a year before the Barber's work. It is now considered one of his most famous paintings and is in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. Gossart's mythological nudes certainly seem to be connected to Philip, as he stopped making such works after his patron's death in 1524. However, mythological figures did hold a fascination beyond Philip's circle. Hercules was widely held up as an exemplar of tireless effort and moral strength in the early 16th century; he was thought to combine Christian fortitude and civic heroism. He was also considered prone to flawed behaviour, having both a god, Jupiter, and a mortal for parents. Renaissance artists seemed to enjoy grappling with this complexity, making many statues, prints and paintings of Hercules.

The image of Hercules as a world ruler was in the minds of Netherlandish nobility in 1517 when Gossart made his painting, as Charles V sailed that year from the Low Countries to Spain to claim his newly inherited kingdom. Displayed at the ceremony in anticipation of the journey was an

image of two pillars standing in the sea, together with the motto 'still further'. This was a reference to the mythical columns erected by Hercules at the Straits of Gibraltar, and an embodiment of the young ruler's imperial ambitions. Charles and his counsellors were inspired by a 15th-century French text, *Compendium of Trojan Histories* by Raoul Lefèvre, which was central to the Burgundian court. The author was chaplain to Philip the Good, who regarded Hercules as an ancestor and Lefèvre satisfied this belief by weaving an ancient ancestry for the Burgundian nobility that combined biblical, mythological and historical narratives, including the Labours of Hercules. From 1514, Philip the Good's son, Gossart's patron, had a particularly personal interest in Hercules after finding an ancient stone altar with a dedication to the god Hercules Magusanus washed ashore in Zeeland, where he had one of his residences. Philip's affinity with Hercules suggests Gossart's image of this hero may be localised, with the work referring to an imagined local antiquity.

Although there were numerous courtly images of Hercules at the time, none of those produced in the Netherlands were depicted nude, and any that pre-date Gossart's work are based on Lefèvre's text. Gossart's nude versions were likely influenced by his patron Philip of Burgundy. His taste for the subject was guided by the proliferation of nudes in classical Italian art, especially sculpture, and the revival of classical art and antiquities in Renaissance Italy, which both artist and patron had experienced directly during their trip to Rome. Indeed, by the 16th century, the ability to depict the nude had become one of the ultimate tests for Italian artists. Florentine workshops, like Botticelli's, made many drawings of nudes, all of which tended to be of men. Drawings like these signal that artists were interested in models with the most beautiful bodies possible; they would often select the best limbs and elements from several individuals to create what they viewed to be the perfect figure. Depicting a variety of body types was not of interest. Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, made some thirty years before Gossart's painting, takes this notion of ideal proportions to extremes.

Beauty conventions were very narrow in the Renaissance and were further refined in the early 16th century. For example, the ideal woman should have golden hair and ivory skin tinged with pink like fresh roses, all traits that are seen in Gossart's version of Deianira. He also gives her some masculine features, such as a muscular torso, which are even more apparent in other artists' work, such as Michelangelo's. Contrary to popular belief, Michelangelo did use some female models but chose to make them look masculine in line with a dominant school of thought around beauty. This stems partly from early 15th-century conceptions that women did not have perfect proportions and were in fact imperfect versions of the male body. There were also different attitudes to the naked body - the male nude was an accepted part of Renaissance life, whereas female nakedness was associated with the sexual shame of Eve. Women's nudity was believed to be dangerous for the male onlooker and for the woman, so women were veiled for much of the time. This often made it difficult for artists to secure female models, an issue particularly pronounced in the Netherlands, where sex work and modelling were conflated. Some of the only records of female models in the Netherlands are linked to trial reports, and any nudes that artists did paint were confined to the adornment of marriage chambers, and so were connected to marital love and pro-creation.

With this in mind, we might assume that Gossart's painting of Hercules and his wife would have been titillating and even shocking to many in its own time. It has been described as possibly the most provocative of the artist's paintings, and its small scale - 36 x 26cm, roughly the size of a large baking tray at home - seems to invite an intimate and private sort of viewing. Many similar Italian paintings were often closeted away where only a select few could look at them, namely the aristocracy. This type of engagement was considered acceptable for such educated onlookers, who were thought to approach the works from an academic and morally safe standpoint.

Officials sought to control any wider circulation of nudes in art. From the 1520s, nudes depicted in print were censored after concerns about the relatively wide circulation afforded by the medium. The Italian engraver Marcantonio Raimondi was imprisoned in Rome in the mid-1520s for his

role in the distribution of erotic prints, some of which still survive in the British Museum. This anxiety and censorship over the nude and erotic art did not stop other artists from making prints. Gossart himself reproduced the subject of Hercules and Deianira in a woodcut, dating between 1517 and 1523, an impression is in the British Museum. This is even more highly charged than his painting, as Hercules crouches over his wife with

one hand on her thigh, while she invites him closer with fingers stroking his neck. Another version, attributed to Gossart, was made later, between 1520 and 1530, one of the four known impressions is again in the British Museum. In this engraving, the couple behave themselves a bit better and the design depends much more on Gossart's oil at the Barber, suggesting that, in some circles at least, this was a popular and well-received image.

This is still true today. The Barber's painting is one of the collection highlights and is often requested for loan. It was recently lent to the Getty Center in Los Angeles for the exhibition 'The Renaissance Nude' which was also shown at the Royal Academy in London last year. The painting certainly marks a significant point in the artist's practice, being one of his earliest mythological nude subjects, and testifies to the innovative lengths he went to master the classical figure types and animated poses of the Italian Renaissance - as well as to satisfy the values, beliefs and interests of his patron. Thank you for listening, and thanks to Jack Davies for composing and playing the music that accompanies this talk. There will be another talk next week by one of my colleagues, then we will take a short summer break before starting the series again in September.

Speaker info

Helen Cobby joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Assistant Curator in the summer of 2017. She works on a variety of projects including the care, interpretation and display of the Prints and Drawings collection, the digitisation of the collections, and research into new acquisitions. She has also curated an exhibition about the Scottish Colourists with the Director Nicola Kalinsky, and assisted with the curation of the most recent exhibition, 'Cornwall as Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-Century Britain', as well as contributing essays to the accompanying exhibition booklets.

Her research interests also include Rodin's sculpture and photography (the subject of her MA dissertation at the University of London), JMW Turner's early prints and drawings, feminist art history and criticism, and twentieth-century American women printmakers. For the latter, she was recently awarded a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund to undertake research in New York City. Prior to the Barber, Helen worked in a variety of museums, including Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum - as the research curator, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum, and most recently the Ashmolean Museum, where she curated a touring exhibition of Turner's early architectural work.

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.

Select reading list

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