GIOVANNI BATTISTA PALUMBA'S MYTHOLOGICAL PROGENY

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Little is known about the life and career of the artist Giovanni Battista Palumba, also known as the Master I. B. with the Bird. Nearly all the studies of his art, beyond those securing his identity, have concentrated on determining his artistic origins and tracing his presumed stylistic derivations. These are vital questions to be sure, but they have come at the expense of a more thematic evaluation of his work, especially considering that Palumba, who appears to have resided in Rome at the beginning of the sixteenth century, was one of the earliest printmakers to produce independent woodcuts and engravings featuring mythological subject matter, often highly erotic in tone. The transgressive character of his graphic inventions comes to the fore in prints featuring cross-species copulation and bizarre progeny. His prints commanded a wide audience, being reproduced by other well-known printmakers, including Nicoletto da Modena, and even adapted on majolica plates at the time. Rather than using examples of his works to track an illustrious artistic lineage in terms of style or to locate literary sources that explain his imagery in terms of iconography, this article will highlight Palumba's profound engagement with humanists and their literary activities in Rome. Palumba's secular prints reveal an acute investment in the remains of antiquity—from ancient artifacts to ancient fables—a medium for recycling and revitalizing the past in unexpected ways to make it more viable for contemporary audiences. In the absence of early biographical or archival information, humanist responses offer the most salient context in which to interpret Palumba's art. In particular, the poetry of Evangelista Maddalenì Capodiferro (ca. 1450?–1527), known by his nickname Faustus (Fausto in Italian, meaning “lucky”), presents Palumba's printmaking as a means of artistic consummation: the creation of fabulous progeny that connects the past with the present and imagery that binds viewers emotionally, sensuously, and intellectually to the artist's works. Studies of Renaissance epigrams and ekphrases devoted to art in Rome have tended to privilege large-scale sculpture, especially antique, or painting, yet Palumba's works on paper equally afforded patrons and poets vivid and intimate experiences to “interact” with myth and antiquity. What surfaces from the visual and literary evidence is a nexus of learning...
and friendship, a lively cross-fertilization of eloquent image-making and poetic invention, uniting a highly self-conscious artist and his humanist audiences.

Palumba signed his eleven woodcuts and fourteen engravings, none of which is dated, with the initials of his Latinized name (Ioannes Baptista) followed by a rebus of a pigeon, the latter offering a play on his family name in the Roman tongue—palumbes. As we shall see, this signature is not the only moniker the artist assumed, and his various appellations, whether adopted or assigned, reveal his close ties with the Roman academic community, whose members had a habit of adopting pseudonyms. Palumba strategically and conspicuously deployed his signature in his works, for instance in the allegorical engraving Roma (fig. 1), which not only helps locate the artist in the eternal city but also shows his affinity with its illustrious past. Gleaned from various architectural ornaments to analyze and interpret works of art, Rijser privileges the notion of evidentia (vividness) as a primary catalyst for the interaction between art and beholder. See also Gramaccini and Meier 2009 for the relationship between humanist theories of invention and imitation and the graphic vocabulary of the related field of the reproductive print and its Renaissance reception.

in Rome and based in part on ancient imperial coinage, the details of the engraving show a female personification of Rome holding a statuette of Victory and surrounded by lavishly decorated armor, weapons, and trophies. The artist’s near archaeological rendering, analogous to Jacopo Ripanda’s astonishingly detailed drawings of Trajan’s column and other Roman reliefs from the beginning of the sixteenth century, lends the profuse assembly of artifacts a tangible immediacy. As Ripanda’s efforts earned him high praise from the antiquarian communities in Rome, not to mention the patronage of Pope Alexander VI and Cardinal Raffaele Riario, it follows that Palumba conceived his Roma as a re-creation of antiquity to impress the same circles while simultaneously having a broad appeal. What is more, Palumba’s signature relates to the overall graphic design and details of the composition, namely the inscriptions Roma and SPQR, as well as the animal imagery, such as the she-wolf nursing Romulus and Remus. At the lower left, Palumba aligns his signature with the word Roma, where it assumes an ancient epigraphic character. Like hieroglyphs and in keeping with Bramante’s proposed rebus-like pun of Pope Julius II’s name for the frieze on the outer façade of the Belvedere, Palumba veils his name to the masses but reveals it to a select, initiated audience, all the while claiming a Roman identity for his artistic enterprise. He blurs the boundaries between signature and inscription, artifact and image, Roman history and the caretakers of its heritage.

Palumba’s fascination with Rome’s past is matched by his involvement in its contemporary environment, witnessed by the engraving known as the Three Monstrosities (fig. 2). This signed print depicts conjoined twins, a three-headed cat, and a misshapen egg enigmatically labeled Owo (perhaps uovo). According to the Latin inscription, all of these compromised births occurred on 17 March 1503, during the pontificate of Alexander VI, a date that no doubt marks the print’s genesis. As with the engraving Roma, the Roman majuscules evince an antique character and authority. Word and image combine in a dynamic way as Palumba documents these bizarre progeny, which since antiquity were considered portents of ill fortune. By the early sixteenth century, publishers worked with authors and artists to cater to a growing audience fascinated by wondrous monsters and prophetic signs, and such prints and broadsheets raised the curiosity of all levels of society and circulated in a variety of social spaces, from the marketplace to lecture halls to the papal court. The Latin text below Palumba’s imagery seems to target a more exclusive learned audience. It has been speculated that the subject matter may be connected to the superstition that the Borgia pope was the incarnation of the Antichrist, threatening the world’s end, and the engraving may very well have been issued with the encouragement of the pope’s enemies.

We can also look at this print from another angle: More than just a newsflash or a device for negative propaganda, Palumba’s representation of deformed births trades in the field of artistic production and poetic invention, or poiesis, the fervid, divine-like power to bring forth “strange and unheard-of creations [peregrinas et inauditas inventiones] of the mind,” as Giovanni Boccaccio explains in his widely popular Genealogie deorum gentilium. Palumba appears to offer evidence of what the Roman poet Horace scoffs at in his Ars Poetica (1–5): painters who render...
bizarre ornament—mermaids and centaurs—art that relies on *phantasia* rather than *mimesis*. In this instance, however, Palumba demonstrates that the unfathomable is not beyond the bounds of unruly nature and, therefore, within the artistic domain, a legitimate form of *mimesis*. This notion was expressed by Sebastian Brant, who, in 1497, after completing six broadsheets on abnormal births, remarked: “Some people want me to write about another two-headed child... monsters have become so frequent that, rather than a wonder [*miraculum*], they appear to represent the common course of nature in our time.” Albrecht Dürer’s engraving known as *The Monstrous Pig of Landser* (fig. 3) beautifully exhibits this poor creature born on 1 March 1496 by embellishing one of Brant’s broadsheets. Dürer transforms the monstrous and grotesque into a coveted object with his burin, whereas Palumba’s portrayal of curious and defected spawn is unadorned, a visual presentation as literal as the text below. Three Monstrosities elides the distinction between the real and the imaginary: Image and text insist on the immediate, empirical, and verifiable, but at the same time the print offers a fantastic compilation. Viewers are left to wonder whether they should admire the artist’s *phantasia* or fear troubling signs of a suspect future. Palumba redefines Rome not as an idealized, antiquarian-inspired past but as a monstrous, portentous present. A dialectic opens up between *Roma* and *Three Monstrosities*, most likely executed around the same time, as each print respectfully characterizes a vastly different Rome, yet both controlled by the artist.

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13 See Koortbojian 2005. The centaur and mermaid became emblems of artistic *phantasia* in the Renaissance, with artists ranging from Cennino Cennini to Donatello to Piero di Cosimo employing these creatures either in their writings or in their art to claim the powers of visual expression as poetic.


15 Bartrum 2002, 113: “It is typical of Dürer’s ingenuity that he transformed a newsworthy subject, normally interpreted in conjunction with lengthy moralising verse, into a small, beautifully engraved image to be taken at face value without any explanatory text.”
Some of the earliest responses to Palumba's art come from the Roman poet and humanist Fausto. Versatile, ambitious, yet somewhat flawed in his personal and professional endeavors, he was a standout member of the Roman Academy and a pupil of its founder, Pomponio Leto (1427–1498), who emphasized the consonance among poetry, art, architecture, antiquarianism, and especially the revival of ancient theater, netting the group sponsorship by Cardinal Riario. Fausto also participated in the poetic entourage that assembled in the gardens of the humanists Angelo Colocci and Johann Gortiz, and it was in such academic and convivial groups that he adopted his nickname, a common practice of members. In 1505, he married the niece of the Greek humanist George of Trebizond (1395–1486) and subsequently inherited his vast library. Although he held various positions at the papal court throughout his career, including an appointment as lecturer of history at the Palazzo dei Conservatori under Pope Leo X, his proudest role was that of courtier in the service of Cardinal Giovanni Colonna IV (1450/60–1508), whom he called by the pseudonym Maecenas, thereby equating his patronage with that of Emperor Augustus’s cultural arbiter. Fausto’s writings display a flair for dramatic embellishment, with a healthy dose of Greco-Roman and Egyptian mythological references, exemplified in his panegyrics for Colonna. Some of his earliest epigrams denounce the dismantling of the Colosseum by Pope Sixtus IV in order to construct the Ponte Sisto. He also fell out of favor with Alexander VI, converting his initial encomia into invectives, which may lead one to believe he had a hand in Palumba’s Three Monstrosities. Deeply immersed in the Roman art scene, Fausto wrote celebratory poems on numerous contemporary artists, including Michelangelo, Raphael, Andrea Sansovino, Ripanda, and Palumba, as well as on the ancient statues displayed in the Belvedere court at the Vatican, such as the Apollo, Laocoön, and Sleeping Ariadne, regarded at the time as the dying Cleopatra.

In 1936, Augusto Campana first identified the Master I. B. with the Bird as Giovanni Battista Palumba based on a marginal note to a Vatican manuscript (Vat. Lat. 3351) containing Fausto’s writings. In an epigram praising an artist named Dares for his engraving of Leda and the Swan—a signed work by the Master I. B. with the Bird to be analyzed below—Fausto clarified in the margins that he uses the name as a pseudonym for Giovanni Battista Palumba. Unless he is referring to the Trojan Dares, who lost a boxing match to the Sicilian Entellus as described in book 5 of Vergil’s Aeneid, one could reason that Fausto refers to Dares Phrygius, a priest of Vulcan mentioned in the Iliad and a legendary historian who, in the Renaissance, was mistakenly believed to have provided an eyewitness account of the Trojan War in De excidio Troiae historia (most likely a fifth- or sixth-century invention billed as a translation of his war diary). By relating Palumba’s art to the descriptive and documentary authority of Dares’s vivid account of Troy’s destruction, Fausto envelops the artist with an additional layer of identity. Whatever the case, this nickname brands Palumba with an ancient as well as academic persona, a mark of status and prestige among the Roman cognoscenti.

16 On the humanist’s life and career, see Tommasini 1892; Ballistreri 1975; Janitschek 1880; Rowland 1998, 23–24, 87–90, 97, 101, 252; and Rijser 2012, 157–174.

17 On the contents of the library, see Tommasini 1892, 12–13 n. 2.

18 Fausto’s poetic celebration of Colonna’s prophetic lineage is discussed by Curran 2007, 257–259. Giraldi, in his Dialogi duo de poetis nostrorum temporum (1545), stated that Fausto “is more suited to the Muses of poetry than [Camillo] Porcari, but his wife bids him devote himself more to his children than to his literary creations. As far as style is concerned, I think that he achieves more by inspiration than by study”; Giraldi 2011, 95.

19 See Barkan 1999, 36.

20 Janitschek 1880 offers an overview of his poetry on art.

21 Campana 1936, 168.

22 See Clark 2011; and Cunnelly 1999, 79.
of Palumba’s two monikers reads as a commercial identity; rather, they operate outside a market economy and within intellectual and personal bonds. In other words, while Palumba’s prints reached a broad audience and fueled copies and other artistic adaptations, his rebus signature mainly served as a means to style and position himself and his artistic enterprise within the more intimate community of learned men and their ideas. Despite the scarcity of documents on Palumba’s life, Fausto’s use of the name Dares in his poems ostensibly inducts the artist into the elite circles of the Roman Academy and papal Curia, alongside artists such as the Bolognese Ripanda and Amico Aspertini. It is possible that Palumba also originated from Bologna, as some scholars have claimed, training with Francesco Francia and Marcantonio Raimondi, given their stylistic affinities, shared interest in myth and antiquity, and close associations with humanists.

Significantly, Fausto commends a portrait by Palumba of a Sicilian, known as Caesar, who was part of the household of Cardinal Giovanni Colonna. The cardinal, whom Alexander VI exiled to Sicily, was unable to return to Rome until the pope’s death in 1503. Just as Fausto uses the name Maecenas for Colonna, he designates Dares as the author of the portrait, thereby cementing the bonds among patron, artist, and poet. Fausto claims that the portrait, which has not been traced, mimicked life:

De Caesare Imperatorio Siculo Moecenatis a cubiculo a Darete depicto
Dum formosa Dares imitatuar Caesaris ora,
Naturae ambigitur maior an artis honos.
Quod natura parat facit ars, aequae utraque gignit
Spiritus hunc potuit, hunc animare color.

Concerning Imperial Caesar the Sicilian of Maecenas Portrayed by Dares from a Cubicle:
While Dares imitates Caesar’s shapely mouth (or face, by synecdoche), it is uncertain whether the greater honor belongs to nature or to art. What nature prepares, art creates; each equally gives birth. The spirit could have brought this to life, while color could have animated this.

Palumba gives life through his art—he gives birth. More than a casual yoking of a commonplace theme, Fausto’s view of the competition between art and nature becomes the primary means of experiencing Palumba’s imagery. This perspective is symptomatic of a broader experience of art in early sixteenth-century Rome, where poets tended to see the products of artistic invention, past or present, as potent—not distant and artificial but aligned with nature and memory. Whether

23 As Stephen Greenblatt has observed, “in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process”; Greenblatt 1980, 2.

24 Fausto’s verses celebrating the printmaker offer an important precedent to the poetical encomia honoring Raphael in Rome; see Rijser 2012.

25 For discussions on Palumba’s potential Bolognese origins, see Hind 1948, 249–250; Oberhuber 1973, 441; and Zucker 1984, 135–136.

26 Cited in Campana 1936, 170. I would like to thank John P. Lynch for his kind assistance with the translations of Fausto’s poems. See also Rijser 2012, 221–230, for the recurring theme in antiquity and the Renaissance of art creating virtual life.

27 Highly relevant is the engraving (ca. 1504) by Marcantonio Raimondi of the Bolognese poet Giovanni Filoteo Achillini, who celebrated this portrait in his vernacular epic Viridario, which he completed at the end of 1504 and published in 1513. Achillini praises Raimondi in terms analogous to Fausto’s enthusiasm for Palumba’s portrait: “Consacro anch’io Marcantonio Raimondo / Che imita de gli antiqui le sante orme / Con disegno e bollin molto e profondo / Come se vede sue vaghe eree forme / Hamme retratto in rame / Chen dubio di noi pendo quale è vivo” (“I also consecrate Marcantonio Raimondi, who imitates the masters of antiquity, and who is skillful both in drawing and with the burin, as is clear in his beautiful engraved plates. And he has made of me, as I’m writing, a portrait on copper, such that I am now in doubt, which one is more alive”). The translation is adapted from Landau and Parshall 1994, 99, who also discuss the humanist context of Palumba’s art. See further the entry in Faietti and Oberhuber 1988, 123–125; and Fiorenza 2013, 13.
portraits, religious scenes, or fables involving the pagan gods, works of art had a rhetorical force and could seemingly transcend their materiality and entice the audience. An artist like Palumba was admired by his contemporaries not just for his powers of representation but for his ability to generate and actuate his imagery in their eyes and mind.

Palumba’s *Leda and the Swan* (fig. 4) is another important case in point. The print emphasizes strong physical contact between two bodies, with Jupiter and Leda embracing and entwining

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28 Noteworthy is the fervor of epigrams in the anthology Corcyra devoted to Raphael’s *Isaiah* (1511–1512) and Andrea Sansovino’s *St. Anne, the Virgin, and Christ Child* (1512) for the Church of Sant’Agostino, Rome, which borrow from ancient poetic traditions and celebrate the life force within the marble, not unlike an idol; see Rijser 2012, 177–241; Nagel 2011, 145–147.

29 On this print, see Hind 1948, 257–258; Zucker 1984, 140–142; and Landau and Parshall 1994, 99–100. Nicoletto da Modena subsequently reworked the copper plate, canceling Palumba’s signature and replacing it with his own.
themselves around each other as they share a passionate kiss. The imagery seems to eschew defensive moral interpretations, such as the one warning against lust presented by the mythographer Fulgentius in his *Mythologiae* (2.13). Instead, the motif of the grapevine wrapped around the tree in the background derives from the poetic ornaments of Latin love elegy and serves to gloss the physical nature of this sexual union. Catullus first introduced the intimate union of the vine wrapped around the elm as an image of blissful marriage, a simile for the bride’s embrace of her groom. In an elegiac poem invoking Hymen, the god of marriage, Catullus collapses marital bliss and fertility into carnal sexual union with the related poetic image of ivy crawling up a tree:

> Call to her home the lady of the house, full of desire for her bridegroom; bind her heart with love, as here and there the clinging ivy straying clasps the tree.31

Considering the ways in which poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries revived and imitated the seductive potency of Catullus’s language in their own verse, Palumba’s engraving amplifies the sexual literary allusions of Latin love elegy with the purpose of moving his audience to experience the physical and emotional effects of desire.32 Indeed, images of Leda and the Swan in the Renaissance came to be seen as a pretext for inviting the viewer’s sexual involvement.33 Highly poetic, this print also matches in tenor other lascivious representations of Leda and the Swan circulating around the same time, most notably the woodcut illustrating the second triumphal cart in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, published by the Aldine Press in 1499.34 It seems that Palumba had access to a copy of this publication, not only because of shared compositional and thematic treatments—visible in other subjects as well as this one—but also because of the text’s liberal use of rebuses analogous to the artist’s signature. Also relevant is a drawing by Palumba’s likely colleague Raimondi, now in the British Museum and datable to ca. 1500–1505 (fig. 5), which drains any allegorical abstraction out of the fable to present an explicit sexual encounter between woman and swan.35 As James Grantham Turner has examined, sexuality—whether in imitation of antique models or literary descriptions—took root in graphic invention at the dawn of the sixteenth century, resulting in a variety of sensuously beautiful or even strenuously erotic postures filling sketchbooks and cycles of prints.36 Printmakers and book illustrators provided some of the most provocative and accessible imagery to a public demanding to be swayed and stimulated by irresistible portrayals of the gods and their sexual exploits, with Palumba and Raimondi leading the charge.

In an epigram composed around 1503, according to Campana’s reliable dating from other references in Fausto’s manuscript, which in turn corresponds to the date of the engraving, Fausto muses that Palumba’s *Leda and the Swan* helped facilitate the love affair between queen and god:

30 See Demetz 1958; and Fiorenza 2008, 123–124, for Dosso’s imitation of this simile in his *Enchantress* (ca. 1520) and the paragone with Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*.


32 In her study of the imitation of Catullus in the Renaissance, Julia Haig Gaisser explains that literati embraced the idea expressed in Catullus that poetry is an aphrodisiac whose syncopated rhythms and sexually allusive diction causes arousal: *quod puriat incitare possunt* (16.9); Gaisser 1993, 220–233.

33 See, for example, Pietro Aretino’s comments on Michelangelo’s *Leda*, noting that “you can’t look without envying the swan”; discussed by Turner 2008, 182.

34 The image appears on ancient reliefs and gems, such as the one owned by Lorenzo de’ Medici and now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples; see the entry by Mario Cygelmna in Falletti and Nelson 2002, 180–181.

35 See the entry in Faietti and Oberhuber 1988, 185–186; and see Zucker 1984, 222, for a related engraving by Nicoletto da Modena, who came to Rome by 1507.

36 Turner 2012.
Concerning Leda Engraved by Dares: (Giovanni Battista Palumba)

Leda left the impression that she would hardly have slept with the Thunderer if she were not by the new art hooked up with Jove without art.

Palumba’s engraving—the new art—enables Leda to join with Jupiter. Art, seemingly without a trace of artifice, supplants nature to enable the copulation of divine and human. The phrase *sine arte* refers to the fable of Pygmalion, whereby Ovid observes how the sculptor created an ivory statue so convincingly lifelike that it concealed artifice: *ars adeo latet arte sua.* Venus rewards the sculptor’s technique by bringing his creation to life, a miracle that is accomplished through the kiss: “Again he kissed her, and also touched her breast with his hand. The ivory yielded to his touch, and lost its hardness, altering under his fingers.”

Pygmalion’s kiss, like that of Jupiter and Leda, is an act of artistic consummation, a prelude to the couple’s intercourse and conception of a child. Likewise, Fausto saw Palumba’s artistry—the design, the push of the burin, the cut of the plate, the absorption of ink into the paper, all realized with a flawless, imperceptible technique—as capable of transforming the otherness of myth into a sensuous reality, making Leda a willing participant. This engraving, like Raimondi’s drawing, goes beyond a mere explicit description of the gods: it details in line and form the physical and near

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37 Cited in Campana 1936, 168. The marginal note appears in Vat. Lat. 3351, fol. 56r.

38 Ovid 1964, 10.252. On the Pygmalion theme, see further Stoichita 2008; Cropper 1997, 92–98, on Bronzino’s *Pygmalion and Galatea*; and Bolland 2000.


40 Palumba’s *Saint Jerome* and *Three Graces* each carry the monogram of a cutter, still unidentified. The extent of Palumba’s involvement in the actual cutting or engraving of his works is an open question; see further Hind 1935, 2:442; and Zucker 1984, 156, who concur that Palumba designed the imagery and left the execution of the woodcuts and engravings to others.
biological possibility of such a bizarre interspecies coupling. By equating his engraving practice with divine lovemaking, Fausto anoints Palumba (Dares) as a new Pygmalion.

The union of Jupiter and Leda, moreover, leads to an equally bizarre birth of two sets of twins at the same time: Castor and Pollux and Helen and Clytemnestra—one pair conceived by her husband, Tyndareus, king of Sparta, the other pair by the god.41 Palumba also made an engraving of this subject (fig. 6), with the crouching figure of Leda imitating the kneeling Venus Anadyomene from ancient sarcophagi.42 Even though Konrad Oberhuber and Mark Zucker suggest that Palumba’s composition is essentially dependent on Leonardo’s studies for his Leda (ca. 1504), thereby dating the engraving to ca. 1510, none of Leonardo’s inventions correspond closely enough to warrant them as an immediate source. Leonardo tends to show Leda in a more frontal pose, emphasizing the highly artificial figura serpentinata of her body and that of the swan’s neck. Palumba focuses instead on the physical and emotional interactions of the hybrid family unit, enhancing the complex yet elegant interconnection of bodily forms based largely on ancient art. Jove bites the finger of one

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41 Leda, according to ancient fable, had just been with her husband prior to Jupiter’s ravishment, but there is much discrepancy in the classical sources about the respective fathers of the twins.

42 Hind 1948, 258; Oberhuber 1973, 450–452; Zucker 1984, 142–143. Formerly attributed to Giovanni Antonio Sodoma, a drawing of this figure group by Palumba, with some variations and a different setting, is in the British Museum (1862,1011.199).
of the playful children, invoking the sense of touch as well as admonishment. Palumba’s engraving also features Rome’s Temple of Minerva Medica in the background. This edifice infuses the print with an antique aura and provenance for its subject matter, providing Roman sculptural origins for its figures. The ruined temple also locates the event in Renaissance Rome, littered with ancient ruins, as if its events take place in the present, not the past.

A near contemporary, reversed copy of the print contains a verse that slightly revises the myth: *Laeda iacens falsis cigni delusa sub alis / Portentosa duo parturit osa Iovi* (“Leda, lying deluded beneath the fake wings of a swan, births two portentous eggs for Jove”) (fig. 7). Although the authorship of this inscription is unknown (it may very well be by Fausto), the lines suggest that both eggs carry Jupiter’s spawn, and the word *portentosa* further links this print to Palumba’s *Three Monstrosities*, both in subject and theme, as each work showcases peculiar hatchings and strange progeny with either uncertain or providential futures. Marvelous nature and fabulous myth permeate each other in Palumba’s graphic inventions. One of Leda’s offspring (in both versions of the print) holds a butterfly, as if to suggest a natural correspondence to his own peculiar gestation. Butterflies, an example of nature’s wonders, come from the metamorphosis of caterpillars in their cocoons, making a mythical mammalian birth from an egg seem less extraordinary and even conceivable. Palumba

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43 Viljoen 2004, esp. 237.  
44 Hind 1948, 258; Zucker 1984, 143.
was active in an age when new attitudes were emerging about the benefits of inquiry into nature’s secrets, with a view of nature as a generative, life-giving force (natura naturans), a creative artifcer that fuels artistic creativity. Around the same time, the Florentine Piero di Cosimo introduced tadpoles and caterpillars into his religious paintings featuring Christ’s birth, analogizing nature’s mysteries of transformation and nonsexual generation with the miracle of Christ’s Incarnation (or the Word made flesh). \(^{45}\) Whoever was responsible for the reversal and publication of Palumba’s engraving, the attached verse reveals a culture captivated by the natural-philosophical underpinnings of miraculous progeny, whether earthly, divine, poetic, or artistic.

Palumba also enabled his viewers to connect with his imagery in more personal and immediate ways. Another scene of sexual coercion, his Rape of Europa, shows the princess, like Leda, as a willing participant in Jupiter’s abduction (fig. 8).\(^ {46}\) Stylistically, Palumba largely imitates the composition and background of Dürer’s Sea Monster (ca. 1498), including specific details such as the ship under sail, but he completely re-envisions Dürer’s engraving into a wholly novel invention. Unlike the woman astride the sea monster, Europa rides serenely and pleasurably on the back of

\(^{45}\) See Fiorenza 2012.

\(^{46}\) Hind 1984, 257; Zucker 1984, 143–144. A reversed copy of this print (sometimes attributed to Nicoletto da Modena), with modifications to the landscape, also exists.
the bull, in a departure from the terrifying (pavet) experience described by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2.873–75). The artist develops the more sensuous nature of the fable, which is consistent with the treatment of the subject in Renaissance literary and artistic practice emphasizing Europa's active role. A glazed terracotta relief of the subject by the Florentine sculptor Giovanni Francesco Rustici, in which the bull turns its head around to lick Europa's breast (fig. 9), exemplifies the narrative revision of Ovid in the Renaissance. If Giancarlo Gentilini’s precocious dating of Rustici’s terracotta to ca. 1495 is correct, then the artist must have kept this work close at hand throughout his career because, in his *Vite*, Giorgio Vasari states that Rustici presented it as a gift to Ruberto di Filippo Lippi (1500–1574), the son of the Florentine painter Filippino Lippi.47 This gesture implies that such seductive imagery was popular among artists and collectors not just for its poetic content but for the emotional experience it could evoke—a token of a bond of rapturous interpersonal feelings.48

In Rome, in an unsurprising misogynistic gesture, Fausto invoked the fable of Europa in one of his epigrams to express his own desires for a young woman named Sperata Coppi. The poet identifies with Jupiter’s rape in writing about his own love affair and subsequent kidnapping of Coppi, which occurred in 1500:

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48 For other relevant examples of presenting works of art as tokens of personal bonds, see Pfisterer 2008, 258–286; Nagel 1997; and Barkan 2011, 227–234. Cropper 1995, 196–205, discusses how Michelangelo's presentation drawings constituted “gifts of love” and “represented his desire for the possession of beauty,” coinciding with the poetic conventions of lyricism. On the literary side, there is the example of Antonio Beccadelli’s *Hermaphroditus* of 1425, which the poet dedicated to Cosimo de’ Medici; the book contains sexually explicit Latin epigrams, many of which were dedicated to sex between males. As Michael Rocke notes: “By dedicating the book to Cosimo, he probably hoped to gain the eminent benefactor’s patronage, perhaps not so much because he would have fully approved of its subjects or shared its sentiments as out of appreciation of its elegant Latin form and imitation of the classics. Nonetheless, Beccadelli must have had good reason to believe that Cosimo would have found the sexual content and message of the *Hermaphroditus* inoffensive”; Rocke 1996, 43.
Concerning Three Rapists
Sextus led away Faustina, Caesar [led away] Theodora, Faustus [led away] Sperata; they are equal in love. Crete memorializes Jove’s thefts, Rome memorializes the three rapes, Crete is proud of Jove alone, Rome is proud of the three.

In relating his own actions to those from ancient Roman history and poetic fable, Fausto attempts to exonerate himself for his crime in the eyes of Pope Alexander VI. Depending on the precise date

49 Cited in Janitschek 1880, 53 n. 3; and Tommasini 1892, 9 n. 1, with some minor textual differences.
of the engraving, Palumba’s sympathetic imagery may have sparked Fausto’s poetic imagination in such a direction. Conversely, the artist may have complemented Fausto’s poetry with an engraving that transforms and celebrates a scene of rape.

Fausto’s poems also display passionate longing for his academic companions or “clubmen” (solades). For example, in several poems addressed to the humanist prelate Tommaso (“Phaedrus”) Inghirimi, who accompanied Cardinal Colonna on a diplomatic mission to Sicily, Fausto confesses to “wast[ing] away” waiting for his return, feeling despair and nearing death. Fausto compares the “shackles” of his affection for Phaedrus to the collars around the necks of Molossian mastiffs: “Phaedrus and love made my bonds,” he freely admits. A large body of recent scholarship has demonstrated that a homosocial ethos characterized the confluence of humanism, poetry, and art throughout Italy. The activities of the Roman Academy were no exception. What is more, some of the more transgressive and explicitly homoerotic encounters from classical mythology, chief among them Jupiter’s abduction of Ganymede, served to define the activity of poetic hermeneutics coinciding with rites of initiation. With this information in mind, it is worth mentioning Palumba’s Rape of Ganymede (fig. 10), one of the most frankly sexual depictions of the myth in the Renaissance. Although the scene follows Vergil’s description of the event in the Aeneid (5.250–257), Palumba exalts the grips of physical desire. The artist accentuates the horizontal position of Ganymede with the parallel outstretched wings of the eagle, which holds the youth tightly in its talons while forcing its dominant feathered body up against Ganymede’s nude body—unambiguously wedged between his open legs—to consume his passion. One can imagine Fausto or one of his academic colleagues casting a fascinated eye on imagery that clearly presents sexuality as the basis for intellectual, emotional, physiological, and artistic discovery.

Fausto often invoked myth in relation to works of art for the purposes of self-fashioning and to express a variety of themes, from the political climate of his times to the nature of love and the human condition. This process is especially evident in his epigrams devoted to the statues in the Vatican Belvedere court. For example, he has the Laocoön, rediscovered in 1506, speak in the first person, addressing the audience and lamenting his lapidary prison.

50 The poems are translated and discussed by Rowland 1998, 23–24; the relevant lines are as follows:

Longa mora est: ab diminuor mi phaedre morando: Non sperare fuit poena mihi brevior . . . 
Exspectatus morior: prodest sperare; sed haec est Desperare mags, spes quia clauda venit. 
and

Ista molossorum sunt apta monilia collo: Haec regit ardentes copula cauta canes. 
Sed quae me retinent vinctum haec vincla catbenae: Phaedromus has et amor: quilibet ista facit.

51 See, among other excellent examples with regard to the Renaissance, Rocke 1996; Barkan 1991; Saslow 1986; Campbell 1997, 29–51; and Wyatt 2004. Also important are the studies by Sedgwick 1985; Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin 1990; Halperin 2002; and Crompton 2006.

52 That humanist circles and the burgeoning literary academies throughout Italy also cultivated male bonding through both intellectual and physical encounters among their members was no secret. The elite members of the Roman Academy provide a clear example. In a letter of 1501 addressed to Nicolò Machiavelli, the Florentine Agostino Vespucci relates the travails of a young poet named Raffaello Pulci, who was always to be found in the protective company of four prostitutes: “he said to me that he worries that because he has a certain reputation for being a poet, and that the Roman Academy wants to induct him, he does not want to run the risk of being molested”; cited and translated by Rowland 1998, 24. See also Wolk-Simon 2008.

53 Barkan 1991, 50, observes: “Ganymede’s flight into heaven, which acted as the charter for a Plato-inspired vision of pedagogy, pederasty, and initiation, now becomes an emblem of hermeneutic recuperation of the potentially immoral remains of antiquity, justifying it in the highest terms and making poetry and interpretation a self-conscious part of the activity of humanism.”

54 Zucker 1984, 156. Palumba’s woodcut is neglected in the two essential studies on Ganymede in Renaissance art: Barkan 1991; and Saslow 1986.

the fate of Laocoön to the downfall of the ruling Bentivoglio family in Bologna. With regard to the statue believed to be Cleopatra (fig. 11), installed by Pope Julius II as a fountain in the Belvedere court immediately after its excavation in 1512, Fausto composed numerous epigrams, one in which Cleopatra pronounces an intimate connection between history and art: *Quantum me, vivam, Caesar mundi arbiter arsit / Marmoream tantum Iulius alter amat* (“As much as, while I lived, Caesar, ruler of the world, burned for love of me, so much a second Julius loves me, now marble”). A fundamental connection between art and audience arises on a sensual level, with works of art being seen as embodiments of love. Such sensitivity or affection toward objects was nothing new: in 1412, the Greek scholar Manuel Chrysoloras marveled that “everywhere in Rome the walls of private homes were filled with reliefs and sculptures depicting mythological scenes, so that whoever wanders about the streets of Rome cannot avoid looking at them, almost like lovers admiring living beauties and gazing at them intensely.” Indeed, by the beginning of the sixteenth century in Rome, collectors and learned viewers saw myth as a means of investigating *de rerum natura*—the nature of things—and not necessarily for gleaning moral or allegorical lessons.

Palumba seems to have designed his *Priapus and Lotis*, an image closely related in style to his *Leda and the Swan* of ca. 1503, specifically to invite such imaginative projections from his audience (fig. 12). The engraving depicts the popular scene of Priapus’s irrepressible desire and frustrated rape of the nymph Lotis, interrupted by the braying of the Silenus’s ass, set in a meadow with two other sleeping nymphs (or naiads). By contrast, Giovanni Bellini’s *Feast of the Gods*, signed and dated 1514 and painted for Alfonso d’Este of Ferrara, stages Priapus’s advances according to the narrative in Ovid’s *Fasti* (1.391–440), in the context of the banqueting gods. Priapus’s large erect member, partially unveiled in Palumba’s print, was celebrated in antiquity as an emblem of nature’s

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56 Janitschek 1880, 54–55; and Tommasini 1892, 10 n. 5.

57 Curran 2007, 174 (with translation). As Curran has shown, Fausto described the various sculptures in the Vatican Belvedere court as the ancestral household gods (*marmoreos lares*) of Julius II—he saw them as guiding the family; Curran 2007, 176.

58 Quoted in Settis 2008.

59 Hind 1948, 257; Oberhuber 1973, 441; Zucker 1984, 146.

60 For the genesis and invention of this painting, see Colantuono 1991.
generative power. The lascivious content of the image coincides with the development and popularity of Priapic poetry in the Renaissance, based on the ancient Priapea: lewd yet lighthearted poetry composed about the phallic god Priapus, who is invoked, addressed, or appears as the protagonist and speaks with an ironic voice in the first person. The decidedly prurient nature of this engraving further recalls Boccaccio’s Genealogie deorum gentilium, which protests critics who call poetry “a futile and empty thing, nay, damnable, detestable, because the poems which come of it sing the adulteries of the gods they celebrate, and beguile the reader into unspeakable practices.”

Boccaccio warns that we should not condemn poetry because it was acceptable for artists like Praxiteles, Phidias, Apelles, and Giotto to produce images of Venus embracing Mars or Priapus’s attempted

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61 The authorship of the Priapea is still an open question, but in the Renaissance many believed the poems were by Vergil. Although Aldus Manutius denied Vergil’s authorship, Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, writing in his Historiae poetarum tam Graecorum quam Latinorum (1545), asserted that “in these gardens [of Maecenas] there was a Priapum shrine . . . poets meeting there hung up appropriate verses, which, because they were collected by Vergil, are now published under his name”; quoted and translated in Parker 1988, 33. On Priapus, see further Giraldi 1548, 401–406.

62 Boccaccio 1951, 698; 1956, 38: In diverticulum aliud irruent, et suo interpretantes iudicio dicent bunc adiective futilem intelligendum fore damnosam atque detestabilem, eo quod poemata, a poesi venientia, deorum suorum cantent illecebra et infanda suadeant.
rape of Lotis.\textsuperscript{63} In this famous defense, Boccaccio goes beyond the notion of artistic license, or that poetry need not be didactic. He commends the sensation of art: the power of words and images to move the audience, to instill desire, to act as a go-between for lovers.\textsuperscript{64}

Equally provocative, Palumba’s inclusion of the two sleeping nymphs (or naiads) in his engraving implicates the audience within the narrative. Naiads feature as part of the Ovidian fable (\textit{Fasti} I.405–410), either serving the gods or in attendance, partially unclothed. The highly popular image of the sleeping nymph was frequently used in different Renaissance contexts in combination with such themes as lust, continence, fecundity, and inspiration.\textsuperscript{65} Palumba’s overall composition approximates the famous illustration of a fountain in the \textit{Hypnerotomachia Poliphili}, in which an ithyphallic satyr approaches a slumbering nymph possessing physical and metaphorical qualities of voluptuousness that suggest seduction (fig. 13). The text invokes the story of the Cnidian Aphrodite sculpted by Praxiteles, an ancient work whose beauty and simulation of life provoked young men to masturbate.\textsuperscript{66} The protagonist of the romance, Polifilo, reacts to the work of art’s erotic charge; his admiration is aimed at the quality of the carved stone, which appears like ivory (“\textit{il lustro dilla petra quale striso eburo}).\textsuperscript{67} The play between artifce and nature is at the heart of the narrative and, moreover, governs the phenomena of actual fountains established in early sixteenth-century Rome, locales that provided \textit{convivia} for poets and antiquarians. The most famous among these sites, all developed from 1512 on, are the aforementioned Ariadne/Cleopatra fountain in the statue court of the Vatican Belvedere, the \textit{nymphaeum} in the garden of Angelo Colocci, and the fountain in the garden of Johann Gortiz, the latter two accompanied by inscriptions urging the beholder not to wake the nympha.\textsuperscript{68} The origins of such inscriptions can be traced to an epigram, supposedly ancient but in actuality a humanist invention of the 1470s, that allegedly graced a fountain on the banks of the Danube, paired with a statue of a sleeping nymph. Using the first person, the final line of the epigram implores the visitor to drink or wash in silence lest she be woken: \textit{sive bibas sive lavere tace}.\textsuperscript{69} Fausto cleverly imitates these verses in several epigrams dedicated to the Cleopatra fountain, as when the statue beseeches her audience: \textit{Ne me tange, precor, dulci ne me excute somno / Vivo ego} (“Do not touch me, pray, do not wake me from my sweet sleep. I am alive”).\textsuperscript{70} As Leonard Barkan has shown, Fausto’s poetic imagination collapses the identity of Cleopatra with that of the Danube sleeping nymph. This blending of myth with ancient Roman history designates the Belvedere statue as a timeless artistic force whose “voice” ostensibly repudiates the viewer’s intrusion yet whose materiality as a treasured object—and whose identity as a slumbering beauty—manifest desire.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{63} Boccaccio 1951, 698–699; 1956, 38: \textit{Sed deprecor: si Praxiteles aut Phydias, sculpturna doctissimi, impudicum sculptserint Prapum in Yolem nocte tendentem potius quam spectabilem honestate Dianam, aut si pingat Apelles, seu noster Ioctus, quo suo evo non fuit Apelles superior, Martem te Veneri immisciment potius quam loquem dixi ex throno iura prebentem, bas artes damnandas fore diceamus.}

\textsuperscript{64} See Osborne 1998, 225–235, on subjects and themes related to the “sensation of art” in ancient Greece.

\textsuperscript{65} The classic study is Meiss 1976; see Ruvoeldt 2004, with further bibliography cited below.

\textsuperscript{66} Colonna 1980, 1:63.

\textsuperscript{67} Colonna 1980, 1:64. The woodcut served as a model of imitation for numerous Renaissance artists, including Doss-Dossi’s \textit{Myth of Pan} in the J. Paul Getty Museum; see Fiorenza 2008, 79–100.


\textsuperscript{69} Cited in MacDougall 1975, 357.

\textsuperscript{70} For Fausto’s epigrams on the fountain, see most recently Barkan 1999, 233–243; and Curran 2007, 174–175, from where I derive the translation.

\textsuperscript{71} Barkan 1999, 240–242.
Implied, too, in Palumba’s Priapus and Lotis is that the viewer needs to be stealthy. In the absence of an epigram, the scene of Priapus’s interrupted ravishment serves to caution the viewer’s own ocular advance: according to Ovid, Lotis awoke terrified (terrata) and fled. Silence, whether in the context of rhetoric or art (as in poesia muta, the classical epithet for painting), defines boundaries and here offers a liminal experience between absorbed contemplation and eloquent expression. The main scene takes place in the middle ground, allowing the beholder to savor the image surreptitiously and create a subjective narrative for the foreground nymphs void of distracting sound. Sleep still endures, and time is suspended. Palumba’s rebus signature is also strategically positioned to guide the eye and imagination of the audience toward the realm of seduction: located at the bottom center of the composition, it is on a direct vertical axis with one nymph’s vulva and Priapus’s penis. In Palumba’s engraving, the burin becomes a generative tool for a fecund and fertile invention, “birthing” two additional nymphs from his phantasia and promising hope to the viewer where Priapus failed. Meant to be held in the hand, up close, this

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72 On the theme of silence in art, see Roberts 2013; and Fiorenza 2008, 38.

73 An epigram from the Greek Anthology (16.178) describes the image of Aphrodite by Apelles as rendered in pencil, and significantly, in celebrating his skill and technique, merges the
engraving expands Renaissance expectations of the poetic potential of the sleeping nymph trope in ways that sculpture cannot.

On the other hand, when silence is broken and the boundaries of eros are trespassed, the unimaginable happens, as seen in Palumba’s large woodcut Diana and Actaeon (fig. 14).74 This extraordinary work, which exploits the tension between seduction and terror, depicts the heart of the fable, when the hunter Actaeon stumbles upon Diana and her nymphs bathing in the mid-day heat. Nonnus’s Dionysiaca (5.287–551), a primary source for the renewal of the myth in the Renaissance, describes Actaeon as “gazing greedily on the goddess,” staring with an obsession characterized as the “wild daring of a lovesick man.”75 Discovering his presence, the goddess

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74 Zucker 1984, 156.
75 Nonnus 1940. Ovid’s Metamorphoses (3.138–252) and Boccaccio’s Genealogie deorum gentilium (5.14) were, of course, the other main texts for the myth in the Renaissance; see further Schlan 1984.
splashes water on Actaeon, who raises his arms in horror in the print, and transforms him into a stag. The ominous sign of the spectacular hybrid returns: the hunting scene in the background, where dogs sink their teeth into a helpless deer, is a prelude to Actaeon’s fate. Once again, the protagonist’s loss is the viewer’s triumph: the voyeuristic gaze of the collector holding the sheet is not under threat. Palumba also inscribes his rebus signature on a fragment from a ruined entablature, presumably fallen from a temple and lying innocuously on the ground, or so it seems. This inscription takes on the authority of a historical relic, a remnant of the past bearing an eyewitness account of the tragedy.

Because it is difficult to determine the precise dates for many of Palumba’s woodcuts and engravings, and given the dearth of information on the artist, it is perhaps too convenient to overlook his extraordinary achievements and privilege the work of his more famous contemporaries. But Palumba was far from bereft of esteem in his own time. His prints lure his audience, not as casual observers but as engaged and inquiring participants. As Fausto attests, Palumba spawned and activated his imagery in the eyes and mind of his humanist audience in Rome. Poet and printmaker reformulated mythological narratives concerning the amorous nature of the gods to make them more vivid and vital for their audiences. In Boccaccio-like fashion, Palumba’s woodcuts and engravings act as go-betweens—between past and present, fiction and nature, image and the viewer’s desires.

76 With the publication of the I modi in the 1520s, however, there was a swift and concentrated effort by the Catholic Church to censor such salacious imagery from public consumption; see Talvacchia 1999.
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