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Adriaen de Vries' *Bacchic Man*: Art With a Distinct Meaning

In discussions of individual art pieces, the subject of an artwork's meaning usually enters the conversation at some point or another. People enjoy understanding what they are looking at, and question the artist's thought process. Contemporary artists have challenged the notion that art must contain meaning, but for most of art history, it has been accepted that art is meant to express something from life, and that art pieces contain different social, political, or historical themes. This idea is prevalent in studies of Renaissance art, which was highly symbolic. Art was not simply for 'art's sake', it had utility or decorative significance, furnishing churches, public architectural works, and the homes and properties of the elite. Furthermore, artists employed various symbols in order to allude to figures and stories from religion and mythology. In this paper, I will be focusing on Adriaen de Vries' *Bacchic Man: Lomazzo Personifying the Accademia della Val di Blenio*, which, in 16th-century Italy, represented the ideals of the Accademia della Val di Blenio, an institution that was part of the cultural avant-garde that promoted anti-classical views on artistic freedom.

Cast in the 1500s, *Bacchic Man* is a bronze sculpture of medium size. As can be gleaned from the work's title, the sculpture is a human figure, a man. It is rendered highly realistically, and portrayed naked, leaning slightly forward with his torso curving to the right. The man's left foot is placed on a wooden bucket, and his face, wearing a grim-looking mask, is directed over his right shoulder. It is clear that the sculpture was meant to emulate Bacchus, the Roman god of,

among other things, wine and wine-making. A garland of grapes adorns his head, more spill over the side of the bucket that his foot rests on, and several clusters are loosely clutched in the figure's hands. At the same time, despite this seemingly obvious imagery the figure is fit and muscular, contrasting with the typical portrayals of Bacchus as fat-- historically, a marker of pleasure and indulgence. It has been suggested that *Bacchic Man* is a representation of Giovan Paolo Lomazzo,<sup>1</sup> the revered leader of the Accademia, but most likely the figure is a collage of different symbols denoting the various traditions and beliefs put forth by the Accademia.

Prior to its sale in 1932, *Bacchic Man* had been located since 1602 in the Villa Visconti Borromeo Litta in Lainate, Milan, where it functioned as a fountain in the villa's nymphaeum (several small holes in the sculpture allow water to exit).<sup>2</sup> The villa was owned by a certain Pirro Visconti, who, in the year of the nymphaeum's opening, was included in the dedication of the writer Giovan Paolo Lomazzo's book, *Rabsich*.<sup>3</sup> Lomazzo was the abbot of the aforementioned Accademia, and in *Rabisch*, he listed Visconti as the Accademia's major benefactor.<sup>4</sup> Additionally connecting *Bacchic Man* to the Accademia is the fact that the man who commissioned the fountain, Antonio Londoni, was likely a member.<sup>5</sup> These details, combined with the figure's physical attributes, ultimately resulted in the belief held by scholars that *Bacchic Man* was originally intended to pay tribute to the Accademia della Val di Blenio.

The Accademia della Val di Blenio was founded in 1560, during a period when the Counter Reformation was taking place. Acting in response to the Protestant Reformation, the

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<sup>1</sup> Hill Art Foundation, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper. Pagan Paradise* (New York: Hill Art Foundation, 2019), Exhibition Catalogue.

<sup>2</sup> Hill Art Foundation, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper. Pagan Paradise*.

<sup>3</sup> Hill Art Foundation, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper. Pagan Paradise*.

<sup>4</sup> Hill Art Foundation, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper. Pagan Paradise*.

<sup>5</sup> Hill Art Foundation, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper. Pagan Paradise*.

Roman Catholic Church took measures to prompt religious renewal.<sup>6</sup> With this as his motive, the then cardinal archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo, cracked down on the city's festivities and condemned pagan and non-religious art.<sup>7</sup> In some ways, the Accademia was formed as a refuge from Borromeo's influence-- its members gathered in the name of fun and social pleasure, and recognized Bacchus, the god of drunkenness and poetic madness, as their founder.<sup>8</sup> Bacchus additionally represented the trade of the *facchini*, wine porters from the valley of Blenio, who the members of the Accademia masqueraded as at their meetings.<sup>9</sup> By dressing up as *facchini*, and taking for their official language *fachinnesco* (the dialect spoken by the wine porters), the members practiced one of the Accademia's key principles-- to quote Giovan Paolo Lomazzo in *Rabisch*, "Be careful not to be considered a fool, because, among good people, no more respect is paid to a prince than to a porter or an artisan."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, this is represented in the mask that the *Bacchic Man* wears-- a garish, ugly thing that contrasts with the statue's otherwise svelte characteristics. It is highly likely that to the Accademia's members, this element of the fountain conveyed the idea that harshness could conceal great beauty.

Most importantly, the Accademia held that art should not solely serve the purpose of documenting history, and should be free of connections to the Church.<sup>11</sup> The members believed that art should be the product of "unchecked fantasy" and "uninhibited inspiration,"<sup>12</sup> and thus they promoted the grotesque, a style of ornament often consisting of animal heads, fantastic

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<sup>6</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Counter Reformation," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Counter-Reformation>.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 110.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Tramelli, "Artists and Knowledge in Sixteenth Century Milan: the Case of Lomazzo's Accademia de la Val di Blenio," *Fragmenta* 5, (2011): 124.

<sup>9</sup> Tramelli, "Artists and Knowledge," 123

<sup>10</sup> Tramelli, "Artists and Knowledge," 123

<sup>11</sup> Hill Art Foundation, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper. Pagan Paradise*.

<sup>12</sup> Hill Art Foundation, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper. Pagan Paradise*.

creatures, and whimsical human figures.<sup>13</sup> The grotesque contrasted greatly with the severe atmosphere projected by the Church, and went hand-in-hand with the ideals of decadence and expression that Bacchus represented to the Accademia. As a result, this tradition is reflected in the fountain-- the statue's face, in particular, bears great resemblance to motifs present in grotesque ornament.<sup>14</sup>

In sixteenth century Italy, the supremacy of the Church factored greatly into all matters of life, the arts included. Ecclesiastical powers demanded that art be free of any embellishments or flourishes when it contained religious content, and that it depict scenes and images solely from the Bible.<sup>15</sup> The Accademia della Val di Blenio existed in direct contrast to these ideals-- promoting fun and celebration, championing Bacchus as their founder, and identifying as their *raison d'être* artistic creativity and liberty. Furthermore, the essence of the Accademia manifests itself in Adriaen de Vries' *Bacchic Man*, a statue whose physical attributes allude to a variety of important ideas and principles held by the Accademia's members. In the modern day, *Bacchic Man* is representative of art that is significant for what it symbolizes, art that, through its visual elements, tells a larger story.

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<sup>13</sup> Monique Riccardi-Cubitt, "Grotesque," Grove Art Online, accessed January 22, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T035099>

<sup>14</sup> Hill Art Foundation, *Three Christs, Sleeping Mime, and the Last Supper. Pagan Paradise.*

<sup>15</sup> "Art History Lecture 2: Renaissance," Teen Curators, November 19, 2019, Hill Art Foundation, Powerpoint presentation.

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