

## Adriaen de Vries

*Bacchic Man: Lomazzo Personifying the Accademia della Val di Blenio, cast*

Circa 1578 - 1580

The Bacchic Man is a bronze cast of the Roman god Bacchus **who** is comparable to the Greek god Dionysus. They are both gods of agriculture and wine and their origin stories are basically identical.<sup>1</sup> Bacchus was the product of Jupiter's adultery with the mortal woman Semele. When Jupiter was with Semele he took on the appearance of a mortal because humans cannot see gods in their true forms. Juno, Jupiter's wife, wanted revenge on Semele after learning about Jupiter and Semele's adultery. Knowing that mortals cannot see gods in their true form, Juno tricked Semele into seeing Jupiter in his true form and Semele burned up seeing Jupiter. This happened while Semele was still pregnant with Bacchus, so Jupiter sewed Bacchus on his thigh until he was ready to be born. Although Bacchus's origin story is not apparent from just looking at the sculpture, it is probable that Adriaen de Vries was familiar with this myth when creating this cast. The emotion and significance of an object changes when it is taken out of the context its artist intended it to be in.

We can look at the positioning and expression of the god to understand its significance and Adriaen de Vries's portrayal. The god stands relatively straight with his back hunched over and his leg up on a basket full of grapes while looking off to his side. This positioning gives Bacchus a fiend-like appearance in the way he seems to be brooding looking off into the distance. His hunched back makes it seem as if he is thinking about something cruel. His leg propped up on the basket allows him a certain power that he maintains, and makes it appear as though no one should dare oppose him. Bacchus appears to be stepping on the grapes and smushing them in his hand, and his head and hair are adorned with them. The way Bacchus is handling the grapes and is wearing them as a crown gives him a power over them because of the way they surround him, how much smaller they are in comparison to him and that they ~~looked~~ are placed upon his head so casually as **if** to signify his authority. Since he is crushing the grapes while looking into the distance it is as if he doesn't care or realize that he is crushing them both in his hands and his foot which seem relaxed atop them. Bacchus is wearing a grotesque mask that hides most of his face. This mask ties into the aforementioned brooding because it ties into the idea that he has something to hide and that he doesn't want to reveal his true face to the public. Without knowing that Bacchus is a god, or knowing what he is the god of, his positioning, expressions, and overall eminence suggests that he isn't bothered by whomever may be watching as he is looking into the distance, that he is cold and uncaring for the grapes surrounding him, and that he is at ease in his place resting his foot upon the basket.

When the viewer understands that this piece was intended to be part of a fountain and that there were various holes in the cast where water would flow out, **it** gives the piece a different

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<sup>1</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Adriaen De Vries," accessed March 3, 2020. Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Adriaen-de-Vries>

feel. Bacchus's position seems less cold and more affectionate because of the spring water that would be surrounding his figure. His gazing into the distance would hold more wisdom and kindness in it as the water flows, because it would seem he has purpose in what he is doing. Him crushing the grapes would be less cruel and more passionate and respectful of the grapes and himself. The water represents the wine that Bacchus is crushing from the grapes; He is fulfilling his duty as the god of vine and agriculture. <sup>2</sup>Knowing that the flow of life surrounds him we wonder what purpose he has for crushing the grapes and it seems as if he does so with this appreciation for them. Looking at Bacchus's mask it is less grotesque and more something to pity or be curious about. Once again we wonder what purpose or reason he has for wearing the mask and covering his face. The mask seems more like a way to hide from the public out of compassionate mystery rather than malevolent neglect. Bacchus' mask could be because he doesn't want the mortals to see his face and burn up, or because he was also the god of theater. Both of these possibilities connect to the mortal's appreciation of Bacchus, as well as the kindness Bacchus showed the mortals. Rather than ask the figure to reveal what he seems to be hiding we are in awe in his high position above a fountain. Whereas the Bacchus seen without the fountain appears cold, cruel, and unforgiving, the Bacchus with a fountain seems to be kinder, wiser, and grateful for all around him. Although the Bacchus would remain physically the same no matter its location, the emotion portrayed by the Bacchus would change. In this instance the artist had intended and created this cast with the understanding that it would be apart of a fountain with water flowing out and around it. The difference between the Bacchus being on a white podium and being atop a fountain is that with the water surrounding it the bacchus seems much more careful and majestic. The water has this impact because not only is it what the artist considered to be a key component in the portrayal of this piece but also because water is a life force that generally adds power and happiness to it.

When you picture the bacchus with water flowing out of the holes the artist imagined, the basket, the grapes in his hand, his mouth, Bacchus appears as if he is one with nature and more so, an other-worldly being. When the Bacchus is not where it was meant to be we get a very different understanding of its significance and it makes us feel differently than perhaps the artist would have wanted imaging it in its rightful place atop a fountain. Although in situations such as these we might never know what the artist was actually intending, it is meaningful if we think about these questions. By thinking about questions of intent, or purpose it helps us to understand the values of the people at the time and what art meant to them.

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<sup>2</sup> Geller, and Geller, "Bacchus - Roman God of Wine and Theatre," Mythology.net, Accessed March 3, 2020. <https://mythology.net/roman/roman-gods/bacchus/>

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