



Subjects of the Visual Arts: Ganymede

by Peter R. Griffith

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Ganymede, a Phrygian shepherd or hunter, was the son of Tros, the legendary king of Troy. Taken with his remarkable beauty, Jupiter abducted the youth to serve as cup bearer to the Olympian gods.

In some literary versions of the story, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 10:152-161, Jupiter transforms himself into an eagle to snatch the youth from earth; while in others, such as Virgil's *Aeneid* 5:252-257, Jupiter sends an eagle to fetch the boy.

In art Ganymede is most often depicted with the eagle and is sometimes accompanied by a dog.

Since antiquity Ganymede has served as an artistic expression for homosexuality. The ancient popularity of the homoerotic myth is apparent by the frequent vase depictions of Jupiter giving Ganymede a cockerel, a common gift to youths from older male admirers. The theme also appears in ancient statuary, where Jupiter lovingly embraces the Phrygian youth.

The myth becomes less common in the Middle Ages, but still occurs in literature, manuscript illumination, and sculptural decoration as a subject of censure, warning viewers not to follow the sinful ways of the pagan immortals.

In the Renaissance, the figure recovers its earlier popularity through the Italian humanists. While they sometimes turn the myth into an allegory of the soul's ascent toward Heaven, as in Alciati's *Emblemata*, it most often serves as a symbol of male homosexuality, particularly of pederasty, the love of an older man for a youth.

Ganymede's homoerotic tradition flourishes at this time in the art of Michelangelo, Correggio, Parmigianino, and Giulio Romano.

However, by the mid-sixteenth century, reformers in the Catholic Church begin to frown upon mythology and nudity in art. As a consequence, Ganymede's popularity begins to wane. There are depictions of the youth in seventeenth-century Italian art, such as Annibale Carracci's *Rape of Ganymede* (1596-1600) and Pietro da Cortona's *Planetary Rooms* (1641), but they appear with less frequency and most lack any homoerotic charge.

While Ganymede also appears in Dutch and English art of the time, in such works as Rembrandt's *The Rape of Ganymede* (1635), Rubens' *Rape of Ganymede* (1635), and Inigo Jones' *Coelum Britannicum* (1634), and continues to be depicted in French art into the early nineteenth century, the allegory never again attains the notoriety it enjoyed in sixteenth-century Italy.



Three representations of the rape of Ganymede:
Top: An ancient Greek sculpture (ca 470 B. C. E.).

Center: A painting by Correggio (1531).

Above: A painting by Rembrandt van Rijn (1635).

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