

*SARA VITACCA

Dionysian fantasies and queer subtext in Filippo de Pisis' male nudes

ABSTRACT: The Italian painter Filippo de Pisis (1896-1956) often used references to Dionysians and Arcadian subjects to emphasize the homoerotic connotations associated with the representation of the male body. Sometimes, de Pisis represents a Dionysian male nude immersed in nature, as in *Bacchino* (1928) or the striking lithographs illustrating Catullo's *Carmi*. At other times, the animalistic dimension of the Dionysian world is transposed into the intimacy of the artist's studio, as in *Nudino sulla pelle di tigre* (1931). This paper aims to shed new light on the homoerotic and self-reflexive dimension of these Arcadian fantasies the artist elaborated during a lifetime. I will investigate their connection with a well-established homoerotic visual culture that has been widespread since the late 19th century and the way they offered the painter a prolific and safe outlet for representing the eroticized male body in the Italian context of the early 20th century. It will thus be possible to address through an original perspective the queer dimension of de Pisis' work, still too often overlooked by the artist's historiography.

KEYWORDS: Italian twentieth-century art history, Filippo de Pisis, homoeroticism, male nude, Dionysian imagery

In a black-and-white photograph, the Italian painter and writer Filippo Tiberelli de Pisis (1896-1956) is immortalized on a rock in the middle of a lake. His legs are carefully staged in a masterful show of a classic *contrapposto*, the head is slightly lowered, he carries a wood stick in his hand. This very photograph was hung in good sight in De Pisis' studio, so that the young models coming to pose were able to see it, as the artist himself relates in his autobiographical memoir, *Il Marchesino pittore*:

To the side, pinned to the wall, there was a photograph of the Marquis in heavily tucked-in bathing panties. It has been executed in Lavarone on a boulder by a delightful pond, surrounded by trees. The marquis had assumed the pose of Praxiteles' satyr (with a bit more belly and hips), his beautiful legs were set in the classical pastoral pose [...]. The models looked at this photograph, but usually without much admiration, even if the marquis always tried to bring attention to it. It was not their ideal athletic body.¹ (DE PISIS 1969: 270)

¹ "Al lato, affissa al muro con spilli e chiodini, una sua fotografia in mutandine da bagno

De Pisis, who loved disguises and masquerades, played at embodying a famous statue from the classical repertoire and the choice of model is anything but accidental. To choose Praxiteles's satyr as a double is a way to identify with an active, desiring, and passionate figure of the ancient Dionysian world. Moreover, the fascination with the figure of the satyr, a vector of erotic suggestions, is a recurring feature in the artist's writing. The painter, for example, used to linger in front of the colossal satyr of the Villa Borghese, to admire his sensual beauty:

In that Herculean and muscular body F. saw a secret tempting sweetness; the right foot, on which the figure rests by lifting his heel, the fleshy thighs, the rhythm of the whole figure had the power of recalling to him very sweet things, linear memories, countries seen who knows where, and beautiful idolized bodies.² (DE PISIS 1984: 213)

These intimate fragments suggest that Ancient Greece, and more specifically an image of Antiquity associated with the Dionysian, Hellenic, and Arcadian universe, offered de Pisis a space of sensual projection, charged with a homoerotic dimension. Dionysian subjects, portraying longing beautiful ephebes under the guise of Bacchus, Pan or young Fauns, lying on tiger's furs, are indeed recurrent in the artist's works. And they seem to offer the artist a "place to fantasize, and, also, and to live out fantasies" to quote Robert Aldrich's fundamental contribution on the Mediterranean imagery and the homosexual subculture (Aldrich, 1993: 167). It is precisely de Pisis' Dionysian subjects that I would like to study more thoroughly in this essay, to investigate their connection with a well-established homoerotic visual culture that has been widespread since the late nineteenth century, and the way they offered the painter a prolific and safe outlet for representing the eroticized male body. De Pisis' arcadian production, in fact, must also be contextualized in a more general interest shown by the artist in the representation of male nudes, a topic on which much remains

molto rimboccate. Eseguita a Lavarone su un masso in riva a un laghetto delizioso cinto di alberi. Il marchesino aveva assunto la posa del satiro di Prassitele (un po' più di ventre e di anche), le gambe bellissime eran poste in evidenza nella posa pastorale classica, la testa reclinata [...] I modelli guardavano questa fotografia, ma quasi sempre senza ammirazione vera, sebbene il marchesino la sottolineasse. Non era così il loro ideale sportivo".

² "Nel corpo muscoloso da Ercole per F. era una segreta dolcezza tentatrice; il piede destro, su cui la figura si appoggia sollevando il tallone, le cosce carnose, il ritmo di tutta la figura avevan la potenza di richiamargli cose dolcissime, ricordi di linee di paesi viste chissà dove, bei corpi idolatrati."

to be said. Despite the artist's albeit very extensive bibliography, the many drawings and paintings by de Pisis depicting young male bodies have never been interpreted in light of the artist's overt homosexuality. While the artist's homosexuality is certainly no secret, thanks to an abundant literary and autobiographical production that provides, among other things, valuable accounts of homosexual lifeways from the early twentieth century, the queer dimension of his painting has rarely been addressed head-on.³ Mention must be made, however, of Lorenzo Benadusi's important contribution (2006: 135-52), which addresses, through the case of de Pisis, the issue of homosexuality in Fascist Italy, while delving into intimate and personal events that deeply marked the artist's career and reputation. John Champagne has also perfectly demonstrated the difficulty of traditional Italian art historiography in approaching the homoerotic subtext of the de Pisis's production of male bodies: "when it comes to enumerating the various tropes the artist employed, the male nudes remain unmentioned", says Champagne (2023: 160), who also points the inability of critics and curators to interpret this side of de Pisis' work beyond the classicizing body trope, or to see them other than a sign of a melancholic, veiled and unfulfilled homoerotic longing.⁴

However, the frequency and variety of Dionysian subjects cannot be simply reduced to the fascination of the ephebic body, or to the sublimation of an unfulfilled forbidden desire. Instead, it seems to reveal the recourse to a codified and shared homoerotic subtext, which often lets out a dimension of irony and lightness. The Dionysian world, after all, has always embodied a space for liberating the body and the senses, and for overcoming social as well as gender boundaries. In ancient sources Dionysus is the god who loves

³ On De Pisis and the human figure see Caramel 2002; LOPRESTI 1996 and SERRANO 1996. Serrano's essay explores De Pisis' production of male nudes, but mostly focuses on the trope of the young ephebe, transporting the analysis of such works into an aestheticizing dimension of abstract and classicizing desire.

⁴ John Champagne's essay focuses more precisely on De Pisis' exhibitions of the post-Stonewall years, highlighting the nuances and different approaches to the artist's homosexuality. Luca Massimo Barbero, in the exhibition catalogue *L'Uomo e la natura* (BARBERO 2001: 139), does not ignore, nor underplay De Pisis' love of men, and does not reinforce the stereotypical image of the melancholy homosexual, inherited in part from the artist's own biographers, and especially from Nico Naldini. We also owe to John Champagne a rare approach of early twentieth-century Italian art through a queer perspective. See for example CHAMPAGNE 2019, and CHAMPAGNE 2013. We also point out the interesting approach of Alessandra Vaccari (2021: 71-80), who proposes a queer reading of De Pisis' taste for fashion and flowers that runs through the artist's work and life.

women and men without distinction. He is both active and passive, the creator of the dildo, and described as the god who reconciles the male and female in his own body.⁵ Even before Nietzsche's theory, the queer and subversive potential of the Dionysian myth had been widely grasped and exploited by late Nineteenth-Century art and visual culture, when the Ancient God played a key role in the development of homosexual identities, in search of representational figures. The famous text by Walter Pater, "A study of Dionysus" marked a fundamental landmark in this sense.⁶ The reception of this text led to associate Dionysus with male homoerotic desire and homoerotic aestheticism, making him a symbol of the Victorian homosexual, torn between amorous passion and the melancholy of repressed desire much like the *Bacchus* painted by the homosexual Victorian artists Simeon Solomon (FIG. 1).

De Pisis began to take an interest in the representation of the nude figure around the mid-1920s, that is, after his move to Paris, which is usually interpreted by the artist's biographers as a moment of profound artistic and private freedom and experimentation.⁷ In addition to numerous erotic encounters with young models whom he invited to pose in his studio, de Pisis frequented clubs, taverns, night parties, and even masquerade balls. The artist attended, for example, the famous themed *Bal des Quat'z'art*, organized yearly by the students of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. The *Bal* was commonly referred to as a modern, orgiastic bacchanal.⁸ Themes and disguises varied from year to year, always choosing, however, an antique, exotic, or Orientalist setting that allowed for sexual transgressions and gender role subversions to be experienced in a fictional and fetishized

⁵ In Euripide's *The Bacchae*, Dionysos has a male body, but is often described as an effeminate god. In other ancient sources, such as in Eschyle's *Edonoi* he also takes the appearance of a young girl. He is known for having both female and male lovers, such as Ampelos and the shepherd Prsymnos. According to Clement of Alexandria, Dionysos wanted to descend to Hades and asked Prsymnos for directions on how to get there, promising sexual favors in exchange. Upon the God's return from the underworld, Prsymnos has died, yet Dionysus penetrated his own anus with a wooden dildo made from a tree to pay his due.

⁶ On this subject see Friedman, 2019: 64-70; on the reception of Hellenism as homosexual code in Victorian society see DOWLING 2014. On Walter Pater's use of Dionysus see for example GILLARD-ESTRADA 2008.

⁷ On De Pisis' Parisian years (1925-1939) see the exhibition catalogue BRIGANTI 1987; GIAN FERRARI 2006. On the group of Italian artists working in Paris at the same time see COLOMBO, GODIO 2021.

⁸ An extensive artistic and cultural study of the *Bal des Quat'z'Arts* tradition has been conducted by Isabelle Conte, in her PhD thesis (CONTE 2021). The writer and De Pisis' close friend Giovanni Comisso also recounts the experience of this ball, whose aim was to be as naked as possible, in his Parisian memoirs (COMISSO 1993: 123-132).



FIGURE 1. Simeon Solomon, *Bacchus*, 1867, oil on canvas, 50×37 cm, private collection.

elsewhere. Marino Moretti, in a 1926 letter sent to Aldo Palazzeschi recounts the enthusiasm with which the artist disguised himself, offering his own naked body as a work of art:

The other day there was the amazing ball of (I don't know how to write it) *4 arts*. Paris by night was all awash with naked men making an infernal racket from and about everything. Need I tell you that de Pisis also attended the ball, and indeed de Pisis was one of the most naked? You should have seen how his skin was painted and tattooed!⁹ (MORETTI, PALAZZESCHI 2001: 29)

De Pisis paints his first explicitly Dionysian subject, the *Bacchino* or *Piccolo Bacco* (FIG. 2), in 1928, that later became part of the collection of Vittorio Fossati Bellani, friend of the artist, along with another painting with explicit homoerotic subtext, the *Saint Sebastian* of 1930.¹⁰

⁹ “C'è stato l'altro giorno lo stupefacente ballo dei (non so come si scrive) *4 Arts*. Parigi notturna era tutta inondata d'uomini nudi che facevano un chiasso d'inferno da per tutto, ma più spesso nelle stazioni del metro. C'è bisogno di dirti che al ballo ha partecipato anche de Pisis e che anzi de Pisis era uno dei più nudi?”

¹⁰ The history of the Fossati Bellani's collection has been carefully explored by the exhibition CAMPIGLIO, DULIO 2019. See in particular DULIO 2019 and CAMPIGLIO 2019. The painting has been already published by Cesare Brandi (BRANDI 1932, p. 395). See also BRIGANTI 1991, vol. I, cat. 1927/106; 1927/107.



FIGURE 2. Filippo De Pisis, *Il Bacchino*, 1928, oil and tempera on cardboard, 31,5×41,5 cm, Rome, Collezione Claudio Cervini.

The small, intimate painting depicts a nude young man with a svelte, androgynous body sprawled and abandoned on panther fur and immersed in a rural landscape. In his hands he clutches a pink flower, his head is encircled with ivy leaves, and the sandals on his feet are his only garment. If the figure's eroticism seems at first glance to be diluted by the painting's mythological pretext, on a closer look, the Dionysian dimension gives the work a greater erotic charge. The black patches of the tiger fur, a typical attribute of the followers of Dionysus, immediately orient the viewer's gaze toward the young man's pubic hair and member, while traces of red paint in the foreground, evoking the intoxication of spilled wine, provide the scene of a carnal and passionate atmosphere. It is also interesting to note the symbiotic relationship between the nude and nature, which seem to merge into each other. Among other things, the viewer's attention is drawn to the pink flower clutched in the young god's hand. The flower, of the same colour as the young boy's cheeks reddened by wine or pleasure, seems to reiterate the erotic availability of the young man, who openly offers himself to the viewer as an object of desire and longing, in a pose which suggests both passivity and availability. The flower device is used by De Pisis in another work of ancient inspiration, the 1930 *Pan* (FIG. 3), where the figure, sketched by broad, vigorous brushstrokes, stands out against a hinted natural background.



FIGURE 3. Filippo De Pisis, *Pan*, 1930, oil on canvas, 90×80, private collection.

The young arcadian figure, however, is shown in a more confrontational pose than the young Bacchus. The look he sends back to the viewer is tinged with a defiance even more emphasised by the red flower in the foreground.

In the same years, artists such as Pablo Picasso and Francis Picabia, whom De Pisis frequented in Paris, were also involved in a general revival of the Dionysian and pastoral theme, influenced by their reading of Nietzsche's texts.¹¹ De Pisis was also thoroughly familiar with Nietzsche's philosophy, which had been a fundamental point of reference for de Chirico in the

¹¹ See for example FLORMAN 2002; LEYMARIE J. et alii 1996: 22-36; LOS ANGELES 2011; and the exhibition catalogue MILOVANOVIC 2022.



FIGURE 4. Filippo De Pisis, *Homage to Corot*, 1945, oil on cardboard, 21×36 cm, private collection.

development of metaphysical painting.¹² However, looking at de Pisis' Dionysian works, I would like to suggest that such Dionysian inspiration comes from other sources, perhaps more anachronistic, but deeply connected to a widespread homoerotic visual culture. While these kinds of representations are certainly to be related to the artist's greater creative freedom in the Parisian sphere, they also reveal a subtle play of citation of the French academic nude tradition, which de Pisis enjoys reinterpreting through a subversion of gendered conventions. Looking back at *Piccolo Bacco*, the painting clearly tries to revive the Renaissance tradition of the nude in the landscape, but it also parallels Corot's nudes, which often depicted young bacchantes on tiger's furs lying in the wilderness.¹³ Among other things, the parallel with Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot seems to me effective when considering a later work by de Pisis, entitled *Homage to Corot* (FIG. 4) which refers precisely to the artist's sensual female nudes immersed in nature, to which, however, De Pisis responds with an eloquent gender substitution.

¹² De Pisis started to get acquainted with Nietzsche's and Schopenhauer's philosophy already around 1917, thanks to his contacts with Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Fort. In 1919, De Pisis also used to attend the circle of Julius Evola, a fundamental figure in Nietzsche's reception in Italy, with whom De Pisis shared a common interest in esoteric and theosophic ideas. On De Chirico and Nietzsche, see for example BENZI 2020: 12-25; and BALDACCI 2021: 26-30, 50. See also MERJIAN 2014.

¹³ See for example Camille Corot, *Bacchante in a landscape*, 1865-1870, Oil on canvas, 30,8×61,5 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It is also clear that these kinds of depictions also owe something to the overtly homoerotic photographs of young male nudes made at the turn of the 20th Century by Wilhelm von Gloeden, Wilhelm von Plüschow, or Vincenzo Galdi, whose arcadian and bucolic setting, also well-informed of the French Academic painting tradition, authorized a freedom of poses and interactions between male bodies that would have been otherwise publicly unrepresentable.¹⁴ If much has been written about the homoerotic dimension and reception of Von Gloeden, Von Plüschow, and Galdi's photographs, it will suffice for us to point out here their fundamental role in consolidating an homoerotic visual culture firmly associated with a fetichized fantasy of the Antiquity and "Mediterranean South", made up of languidly stretched ephebic nude bodies, and offered to the gaze and consumption of a conscious viewer. This production also very clearly produced a modern imagery of the idealized "Greek love", mostly based on pederastic relationship between adult males and young boys,¹⁵ that worked as one of the role models through which male homosexuality was conceived and experienced at the beginning of the 20th Century. This was also true for De Pisis, as Benadusi pointed out in his exploration of De Pisis homosexual ways of life (BENADUSI 2006: 147-150).

There is no noted evidence that the artist may have possessed or collected those kinds of photographs, which, however, circulated widely in Italy in the early decades of the twentieth century. They were often displayed in official exhibitions where they would even win medals. They were also reproduced in the photographic magazines of the time or distributed as post-cards among gay collectors.¹⁶ However, it seems that de Pisis made extremely conscious use of that codified construction of desire, elaborated through the works of Gloeden, Plüschow or Galdi, and that he knowingly exploits this specific reference to enhance the erotic dimension of his own work. A simple visual comparison between De Pisis' 1928 *Bacchino* and von Gloeden, *Sleeping boy in Sicily* (FIG. 5) shows a close proximity, in the pose surrendered to the viewer's desire, in the intermingling of the body with

¹⁴ See PERNA 2013; ZANNIER 2008; KIERMEIER-DEBRE 2007; MAFFIOLI, FAVROD 2000; NATTER, WEIERMAIR 2000; MIRAGLIA 1977. On the subject see also ALDRICH 1993: 136-161.

¹⁵ See Bolognari, 2012 for an anthropological take on von Gloeden's works, and a focus on homosexuality and the representation of a Sicilian eroticism in von Gloeden's photography. See also MIRISOLA, VANZELLA 2004, for a focus on Sicily and arcadian imagination.

¹⁶ Von Gloeden, for example, took part in the 1909 National Photographic Exhibition in Milan, where he won the golden medal, and he also presented his works at the International Exhibition in Rome, in 1911, where he won the silver medal.



FIGURE 5. Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Sleeping boy in Sicily*, 1900, albumen print, private collection.

nature, in the use of Dionysian attributes such as animal skin, but also in the crossed position of the legs that emphasizes the boy's pubis.¹⁷

The reference to this late 19th-century imagery of a Dionysian Greece as a land of young ephebes, however, is all the more interesting for it is slightly, yet fundamentally, anachronistic. While the photographs of Gloeden, Pluschow, and Galdi had been extremely popular in the early years of the 20th century, the interest aroused by this type of production had gradually waned over the years, no doubt because of the new political and moral climate of Fascist Italy.¹⁸ But it's also because the new ideal of a virile and athletic body did not match the ephebic ideal extolled by this type of artistic production. The very image of Antiquity promoted by the regime as the ideal of health and "virility" was certainly not the Dionysian, sensual and lascivious Greece made up of satyrs, fauns and flute players, but the Classical and Roman canon land of athletes and muscled heroes. Then again, von Gloeden's archives of negatives and photographs,

¹⁷ Champagne also suggests a possible inspiration of von Gloeden's works on the already mentioned De Pisis' painting *Pan*, but also on Corrado Cagli's 1938 *Bacchino* (Champagne, 2023: 169, n. 11).

¹⁸ See also HEWITT 1996. For an historical account homosexuality and homosexual repression in fascist Italy see BENADUSI 2012; GORETTI, GIARTOSIO 2006 and PINI 2011. On the imaginary of virility in fascist discourse see SPACKMAN 1996.

inherited by the photographer's assistant and close friend Pancrazio Buciuni, who continued their marketing in Sicily, were indeed seized by the fascist authorities in the 1930s. Buciuni was also accused of peddling pornographic material, although he was eventually acquitted.¹⁹ According to the Tribunal's ruling, "most of the youths photographed had their members in evidence", but they were "in the floppy state and not at all erect so as to arouse erotic feelings". And the inexpressive faces and inactive attitudes were not provocative enough to be accused of being pornographic.

De Pisis, thus, seems to pursue an image of Antique and Dionysian beauty that was certainly not in line with the virile idea of the male body promoted by Fascist discourse and Propaganda, as John Champagne has also demonstrated with his works on the representation of masculinities in Italy during the *Ventennio* (CHAMPAGNE 2019: 125-180). But the artist is also choosing to bring the Dionysian inspiration in a very different direction than what modernist artists in Paris were doing, whose revival of Arcadian motifs was reviving a very heteronormative image of the ancient Bacchic frenzy, such as in works by Picasso or Picabia. De Pisis does not really use the myth to disguise the homoerotic dimension of the painted nude. Other figures from modern life, from sailors to boxers, come in fact to enrich the constellation of homoerotic icons that emerge from his corpus. And quite often the artist indulges in the sheer sensual representation of the anonymous naked model, without needing any kind of representational justification for it. Instead, it seems that when the Dionysian element comes into play it is precisely for its capacity to enhance, rather than veiling, the affective potential of the image, and to call back to a shared homoerotic visual culture.

Furthermore, alongside these representations that reintroduce an ancient myth and create a fabulous world of projection and sensual possibilities, we also find numerous representations of male nudes where the bucolic setting gives way to the intimacy of the artist's studio. In these cases, the Dionysian reference is then reduced to some of its most obvious symbols and attributes, such as tiger furs or bucolic costumes, which serve as a visual code aimed at emphasizing the eroticism of the young models'

¹⁹ Van Gloeden's photographic material was seized in 1933. Buciuni's trial took place on October 17, 1940 and he was completely acquitted from all charges in 1941 (Tribunale di Messina, sentence of 30/05/1941). On this subject see BOLOGNARI 2012; MORMORIO 1994 (includes quotations from the tribunal ruling); MIRAGLIA, MUSSA 1996 (includes further quotations from the ruling). See also BOLOGNARI 2017.



FIGURE 6. Filippo de Pisis, *Nudino sulla pelle di tigre*, 1931, oil on canvas, 60×91 cm, private collection.

bodies, posing under the artist's gaze. Any explicit reference to the myth, for example, is missing in the case of the famous *Nudino sulla pelle di tigre*, painted in 1931 (FIG. 6), which plays instead with the iconography of the courtesan in the alcove, echoing a tradition going from Titian to Manet.

However, the animal skin is used consciously as an instrument of pose and play, which allows visually to put the emphasis on the black stockings of the young man lying down and offered to the viewer's gaze. And it is precisely the contrast between the triviality of the black stocking and the artifice of the display, that gives rise to the erotic tension of the painting, that also re-enacts the nineteenth-century academic tradition.

In later drawings and sketches, such as *Figura nello studio* (FIG. 7), the artist fixes on the canvas the very moment of the pose, in which the model dresses in the shoes of a mythological figure, Bacchus or Pan. Works like this one, thus come to reveal the power of myth as a play of doubles, as a space to invest new possible identities.

De Pisis seems here to unveil the artifice of the mythical subject, but at the same time reveals its role as a space of performance and subversion that can be experienced in an even more personal and intimate way, where the artist and the model consciously play at, and pretend to. The atelier itself becomes then a fabled place, a new domestic and domesticated Arcadia, where models can play the role of Bacchus, Pan, Narcissus or St. Sebastian, transforming themselves in front of the artist's gaze, into new deities. Sometimes, the model posing in disguise becomes almost a decorative motif, an arabesque in its own right, that strongly evokes Matisse and French post-impressionists, such as in *Nudo*, or *Riposo del Fauno* (FIG. 8).



FIGURE 7: Filippo de Pisis, *Figura nello studio*, 1937, oil on canvas, 65×54 cm, private collection.



FIGURE 8: Filippo de Pisis, *Nudo (Riposo del Fauno)*, 1934, watercolor, 33×25,2 cm, Torino, GAM, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe.



FIGURE 9. Filippo de Pisis, *Bacchanal*, 1940, oil on cardboard, private collection.

The male models are further objectified, nearly transformed into those statues whose pose they imitate, merging with the domestic decor of the atelier and becoming much like still lifes, creating a constant tension between real life and representation, between the model and the character he personifies. Within this Dionysian corpus of work, there is however a painting that is quite surprising for its disruptive erotic charge and for its singularity in the artist's production, which, in my knowledge, rarely gets so explicit in term of representation of sexual acts. In 1940, one year after de Pisis' return to Italy, and as the war rages on, the artist paints a frieze-like *Bacchanal*²⁰ (FIG. 9).

There is nothing in this work of the languorous passivity of the *Bacchino*. Here, the Dionysian subject is displayed in its collective and orgasmic dimension, which includes the representation of both heterosexual and homosexual couplings, masturbation and oral sex. Both in its format and in its iconography, de Pisis seems here to be directly inspired by the ancient Dionysian vases and sarcophagi where sexuality was explored in all its possible combinations. All the participants of the feast are absorbed in their own erotic acts. Yet, it is interesting to note that de Pisis paints the vigorous and muscled figures in the foreground from behind, offering an explicit invitation to the viewer, much like that raised cup of a Bacchus in the centre, or the erected members of the male bodies opening and closing the frieze. Unfortunately, I could not find more information about the making or the reception of this work, now in a private collection, which may shed new light on its meaning and origin. Investigating the network of collectors and amateurs of de Pisis' erotic works would be, among other

²⁰ On this work, see BRIGANTI 1991, 2, n° 68.

things, a useful and necessary research, which we hope to realize in the future. Indeed, it would allow us to build a full-scale history of queer art in Italy, based on the reconstruction of networks and private relationships of friendship and the circulation and exhibition of works.

The illustrations made by de Pisis for the new edition of Catullus' *Carmi* can also be interpreted as a way of rediscovering the primordial potential of the Arcadian world, even if, given their public destination, they clearly temper and dilute the visual directness of the 1940 *Bacchanal*. The gestation of the work is long and quite painful, as de Pisis does not show much enthusiasm for the project, and often postpones the insistent requests of Giovanni Mardersteig, who had commissioned the illustrations from him.²¹ The first preparatory drawings date back to 1943, and, after numerous rehearsals, the artist brings to life 17 illustrations that give life to an overly erotic, yet playful and joyful, Arcadian imagery. In the letters that the artists wrote to Mardersteig, de Pisis addresses precisely the anti-classical nature of these illustrations. "These drawings are free, and they have an explicit *ironic* character, and anti-*classical* (classical as in the boring way)"²². De Pisis' illustrations, in fact do not really match the text, but they create a free world of naked archers, zither-playing shepherds, and playful fauns and shepherds, where male and female bodies coexist in a great variety of visual solutions and interactions between the genders, offering themselves to the desiring viewer's gaze (FIG. 10).

In their watercolor version, as three volumes presented the watercolor lithographs, the play between line and color and the bucolic, almost cartoonish dimension of the illustrations are even more noticeable. The color does indeed emphasize the flushed cheeks, draws attention to the nudity and volumes of the body, to the nipples.

After the Liberation, in 1945, de Pisis seems to want to bring to life this very orgiastic universe when the artist decides to organize a celebration with a certainly Dionysian atmosphere, in which his most beautiful models were supposed to take part. In fact, as writer Giovanni Comisso recalls in *Il mio sodalizio con de Pisis*: "It would be up to de Pisis to choose the participants to decorate, all of whom were to be beautiful". And of course,

²¹ On De Pisis' lithographs see MALABOTTA 1969 and BARBERO 1996.

²² Letter from Pisis to Giovanni Mardersteig 1945 (MALABOTTA 1969: 29): "Questi disegni sono liberi e vogliono avere espressamente un carattere ironistico e anti classico (nel senso noioso della parola)."

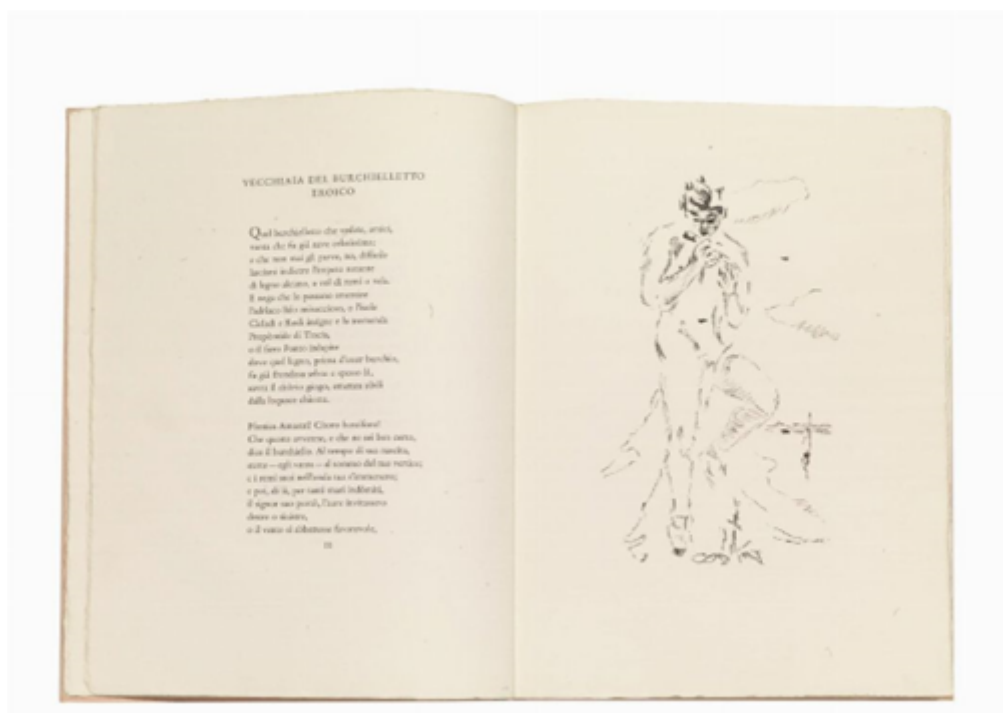


FIGURE 10. Filippo de Pisis, *Fifth illustration for I Carmi di Catullo* (Milano, Hoepli, 1945), 18,4×14,4 cm, lithograp.

“The participants would be entirely nude”, writes Comisso, and the party was called the “Crab Bal” since their models were supposed to be “covering only their genitals with a crab shell”²³, from which small chains decorated with shells would be dangling and move to the rhythm of the dance. However, de Pisis proposed to paint on the bodies of the guests his best watercolors, he “painted with the utmost brio on each participant’s chest and back seascapes, Venetian canals, flowers, and still lives, and when he wanted to be spic and span he would sketch Harlequin’s checkerboard or fanciful tattoos on them”²⁴ (Comisso, 1993: 111). Somewhat as he had done on his own body for the Parisian *Quat’z’arts* dance. The artists indeed decorated his models’ bodies with seascapes, flowers or still lifes, using the naked body as a blank canvas, and setting them in motion.

Unfortunately, de Pisis had the unwise idea of discarding one of the models that did not meet his beauty standards anymore, and much like in the script of an ancient myth or fairy tale, the jealous model is said to have

²³ “I partecipanti sarebbero stati tutti nudi, solo coperti da gusci di granseole attorno ai fianchi. Il ballo si sarebbe chiamato della granceola. [...] Sarebbe spettato a de Pisis la scelta dei partecipanti da decorare che avrebbero dovuto essere tutti bellissimi.”

²⁴ “dipingeva con il massimo brio sul petto e sulla schiena di ogni partecipante paesaggi marini, canali veneziani, fiori e nature morte e quando voleva essere spicciativo vi tratteggiava la scacchiera di arlecchino o fantasiosi tatuaggi”.

reported the news of the party to the Venetian authorities. When the police intervened, they found some 20 young people dancing to the sound of music, solely covered in tattoos and crab shells, in an orgiastic party atmosphere. All participants are escorted to police headquarters, where they faced accusations of harm to the public moral. When De Pisis was asked for an explanation of his role in such a scandalous party, he is reported to have replied that as a painter, he wanted to have before his eyes “a painting of original representational vigor”²⁵ (Naldini, 2013: 268). A real bacchanal, in short, staged and enacted by the artist, now truly become a new Dionysus.

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²⁵ “un quadro di originale vigore rappresentativo”.

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THE AUTHOR

Sara Vitacca is a lecturer in contemporary art history at the Université de Franche Comté. Her PhD dissertation, *Michelangelismes. La réception de Michel-Ange entre mythe, image et création 1875-1914*, was published in 2023 by Les presses du réel. She is a former fellow of the Académie de France in Rome and the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck Institut für Kunstgeschichte. Her research focuses on the reception of the Renaissance in nineteenth-century art, artistic revival phenomena, and the history of the body, sport, and virility in the 19th and 20th century art and visual culture.