

José de Ribera (Xàtiva, 1591 – Naples, 1652)

LETICIA DE FRUTOS SASTRE

Head of Silenus

(fragment of *The Visit of Bacchus to Icarus*)

Oil on canvas

47 x 36.5 cm

Provenance / Royal Collections, Alcázar de Madrid Inventory, 1666; Alcázar de Madrid Inventory, 1686; will of Carlos II, 1701; Palacio del Buen Retiro Inventory, 1772; will of Carlos III 1794; *Nota de los cuadros que han faltado en el Real Palacio de Madrid y en los reales sitios...* 1818 [note of the pictures that have been missing in the Real Palacio of Madrid and in the Reales sitios...1818]; Museo Nacional del Prado (1857 Inventory, 1854-1858 Catalogue) Pittsburgh, Wills Mc Cook Reid and Henry Miller Collections; Bogotá, Private Collection; USA, Private Collection; France, Private Collection.

Exhibitions / Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado 1992, n. 64; Northampton; Massachusetts, Smith College Museum of Art.

Literature / A. Ponz, 1772-1794, *Viaje a España*, ed. 1947, p. 533; A. Ceán Bermúdez, *Diccionario histórico de los más ilustres profesores de las Bellas Artes en España*, 1800, IV, p. 191; J. A. Danvila, “Reseña crítica de las obras de José de Ribera el Spagnoletto” in *Revista de España*, 1888, pp. 173-174; A. L. Mayer, *Jusepe de Ribera (Lo Spagnoletto)*, Leipzig, 1923, pp. 79-80; A. L. Mayer, “El Bacchanal de Ribera y su origen” in *Boletín de la Sociedad Española de Excursiones*, XXV, 1927, p. 159; D. F. Darby, “In the train of a Vagrant Silenus” in *Art in America*, XXXI, 1943, p. 140; E. du Gué Trapier, *Ribera*, Hispanic Society of America, New York, 1952, pp. 53-54; J. Sarthou Carreres, “José de Ribera el Españoletto” in *Archivo de Arte Valenciano*, XXIV, 1953, pp. 14-61; C. Gilbert-Claire, “Sur une composition retrouvée de Ribera d’après le relief Alexandrin dit, Visite de Dionysos chez Ikarios” in *Revue Archéologique*, 1953, pp. 70-78; J. A. Gaya Nuño, *La pintura española fuera de España*, 1958, n. 2290; C. Felton, *Jusepe de Ribera: A catalogue Raisonné*, Pittsburg, 1971, n. A 14, p. 173; R. Causa, “La pittura del Seicento a Napoli dal Naturalismo al Barrocco” in *Storia di Napoli*, vol. V Cava dei Tirreni, 1972, p. 284. pp. 915-994; N. Spinosa, *L’opera completa del Ribera*, Milán, 1978, p. 106, n. 90; C. Felton and W. B. Jordan, “Jusepe de Ribera, lo Spagnoletto, 1591-1652” in Catalogue Exhibition, Fort Worth, 1982, n° 9; R. López Torrijos, *La mitología en la pintura española del Siglo de Oro*, Madrid, 1985, pp. 345; F. Benito Doménech, *Ribera 1591-1652*, Madrid, 1991, pp. 96-98; A. Pérez Sánchez and N. Spinosa, *Jusepe Ribera*, Catalogue Exhibition, Naples, 1992, p. 200; N. Spinosa, *Ribera. L’opera completa*, Electa, Naples, 2003, p. 293, A143; N. Spinosa, *Ribera. L’opera completa*, Electa, Naples, 2006, p. 320, A165; N. Spinosa, *Ribera. La obra completa*, Fundación de Apoyo al Arte Hispánico, Madrid, 2008, p. 401, A185.

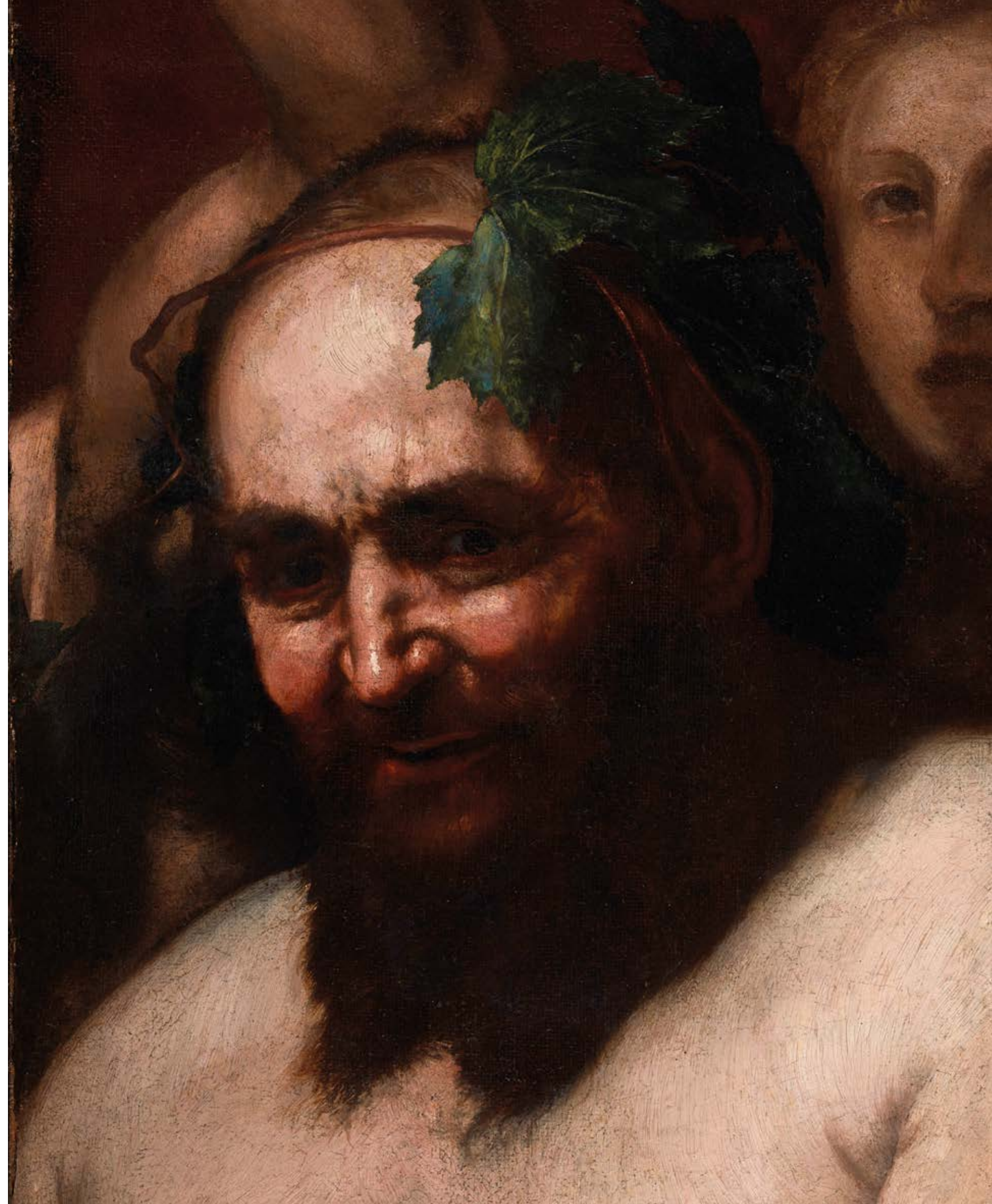


Fig. 1 / Diego Velazquez,
Phillip IV on Horseback,
ca. 1635, Madrid, Museo
Nacional del Prado.



Ribera, Silenus – and a poet?

“Tell us, gaffer, how you found on earth the nectar of Olympus? This golden water never came from Cephisos, this honeysweet treasure was not brought from the Naiads! For our fountains do not bubble up honey-streams like this, the river Ilissos does not run in such a purple flood [...]. A strange drink yours, which dissolves trouble! for it has scattered my cares wandering in the winds of heaven”¹

Nonnus of Panopolis, *Dionysiaca*

If we are to fully appreciate the depth of nuance and meaning that an image can produce, we have to place that image in context. The same is true of quotations – as with the words attributed to Nonnus of Panopolis, the 5th century BCE Greek poet who praised wine as a gift of the god Bacchus to Icarus. We can only grasp the full resonance of the message when we are familiar with its context.

This is the case with the magnificent image that will be the focus of this study. Once the history of the image itself and the subject it was intended to convey come to light, then the discovery of new meaning is all the more extraordinary. This is for a number of reasons: partly because we are dealing with a fragment of a much bigger painting; partly because this painting belonged to the royal collection of Phillip IV (1605-1665); and partly because, once we have contextualised this painting, we can assess the influence of several crucial historical factors in its production.

The painting measures 47 x 36.5 cm and depicts the head of a bearded old man. His look is pensive, and he wears a crown of vine leaves on his head. Traditionally, vines have been associated with Bacchus, the god of wine and drunkenness and, without further context, we might assume

this is a representation of that deity. However, as will be shown, the head in fact belongs to Silenus, one of the participants in the Dionysian procession that appears in the full canvas.

This painting by José de Ribera portrayed a myth of Bacchus, or more exactly, a theoxeny or tale of hospitality extended towards the god.

To grasp this work’s significance, I will focus on two aspects. First, I will address details of how the work was produced: when it was commissioned; by whom; where it was placed on completion and the fuller readings associated with its imagery. Second, I will think about the figure of the god Bacchus, which will allow us to focus on the significance this had in its original context.

The head of Silenus is a fragment of a magnificent painting of José de Ribera, known as the *Visit of Bacchus to Icarus*. This work is first catalogued in the inventory of the royal collections of Phillip IV (Fig. 1), which place it in the Royal Alcazar of Madrid in 1666, in the room where the king himself dined.² Unfortunately, it was among the paintings which were lost in the Alcazar fire in 1734. Only four fragments survived the fire. Two fragments which are in the *Museo Nacional del Prado* are the heads of Bacchus (Fig. 2) and Erigon (Fig. 3) – daughter of the host who received the divine visit. This head of Silenus is in a private collection, and one that showed “the three heads” is unfortunately lost.³

The exceptional origin of the painting itself, commissioned from one of the most renowned artists of the age, is enhanced by the symbolic richness of its imagery. Bacchus is one of the most complex characters in the Olympic pantheon, but is most often associated with festivities around wine.

He is commonly envisioned as a mad god who roams the world and brings chaos, with a retinue of satyrs, semi-human beings, wild animals like panthers, tigers or lynxes, and the Maenads – the crazed women who venerate him and offer up ecstatic rites. But who really was this deity and what message did this painting project over the head of the dining king?

Who was Bacchus

Dionysus, Liber, Bacchus, but also known as: Bromius, “thunderous”; Lyaeus, “liberator”; Nyseus, “raised by the nymphs of Nysa”; Thyoneus, the son of Semele who was also known as Thyone; Lenaeus, “god of wineries”; Nyctelius, “nocturnal”; or Eleleus or Evius, for the repeated cries of his followers, “eleleu” from the Bacchae or “evhoé” from the Maenads. These and his many other epithets conjure up a god who is both fascinating and complex. Far from submitting to a universal reading, Bacchus is a many-faced deity, as Cicero said (*De Nat Deor.* 3. 58); and his cult among the most ancient. He satisfies, perhaps, a collective need for imagery that personifies ecstasy, energy, and madness (which in particular becomes dominant), as qualities of the intense living feelings the god provokes.

His vitality and appearance were produced along conflicting axes and in different ways, which has served to reinforce his duality. Faced with this “freedom” of interpretation, we can see that traditionally and already in the Homeric hymns, he presents a classic duality between myths of hospitality (*theoxenia*) and rejection (*theomachia*). These conflicting attitudes, of acceptance or rejection when faced with the arrival of the deity and his cult, coexist in the very nature of the god.⁴

The full canvas from which the head of Silenus is taken depicted an example of *theoxenia*, a myth of successful hospitality being extended to the arriving deity. Such myths generally came to be associated with the freedoms that form the necessary basis of social life, as well as festivals and theatre. Indeed, the very origins of Greek tragedy (which Nietzsche in turn discussed as the origin of modern opera) are the dithyramb, an ode sung in praise of Bacchus. Interestingly, the version of the myth of Bacchus’ visit to Icarius that we find in the painting may have been “contaminated” to an extent by readings of Bacchus that relate him to the birth of theatre. For this reason, a great deal of scholarship has interpreted Bacchus’ visit as being to a poet⁵ whereas, as we will see, Icarius was in fact a poor farmer.

Fig. 2 / Jusepe de Ribera, *Head of Bacchus*, Fragment from *The Triumph of Bacchus*, 1635, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



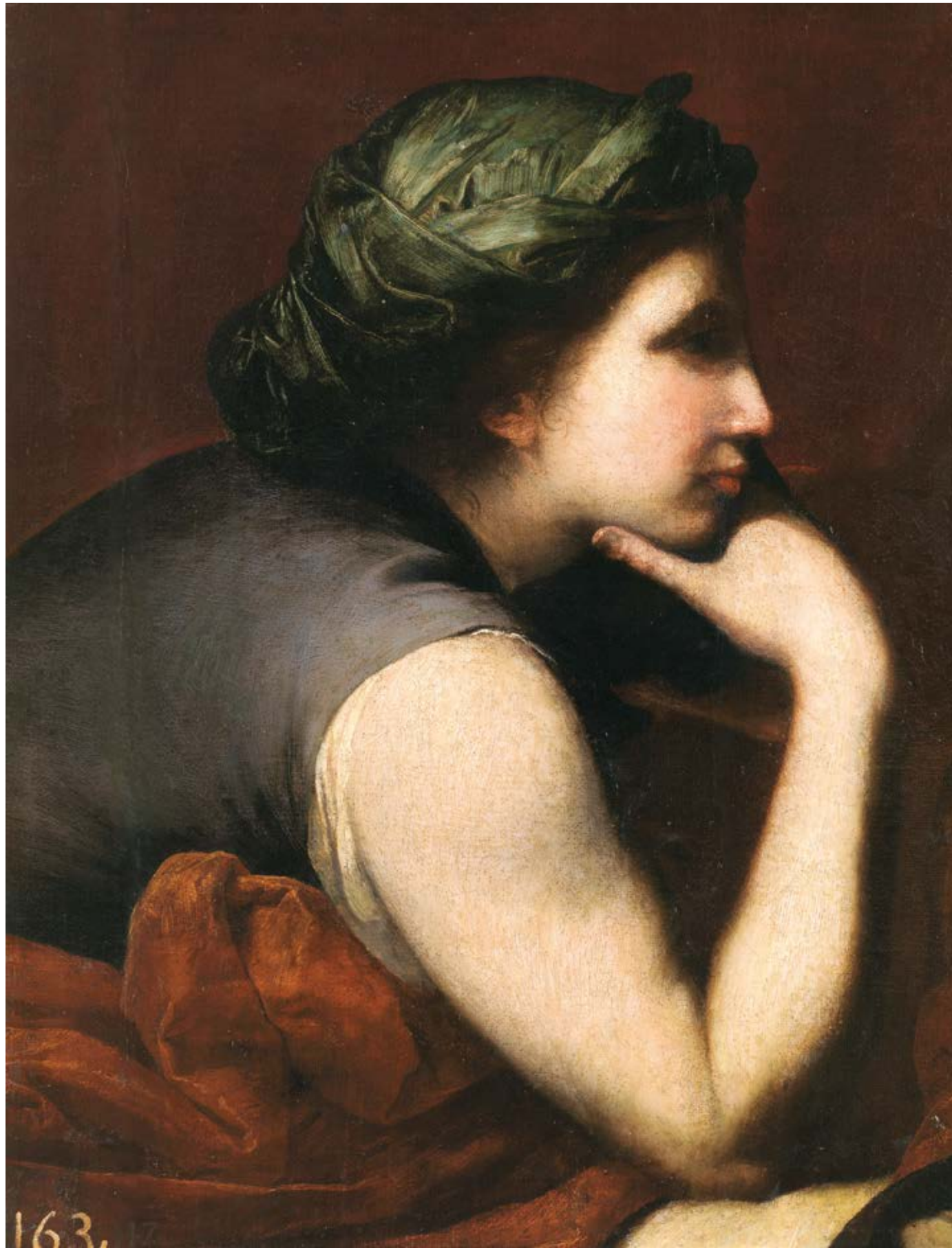


Fig. 3 / Jusepe de Ribera, *Head of Erigon*, Fragment from *The Triumph of Bacchus*, 1635, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

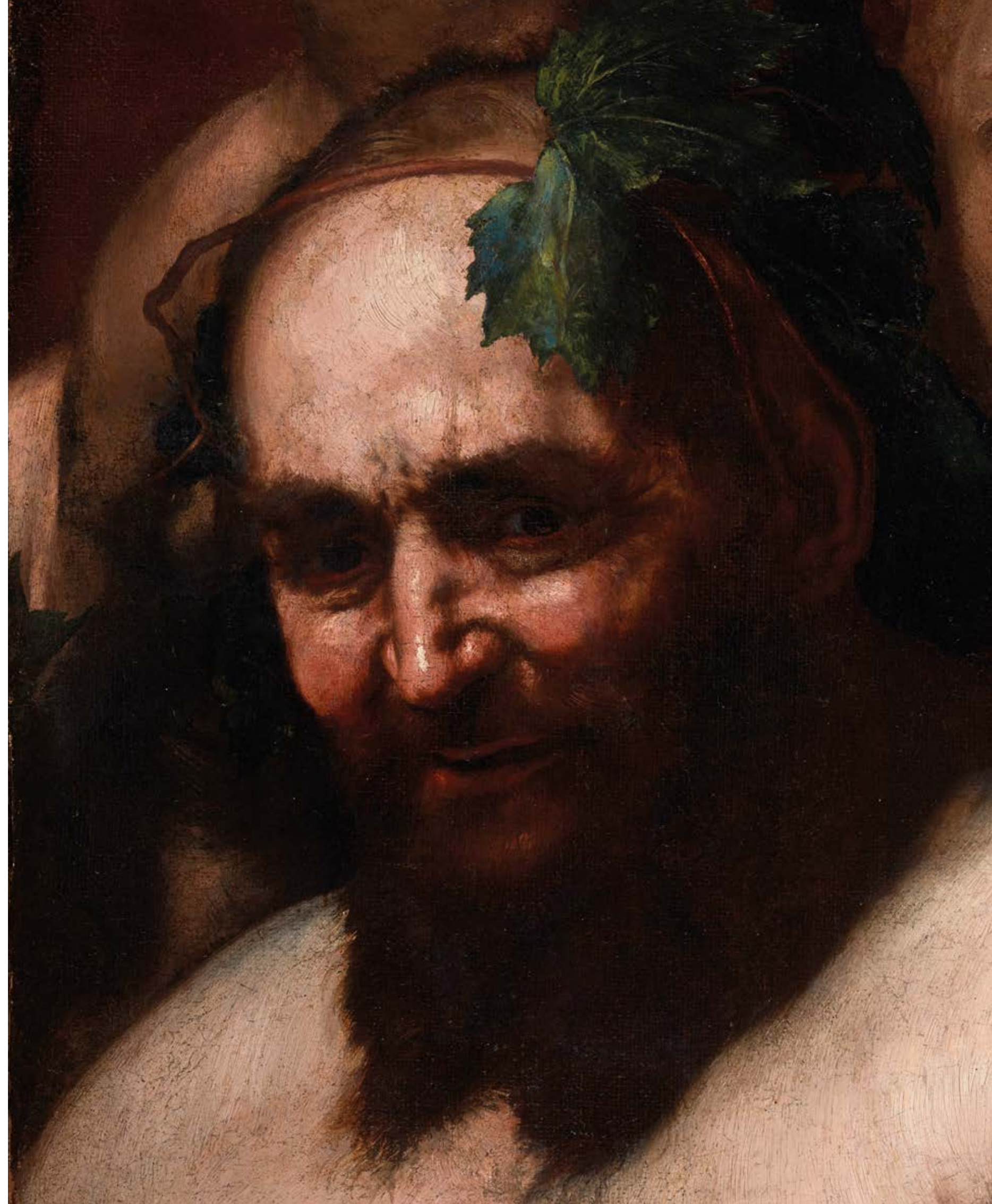




Fig. 4 / Filippo Pallota, *Real Alcázar de Madrid*, 1704.

A divine visit: theoxenia

As has already been mentioned, Ribera's great painting was among those tragically lost in the fire that broke out in the Alcázar of Madrid on Christmas Eve, 1734 (Fig. 4). Nonetheless, it is still possible to study that original composition thanks to a copy that has been preserved in a private collection.⁶

The original painting portrays the scene of Bacchus and his retinue who, on arriving in Attica, are received and entertained by Icarus and his daughter Erigone. The scene was described by, among others, Nonnus of Panopolis in his *Dionysiaca*.⁷ Nonnus writes that Icarus "excelled the other countrymen in planting new sorts of trees" and the arrival of the god is narrated thus: "The old gardener danced on his clownish feet when he saw Dionysos as his visitor, and entertained the lord of noble garden vines at his frugal board".⁸ The story is preceded in the *Dionysiaca* by that of Brongus, who also offered Bacchus a simple meal and milk to drink. However, when Icarus' daughter Erigone goes to mix the goat's milk that the goats have provided, "Bacchos checked her, and handed to the kindly old man skins full of cure-trouble liquor. He took in his right hand and offered Icarus a cup of sweet fragrant wine".⁹ The god addresses him:

"Accept this gift, Sir, which Athens knows not. Sir, I deem you happy, for your fellow-citizens will celebrate you, proclaiming aloud that Icarus has found fame to obscure Celeos and Erigone to outdo Metaneira. I rival Demeter of the olden days, because Deo too brought a gift, the harvest-corn, to another husbandman. Triptolemos discovered corn, you the wine-cheeked grape of my vintage. You alone rival Ganymedes in heaven, you more blessed than Triptolemos was before; for corn does not dissolve the sorrows that eat the heart, but the wine-bearing grape is the healer of human pain."¹⁰

Wine was considered a precious gift that freed humans from their suffering. The grateful old peasant farmer then teaches the other men "how to plant and care for the viny growth of Dionysos".¹¹ However, the other farmers, not understanding the ill effects that drinking wine can produce, "quaffed cup after cup, and made a wild revel over the wine which dazed their wits. Their eyes rolled, their pale cheeks grew red – for they drank their liquor neat". Then, "the company of countrymen driven by murderous infatuation charged upon poor Icarus in maniac fury, as if the wine were mixt with a deceiving drug".¹² Icarus is brutally murdered and his daughter Erigone, on finding out, commits suicide by hanging herself from a tree, watched by their faithful dog Maera. Out of pity for the three of them, Zeus turns them into constellations: Virgo (Erigone), Boötes (Icarus), and Sirius (the dog).

This mythological account must have had an impact on artistic representations of Antiquity, and various Hellenistic bas-reliefs are known that in fact reproduce the composition that Ribera later interpreted (Figs. 6a and b).¹³ One of these reliefs must have belonged to the Duke of Alcalá, who was Viceroy of Naples from 1629-1633, and seems to correspond to one that Ponz cites in the collection of the Duke of Medinaceli in Seville: "a Bacchanal, in which two figures are lying down on a bed, a barefoot priest in long clothes from whom a small faun is removing the sandals; and the other half-hidden between his robes, holds him up; Silenus is visible, and other fauns, and Bacchae with a table covered in glasses and fruits. The entire scene takes place in front



Fig. 5 / *Dionysus sarcophagus*, New York, Metropolitan Museum.



Fig. 6b / *Relief Visit to Icario*, Paris, Louvre Museum.



Fig. 6a / *Relief Visit to Icario*, Paris, Louvre Museum.



Fig. 7 / Antonio Lafreri, *Bacchus visiting the Poet Icarius*, 1549, engraving, London, British Museum.

of two houses. Some authors state this stone came from the Villa Montalto in Rome: it is possible that both are repetitions of the same scene".¹⁴ Some authors have suggested that Ribera would have known the relief which was kept in the viceregal palace of the Duke of Alcalá. This would bring forward the date of the work to around 1629-1630.¹⁵

Whichever is the case, the composition's success was such that it was included by Francisco de Holanda in his drawings of Antiquity. It was also one of the works engraved by Antonio Lafrery (1512-1577), a French printer and engraver based in Rome, and went on to be published in the *Speculum*

Romanae magnificentiae along with other images of the Eternal City (1549).¹⁶

This work was widely circulated among artists of the 17th century, which makes it quite possible that this was the direct inspiration for Ribera, as it is this arrangement that the painting most faithfully reproduces. The engraving, known as "TRICLINARIUM LECTORUM TRIPEDIS MENSÆ ET ACCUMBENTIUM EX MARMOREIS TABULIS GRAPHICA DEFORMATIO. ROMÆ DXLVIII" (Fig. 7) represents the moment when Icarus and his daughter Erigone, reclining on a *triclinium*, receive the god and his followers.

Iconography of Bacchus

We will now take a closer look at the painting from which this portrait was taken. On the left, Icarius and his daughter Erigone appear reclining on a *kline* (*triclinium* in Latin). This is how they receive the visiting deity, Bacchus himself, who leads a procession of his followers. Following the Hellenistic model, Ribera represents him as a fat and bearded old man but this imagery actually diverges significantly from other contemporary representations of Bacchus. His iconography has in fact been one of the most mutable over the ages. The earliest images show him closer to his half-brother, Hermes, as bearded herms adorned with a phallus of fertility. During the classical era he appears as divine child (as by the sculptor, Praxiteles) or as an adult, bare-faced and somewhat feminine in appearance.

His principal attributes are an animal pelt (*nebris* in Greek); at times, it is fox skin or lynx which “is carried over the shoulder” because – according to Ripa, this animal was also dedicated to Bacchus – “given the understanding that wine, if drunk in moderation, can increase valour and even sight; since it is well-known that the lynx has the most far-reaching vision of any animal in existence”.¹⁷ In this guise, Bacchus appears almost like an antique philosopher, dressed in a heavy tunic and wearing a pair of sandals that a satyr is removing.

Furthermore, Bacchus is a god of plants and fertility, and in some ways, his condition allows him to be powerfully identified with the regenerative cycle of vegetation. The plants principally associated with him are vines and ivy. His myth tells that ivy sprang up to protect the infant from the roaring flames that consumed his mother, Semele. This is why crowns of ivy were worn at rites dedicated to the god and the torso of participants also wrapped in ivy. Ribera paints the god wearing one such ivy crown, Icarius too, reserving vine leaves for Silenus. As the other plant associated with Bacchus, the vine also undergoes transformative growth and change, but while vines require light and warmth, ivy achieves its strongest increase in cooler, darker environments.

It might appear strange to us that, in the painting, the god is represented as an old man: in his account, Ripa signals that generally “he is represented as young and with a crown of ivy because this plant, which is also dedicated to him, is evergreen. This is intended to indicate the vigour of the vine, which is owed to Bacchus, since the mentioned liquor never ages one but, on the contrary, the more time one has passed, the stronger one is”. But he also writes: “the branch of ivy indicates that just as this plant takes over its surroundings, so the vine fixes and roots itself in the minds of men”.¹⁸ Once again, there is ambiguity on how the god is interpreted.

Drinking too much wine has, in the Modern Era, come to be identified with a certain recklessness. The representation of an old man could therefore be an allusion to the powerful, inebriating effects of wine. According to Ripa, this would otherwise be represented by a woman who is “old because too much wine makes men weak, ageing them rapidly”.¹⁹

Bacchus is depicted as being held up by a young and semi-nude satyr, while behind him follows his retinue. But Ribera chooses to omit a youth who appears in the engraving behind the god, carrying the thyrsus laced with ivy, and replaces him with a satyr who is playing what appears to be a form of rattle or jingle. This instrument, widely identified with the cult, consists of a wooden hoop that carries five or six pairs of small castanets and is diametrically crossed by two cords of bells.

Just behind the satyr, Silenus appears and assumes in Ribera’s painting a special centrality that is lacking from the bas-relief composition. Unlike the other figures, who appear absorbed and distant to the viewer, Silenus is made complicit with us, as is the young satyr who is pushing Bacchus forward.

Silenus appears as a mature man, bearded, whose body suggest what effect the excesses of wine and food can have. He is semi-nude and barefoot and, as is often the case in the Dionysian procession, he appears to be playing one of the god’s instruments, in this case, a natural sort of trumpet (which in the engraving is an *aulos* with two trumpets).

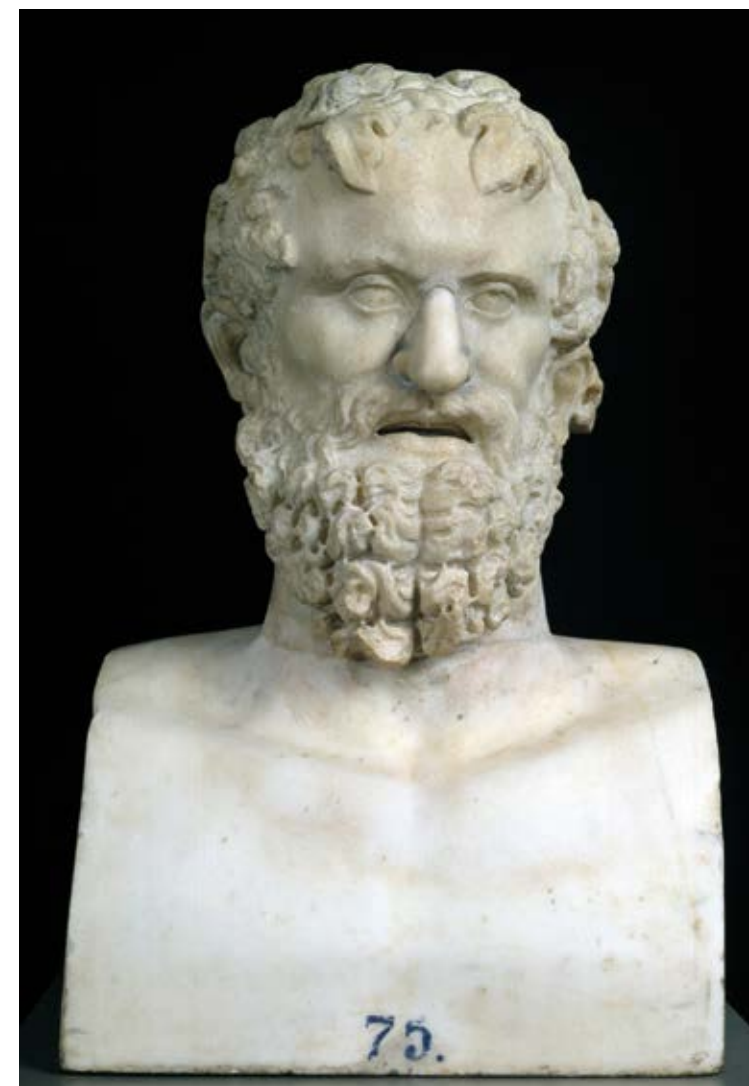


Fig. 8 / Roman workshop, *Silenus*, 170-190, marble, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

Fig. 9 / Jusepe de Ribera, *Drunken Silenus*, 1626, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte.



But who was Silenus? (Fig. 8). In order to better understand him, we must return to the childhood of Bacchus who is known for the persecutions he suffered as an infant. Many stories from his childhood tell how, in some way or another, his father Zeus attempts to keep him safe from the fury of Zeus’ wife, the goddess Hera. In one of these myths, Zeus carries his son him far from Greece, to the country of Nysa (which has been variously situated in Asia by some, by others in Ethiopia or elsewhere in Africa). Zeus entrusts a group of nymphs with raising the child and to prevent Hera from recognising him, Bacchus was transformed into a little goat. The nymphs are later turned into the stars of the constellation Hyades. Silenus was among his tutors.

Silenus has thus been a figure who is portrayed as part of the god’s retinue and associated with the consumption of wine. What is salient to bear in mind is that wine consumption has not always had a negative interpretation: in Antiquity it was strongly regulated. In the *Laws*, Plato

speaks of limiting who can access wine: it is forbidden under 18 years of age, from the age of 30 there can be moderate use, while it is only from the age of 40 that full Dionysian inebriation is allowed (Fig. 9).²⁰ Wine was understood to be a gift from the gods and according to Plato, it is primarily for elders to participate in the mysteries and lyricism of Dionysian drunkenness, as those who are at the same time responsible for governing. It is precisely this relation, between drunkenness, creativity and the responsibility of ruling that could offer an interpretive approach to the Ribera painting.

It is significant that studies of the painting, dating back to Picard, have identified Icarius as a poet and refer specifically to his role as a dramatist and to the relation that can be drawn between Bacchus’ cult and the birth of tragedy. In the painting, three heads – in the Lafrery engraving, four are visible – can be identified with the masks that allude to the affective and animating spirits of tragedy, comedy, drama and satire.

These appear on the table, represented in the lower left side,²¹ and observing how these are missing from the surviving Hellenistic bas-reliefs, yet present in the engraving, we must assume Ribera made use of the latter for his inspiration. As will be done with the representation of Silenus, we can interpret these masks according to realist style in which they have been painted, which shifts these theatrical masks into an image of *decapitated* heads, similar to iconography of Holofernes or John the Baptist. What's more, due to their individuation, could these heads in fact be portraits?²²

It is possible that misreadings of the scene have been undertaken under a confusion with figure of Thespius, the first actor and dramaturge of the VI century BCE. He was born in Icarus and was a devotee of Bacchus. It is also known, from Clement of Alexandria, that Icarus was the husband of Phanotea, the possible originator of the hexameter.

What is clear from describing and interpreting the painting in this way is that Ribera, as well as alluding to the associated significations of wine, also intended to link the deity to the origins of theatre. On this point, it is worth recalling the circumstances in which the work was commissioned. In 1636, Ribera was in Naples, where the viceroyalty was ending of Don Manuel de Acevedo and Zúñiga (1586-1653), 6th conde of Monterrey and great lover of theatre.

History of the painting

The painting foregrounds the duality that is entailed by the consumption of wine. An unambiguously positive reading of the scene is foreclosed: the god Bacchus rewards the hospitality of the poor farmer Icarus with the gift of wine, which in moderation frees us from our pains yet, in excess, can have tragic consequences, leading to recklessness and death. It is my contention that it is precisely this double reading that is behind the commission of the painting, and the location it was subsequently displayed.

When and why was the painting produced? The painting is first included in an inventory of 1666, according to which it was located in the room

where the king ate dinner, placed alongside the marvellous painting of the *Sacrifice to Bacchus* by Massimo Stanzione (Fig. 10).²³ The painting is included in an inventory²⁴ that was compiled following the death of Charles II in 1700, in the same location. The document further notes that in the same room hung paintings of hunting scenes, flowers, fruits, and similar subjects.

It is striking that, within such a relatively similar grouping of subject matter, we find two equestrian portraits: one of the heir Ferdinand on horseback, which was acquired by Phillip IV at an auction of Rubens, and the equestrian portrait of Queen Cristina of Sweden, which Cristina herself presented to the king in 1655.²⁵ Without looking for more complex explanations, perhaps these two paintings were so placed because of their similar measurements which, on the vertical axis, offered a counterpoint to those of the two Bacchus paintings.

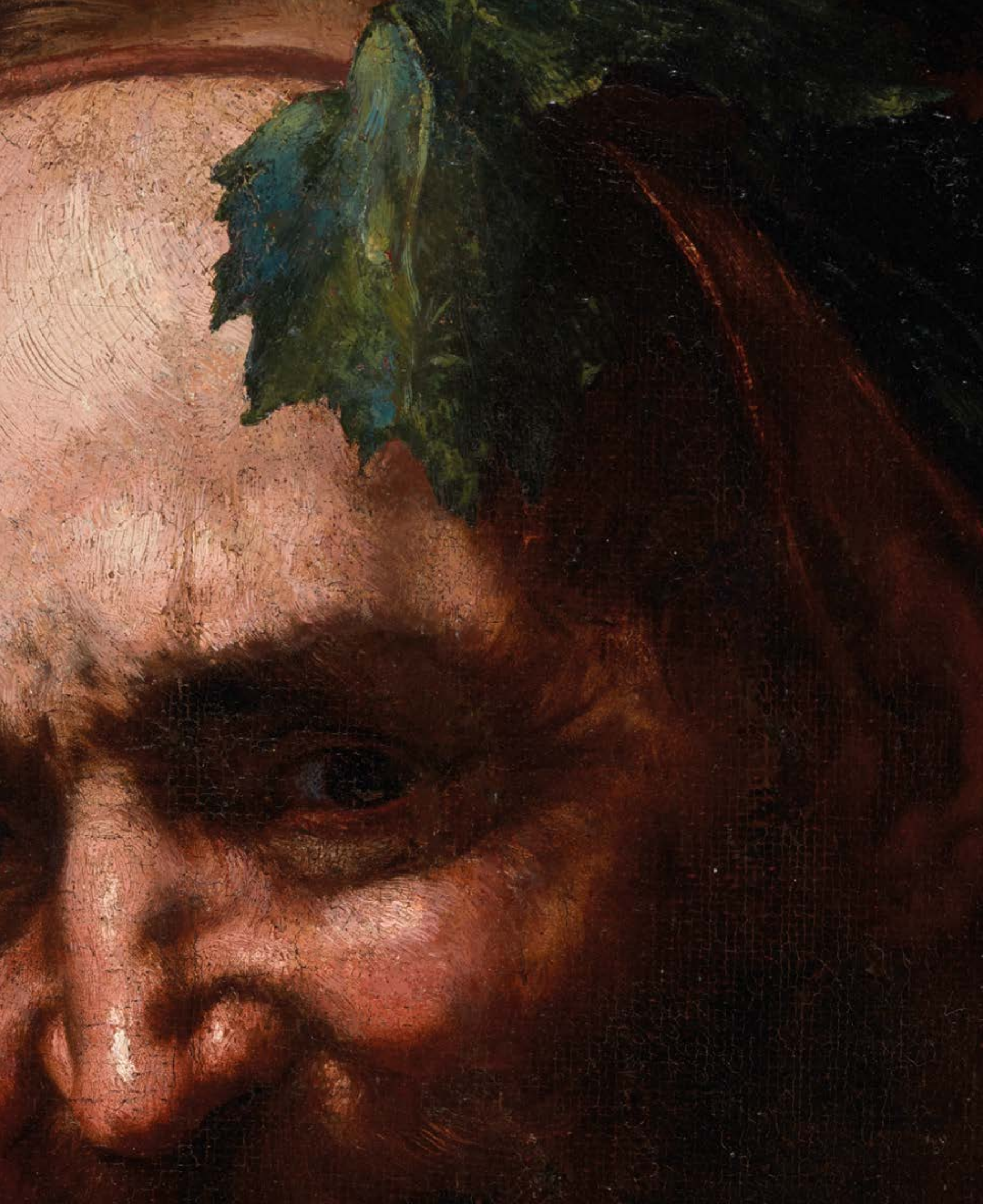
In any case, these two paintings by Neapolitan artists appeared all the more exceptional from this layout. Efforts have been made to identify Stanzione's painting with one that the Neapolitan biographer, Bernardo de Dominici, describes as having been produced for the king as part of a series on the cults of Antiquity, to be placed in the Buen Retiro palace:

“In Ispagna molte opere; ma la più rimarchevole fu il quadro fatto d'ordine di quel re, il quale pose in gara dodici migliori pittori che vivevano allora in varie città d'Europa, ma più in Italia, ordinando un quadro per ciascheduno sui fatti degli antichi romani, Massimo riportò del suo molta laude del re e della sua corte”²⁶

It is worth recalling that, in the 1630s, series of paintings were being commissioned to furnish the new recreational palace of the king. These were commissioned through the king's ambassadors in Rome, the marques of Castel Rodrigo and the Viceroy of Naples, 6th Count of Monterrey. Among the works commissioned were landscapes – from the likes of Claude Lorraine, Dughet, Poussin – as well as works on the history of ancient Rome, Anchorites, etc.²⁷



Fig. 10 / Massimo Stanzione, *Sacrifice to Bacchus*, ca. 1634, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



It has been suggested that the Stanzione painting, together with that of Ribera, would have been commissioned as part of a series of works on the cults of antiquity.²⁸ However, this has not been proved conclusively. For this to have been the case, the painting would have had to have pleased the monarch so much that it ended up being transferred to the Royal Alcazar in Madrid and placed in a position I consider unwarranted: in the lower quarter of the room where the king himself ate.²⁹

The Stanzione painting represents a bacchanal, the moment in which female devotees, the maenads, enter a state of religious ecstasy and offer up rites to the god. Opposite this generally “positive” scene of wine’s effects, the Ribera painting might have been seen to allude to the dangerous effects of drinking too much, as the *theoxenia* scene painted by Ribera ends tragically, with the deaths of Icarius and Erigone. As we have already seen, the unusual representation of Dionysus as an old man would have been identified with the more common representations of drunkenness as a woman who is “aged because the excess of wine makes men weak, ageing them swiftly”.³⁰

The presence of these two painting in the chamber where the king ate dinner no less, could be as much an allusion to the advantages of drinking moderately, as to the problems arising from excess.

In fact, for Ripa, the explanation that Bacchus always appeared naked was due to the belief that “those who drink without measure, once drunk, finish by discovering everything”. In some ways, the excessive consumption of wine was associated with recklessness, in opposition to prudence, which writers like Saavedra Fajardo had praised as the most princely of virtues. Under the influence of excess alcohol and inebriation, one becomes circumspect and loses control over circumstances.

As mentioned, the painting was heavily damaged in the Alcazar fire of 1734 but is fortunately among those recorded as having been saved, in however poor condition.³¹ After this, the only mentions of the painting describe it in fragments. Thus, in 1772, it is listed that in the dog room of the Buen Retiro palace are “two heads, one of Bacchus, the other of a

notable, one with laurel and the other with ivy, fragments possibly taken from a lost painting of a triumph of Bacchus by the Españoletto, of average size and approximately square”. They are also mentioned in the office of the king, “on a frame and white canvas, three heads, pieces of a painting by the Spañoletto of a triumph of Bacchus, which was lost”.³² Subsequently, in the inventory drawn up on the death of Charles III, the head of Silenus is mentioned in the chapel of the Royal Palace.³³ However, in 1818, a note appears that the two paintings are missing from the royal palace of Madrid and in the royal sites of Aranjuez, San Lorenzo, San Ildefonso and their respective palaces.³⁴ It appears that the painting was given to the canon of Seville, Lopez Cepero, in exchange for some works of Pacheco and Zurbarán for the recently created Museo Real de Pintura y Escultura.³⁵

The (re)location of this fine painting allows us to complete, as if it were a puzzle, the canvas which occupied such a prominent position in the royal collections, in the Royal Alcazar of Madrid itself, and offered a moral and edifying political reading for good governance. Perhaps it is not outlandish to also think about the 1629 painting by Velázquez, which similarly had Dionysus as its protagonist. According to the 1636 inventory of the Alcazar, this was placed in the room where the king slept, in the gap beneath the window. Thereafter, successive inventories of the Alcazar register the painting in the *cierzo* gallery.

The unchecked consumption of wine can lead to recklessness, the worst of all vices that a ruler can possess. This superb image of Silenus reminds us of both the virtues and the dangers that come from imbibing the nectar of the gods.

NOTES

1. Nonnus, *Dionysiaca, Volume III: Books 36–48*. Translated by W. H. D. Rouse. Loeb Classical Library 356. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940. 379.
2. “Another painting of the same size [four yards long and two yards and a half in width], in a black frame, a tale of Bacchus, by the hand of Giuseppe de Rivera, valued at 500 silver ducats ... 5500”. *Inventario de las pinturas a la muerte de Felipe IV en el Alcázar de Madrid*. Archivo General de Palacio – hereinafter AGP – sección administrativa, leg. 38, exp. 1. Published by G. Martínez Leiva y A. Rodríguez Rebollo, *El inventario del Alcázar de Madrid de 1666. Felipe IV y su colección artística*, ed. Polifemo, Madrid, 2015, p. 229.
3. Museo Nacional del Prado, *Cabeza del dios Baco (fragmento de El Triunfo de Baco)*, inv. P1122 y Museo Nacional del Prado, *Media figura de mujer (fragmento de El triunfo de Baco)*, inv. P1123.
4. For further information about the god, and a definitive bibliography, see the exceptional study by David Hernández de la Fuente, *El despertar del alma. Dionisio y Ariadna: mito y misterio*, Barcelona, Ariel. 2017. My gratitude to David for the conversations and clarifications of the myth of the meeting between the god and Icarus.
5. C. Picard identifies the god’s host as being a dramatic poet. C. Picard, “Ribera and the Antique” in *Bulletin de l’Institut Français en Espagne*, 1953
6. Mayer revealed the existence of a head of Silenus in the supposed collection of Mr W.F. Cook, in Pittsburgh, but no image was published. A. L. Mayer, “El Bacchanal de Ribera y su origen” en el *Boletín de la Sociedad Española de Excursiones*, XXV, (1927), pp. 159-160. Darby corrected the location of the work, showing that it was actually in the possession of Mr Willis McCook Reid and reproduced the work for the first time. D.F. Darby, “In the train of a Vagrant Silenus” en *Art in America*, XXXI (1943), pp. 140-150. Another copy exists in London, in the collection of John Cooper. A. Pérez Sánchez, *Jusepe Ribera*, exhibition catalogue Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 1992, p. 277. A third one is in a Sevillian collection, reported by Andrés Pérez-Palatín y Santos with the groundless theory that it could be a version of the original. N. Spinosa, *Ribera. La obra completa*, Fundación de Apoyo al Arte Hispánico, Madrid, 2008, p. 401.
7. My thanks to David Hernández de la Fuente for having provided an annotated version of the Nonnus of Panopolis’ *Dionysiaca*. Nono de Panópolis, *Dionisiacas*. Cantos XXXVII-XLVIII. D. Hernández de la Fuente (ed.), Madrid, Gredos, 2008, 47.256ss. [Translator’s note: all English citations have been taken from the 1946 Rouse translation].
8. Nonnus. *Dionysiaca*. 375
9. Nonnus. *Dionysiaca*, 377.
10. Nonnus. *Dionysiaca*, 377.
11. Nonnus. *Dionysiaca*, 379.
12. Nonnus. *Dionysiaca*, 381.
13. Mayer identified the relief as Dionysus’ visit to Icarus. Mayer 1927, p. 159. Gilbert also cites various reliefs, among which those conserved in the Musée du Louvre and in the Naples Museo Arqueológico. C. Gilbert, “Sur une composition retrouvée de Ribera d’après le relief Alexandrin dit “Visite de Dionysos chez Ikarios” en *Revue Archéologique* (1953), pp. 70-81.
14. A. Ponz. *Viaje de España*, vol. V, Madrid, ed. 1947, p. 312. Darby mentions this relief as a gift from Pope Pious V to Perafán de Ribera, uncle of the duke of Alcalá. Darby 1943, p. 146. Citation taken from R. López Torrijos, *La mitología en la pintura española del Siglo de Oro*, Madrid, 1985, p. 347.
15. Trapier considered the work must have dated from under the viceroyalty of the Duke of Alcalá. E. du Gué Trapier, *Ribera*, [Hispanic Society of America], New York, 1952, p. 53.
16. E. Tormo, *Os desenhos das antigualhas que vio Francisco d’Ollanda*, Madrid, 1940, p. 81.
17. C. Ripa, *Iconología*, Akal, Madrid, 3ª ed., 2002, vol. I, p. 177.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 176.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 316.
20. Hernández de la Fuente 2017.
21. Picard, 1953, cited by Pérez Sánchez, 1992, p.276.
22. Some authors, like Darby, interpret the painting as an allegory of the Spanish court in which the king, descended from the god Bacchus himself, is surrounded by a court of satyrs and Bacchae. With this painting, he is satirising the court intrigues, by which the Count-Duke of Olivares brought about the downfall of the Count of Osuna, Viceroy of Naples. Darby 1943, p. 148.
23. “102. A painting four feet long and two and a half feet wide, in a black frame, a triumph of Bacchus, by Sir Magsimo, valued at 500 silver ducats.” Inventory 1666. Martínez Leiva y Rodríguez Rebollo 2015, p. 228. My thanks to Gloria Martínez Leiva for our exchange about the location of the paintings in the royal collections.
24. Will of Charles II (1701-1703). Alcázar of Madrid, room in which his majesty dined: “A painting of the same dimensions as the scene of Bacchus, by Joseph de Rivera in a black frame, valued at two hundred dubloons... 200”. Published by Fernández Bayton. *Testamentaria de Carlos II (1701-1703)*, vol. I, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 1975, p. 40.
25. Rubens, *El cardenal-infante Fernando de Austria, en la batalla de Nördlingen*, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. P001687; Bourdon, *Retrato de la reina Cristina a caballo*, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. P001503.
26. B. De Dominici, *Vite de pittori, scultori, ed architetti napoletani*, Nápoles, 1742 [ed. Arnaldo Forni editore, Bologne, 1979], p.108.
27. A. Úbeda de los Cobos (dir.), *El Palacio del Rey Planeta. Felipe IV y el Buen Retiro*, exhibition catalogue, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 2005, p. 182.
28. Pérez Sánchez 1992, p. 276.
29. G. Finaldi in Úbeda de los Cobos 2005, p. 234.
30. Ripa, p. 316.
31. *Ynventario General de todas las pinturas qu se han libertado del Ynzendio acaezido en el Real Palacio de Madrid, el que se ha executado en virtud de orden del excelentísimo señor marqués de Villena, mayordomo de Su Majestad, su fecha de 28 de Diziembre del año próximo pasado de 1734 ...* AGP, Secc. Administrativa, leg. 768, exp. 13: “[654] Other, of two and a third feet in length and four feet in width, the triumph of Bacchus, in extremely poor condition, a Ribera original”.
32. *Reconocimiento de las Pinturas de S.M. que se hallan colocadas en su Real Palacio de Buen Retiro, que antes fueron dotación del de Madrid, executado de orden del Exmo. Sr. Marqués de Montelegre, Mayordomo Mayor, por el pintor de Camara dn. Andrés de la Calleja con asistencia de las oficinas de Contralor y Grefier Generales, el que feneció en 9 de agosto de 1772*. AGP, Secc. Administrativa, Leg. 38, Exp. 45, s/n, s.f. Martínez Leyva y Rodríguez Rebollo 2015, p. 231.
33. Will of King Charles III (1789-1794). Royal Palace of Madrid, chapel: “Square, average size: head of Silenus crowned with ivy shoots damaged: Yd (Rivera) ... 700”. Published by F. Fernández Miranda, *Testamentaria del rey Carlos III (1789-1794)*, vol. I, Madrid, p. 70.
34. *Nota de los cuadros que han faltado en el Real Palacio de Madrid y en los de los Reales Sitios de Ananjuan, San Lorenzo, San Ildefonso y sus respectivas casas de campo, pertenecientes al Real Patrimonio de S. M.*, Archivo de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, 2-58-15 y AGP, Secc. Reinados, Fernando VII, Cª 387, exp. 6: “one of medium size, in square: head of Silenus crowned with vine shoots: damaged = Yd. (Rivera).
35. Pérez Sánchez 1992, p. 278, n° cat. 64.

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Technical Review

ICONO I&R

José de Ribera (Xàtiva, 1591 – Naples, 1652)

Head of Silenus

(fragment of *The Visit of Bacchus to Icarius*)

Summary of Techniquet

José de Ribera's painting technique – quite contrary to the obvious clarification of his historical and stylistic evolution – has rarely been studied in specialized publications and exhibition catalogues in the last few decades. Analytical studies of the materials he used and of his painting procedures are unquestionably scarce. This shows a notable deficit in this type of knowledge regarding his initial period in Rome between 1606 and 1616, on through the development of his prolific career in Naples and until his death in 1652.¹

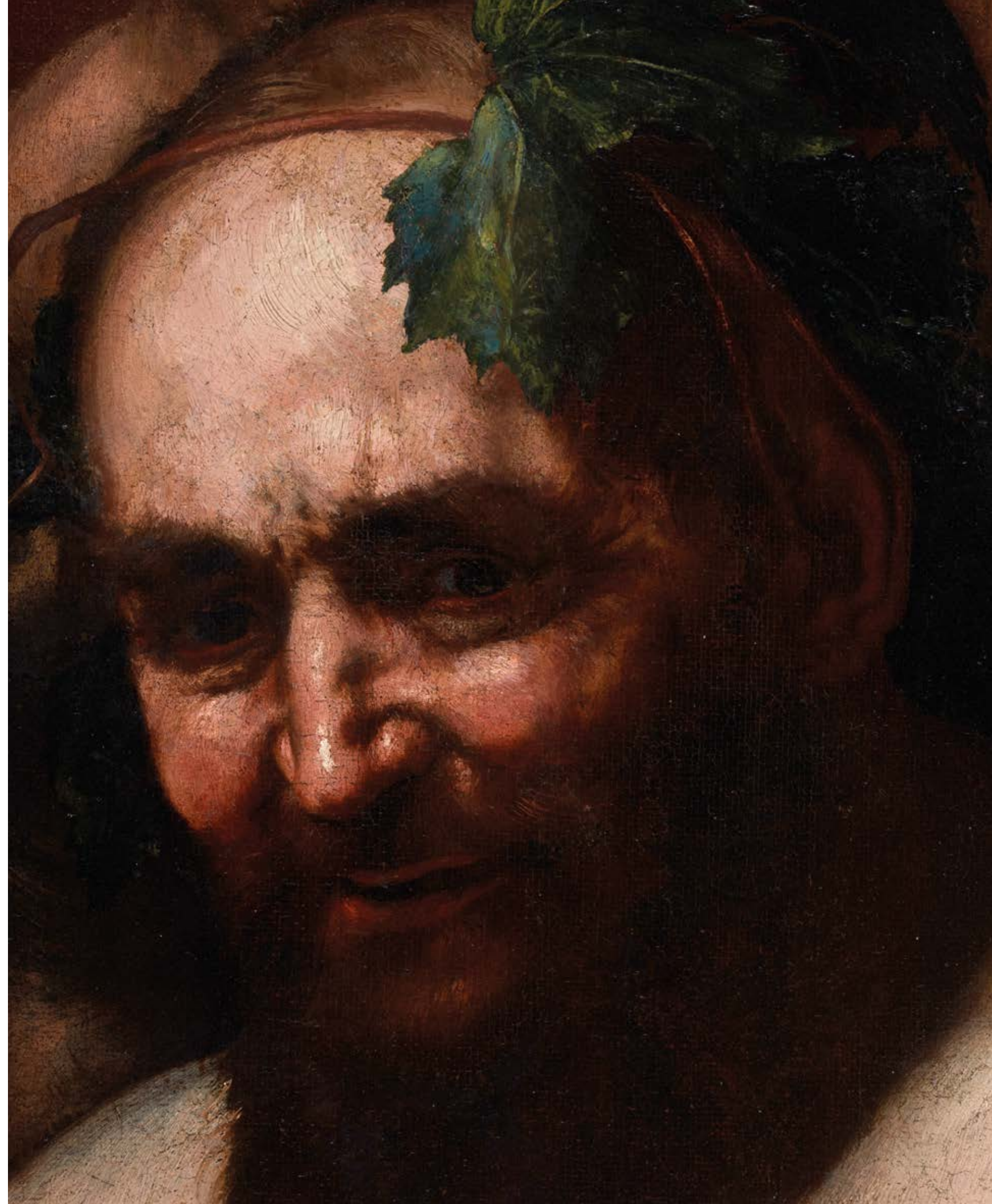
The work upon which we focus is a fragment of a painting known as *Visit of Bacchus to Icarius*, (painted around 1634-1636), a master work in the Valencian painter's oeuvre, as much from the point of view of the initial destination of the work and of the likely commissioner as to the vicissitudes suffered by it over time. Leticia de Frutos' exhaustive study, which precedes this investigation, perfectly illustrates this unique painting and its historical and artistic context.

This is a singular technical study as it is based solely on a part – a Head of Silenus – of the whole painting *Visit of Bacchus to Icarius*. It would be very enlightening to be able to compare the documentation and

information provided by this study with the analysis of the other two fragments preserved in the *Museo Nacional del Prado*.

In this painting Ribera opted for a good quality and medium density canvas with open-weaved fabric, as usual in Naples. He prepared it with a red ochre colored priming bounded with linseed oil.² This ground, apparently applied in one or two coats, was typically used in the Neapolitan painting through all the 17th century. This provides, interestingly, a compositional coloring and granulometry very similar to the preparations used at that time in Seville. This similarity serves to prevent us from making errors of attribution or assignment of a work to a certain geographic area, based only on the characteristics of the grounds.

This priming consists mainly of ochre and red earth, quartz, clays, black charcoal, and traces of gypsum. At first glance the ground color of the work appears to be brown ochre, as occurs in primings from Seville; this layer plays an important role in certain aspects of the work, such as the sketched character seen on the right: Ribera allows the brownish ochre color of the ground to come up in this area by employing a more fluid and transparent brushstroke rich in the binding agent. This was identified as linseed oil as it was in the paint layers.³



Interestingly enough – and not published until this moment – it is important to point out the fact that in some details we have clearly observed underdrawing using infrared photography. It is apparently carried out with black charcoal in a fluid medium. It is clearly observed on the forearm of the fragmented character to the left, in his nose outline and forehead, as well as on the right temple and the tip and nostrils of Silenus' nose (Fig. 1).

In Silenus' figure the construction of the brushwork is solid and the texture is masterfully carried out, from rich *impastos* in the most illuminated areas such as the forehead, cheekbones, chest and shoulders to the more ethereal areas such as the beard, the eyelids or the vine leaf, as observed in the impressive radiographic image of the work (Fig. 2). The painting process is so skillful and confident that the painter normally uses one or two layers of paint to construct the flesh tones. Only on the vine leaf do we observe a more complex structure, accomplishing this element over the flesh tones of the previously painted head.

Ribera's palette in this fragment is primarily based on the use of different colored natural earths, from ochre and red earth as well as browns and umber, these mainly in the darkest areas and always combined with white lead in varying proportions. In the darkest, most shadowy areas of the beard, he also adds a considerable amount of organic brown and traces of azurite, which balances the tone and depth of the dark colors.⁴

In regards to this topic it is interesting to point out that in the lighter and textured areas of the flesh tones, alongside the white lead, we have found considerable quantities of silica and ground quartz. They are most likely added with rich and loose brushwork by the artist to increase the density of the *impasto*, thus increasing the translucency of the painting (Fig. 3).⁵

It is also interesting to make clear the scarce use of vermilion as a usual red pigment in the flesh tones. Ribera opted for red earths of intense color and occasionally red lead. Therefore in some elements such the lips – in which one would expect a more generous addition of vermilion – this only appears in traces, using mainly red earth of high color intensity.⁶



Fig. 1 / Digital infrared image.

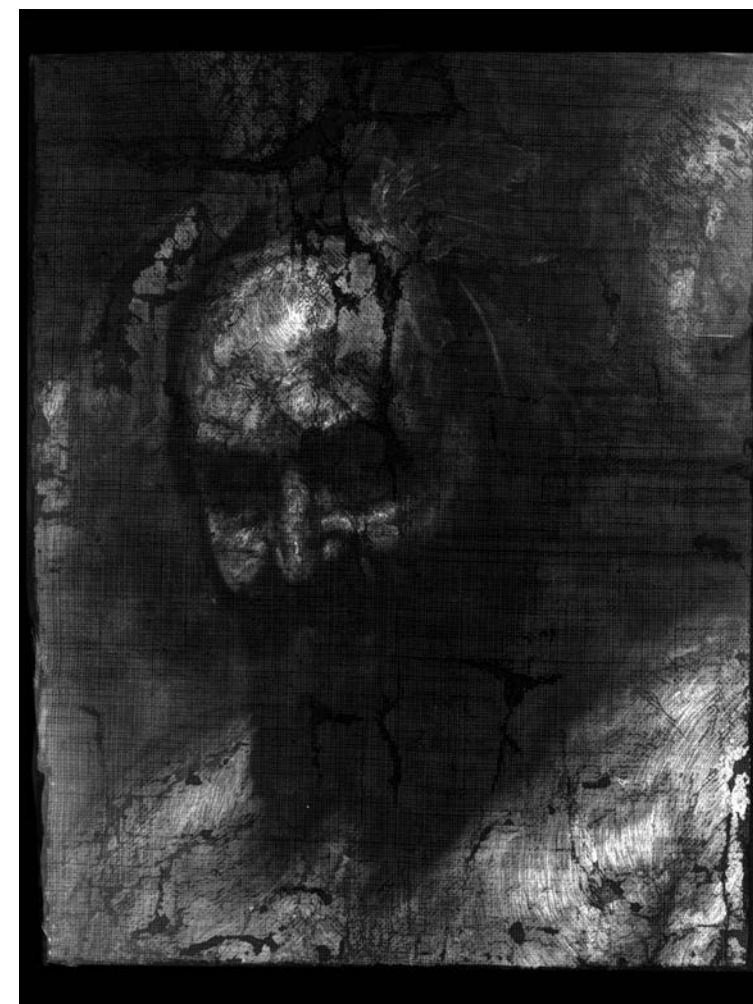


Fig. 2 / General x-image.

As stated before, the artist places the vine leaves wreath upon the previously painted head. This adds a certain complexity to the micro-sample taken of this area. The main green layer is based on a majority use of verdigris and smaller amounts of red earth, bone black and white lead, most likely added for its drying effects within oily mediums.⁷ Observation of the leaf surface reveals that touches of blue have been added in certain spots, which increases the color variation. The microscope revealed a combination of azurite and white lead in order to achieve such nuances (Fig. 3).

The background in this area of the work is meant to correspond to a deep royal purple curtain that can be observed in the existing copies of the work before it was fragmented. Its execution in this area is very cursory and is based mainly on the use of organic red lacquer in a single translucent layer with minor amounts of red earth, carbon black and red lead.⁸

In this fragment one does not observe *pentimenti* or corrections made during the painting process. Ribera works directly and confidently. Only can be noticed a slight change in the position of the right shoulder and trapezium of the figure, which are initially more withdrawn and were made slightly larger as the execution progressed.⁹

In conclusion - and under the light of the technical studies carried out upon the *Head of Silenus* – we can affirm that the resources employed to make this head are shown too in the best works of the artist from Xàtiva who, with masterful skill in his brushstrokes, builds the anatomy of the Silenus. His rendering of the main figure contrasts with the execution of the character to the right in the background, which is carried out in a more cursory manner and with large brushstrokes that allow the ground layer to come through.

Ribera also adds a large amount of bulking agents to the light areas of the flesh tones with the goal of increasing the *impasto*, thus creating the “topography” so dear to him when he depicts the human body.

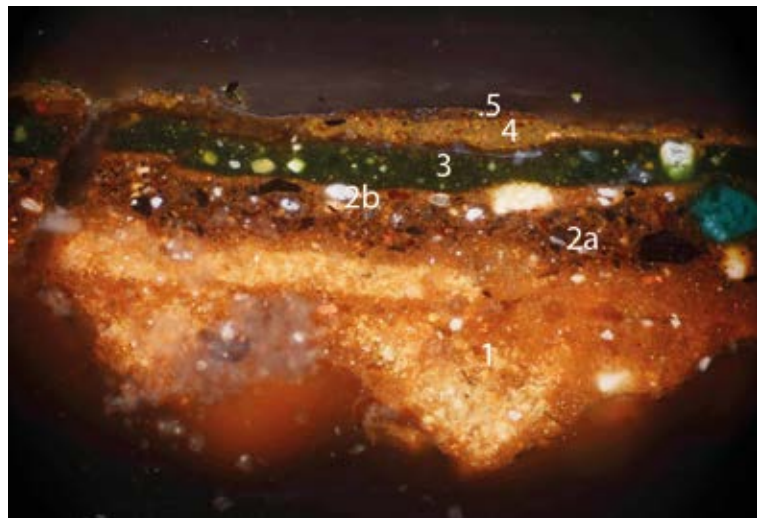


Fig. 3 / Cross-section from the sample taken of the leaf vine on the head. The third layer corresponds to that leaf and is mostly composed of verdigris, lead-tin yellow, white lead and traces of earth.

The dark areas of the face and beard also show a rich methodology, using predominantly brown bitumen of warm translucency and depth, the effect of which is accentuated by adding a deep blue pigment like azurite.

The technical dexterity of this painting, combined with a masterful but simple brushwork, results in a painting of exceptional quality that is clearly in line with its destiny: it should be hung alongside *Triumph of Bacchus* by Massimo Stanzione, two masterworks in the Royal Alcazar of Madrid.

NOTES

1. In Icono I&R in Madrid, we are compiling a large quantity of technical documentation about Ribera's works as well as documentation from his Roman period as a Neapolitan, which will be presented soon in a specialized publication.
2. The type of fiber determined through a microscope was characterized as flax (*Linumustatisimum*); the weave density is 6 x 8 threads cm² (vertical-horizontal). The weave can only be examined with x-ray, as the work was wax-resin relined.
3. The SEM-EDX and EDXRF analyses show a minor presence of other minerals naturally associated with soil such titanium oxides (rutile and/or anatase), pyrite, baryte and dolomite. Determination of the gluing agent in the ground and in the painted layers was carried out with the use of gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS).
4. The presence of organic brown, probably bituminous, is determined in these areas through fluorescent x-ray lighting (EDXRF). Due to the presence of remarkably highlighted calcium peaks at 3.69 and 4.01 KeV, sulfur at 2.31 KeV, and due to the clear presence of potassium at 3.31 KeV, this would indicate that the dye has been precipitated in an inorganic substrate probably alumina. Potassium is a by-product of the color preparation.
5. It is significant to point out that Ribera combines small quantities of black charcoal, red earth and traces of umber for his clear flesh tones. The detection of vermilion is not customary. This combination has already been documented in the artist's works. See Gayo, M.D., Sánchez, A. and Gómez, María J., *Estudio de Materiales*, in Vv.Aa. Ribera. *La Piedad*, Contextos de la colección permanente 14, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid 2003.
6. The marginal presence of vermilion is confirmed by the detection of hints of a mercury peak at 9.99 KeV and of the light highlight of sulphur at 2.31 KeV.
7. The presence of bone black in this detail is clear upon the detection of peaks of phosphorous at 2.02 and 2.14 KeV, as well as a highlighted calcium peak at 3.69 KeV.
8. The red color in this lacquer has also been prepared in a substrate of alumina and gypsum, with potassium as a by-product. Analysis has not been carried out to determine the type of dye used.
9. Ribera tends to follow a pre-established design in his works. It is not common to see large corrections within the painting process. For this topic, see Gabaldón, A. and Antelo, T., *Las radiografías de La Piedad del Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza y el Entierro de Cristo del Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias: análisis comparativo*, in Vv.Aa Op. Cit. 2003, pp. 61-68.



