

Review: Charles Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto*

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The Art Book

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Evermore by Julian Barnes (1997). A brief final section gives a career chronology, list of exhibitions, bibliography and index.

It is ironic that an artist so sceptical of printmaking's ability as a medium to carry serious emotional weight should help to revitalise it. He tells Heenk: 'Prints are less demanding than paintings, but they don't deliver quite so much'. In bending the medium to his will, or maybe figuring out a way around it, Hodgkin sets aside the niceties of craft and says what he has to say. That's what good artists do.

STEPHEN MAINE
Writer and artist, New York

INVENTING THE RENAISSANCE PUTTO

CHARLES DEMPSEY

University of N. Carolina Press 2001 £42.00
277 pp. 8 col/112 mono illus
ISBN 0-8078-2616-2

Charles Dempsey's exhaustive analysis of the putto, in the Renaissance and other periods, is an important book. Perhaps it is important because up until now there has been no study devoted wholly to this idea, an omission admirably rectified by the author.

To most people the word 'putto' will immediately conjure up cherubs flying gracefully through the air in the art of baroque painters such as Rubens, or chubby infants staying the hands of murderous sorceresses about to slay sleeping knights in Poussin. As Dempsey shows by using an impressive apparatus of erudition, however, the idea of the 'putto' is much more complex than this. This is explained in the introduction, where the reader is told of the view of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who was the first to claim that winged children in ancient art were not representations of 'Amore', the god of love, but many types of genius. One of these types appears in the art of the early Renaissance, the type known as the *spiritello*, seen depicted dancing on tomb sculpture. Examples of *spiritelli* can be seen in Donatello's *Cavalcanti Altar*, which shows the Annunciation taking place in the lower register with putti balanced precariously on the top. As Dempsey reminds us, within the context of the Annunciation story, the *spiritelli* represent the emotions that overwhelm Mary when

the angel Gabriel appears to her, a catalogue of feelings that Baxandall enumerated in his book, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy*.

Such strong emotions of fear and excitement are spoken of by Dante in his poetical treatise, *La Vita Nuova*, (c 1293) but Dempsey also sees a different kind of idea emerging here. Apart from intense emotion, the *spiritelli d'Amore* stand for the idle fancies or daydreams that can seize the poet and divert him from his romantic course. As Dempsey shows, a sudden impulse to study philosophy rather than to court Beatrice can be traced back to Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (c 520 AD) because in this medieval dialogue, Lady Philosophy speaks of a sudden upheaval in the mind of Boethius which causes him to lose his calm. Dempsey connects such idle fancies that distract with the iconography of fifteenth-century illuminated manuscripts which feature mischievous putti playing with objects in the decorative margins. The author convincingly shows that these represent the distractions that can interrupt the scholar's labours, especially the type of putto that plays with a Silenus mask. This is an important motif that derives from Roman sarcophagi, but which became an object of fascination for artists working in Rome in the high Renaissance and seventeenth century. Amongst the artists who used this as an erudite reference to Virgil's *Georgics* can be numbered Poussin, who was probably under the influence of humanist intellectuals around him. Thanks to the innovative work of Anthony Colantuano, in his unpublished dissertation on the young infant in Poussin, we are now more familiar with the iconography of the seicento putto, but Dempsey takes this further, reading the motif of putti scaring with masks as symbols of the notion of panic terrors.

These terrors are also represented by the infant *satyrisci* that denote *larve* or the distractions personified by the masked infants previously mentioned. One of these appears in Botticelli's canonical *Venus and Mars*, which has a *satyriscus*, a cross between a putto and a satyr, playing with Mars' helmet. This motif has often been taken to refer to a description by the Roman poet Lucian of a painting by the classical artist Aetion; this showed the marriage of Alexander and Roxana, in which *erotes* played in the armour of the warrior's

helmet. As the author explains, Lucian used the word *phobéo*, which in addition to meaning 'terrify', could just as well be rendered as 'put into a panic terror', which is one of the ideas that the *satyriscus* blowing a conch shell is meant to suggest in Botticelli's work. It is almost certainly the case that Politian, a formidable humanist scholar at the Medici court, conceived the idea of the *satyriscus* blowing the conch-shell trumpet, since his *Miscellanea* of 1489 proves conclusively that he knew the meaning of the word *panikós*, which can be associated with the irrational fears sent by the god Pan, who is iconographically related to the conch-shell motif.

It should also be remembered that the humanism of Politian occurred at a time when Europe was intensely fascinated by the phenomenon of witchcraft, especially the dreams and visions associated with witches. The most famous example of such a dream within the aristocratic culture of Medici Florence was actually written by Politian himself: the *Stanze per la Giostra di Giuliano de' Medici*, probably composed between 1475–8. In this poem, Giuliano's *inamorata*, the beautiful Simonetta Vespucci, appears in the allegorical guise of the goddess of Chastity, Pallas, who proceeds to tie Cupid to a tree. This poetic dream was based upon a historic event, a joust in which Giuliano made his entrance into the arena bearing a standard painted by Botticelli upon which was depicted a figure of Cupid. More darkly, given the coming events of the Pazzi Conspiracy in 1478, when Giuliano was assassinated, the figure of Pallas/Simonetta can be also read as a personification of Fortune who thwarts the young Medici's hopes of a long and fruitful life.

The imagery and costume present in Politian's *Giostra* show parallels with the kind of art and fashion on show at the Florentine masquerades or *mascherata*; this pageantry expressed the optimism of Medicean Florence before the tragedy of the Pazzi Conspiracy. The climate changed to a more authoritarian one after that event, however, and this pessimism pervaded the subsequent art that the Medici commissioned. Such gloominess is noticeably present in Michelangelo's Medici Chapel in San Lorenzo, Florence, where the iconography of masks or *larve* symbolise the deep tragic foreboding of the Medici. Dempsey's next step is to link the *larve* surrounding Michelangelo's statue of Night with the shades of nightmares or *ombre* represented by the

conch-blowing satyriscus in Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*. This menacing theme is echoed in the decoration of the architecture which features hundreds of laughing masks, the *larve* that encircle the more famous reclining marble statues of *Night, Day, Dawn and Dusk*. These *larve* may symbolise the nightmares of Night herself, but Dempsey, reading an annotation on one of Michelangelo's architectural studies in an original way, goes on to develop his final hypothesis. The verse on one of Michelangelo's sheets refers to the nights and days of Duke Giuliano, and the mocking *larve* are the thwarted hopes of mortal ambition which torment Night and Day, now powerless to help the Medici achieve their aims of glory and fame.

Inventing the Renaissance Putto is a remarkable achievement, not only for its originality and meticulous research but also for its interdisciplinary approach; it skilfully manages to combine searching analyses of humanistic texts with the traditional iconographical decoding of pictures. It is also undertaken in a spirit of intellectual generosity, with Dempsey acknowledging and enhancing the ideas

of many scholars, ranging from specialists on Botticelli through to Poussin along the way. This is inspiring art history, original, exciting and clearly written, and it will ensure that artists such as Donatello, Botticelli and Michelangelo are seen in a new light.

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ORIGINS OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

ESSAYS BY Y PETROVA ET AL.

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ABSTRACTION IN RUSSIA XX (2 vols)

ESSAYS BY Y PETROVA ET AL. (VOL 1);
A. BOROVSKY ET AL. (VOL 2)

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Petersburg are published. They are luxury editions, largely of the museum's collection, and over a dozen volumes have been published on the early twentieth-century avant-garde, since the mid-1990s. Works belonging to this collection had been in the museum's reserves since Stalin's 1932 decree that art should be an instrument of the political state; only since the 1990s have these works reappeared and been displayed – in important exhibitions with much pomp and circumstance as the Russian Museum reclaims the place of twentieth-century Russian artists. There are also newly acquired works by contemporary Russian artists, dating from the 1940s, but as abstract painting was actually illegal until the change of regime, the bulk of the collection dates from the last 15–20 years. It is wonderful that in 2003 Antique Collectors' Club became the distributor for these publications, because they provide access to the museum's collections in publications that give the utmost attention to high quality reproduction of works, as well as to recent scholarship.

Origins of the Russian Avant-Garde was jointly organised by the State Russian Museum and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, opening there in February 2003 and closing at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco in September. This exhibition focused on the Russian Fauves such as Mashkov, Konchalovsky, Lentulov, Shkolnik, David Burliuk and Malevich, and the Neo-Primitivists such as Natalia Goncharova, Larionov, Tatlin; Petrov-Vodkin, Filonov and David Shterenberg were also included. The paintings of these artists are complemented by examples of Russian folk arts such as signboards, painted trays, toys, carved furniture, lacquered bowls and embroidered costumes, to show how the painters drew from these peasant arts. There are also icons juxtaposed to paintings by Burliuk, Malevich, Petrov-Vodkin and Goncharova, while examples of the popular print, the *lubok*, are seen together with works by Kandinsky. The indigenous folk arts were still alive around 1910, even if the origins were in a distant past, and in their use of flat space and vibrant colour and pattern, combined with the new conventions found in the painting of Gauguin and Matisse, and in Picasso's bold African sculpture-inspired canvases, powerful and innovative works were generated that are entirely modern and entirely Russian.

Vladimir Tatlin, *The Sailor*, 1911. Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

Palace Editions is the imprint under which the exhibition catalogues of the State Russian Museum in St



Drawing inventively on a rich body of scholarship, "Inventing the Renaissance Putto" by Charles Dempsey uses these findings as a point of departure for a fresh and remarkable study. ("TLS"). Synopsis. The putto (often portrayed as a mischievous baby) appears frequently in the art and literature of Renaissance Italy. The "spiritelli" embody a minor species of demon, neither good nor bad. This book discusses the manifestations of the putto-spiritello in 15th-century art and literature. It offers parallel interpretations of two works: Botticelli's "Mars and Venus", a painting in which infant Satyr The putto in Renaissance art was a winged or wingless, male child figure. The word putto (plural putti) in Italian vernacular was derived from Latin putus, meaning "boy." Putti were secular, sometimes profane and definitely not part of the nine choirs of angels. However, in the Baroque period of art, the putto was often used in a religious context and the distinction between being secular and ecclesiastic became less defined. Beginning of the Putto- Greek, Roman.Â Sources: Dempsey, Charles. Inventing the Renaissance Putto. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 2001. Duston, Allen and Nesselrath, Arnold. Most Renaissance putti are essentially decorative and they ornament both religious and secular works, without usually taking any actual part in the events depicted in narrative paintings. There are two popular forms of the putto as the main subject of a work of art in 16th-century Italian Renaissance art: the sleeping putto and the standing putto with an animal or other object.[6]. Where putti are found[edit].Â One useful scholarly examination is Charles Dempsey's Inventing the Renaissance Putto.[2]. Gallery[edit]. Renaissance putto on the ceiling of Stirling Castle (Stirling, Scotland). Design for a frieze with a putto and an acanthus scroll; probably from the 17th century; pen and brown ink with gray and light brown wash; the sheet: 21 Å— 32.5 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City).