

## “BACCHUS, VENUS AND CUPID”

ROSSO FIORENTINO

22 JANUARY – 18 MAY 2015

**VIEWED FROM THE OUTSIDE**, the Francis I Gallery has nothing particularly special to distinguish it. Situated on the top floor of a sober architectural body which links two sections of the enormous royal residence of Fontainebleau, the gallery which the devoutly Christian king of France created following military defeat in Pavia and his humiliating captivity in Madrid (1525-1526) appears to exist for a simply functional, practical reason. Inside (figure 1), however, the fantastic and totalising decoration through frescoes, stucco and panels with an inexhaustible variety of motifs and themes, transform it into an artistic ensemble unique in Europe at that time. When decoration work was completed in 1539, the gallery effectively connected the king's renovated quarters on the east side to the former Trinity Chapel opposite. However, thanks to the Italian painters hired to direct this venture (Rosso, the Florentine, and Primaticcio, the Bolognese) it was much more than that. Through the representation of certain myths, symbols and complex allegories, it constituted a fabulous manifestation of reaffirmation of the privileges of regal power (after recent disasters) and a sumptuous rhetorical discourse of strengthening the institutional reality of the French monarchy that Francis I embodied. Hence it became the Prince's *studiolo* and a chamber of courtly protocol where the king himself led his most illustrious guests to visit (the first being Charles V in December 1539).

Full decoding of the inextricable iconological arrangement of the gallery seems, even today, to resist the most erudite interpretations. It contains an internal unity, an organic significance of the relationship between the various mythological stories and allegorical figurations that it narrates and represents (and of the respective moralising sentiments), but what still stands out is an apparent and considerable fragmentation and a process of indirect allusions which constitute a kind of Mannerist “whim” and type of “hieroglyphic” puzzle centred on the king's erudite (and Neo-Platonic) personality. In any event, the arrangement appears to be based on a dual structure in keeping with the division formerly marked by the existence of a bust of Francis I in the centre of the gallery. In the east wing, six frescoes depict mythological episodes alluding to earthly and carnal love, the domains of “Earthly Venus” (figure 2). Opposite, in the western wing of the gallery to the right of royal bust, are an equal number of frescoes showing the virtues of good government, the pacification of the kingdom, and the elevation to spiritual love, alluding to the realms of “Celestial Venus”. At the ends of the gallery there were two canvases that shared this duality and completed the aforementioned “moralising” confrontation. The painting on the eastern side, above the door which opened onto the start of the visitor's route, was precisely that of *Bacchus, Venus and Cupid* by Rosso, currently at the MNAA as a guest artwork. The painting was removed from its original location in 1701 as a result of one of the successive changes of parts of the gallery's decoration. However, a German traveller (Gölnitz, 1631) points out this location



### *Bacchus, Venus and Cupid*

Rosso Fiorentino (1494-1541)

ca. 1535-1539

Oil on canvas

205 × 162 cm

Luxembourg, Musée National d'Histoire et d'Art,

1941-100/412

in his traveller's account – *ad introitum Bacchus, Venus et prostant Cupid* – and well before that, we have a precise description of the work by Giorgio Vasari, in the chapter on *Vite* (ed. 1558) dedicated to the biography of the Florentine painter:

*“Nelle due testate di questa galleria sono due tavole a olio di sua mano disegnate e dipinte di tanta perfezione, che di pittura si può vedere poco meglio: nell'una delle quali è un Bacco ed una Venere, fatti con arte maravigliosa e con giudizio. È il Bacco un giovinetto nudo, tanto tenero, delicato e dolce, che par di carne veramente e palpabile, e piuttosto vivo che dipinto; ed intorno a esse sono alcuni vasi, finti d'oro, d'argento, di cristallo e di diverse pietre finissime, tanto stravaganti e con tante bizzarrie attorno, che resta pieno di stupore chiunque vede quest'opera con tante invenzioni. Vi è anco, fra l'altre cose, un satiro*



*che lieva una parte d'un padiglione; la testa del quale è di maravigliosa belezza in quella sua strana cera caprina, e massimamente che par che rida e tutto sia festoso in veder così bel giovanetto. Evvi anco un putto a cavallo sopra un orso bellissimo, e molti altri graziosi e belli ornamenti attorno. Nell' altro è un Cupido e Venere, con altre belle figure”<sup>1</sup>.*

Vasari was never in Fontainebleau but had a privileged informant, Primaticcio, who must have been particularly impressed by the sensualist eloquence of the painting. Thus the description is quite accurate, failing only in reference to Cupid's "mount", not a bear but a lion. This was, in fact, an explicitly allegorical mention of the king himself (in his manuscript, Francis I compared his mother, Louise of Savoy, to a lioness who gave birth to a great lion). The figures of Bacchus, Venus and Satyr, modelled with subtle sense of volumes, owe much not only to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel (which Rosso admired) but also to the sculpture of antiquity, still very scarce in Fontainebleau at that time but with which the painter had widely come into contact with in Rome. His engraved work from the Roman period, in the middle years of the 1520-30 decade, already reflects this particular rejection of the sophisticated and sensual representation of the human body, quite divergent from the somewhat hard and austere manner he employed with some of his religious compositions. His style in Fontainebleau is established as an absolute paradigm of courtly Mannerist painting.

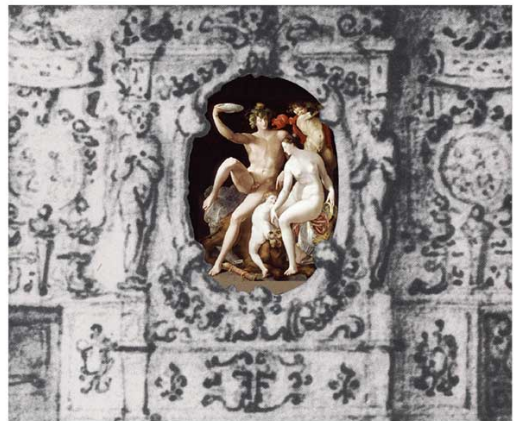
The original format of the work was not the current. The canvas was cut, especially in the upper and lower areas, and its former shape was elliptical. The composition itself suggests this format with the shape and positioning of the urn in the lower right corner, the curved arc of Bacchus' right arm and the movement of Satyr's torso. From the detail of a drawing by François d'Orbay (1682), which shows the elevation of the eastern end of the gallery in section, Sylvie Beguin reconstituted the aspect of the original placement of the painting (figure 3). It was considered a missing link in the reconstitution of the gallery layout. After being dismantled, the painting only reappeared in 1853 at the auction of Van Parys' collection (Bern) but without its connection to Fontainebleau being identified. It later passed into the possession of Edouard Peterken and, through a donation, to the Musée d'État du Grand-Duché collection in (or shortly after) 1877. The full identification of the work with Vasari's description and its former ownership by the Fontainebleau gallery only occurred in an exhibition promoted by the museum in 1989.



Francis I Gallery in Fontainebleau (figure 1)



Rosso, *Venus Frustrated or The Palas Bathroom*, Francis I Gallery (figure 2)



Photomontage of Rosso's painting at the end of the Francis I Gallery (figure 3)

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1 "At the two ends of this gallery are placed two oil paintings, entirely by his hand and in such perfection that it is hard to find better in painting, one of which is Bacchus and Venus made with wonderful and judicious art. Bacchus is a naked boy, so tender, delicate and sweet that he seems to be of real and palpable flesh and more alive than painted; and they are surrounded by some vessels imitating gold, silver, glass and various extremely fine stones, so extravagant and curiously ornate they leave those who see this work of such rich invention amazed. And then there is also, among other things, a satyr who raises part of a tent; the head of which is of wonderful beauty in his goat-like face, and, above all, who appears to laugh, everything becoming festive when admiring this so beautiful a boy. And also there we see a cherub riding a beautiful bear and many other graceful and beautiful ornaments around" (Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de 'più eccellenti architetti, Pittori et Scultori...*, ed. Milanesi [1558], V, p. 168. Our translation)