THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS

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Certain stories, though fashioned long ago, have so caught men’s fancy that they have survived the passage of thousands of years. The Judgment of Paris has recurred as a favorite subject of artists since antiquity. The venerable beauty contest was presented by each successive age in its own terms, often in contemporary costumes and settings. From the Renaissance to the mid-nineteenth century it has given painters a fine excuse for portraying the female nude in the name of highly respectable mythology. Many a spirited artist has taken advantage of the frivolity of the story to indulge in whimsy—Cranach, for instance, in his amusing interpretation—or in biting satire—as Toulouse-Lautrec has done in a bawdy little sketch on a menu.

The individual manner in which different artists made use of the details of the story justifies retelling the old Greek tale. Paris was the son of Priam, king of Troy. His abduction of Helen, the beautiful wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta, was the precipitating cause of the Trojan war, the story of which was first told in Homer’s Iliad. The events that led to the ten-year siege of Troy by the Greek armies, although only too human in character, took place in the lofty realm of the Olympian gods.

Discord, peeved because she had not been invited to the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis, decided to cause some trouble and threw a golden apple marked “for the fairest” in the midst of the assembled guests. The apple was claimed by Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. To settle the ensuing argument, Zeus sent the three goddesses with Hermes to Mount Ida to be judged by Paris, who was there keeping his father’s flocks. Each goddess in turn tried to bribe the young prince to award her the apple: Hera, Zeus’s wife and queen of the gods, offered him the rule of the world; Athena, goddess of war, promised him victory; and Aphrodite, goddess of love, promised him the most beautiful of women, Helen, for a wife. Paris, a highly susceptible young man, gave the apple to Aphrodite. After the judgment, he sailed to Greece in search of his fair prize. He was hospitably received in Sparta by Menelaus, who, soon after, unsuspectingly departed for Crete, leaving his beautiful wife to entertain his guest. During his absence Paris and Helen sailed to Troy.

On a Greek toilet box of the fifth century B.C. the story is handled in a direct manner, merely displaying the main characters with their identifying attributes. Paris, in shepherd garb—short chiton, traveling hat, and club—sits listening to Hermes, easily recognized by his winged shoes and caduceus. Behind Hermes stand the three elegant goddesses: Athena...
The Judgment of Paris, from a painted ceiling in the Palazzo Chiaramonte, Palermo. 1377-1380

Discord showing the golden apple to the three goddesses at the marriage feast of Peleus and Thetis. From a manuscript by Jean Miélot, French, xv century. Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels

is armed with spear, helmet, and aegis, Hera holds her scepter, and Aphrodite, accompanied by her son Eros, holds her veil in a coquettish gesture. The bearded man behind Paris might be his father, King Priam. The placing of the figures in quiet, stately rhythm around the box makes a harmonious and fitting decoration. The subject too was most appropriate for an important item on a Greek lady’s dressing table.

Classical learning was fortunately preserved during the Middle Ages, mostly because of the scholarly activities of the monasteries, whose monks–more or less faithfully–copied the extant manuscripts. But the artistic form under which classical conceptions survived was medieval, and it was not until the fifteenth century that classical subject matter and form began to be reintegrated in the broad cultural movement of the Renaissance.

The old Greek stories were preserved from the writings of late classical authors rather than from the original Greek sources. The story of the Trojan war was a very popular theme of the medieval romances, the earliest of which was a twelfth-century poem by Benoît de Sainte-More. The medieval versions differed greatly from the tale told in the *Iliad*. In fact the romancers took a dim view of Homer—witness Benoît’s typically medieval opinion: “Homer, who was a marvelous clerk, very wise and learned, wrote of the great siege and fall of Troy after which it was never again rebuilt. But his books do not tell the truth, as we know without question that he was not born within a hundred years of the time when the great host was assembled. No wonder that he should make mistakes, for he was not there to see any of it.”

The story was changed to fit the courtly life of the Middle Ages—epic heroes were transformed into knights and ladies and their behavior determined by medieval ideas of chivalry and courtly love. The Judgment of Paris was a favorite story in the Trojan Cycle. It was the subject not only of paintings but also of the living tableaux that were shown on platforms along the route of triumphal entries into cities. An account of the entry of Philip the Fair, Duke of Burgundy, into Antwerp in 1494 reads: “The stand at which the people looked with the greatest pleasure was the history of the three goddesses represented nude by living women.” For the entry of Charles the Bold into Paris in 1468, a parody of the scene was set up with a fat Aphrodite, a thin Hera, and a hunchbacked Athena.

The Trojan tales were profusely illustrated in paintings, manuscripts, and tapestries. In the *Aeneid*, which was very popular in the Middle Ages, Virgil said that Aeneas was the ancestor of the Romans, and so it became fashionable for most of the ruling houses of Europe to trace their descent from a Trojan expatriate. For this reason the stories of “Troy the Great” were always slanted to favor the Trojans and to discredit the Greeks.

On a painted ceiling in the Palazzo Chiaramonte in Palermo there is a fourteenth-century version of the Judgment of Paris. The Trojan prince is shown as a knight in armor about to award the apple to Aphrodite, who is no doubt influencing his decision by disrobing. All three goddesses have wings to indicate—according to Christian concepts—their divinity. Part of the wedding feast can be seen at the left. In an amusing illustration from a fifteenth-century French manuscript by Jean Miélot of Christine de Pisan’s *Épitre d’Othéa, Déesse de la Prudence, à Hector, Chef des Troyens*, the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis is shown in late medieval dress and setting. Discord, the uninvited guest, is offering the apple to the three goddesses. All the ladies wear flowing dresses and elaborate hennins, and Peleus, seated apart with his bride, wears a brocaded coat and high cap. The feast, somewhat sparing, is served by two young men in doublets and tight breeches and wearing pointed slippers. The manuscript, commissioned by Philip the Good of Burgundy, also has an illustration of the Judgment of Paris in which the goddesses appear as three great ladies of the ducal court.

The revival of interest in classical art and literature which accompanied the Italian Renaissance accounts for the profusion of mythological subject matter in fifteenth-century art.
A Florentine cassone panel presents the story of Paris in a series of episodes. In the judgment scene, illustrated at the far left, the renaissance youth is about to award the truly golden apple to one of the three nude goddesses, who are freely displaying their charms to him. The scene takes place at the seaside in order to lead directly into the next episode, which finds Paris sailing to meet Helen, while in the background Menelaus is conveniently sailing away. In this medieval version of the classical myth Paris found Helen at the temple of Venus on the island of Cythera, where she had gone to see him, having heard that he was one of the handsomest men in the world. As is shown in this painting, they fell in love at first sight. The medieval romancers had changed this part of the story to absolve Paris of his impardonable breach of hospitality in abducting his host’s wife. It was not until the ancient Greek tragedies were published in translations during the first half of the sixteenth century that the original versions of the Greek myths became once more widely known in Europe.

A delightful painting by an unknown Tuscan painter of the fifteenth century shows the judgment in a charmingly naive fashion that
recalls late medieval millefleurs tapestries and painters of the International Style such as Giovanni di Paolo. Again several incidents are illustrated in one painting. At the upper left, the three beauties, seated on the grass, are discussing which of them should receive the golden apple. At the right, a rustic Hermes informs Paris that he must decide which is the fairest. Paris sits guarding a diminutive herd of rams, half of them black and half white. Below, he awards the disputed apple to the central lady, who must therefore be Aphrodite. The goddesses are shown as courtly ladies, resplendent in the rich garments of the period. Two children are seen at the left discussing the events. The painter worked in a conservative style, showing the landscape setting in the quaint descriptive fashion typical of early renaissance painting. The clumps of grass, the rocky ridges, the small trees, and the fountain are drawn in imperfect perspective and scale and in the conventional manner of late medieval painting. However, the modeling of forms seen in the figures of Paris and Hermes point to the direction in which painting was progressing.

The Renaissance, which began in Italy in the fourteenth century, came two centuries later to the countries north of the Alps. Therefore it is not surprising to find a strongly medieval flavor in a painting by Lucas Cranach, one of the most cheerful and appealing of German painters. The Judgment of Paris was a favorite subject which he painted many times. Cranach shows Paris as a contemporary German knight stretched out under a tree, having apparently been awakened by the appearance of Hermes and the three goddesses. A medieval version of the story had the goddesses appear to Paris in a dream. This is a familiar pattern in tales of courtly love, in which knights errant frequently fell asleep under a tree and entertained delightful visions.

Hermes, whose staff and helmet are fancifully feathered, holds the apple, here transformed into a crystal ball—probably to give the artist an opportunity to show off his technical dexterity in painting an effect of transparency. The goddesses are coy, winsome young girls. Aphrodite is distinguished from the others by her handsome hat garnished with two large ostrich plumes; she points to a mischievous Eros, who is aiming one of his arrows at her. Cranach developed elegantly mannered proportions and poses for the female nudes he so loved to paint. The composition of the
group recalls that of the classical trio, the Three Graces. The painter's choice of subject was a happy one, as it gave him the opportunity to combine two favorite themes, charming ladies and landscape, in a painting which bubbles with good humor.

During the Italian High Renaissance, the Judgment of Paris was the subject of an elaborate project by Raphael. Although the original no longer exists the design has survived through an engraving made in 1510 or 1511 by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael's drawing. This engraving enjoyed immediate popularity; it is interesting to see how the design was faithfully adapted to a circular space in a sixteenth-century majolica plate.

Marcantonio's judgment scene takes place at the left with the usual cast of characters. All the figures are nude with the exception of Nike, who flies in to crown Aphrodite, and Zeus, who, borne by the wind, sits watching the event he has brought to pass. During the Renaissance artists had become serious students of antiquity and loved to display their knowledge in a wealth of classical allusions. This is shown, for instance, by Paris's Phrygian cap, the classical headdress associated with Asia Minor, where the incident is supposed to have taken place, and by Apollo riding across the sky in his chariot encircled by the zodiac. The group of river gods lounging at the lower right has assumed a curious importance in the history of European painting. The arrangement of figures was adapted by the Venetian painter Giorgione for his Fête Champêtre, and in the nineteenth century the French painter Édouard Manet used it as the basis of his figure composition for the Déjeuner sur l'Herbe. This large painting, first exhibited in the Salon des Refusés of 1863, caused a great sensation among contemporary critics and the public. The painting, long since considered one of

The Judgment of Paris, by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). In the National Gallery, London
Manet's masterpieces, was decried as vulgar and indecent because the nudity of the ladies is more striking in contrast to the contemporary street clothes of the gentlemen. The same scene with a mythological title and without its aura of a suburban picnic would have been readily accepted by the conservative French public.

Among the antique remains which most fascinated men of the Renaissance were ancient coins and gems. They inspired the making of numerous medals, many of which were designed by leading sculptors, usually to commemorate persons or events. The reverse of a sixteenth-century Italian medal shows, according to its Greek inscription, "the biased judgment of Paris."

In the seventeenth century, Rubens, the busiest and most popular painter in Europe, produced a staggering number of paintings with mythological subjects. Although one of the important religious painters of the Counter Reformation, Rubens is best known for his large decorative pictures commissioned for grandiose baroque interiors. An artist who delighted in painting the female nude, he also was attracted by the possibilities of the Judgment of Paris. He painted three versions of the subject, of which that in the National Gallery in London is illustrated. Rubens's second wife, the handsome Helena Fourment, was the model for all three goddesses. The painter's ability to render textures is evident in the contrast of Hera's skin with her deep red, fur-trimmed coat. The landscape, as was frequent in Rubens's large compositions, was painted by Van Uden, one of the artists in his active studio.

The lively and frequently erotic classical
The Judgment of Paris, by Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). The approach to the subject is similar to that of Rubens. Collection of Henry P. McIlhenny, Germantown, Pennsylvania

The Judgment of Paris

myths appealed greatly to the sophisticated and pleasure-seeking society of the eighteenth century in France. They were illustrated on the myriad objects of decorative art produced at this time as well as in painting and sculpture. There are, for example, in the Museum's collections, ladies' fans, enameled pocket watches, clocks, and an embroidered coat, all decorated with the Judgment of Paris. The two leading painters of this period, Watteau and Boucher, each made use of the story. In Watteau's oil sketch the characters are grouped around the central nude figure of Aphrodite. Watteau's sensitive brush stroke and the delicate, dreamlike quality of his style are very apparent in this painting. Boucher has treated the subject in a less subtle and ethereal way. His spiraling composition directs the eye from one goddess to the next. He has concentrated on revealing the solid bodily charms of the divine contestants. Hera reclines on a cloud in a pose typical of Boucher's nudes, Athena turns away from the scene, and Aphrodite languidly reaches for the fatal apple. This painting is one of a set of four mythological panels now in the Wallace Collection and originally painted by Boucher for the Marquise de Pompadour's boudoir in the Hôtel d'Évreux in Paris. Boucher had found an active and appreciative patroness in the powerful marquise, mistress of the king and leader of taste and fashion during the reign of Louis XV.

The most traditional of the French Impressionists, Renoir indulged his love of color and
rich textures without abandoning interest in form. In this respect he was heir to the traditions of eighteenth-century French painting, which in its turn had gained much from Rubens. Renoir painted, and even sculptured, several Judgments of Paris. This painting, one of his later works, is executed in a free style with easy, loose brush strokes. The figures are broadly modeled with those radiant flesh tones that Renoir had so well mastered. The landscape, in which the artist has placed a small Greek temple to suggest the classical setting of the story, is executed in a purely impressionistic technique.

In modern times, with the artist turning first to the world around him, then to the world within him, subject matter in art has gradually lost importance. From the mid-nineteenth century onward historical, mythological, literary, and anecdotal subjects have been bowing out in favor of social comment, landscape, and still life. Portraiture, thanks to the constancy of human vanity, will always hold its place. Many modern artists have turned from the real world to a new world beyond reality, exploring the hidden regions of the human mind and emotions. Finally, some artists have abandoned subject matter entirely and concentrated on the formal components of painting and sculpture: pure line, color, and form.

Beauty contests still flourish, however, and every year Aphrodite, in the guise of Miss America, is awarded her golden apple.