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*Ovidius Pictus: Afterlives  
of the Metamorphoses  
in Europe, from Books  
to the Arts*



IL CAPITALE CULTURALE  
*Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*

**eum**

*Rivista fondata da Massimo Montella*



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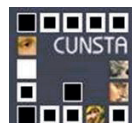
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# *Ovidius Pictus: Afterlives of the *Metamorphoses* in Europe, from Books to the Arts*

edited by  
Giuseppe Capriotti, Fátima Díez Platas,  
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# *Hybris and Sacrificium.* Aby Warburg and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Imagery

Claudia Cieri Via\*

## *Abstract*

The dialectic between Hybris and Sacrifice – which is deeply rooted in Greek tragedy – is ever-present in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and influenced the final years of Aby Warburg's research towards the end of the 1920s. The German scholar had chosen the survival of Classical Culture, *Nachleben der Antike*, as the basis for his research, and found Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to be a fundamental source of study on the original value of myths. The *Ovid-Austellung* was a small photographic exhibition ran in the oval room of the new library – the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* in Hamburg – to be held from the twenty-ninth of January to the sixth of February 1927. The notes – now kept at the Warburg Institute Archives in London – reveal it was Warburg's decisive intention to focus on the wide-ranging subject of cultural migration in ancient myths, in terms of time and space, through images.

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The dialectic between Hybris and Sacrifice – which is deeply rooted in Greek tragedy – is ever-present in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and influenced the final years of Aby Warburg's research towards the end of the 1920s.

The German scholar had chosen the survival of Classical Culture, *Nachleben der Antike*, as the basis for his research, and found Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to be a fundamental source of study in deriving the original value of myths as «antique pre-coinings» of the essential concepts that are «the roots of the mime language of enthusiastic primitivism»<sup>1</sup>.

We also have evidence of Aby Warburg's interest in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from a Conference given by Karl Reinhardt in Hamburg on the twenty-fourth of October 1924 (24/10/1924). The occasion marked Aby Warburg's return to work after a period of hospitalization at the Bellevue Clinic in Kreuzlingen.

Two years later, in Autumn 1926, Warburg also invited Max Ditmar Henkel, curator of the Amsterdam Prints Cabinet to hold a conference on the illustrated editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*<sup>2</sup>.

Not long afterwards, in a letter to Leo Ulrich dated the second of December 1926 (02/12/1924), Aby Warburg wrote that he intended to organize an exhibition on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*<sup>3</sup>.

The *Ovid-Austellung* was a small photographic exhibition ran in the oval room of the new library – the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* in Hamburg – to be held from the twenty-ninth of January to the sixth of February 1927 (fig. 1)<sup>4</sup>.

The notes – now kept at the Warburg Institute Archives in London – reveal it was Warburg's decisive intention to focus on the wide-ranging subject of cultural migration in ancient myths, in terms of time and space, through images. He wrote in his notes for the exhibition:

The question of the influence of Classical Antiquity has led over time to a natural examination of the main forms through which the world of the ancients penetrates the European world. The main means to convey the message of the travelling gods was for centuries clearly in the hands of the well-established firm Publius Ovidius Naso and epigones<sup>5</sup>.

By setting up five wooden panels covered in black cloth and placing them against the book stacks around the oval reading room at the *Kulturwissen-*

<sup>1</sup> Aby Warburg, *Ovid Ausstellung*, III, 97, 1927, London, Warburg Institute Archive (henceforth WIA), Warburg 2006a, pp. 655-672.

<sup>2</sup> The text of the expanded 1926 lecture was published under the title *Illustrierte Ausgaben von Ovids Metamorphosen im XV. XVI Jahrhundert* in Warburg 1930, pp. 58-144, tavv. I-XLV.

<sup>3</sup> Letter by Aby Warburg to Leo Ulrich December 1926: «Wir hoffen, bei dieser Gelegenheit eine Ausstellung von Ovid-drucken im dem grossen Saals unseres Gebäudes veranstalten zu können»: Warburg Institute Archive, General Correspondence (henceforth WIA, GC).

<sup>4</sup> WIA, Aby Warburg, *Ovid Ausstellung*, III, 97.2, par. A, 1927. Cieri Via 2004.

<sup>5</sup> WIA, *Ovid Ausstellung* 1927, III. 97.2.1, par. A.

*schaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*, the Art Historian enabled the public to see the project through images.

Compared to Henkel's conference on the illustrated editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Aby Warburg hoped that on this occasion there would be increased interest in the relationship between text and images, attributing a significant role to books in «a universal history of art aimed at historical spiritual studies» and he added: «a reliable means of artistic observation, for cultural science and the history of development is only possible through the juxtaposition and the interweaving of words and figurative elements»<sup>6</sup>.

On the five panels displayed at the exhibition – as documented by the photographs at the *Warburg Archive* in London<sup>7</sup> – there were illustrated books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from major libraries in European cities, such as Venice, Paris, Frankfurt, Cologne, Amsterdam and Vienna. These were hanging from ropes in the bottom part of the panels, open at pages showing the mythological illustrations of the theme represented on each panel, and were arranged in a chronological timeline, following the direction of left to right script. The same rule applied to the series of images and, in fact, they were arranged following a pattern that wound its way from the ancient model: «The original substratum of the emotion of the soul» – as Warburg wrote – through Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century images, to reach the powerful characteristics of Baroque (fig. 2).

In the words of Aby Warburg, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* were transformed into:

A treasure chest of expressive values for the dynamics of psychology. So-called primitive humanity brought back to life is expressed by attempting to reach the objective experience of the limit values of psychological expression, while at the same time wishing to maintain its full form forged in its very own relevance as a driving force. This dual stylistic requirement, which should be seen in contrast, is achieved by the Ancients in the graceful dynamics and spirit of Ovidian characters which, whilst giving substance within the range of mime language to the most original conditions of passionate rapture in erotic and cultic life, that is pursuit, abduction, death, do, however, echo a lyrical and sentimental self-awareness, in other words the sacrificial dance and the funeral lament<sup>8</sup>.

In fact the most significant Ovidian myths are the ones that give life to the 'motifs' – *Urworte* – marking the line of thought that winds through the photographic images and books mounted on the panels around the oval room at the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*.

They start with 'seduction' – *Lockung* – and 'pursuit' – *Verfolgung* – as embodied in the myth of Apollo and Daphne, 'transformation' – *Verwand-*

<sup>6</sup> WIA, *Ovid Ausstellung* 1927, III. 97. par. 5.

<sup>7</sup> WIA, *Ovid Ausstellung* 1927, III. 97.3.

<sup>8</sup> WIA, *Ovid Ausstellung* 1927, III. 97. 27.2.1, par. B.



*lung* – as embodied in the myth of Aktaeon (fig. 3), ‘abduction’ – *Raub* – of Persephone by Pluto (fig. 4), death – *Opfertod* – dramatically represented by the myth of Orpheus (fig. 5), human sacrifice – *Menschenopfer* – to which Medea gives voice, sacrificial dance (fig. 6) – *Opfertanz* – and the funeral lament – *Klage* (fig. 7) – down the path that, in Aby Warburg’s research, leads from Ovidian myth to the drama in mystic *epos* so sensitively interpreted by the Dutch soul<sup>9</sup>.

The names of the mythological figures were given on cards placed at the top of the panels, below the key words mentioned above. They were arranged in a sequence already found in the diagrams drawn by Warburg in his notes for the exhibition. The mythological images representing the motifs, also extracts from literature, poetry, theatre and musical texts, were placed on the panel.

The diagrams of Aby Warburg’s project clearly reveal this correspondence between myths and symbols – *Urworte* – as the German scholar defines them<sup>10</sup>. However, for a deeper understanding of Warburg’s project I should like to draw attention to the fact that during that same period in Hamburg, the neo-Kantian philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, had published his second book on *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* dedicated to mythical thought. In the introduction the philosopher begins by saying:

Philosophical inquiry into the contents of mythological consciousness and attempts at a theoretical interpretation of these contents go back to the very beginnings of scientific philosophy. Philosophy turned its attention to myth and its configurations earlier than to the other spheres of culture. This is understandable from both a historical and a systematic point of view, for it was only by coming to grips with mythical thinking that philosophy could arrive at the first clear formulation of its own concept and its own task<sup>11</sup>.

The diagrams drawn by Aby Warburg, like the panels arranged in his Library, seem informed by the philosophical thought of Ernst Cassirer, who dedicated his book, published in 1923, to the scholar from Hamburg, in recognition of his teachings: in search of an «interior form of myth»<sup>12</sup>.

Further light is shed on Warburg’s project, again in the words of Ernst Cassirer in the opening passages of his book on myth:

the whole material world appeared shrouded in mythical thinking and mythical fantasy [...] For a long time afterward philosophical thought preserved a middle position, as though undecided between a mythical and a truly philosophical approach to the problem of origins. This twofold relation is clearly and expressed in the concept which early Greek philosophy created for this problem, the concept of the ἀρχή (archè). It designates the zone between myth and philosophy – but a boundary which as such partakes of both the

<sup>9</sup> WIA, *Ovid Ausstellung* 1927, III. 97.1, par. B.

<sup>10</sup> WIA, *Ovid Ausstellung* 1927, III. 93.3, par. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Cassirer 1977, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Cassirer 1977, p. XVIII.

spheres it divides, representing the point of indifference between the mythical concept of the beginning and the philosophical concept of the “principle”<sup>13</sup>.

A more focused look at the panels allows us to understand some aspects of Aby Warburg's choices in order to interpret the role played by Ovidian myths, starting with seduction and pursuit by Apollo, who tries to possess Daphne, magnificently portrayed in Botticelli's staging of the same dynamic, which informs the myth of Zephyrus and Chloris and is exalted later by Bernini through the sensuous marble of the superb statue at the Galleria Borghese in Rome<sup>14</sup>.

Actaeon is a key figure in the dialectic between *Hybris and Sacrificium*. Accused of violating Diana's sacred space, he is, as a result, condemned to be sacrificed and suffer death, his body torn to pieces, after first succumbing to the humiliation and therefore degradation, of being transformed into an animal, a deer. Actaeon's ordeal is ekphrastically expressed in Ovid's verses:

«Me miserum [...] Ah, wretched me!» but now he had no voice, and he could only groan: large tears ran trickling down his face, // transformed in every feature. Yet, as clear remained his understanding, and he wondered what he should attempt to do<sup>15</sup>.

These are Actaeon's ‘unexpressed’ words as he looks at his reflection in the water, the symbolic image form therefore of tragic metamorphosis.

The abduction is personified by Persephone<sup>16</sup> in the classically represented, sensual violence recaptured in the painting by Rubens (fig. 8), and in the extremely essentialized figure of the young girl, swathed in light by Rembrandt in his magnificent painting of the violent abduction, now in the Berlin Staatliche Museen (fig. 9). Aby Warburg places these two lessons on the myth of Persephone side by side on the panel displayed in the Hamburg Library (fig. 4). They exemplify two aspects – two polar forms – of the art by those artists, demonstrating an understanding of the highest values of human expression, through the purity of Rembrandt's use of light, and the dramatic setting of the sumptuous art of Rubens, which informs Baroque culture and is magnificently interpreted in theatrical form. Reference to this is made in the engraving by Antonio Tempesta on the frontispiece of the play by Jacob Struys, that is to say the Baroque tragedy Walter Benjamin also studied in the 1920s: «In the Trauerspiel» – wrote Benjamin – «mourning evokes but also redeems itself. This tension and release of emotion within its own domain is performance»<sup>17</sup>.

The next panel is in fact dedicated to *Opfertod*, sacrificial death, which takes the form of Orpheus, as developed through images of Classical and Re-

<sup>13</sup> Cassirer 1977, pp. 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Fiore 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III, 201-204.

<sup>16</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, V, 390-409.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin 1974-1989, pp. 137-140.

naissance Art (fig. 5)<sup>18</sup>. The roots of mime language in expressive primitivism become increasingly charged with intensity through Renaissance images, from Leonardo's sketch to the powerful drawing by Albrecht Dürer at the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, which Aby Warburg described as: «a storeroom for the artist's energy, a container of psychological expression»<sup>19</sup>, eventually finding lyrical accents introducing the theme of music, echoed in the frontispiece illustrations to Monteverdi's *The Fable of Orpheus* and Rinuccini's *Eurydice*. In his notes to the *Ovid Ausstellung*, Warburg wrote «The atmosphere in Ovid's verses is of Orpheus as heroic theatre and of Orpheus himself, like an opera singer, playing his lute and lamenting the loss of Eurydice forever; these are but the widely spaced, separate branches of the same Ovidian tree». And the funeral lament contains in essence Aby Warburg's reflections on classical tragedy and modern tragedy, on *Trauerspiel*, as a representation of mourning, through the themes of sacrificial death and the funeral lament<sup>20</sup>.

The panel on "Human Sacrifice" (*Menschenopfer*, fig. 6) is dedicated to Medea's madness and Ovid tells the story in book VII of the *Metamorphoses*<sup>21</sup>. The panel outlines the path taken by Medea's story, from the frescoes at Herculaneum and Pompeii (I BC-II Century AD) to the classical sarcophagi (Berlin, Staatliche Museen), the miniatures of a manuscript on the tragedy of Seneca at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, (Innsbruck Universitaet Bibliothek, Cod. 87, fol.120r), to the engravings by Antonio Tempesta, but also those by Marteen de Vos for Ovid's *Medea* in the 1667 edition. In Rembrandt's etching depicting the marriage of Jason and Creusa attention is directed to the theatrical as well as the lyrical aspect which is captured in the figure of Medea standing in the shadows, backstage, holding a dagger, with intent to kill her sons: that moment of suspended animation before tragedy strikes<sup>22</sup>.

In the same panel the theme of *Menschenopfer* is also expressed by the sacrifice of Polyxena, starting with the picture on classical amphora vase dated 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, a series of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century engravings, on the same sheet, the frontispiece to the 1665 Amsterdam edition of the Samuel Coster tragedy, Rembrandt's drawing illustrating Ovid's verses<sup>23</sup>, at London's British Museum, a piece of high Greek dramaturgy. Placed below are illustrated books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from the 1510 Milan edition to the 1512 Paris edition<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XI, 1-44.

<sup>19</sup> WIA, III, 60.1 *Handzeichnungen. Dürer als Spiegel seiner selbst und seiner Zeit*, fol. 7°. Cieri Via 2011, pp. 67-68.

<sup>20</sup> WIA, *Ovid Ausstellung* 1927, III, 97. 27.2.1, par. C. Cf. Cieri Via 2002, pp. 313-335; Wedepohl 2012; Segal 1995, p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, VII, 394-403.

<sup>22</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, VII, 395-97. On the myth of Medea see Pucci 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, XIII, 445-480.

<sup>24</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, XIII, 445-480. Cieri Via 2011, pp. 105-124.

Warburg's interest in the tragedy of Medea had already been given prominence during his conference on Rembrandt in 1926, where the question he had asked himself was: «How does Medea appear to us today in the context of Greek tragedy?»<sup>25</sup> The analysis of Rembrandt's painting in Stockholm depicting the *Oath of Claudius Civilis*, is central to the scholar's essay dated 1926 which focused on the value of sacrifice in the story told by Tacito in the *Historiae*. For Timomachus' Medea, as well as for Rembrandt's, Warburg chose to create an arrangement on his panels, which by then had become actual places, using sheets of text as images, photographs with details of swords clasped by the two characters, each emphasizing a dramatic moment of reflection – for Medea – the decision to sacrifice her children – and for Claudius Civilis – swearing an oath of resistance with his fellow countrymen to reaffirm their identity and challenge the Roman oppressors, in this way sealing his fate, and that of his people, to sacrifice (fig. 10). There is a similarity in composition between Rembrandt's painting and Leonardo's *Last Supper*, Leonardo being an artist much loved and much studied by Rembrandt, as seen from his drawings at the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 11). This similarity confirms that the intention was to exalt the moment preceding the action and the sacrifice, both in the classical myth, the Christian myth and in Ancient History.

Claudius Civilis is not a tragic hero but a silent one, a martyr who recognizes both the dramatic pathos and the solemnity of the event, as well as the inner tension of the waiting and reflection preceding the action. Models for this can be found in both classical and modern tragedy, in authors as Euripides and Shakespeare, and in theatrical characters like Medea and Hamlet, up to the development of an ethical dimension based on sacrifice, as expressed in that 'space for thought', which Aby Warburg called *Denkraum*.

In those same years in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin wrote: «Tragic silence, far more than tragic pathos, became the storehouse of an experience of the sublimity of linguistic expression, which is generally much more intensely alive in ancient than in later literature»<sup>26</sup>. Here the philosopher dwells on 'reflection' as an artistic means used in classical tragedy but also in the theatrical works of Calderon de la Barca and Shakespeare. «All ancient tragedies are dramas of destiny» declared Benjamin: «biased interpretations of a mythical past, in which the advent of a new law is celebrated in the death and sacrifice of the hero»<sup>27</sup>.

Reflection on the *Klage*, the Funeral Lament is – as outlined in Warburg's notes – expressed through the myths of Meleager and Alcestis, two characters in Book VIII of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who, for love of Atalanta and Admetus respectively, pledge themselves to sacrifice.

<sup>25</sup> Warburg 2006b, pp. 405-654; Cieri Via 2013, pp. 32-55.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin 1971, p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 106.

In the *Ovid Ausstellung* panel dedicated to the sacrificial dance, the *Opfertanz*, and the Funeral Lament, the *Klage* (fig. 7), Warburg includes Laocoon (fig. 12), a Greek mythological character who meets a sacrificial fate for love of his homeland, as well as of Christ, with photographs of artistic images of his passion and death, making the ultimate sacrifice for love of mankind. «Tragic poetry» wrote Benjamin in *Drama and Tragedy*, the introductory chapter to his book *The Origin of German Baroque Drama*: «is based on the idea of sacrifice»<sup>28</sup>. While in Baroque drama Benjamin replaces sacrifice with martyrdom, and so the tragic hero with the martyr, Aby Warburg through the Christ figure reintroduces the classical myth, with the images on ancient sarcophagi that have survived to us, of Meleager's death in the iconography of the Passion of Christ<sup>29</sup>.

I would like to conclude this analysis with the words of Aby Warburg on the 'basso continuo' of the *Nachleben der Antike*. The survival of classical antiquity in modern times is, as has been widely documented, at the center of the art historian's line of thinking, and his interest in *Drama*, as a complex, complete art form, is ultimately expressed in a passage that is almost poetic in the hushed words that end the letter, written by Aby Warburg to his friend Carl Neumann on the twenty second of January, 1927, about the essay on Rembrandt:

In the garden of flights of fancy: Ovid, Seneca, Laocoon, Tacitus, Apollo Belvedere are just some of the countless masks of pathos in the chorus of "Energeia" tragedy, where the main actors are few: Mania, Sophrosyne, Mneme and Virtus; then the acts of these tragedies shall be called "eras of culture". Otherwise, should metaphors of antiquity be unwelcome, I suggest... the following quote: "What is the inheritance of humankind? Just the ever fugitive interval between impulse and action"<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Ivi, p. 104. Cieri Via 2010, pp. 31-43.

<sup>29</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VIII, 310.

<sup>30</sup> WIA, GC, Letter by Aby Warburg to Carl Neumann, 22 January 1927. The letter has been published in original language in Pinotti 2005, pp. 493-530. The Italian translation has been published in the *Appendix* of the essay by Cieri Via 2013, pp. 35-55.

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*Appendix*

Fig. 1. Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, Hamburg

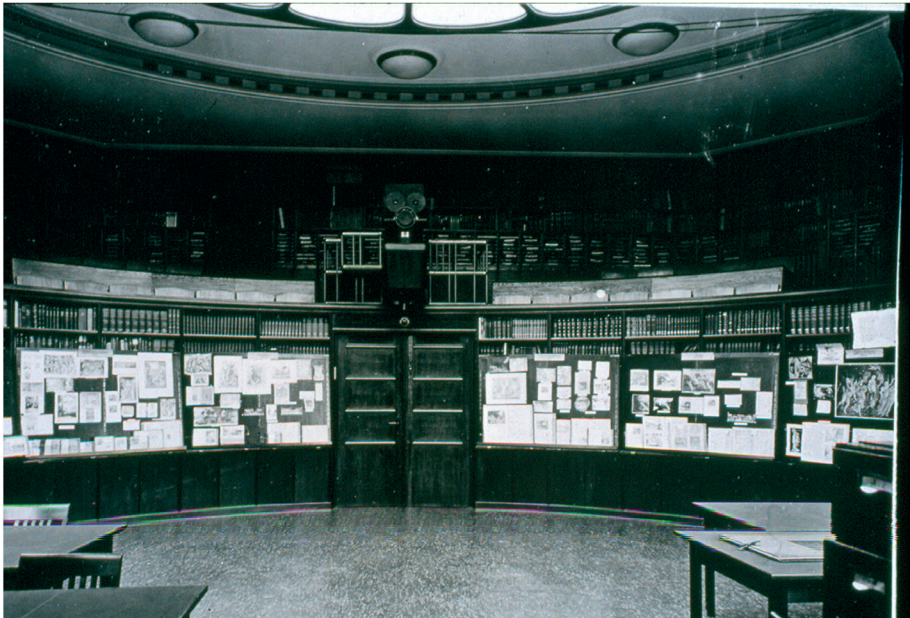


Fig. 2. Ovid Ausstellung, Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, Hamburg 1927



Fig. 3. *Verfolgung-Verwandlung*, *Ovid Ausstellung*, Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, Hamburg 1927



Fig. 4. *Raub*, *Ovid Ausstellung*, Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, Hamburg 1927





Fig. 5. *Opfertod, Ovid Ausstellung*, Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, Hamburg 1927



Fig. 6. *Menschenopfer (Medea), Ovid Ausstellung*, Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, Hamburg 1927



Fig. 7. *Opfertanz-Klage*, *Ovid Ausstellung*, Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, Hamburg 1927



Fig. 8. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of Persephone*, 1636-37, Madrid, Prado Museum



Fig. 9. Rembrandt, *The Rape of Persephone*, 1631-32, Berlin, Staatliche Museen



Fig. 10. Rembrandt, *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*, 1662, Stockholm National Museum

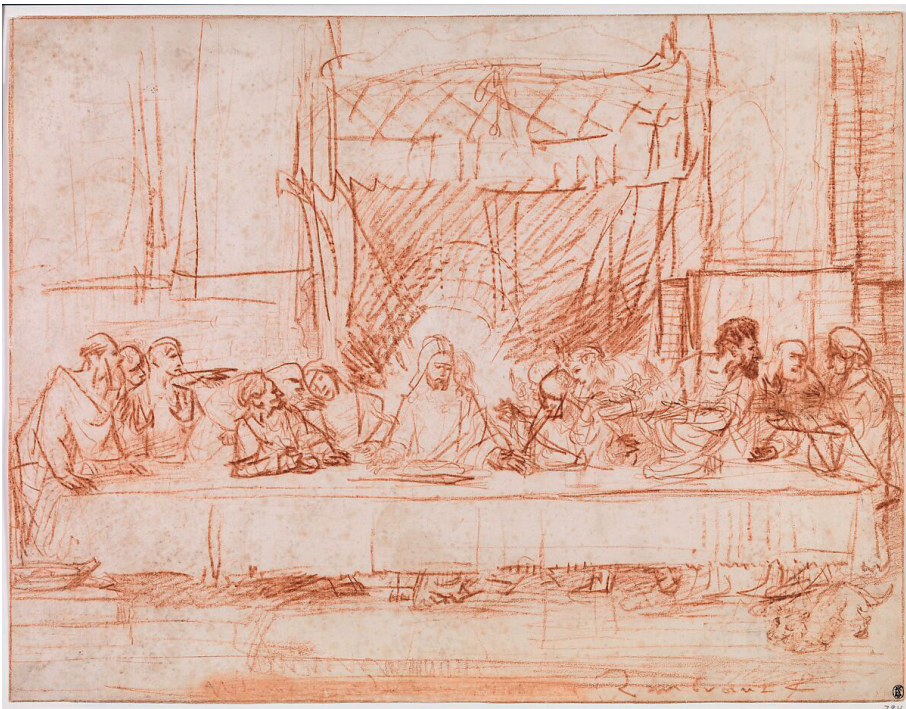


Fig. 11. Rembrandt, *The Last Supper*, red chalk drawing on paper after Leonardo da Vinci, 1635, Metropolitan Museum, New York



Fig. 12. *Laocoön*, marble sculpture attributed to Agesander, Athenodorus, and Polydorus of Rhodes (or perhaps a Roman copy), 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE-1<sup>st</sup> century CE, the Pio-Clementino Vatican Museums, Vatican City

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