

*Ovid and the Metamorphoses of Modern Art from Botticelli to Picasso.*

Paul Barolsky.

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This crafted study is a precious gift from the renowned art historian and author of ten books, including *Infinite Jest*, a trilogy on Vasari, and two monographs on Michelangelo. Barolsky presents “an imaginary museum filled with Ovidian works of art” (5), and emphasizes the poem’s encyclopedic scope: it encompasses the history of the world and manifests nature “in its myriad forms” (11). The details of Ovid’s engaging tales captured the imagination of literary scholars; Barolsky shows how these same details altered artistic approaches to portraying, for example, Andromeda, whom Rubens shows moving from sorrow to joy (167) and whom Rembrandt depicts as intensely suffering (171).

The book consists of seven parts. It covers the major themes in Ovid’s poem and the visual responses to those themes. Part 1, “The Adventure of Reading Ovid,” offers the reasons for the poem’s never-ending appeal: Ovid’s poetic imagination, “which is both heightened and transformed by the art” (7), summons readers to observe the unfolding shapes and colors of the world. Part 2, “The Pleasures of Ovidian Art,” portrays the poet’s universe as the joining of opposites: chaos and cosmos, show and

tell, stone and flesh. Painters and sculptors interpreted paradoxes in Ovid's tales, thus prompting viewers to rethink their stories. Part 3, "Love, Lust, and Artifice," brings together artists, mythological and real, on the subject of "art about art" (151), thereby raising questions over the limits of mimetic art. It considers ambiguity as both a poetic and artistic device, causing readers and viewers to "take pleasure in perceiving something that is there and not there at once" (79). Part 4, "Variations on the Theme of Pygmalion," demonstrates the blurring of the line between Ovid and his protagonist, as they aim at capturing "the effect of a work of art coming to life" (81). This is exemplified by way of Cellini's and Caravaggio's sculpted and painted renditions of Narcissus (95).

Part 5, "From Stoicism to Seduction," explores the poem's psychological depth by unraveling the contradictions in Ovid's accounts, conveyed, inter alia, in Breughel's *Fall of Icarus* (111–13), Rembrandt's *Philemon and Baucis* (119–21), Poussin's *Phaethon and Sol* (123), and Titian's *Diana and Callisto* (133–34). Barolsky also shows how certain fine points in the poem inspire hitherto-unnoticed details in art, such as the red wheel in Rubens's *Fall of Phaethon* (126), Europa's foot licked by the bull in Veronese's painting (138), or the two stones in Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* (44). The author invites the reader to look at Ovid's competition with both the gods, in his architecture (the palace of Sol [114] and the house of Herse [115]), and nature, in his depicted ruins and primordial entities (115–17). Part 6, "Weaving Together Erotic Fictions," describes Ovid as the self-referential poet who organized his collection of 250 myths, causing one story to mirror another (Apollo and Pygmalion [69], Procris and Thisbe [189], or Vertumnus and Jupiter [223]). In this regard, Barolsky facetiously characterizes Ovid's poem as the precursor of the much-belabored "intertextuality" (145). In part 7, "Elegy and Play," the scholar highlights the inevitable bond between love and death, which, in turn, leads to a creation of a new story in Ovid's fictional universe, because "all art is a form of play" (228). Metamorphosis, then, is the central thread of both Ovid's poem and Barolsky's book: myths are transformed into verbal and visual images, the process that lasts forever (6, 21).

This book stands out among explorations of Ovid's impact on modern artists by its comprehensive discussion of the differences between the verbal and visual arts, suggesting details that are either emphasized or omitted. Whenever Barolsky describes Ovid's narrative or a painting and statue, he asserts that description is "the means to understanding; indeed description is a form of interpretation" (2). His book offers numerous descriptive interpretations of visual images, from exhaustive to selective, and in so doing persuades one to look at art attentively. Barolsky is a superb essayist. Every sentence demonstrates his knowledge and insight, his visual intelligence and poetic imagination. A delightful read, *Ovid and the Metamorphoses* should be perused in order to appreciate fully the innovative exposition; it will become a required text for all comparative literature and art history courses.

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