

Cupid's Body: Rubens, Parmigianino and Antiquity

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In 1614 Rubens signed and dated his *Cupid shaping his bow* in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, a work that was closely based on Parmigianino's famous *Cupid* of 1533-35 now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Rubens's painted copies and adaptations were usually intended for his own collection, but the Munich *Cupid* was unusual in having been made for the open market or perhaps to commission. This is surprising because Rubens otherwise showed little interest in Parmigianino's work. This paper will consider how and why he chose to copy this sexually ambiguous and feminised treatment of the male body which departed so strikingly from his usual practice.

Rubens modified the body of Parmigianino's Cupid in significant and perhaps critical ways. In the original the figure twists round to look straight into the eyes of the spectator, perhaps his next victim, but Rubens made him less confrontational and less malicious. He also gave the god a more tense and muscular body, looser ringlets that are not pulled back under a womanly band, and he made the arch of the god's back less provocative. It is an open question whether Rubens was attracted or repelled by the feminised body of Parmigianino's Cupid, and the way that he is shown not only as duplicitous and provocative but as merciless to his victims.

The only time Rubens can have seen Parmigianino's original was during his first visit to the Madrid court in 1603-04 but his adaptation was painted in Antwerp a decade later. This raises the question of the history of this work in Spain and what model Rubens worked from in 1614. The dispatch of the Cupid and several erotic works by Correggio to the Emperor Rudolf in Prague was imminent when Rubens visited Spain for the first time and he may well have seen full-size replicas being made of them early in 1604. A case could be made that Rubens's interpretation of the god fits the polished and often cruel world of his own mythologies of the 1610s, but it is also important to see his adaptation as informed by his knowledge of Habsburg taste and the high status of Parmigianino's original at the courts of Philip II, Philip III and the emperor Rudolf.

Parmigianino had depicted Cupid as an adolescent, perhaps following a classical prototype, and Rubens was forced to respect this, although in his own work he preferred to depict Cupid as an infant, reflecting a wider change that had taken place in early seventeenth-century iconography. Scholars have turned to the antique to understand Parmigianino's *Cupid*, in particular to a statue that was known from two versions in the mid-sixteenth century, one at the Villa d'Este, Tivoli, now in the Museo Capitolino, Rome, and the other at Palazzo Grimani in Venice, now in the Museo Nazionale Archeologico in the same city. Parmigianino's Cupid, however, is elegant and soft unlike the statues which are, by contrast, tense and muscular. Rubens may or may not have made this connection with the art of antiquity, but it raises the question of how he understood the decorum of the naked body in ancient sculpture and in modern art.