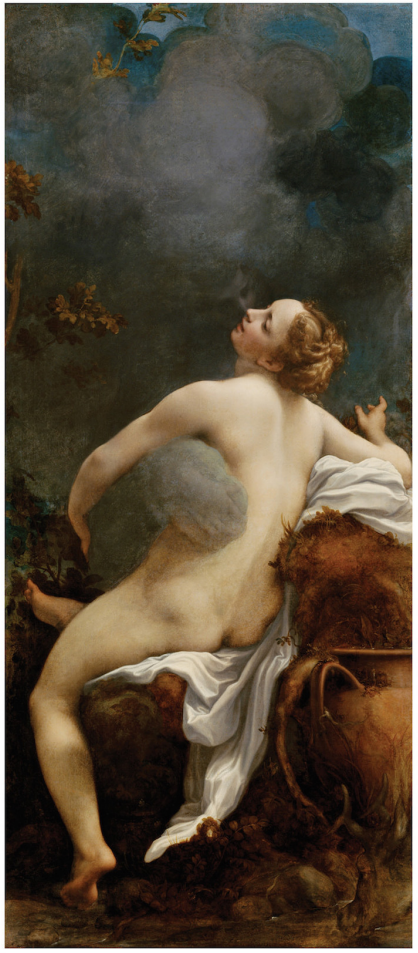
A Masterpiece Vandalized and Restored

Beautiful and provocative, Correggio's *Jupiter and Io* has quite a tale to tell.

ANTONIO ALLEGRI DA CORREGGIO was the greatest artist of the Italian Renaissance associated with the school of Parma. He was notable for his appropriation of Leonardo da Vinci's use of sfumato—the smoky modeling of forms—to sensual effect. While a sweet gracefulness in Correggio's characterizations derives from the Florentine master, the restless twists and dramatic foreshortenings favored by Correggio presage Mannerist and Rococo conventions. He's responsible for several of Western art's most voluptuous images, among them the *Venus and Cupid With a Satyr* in the Louvre and the subject at hand, *Jupiter and Io*, now in the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna.

Jupiter and Io was one of four canvases Correggio painted depicting the loves of Jupiter, the god who, according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, transformed himself into nonhuman forms in order to indulge amatory indiscretions without being discovered by his wife, Juno. To have sex with Io, Jupiter adopted the guise of a dark cloud, a circumstance that challenged Correggio's painterly skills, while allowing great latitude for the presentation of a woman in an ecstatic state. Surely no one could take offense at the ridiculous notion of a woman being ravished by a cumulus puff.



LEFT: ***Jupiter and Io*** (1532; oil on canvas, 63⅛x29½) by Antonio Allegri da Correggio

It's an unusual composition—the design trisected vertically, with Io's body forming a diagonal that fills the lower two-thirds of the canvas. Correggio brilliantly juxtaposes the ethereal presence of Jupiter with the soft anatomical shapes of Io, who rests upon a lilting white garment. Each of these substances—from the vapor in which Jupiter is cloaked to the nude's pliant forms and the gently stylized drapery—demonstrates Correggio's extraordinary sensitivity to tactile elements.

Federico II of Gonzaga commisioned the Jupiter paintings and subsequently gave them to Charles I, the Spanish king. Later this painting was owned by Christina, Queen of Sweden, before landing in the possession of the Regent of France, Philippe d'Orléans, described by Sir Kenneth Clark as a "famous lecher." What delighted the Regent enraged his son, Louis d'Orléans, who demanded the painting's destruction, and may have attacked it himself with a knife. "Can Dionysiac symbol," Clark questioned, "ever have produced a more truly Dionysiac result?" At any rate, Io's head was obliterated. The exquisite head that exists today, thrown back in rapture, is the product of the 19th-century French master Pierre-Paul Prud'hon. For aesthetic and narrative purposes the repair is flawless.

Assaults on great works of art are not unusual. The incident that comes to mind that most closely parallels this was perpetrated at London's National Gallery in 1914, when a suffragette attacked Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* with a meat cleaver. Many years later the assailant admitted that she didn't like "the way men visitors gaped at it all day long."

These are reminders that the artist's studio and the museum are not hermetically sealed spaces and that paintings take on lives independent of our intentions once they enter the public domain. The fine points of painting and the beauty of the human form may be lost on others to the extent of triggering disturbing reactions. Inevitably, we all see what we're predisposed to see in a work of art through our own filter of experience. Some will look at *Jupiter and Io* and see a mythological illustration; some will see erotica and others will see love; some will see the artist's technical brilliance; historians will see the work in the context of 16th-century culture. All these readings are valid and reveal more about the viewer's interests than the work of art.

I can appreciate *Jupiter and Io* as a formal and sensual masterpiece. Perhaps Louis d'Orléans could, too. He just had a funny way of expressing his admiration. ■

Jupiter and Io is included in "Habsburg Splendor: Masterpieces from Vienna's Imperial Collections," which will be on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, from June 14 to September 13, and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, from October 18 to January 17, 2016.

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