Syrinx in Art

22

Anton Haass

Contents

22.1 **Introduction** 319
22.2 **Salomon** 320
22.3 **Bersuire and Filarete** 321
22.4 **Peruzzi and Carracci** 321
22.5 **The Baroque Painters** 321
References 327

22.1 Introduction

In classical mythology, Syrinx is a beautiful woodland nymph who has taken a vow of chastity to show her allegiance to the famously virginal Artemis, the goddess of the woods and of the hunt. The story of her encounter with Pan is told by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–18 AD) in his *Metamorphoses*, a collection of some 250 mythological and legendary stories in which transformation plays some part. Pan is a god of Nature and of the fields, who lives on earth and watches over the flocks of mortal shepherds and goat herds. He is traditionally portrayed with a beard and with the horns, legs, feet and tail of a goat. The terrifying shout he gave whenever he was disturbed in his sleep was said to inspire "panic", a term that has its origin in the goat-god's name.

The mythical story goes as follows: On returning from a hunt, the amorous Pan encounters Syrinx and she flees from his unwelcome advances. She comes to the river Landon and begs assistance from her sisters, the river nymphs, and from her father, the river god Argon. They hear her plea and transform her into a reed. Pan, recognising that his pursuit of Syrinx had failed, then utters a sigh of regret. A light breeze, passing over the hollow stems of the reeds around the river, produces a soft and mournful sound. This inspires him to cut seven reeds and make a flute from them, to provide solace for and remembrance of his failed amorous adventure. Pan also preserves the name of the chaste woodland

A. Haass
Neurological Department,
University of the Saarland, Homburg/Saar, Germany
e-mail: anton.haass@uniklinik-saarland.de

G. Flint, C. Rusbridge (eds.), *Syringomyelia*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-642-13706-8_22,

© Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg 2014

nymph in the name which he gives to the newly invented instrument. The word “syrinx” thus came to signify a flute in ancient Greek but has been preserved in modern English in the word for the reed- or tube-like “syringe”.

The story of Pan and Syrinx was a popular subject for painters, particularly in the nineteenth century. Since translations of the Greek and Roman texts were extremely rare and since painters were certainly not in a position to study the compendious original literature (which was, in any case, often composed in a complex poetic language), there was a great demand for books that summed up the gist of these mythological tales. In particular, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* was regarded as a “painter’s Bible” in the early modern period; such books often illustrated these stories with a simple woodcut print.

22.2 Salomon

The first such graphic illustration of “Pan and Syrinx” is found on page 45 of the “emblem book” *Picta Poesis,* assembled by the French scholar Barthélemy Aneau and published in Lyon in 1552. The Lyon illustrator Bernard Salomon combines an interrelated cycle of myths into a single composite image, set above the text of this page. For this reason, the book makes a sort of “comic-book” impression on the present-day reader (Fig. 22.1). The foreground scene portrays Pan’s “erotic pursuit” of the nymph and reveals him grasping at the reeds, so as to push them aside and reach Syrinx hidden within. It is this scene that becomes the most important *motif* of the myth for modern painters although the original woodcut shows Syrinx’s “metamorphosis” already underway, with her half-transformed into a reed. Set slightly back from this foreground scene is a second scene showing Pan playing his “Pan flute”.

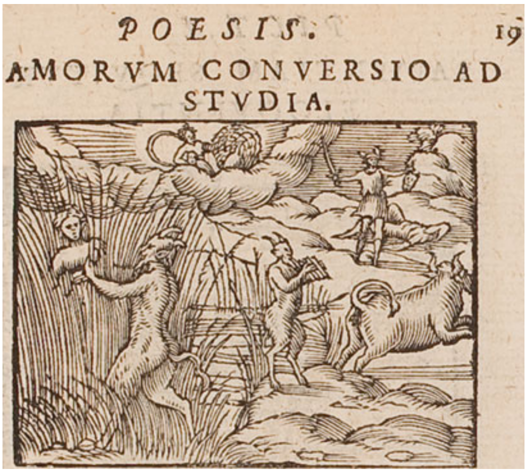

Fig. 22.1 Pan and Syrinx, Bernard Salomon, 1552 (Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel)

The third scene, portrayed just to the right of the second, shifts the illustration into obliquely related realms. It shows a heifer springing out of the picture. This is an allusion to the story of Io, a priestess of Argos who was transformed into a heifer by Zeus, in order to hide his adulterous designs from his wife Hera. When the heifer was tethered to a tree by the suspicious Hera and set under the guardianship of the hundred-eyed Argus Panoptes, Zeus gave Mercury the task of stealing her away. Mercury accomplished this task by distracting Argus with the story of Pan, Syrinx and the invention of the “Pan flute”. The telling of this tale succeeds in lulling Argus to sleep – a rather odd and disillusioning detail, since Mercury appears never actually to get around to playing any soporific tune on the flute itself. Rather, he sends Argus to sleep through his tedious style of story-telling. The aim is nevertheless achieved and the heifer Io is able to spring free. A fourth, related scene is shown, in the background of this third, with Mercury triumphantly holding up the head of Argus and the headless torso of the guardian monster, whom Mercury has slained in its sleep.

In the farthest background of the illustration is a scene depicting the most sublime and abstract framework of all these events: Zeus himself, seated in the clouds, calmly observing the doings of gods and mortals both. Above the composite image is a textual commentary on these events printed in Latin: *Amorum Conversio ad Studia* – “The Turning Away From Amorous Pursuits Toward More Earnest Ones”. It was clearly a concern of the author to de-emphasise the erotic core of the story and introduce a moral tone about the ennobling power of music.

22.3 Bersuire and Filarete

The earliest known modern graphic representations of Pan and Syrinx originate from Italy, where both those who commissioned paintings and those who executed them enjoyed easier access to the classical myths (Lange et al. 2004). The first of these is a decoration by the artist Antonio Filarete (1400–1469), worked into a bronze door of St. Peter's in Rome, between 1430 and 1435. As with the work of the French Benedictine monk and scholar Pierre Bersuire, a century before, Filarete's work depicts a Christian "moralisation", of the myths related in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Medieval Christians believed that metamorphosis of a human being into a plant or an animal was a consequence of and punishment for sinful behaviour. This interpretation casts the chaste Syrinx as a sinner and overlooks Pan's erotic passion. Indeed, both Bersuire's and Filarete's treatments of the subject rather cast Pan in the role of a "redeemer" attempting to "save" the poor sinner Syrinx. This interpretation was the reason that Filarete's Pan and Syrinx was integrated in the door of the former St. Peter cathedral in Rome. It is a sort of ironical vindication of the honour of the original Greek conception that this "moralised" reading of Ovid did not, in the end, prove convincing to the generations succeeding Bersuire and Filarete. It was later condemned as heretical, by the sixteenth-century Counter-Reformation movement, and was placed on the papal "index" of banned books. Indeed Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536) had already given a derogatory description of Bersuire's interpretation of Ovid as a "most ridiculous work" (*opus insulsissimus*).

22.4 Peruzzi and Carracci

Two further artistic treatments of Syrinx to be seen in Rome are also worth mentioning. The first of these is the earliest known painting of the nymph, from the studio of Baldassare Peruzzi (1481–1536), painted between 1515 and 1518. The work is remarkable for showing a literal metamorphosis of Syrinx in the course of her flight from Pan, with reeds sprouting from her head as she flees. The second, executed by Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), consists of two so-called medallions, in the window niches of the Farnese Gallery, located in the west wing of the Palazzo Farnese. These "medallions" are remarkable for adding a further level of interpretation to the story. Previously the myth had been regarded as a tragic, romantic episode, which Pan had put behind him by the sublimating act of the invention of music. Carracci's "medallions", however, add the detail of the god Cupid, leading Pan into the trap of unrequited love, with the intention of proving his dominance and exclusive right to decide on the success or failure of amatory undertakings.

22.5 The Baroque Painters

The Baroque painters Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625), Hendrick van Balen (1575–1632), Abraham Janssen (1571–1632), Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678) and Joos de Momper (1564–1635) all lived in Antwerp at the same period and within 600 m of one another. Each of them produced treatments of the "Pan and Syrinx" *motif* after his own particular manner and style. The inspiration for many of these depictions may have been the excellent prints provided as a painters' "pattern book", by the workshop of the Haarlem engraver Hendrick Goltzius (1589/1590) (Fig. 22.2). Van Balen produced the first representation around 1600 (Fig. 22.3). The composition of this is almost identical to the Goltzius prints. Indeed, leaving aside the somewhat sharper moulding of the figures, it almost seems as if he had merely traced over the earlier work. Around 1615, however, van Balen tackled the theme once again (Fig. 22.4), this time only painting the two main models in the drama, as if in an excerpt from his first painting (a procedure known as "amplification" – see below). Accordingly, this picture, which is otherwise essentially a mirror image of his earlier composition, also bears a strong resemblance to the earlier Goltzius print. There are certain details in this later painting, such as

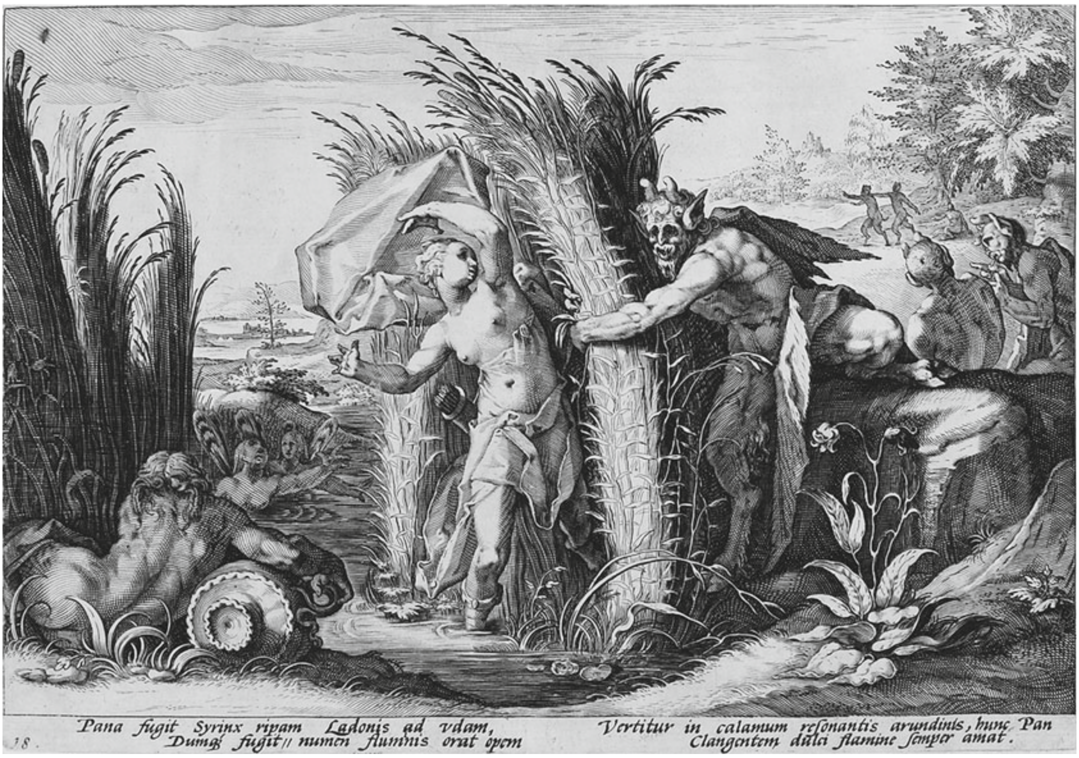
18.
Pana fugit Syrinx ripam Ladonis ad vdam,
Dumq; fugit// numen fluminis orat opem
Vertitur in calamum reſonantis arundinis, hunc Pan
Clangentem dulci flamine ſemper amat.

Fig. 22.2 Pan and Syrinx, Hendrick Goltzius, 1589 (Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel)

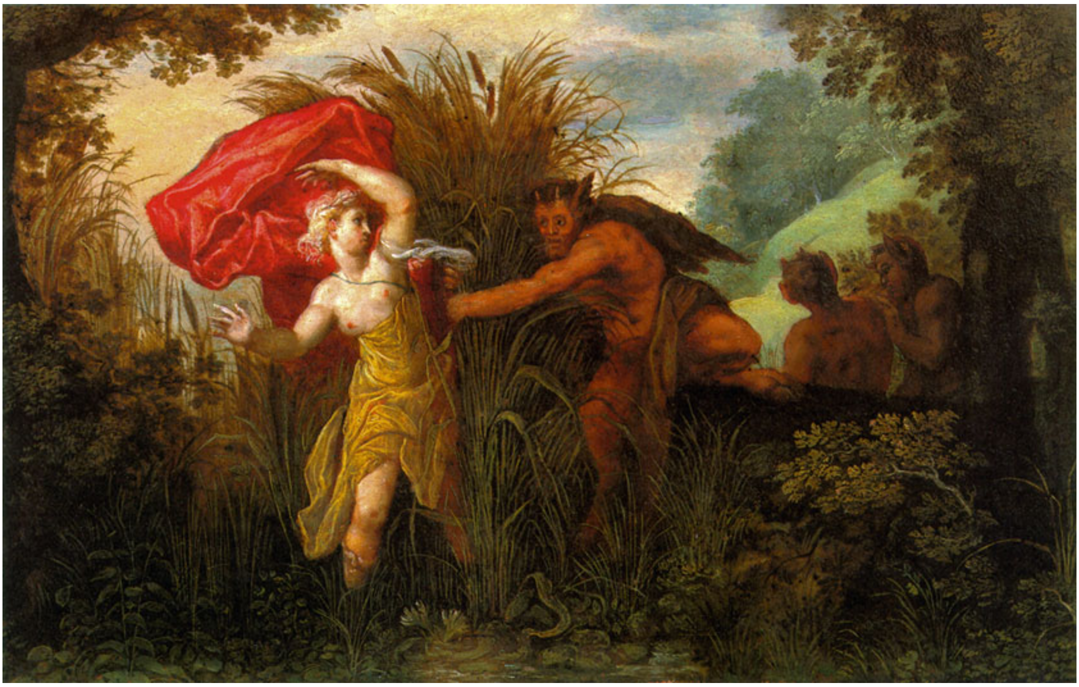

Fig. 22.3 Pan and Syrinx, Hendrick van Balen, circa 1600 (Author)

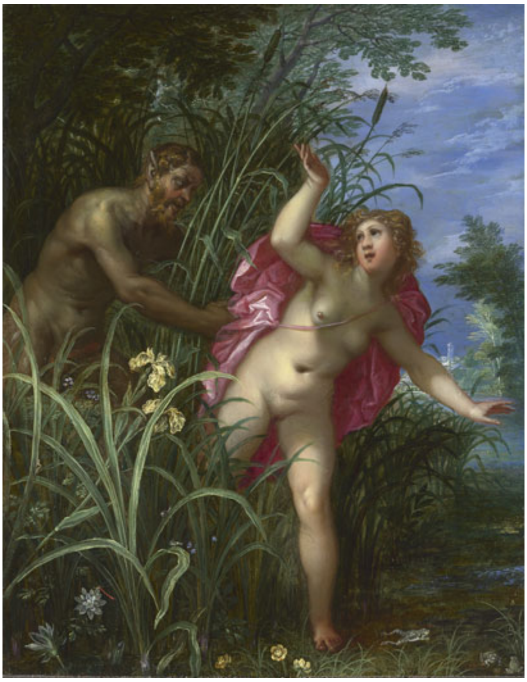

Fig. 22.4 Pan and Syrinx, Hendrick van Balen, 1615 (National Gallery, London, England)

the blossoms of the yellow irises and a frog leaping into the water, frightened by the struggling bodies of Pan and Syrinx. These details are later reproduced in a painting produced jointly by Rubens and Brueghel the Elder in 1617, suggesting that these two artists may have also collaborated with van Balen (Fig. 22.5).

The portrayal of the Syrinx *motif* in Western art reaches an acme in the paintings of Rubens, with one work in particular epitomising European painters' engagement with the "Pan and Syrinx" theme (Fig. 22.5). This painting is often referred to as the "Kassel picture", after the previous owner Landgrave Wilhelm VIII of Hessen-Kassel, founder of the Kassel Old Masters Gallery. The picture is what is referred to as a "cabinet painting" – only 40 × 60 cm in size but hugely impressive in its brushwork. It captures Pan in the moment when he believes that he is just about to get a firm grip on Syrinx. He is lunging forward on his strong goat's legs, his muscular body tensed for action. Although Rubens has positioned him in such a way that his head is seen

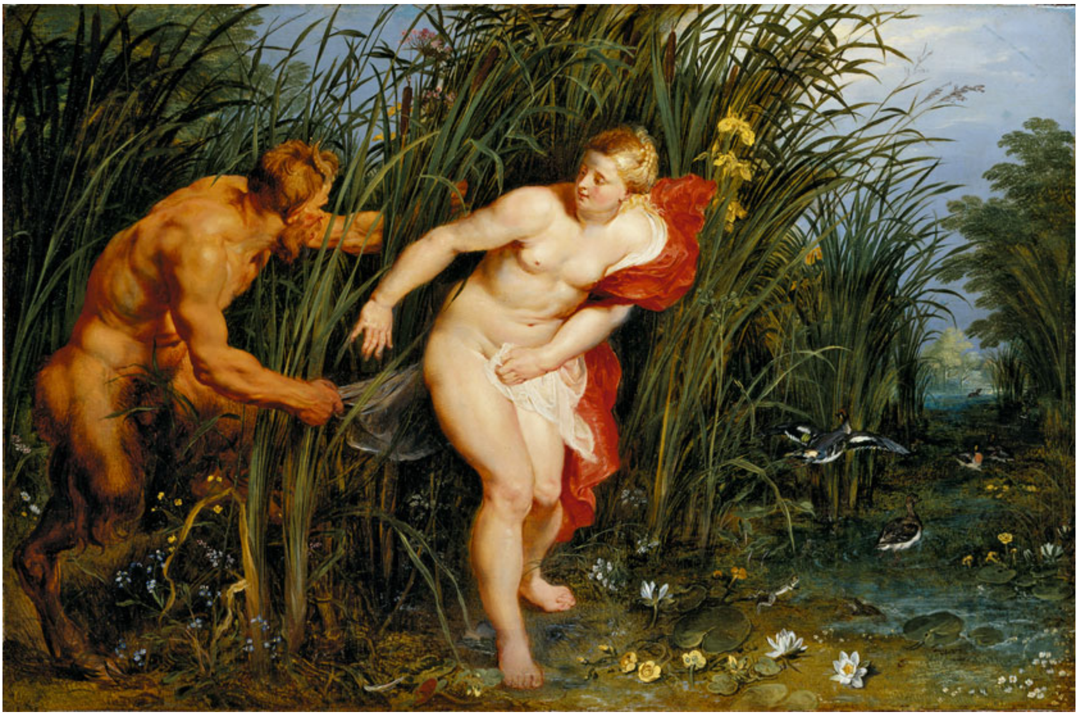

Fig. 22.5 Pan and Syrinx, Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder 1617 (Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Germany)

almost entirely from behind, a perceptibly determined facial expression is evident. His mouth is slightly open in amazement as he reaches out with his left arm, to embrace both Syrinx and the reeds that protect her, while seizing, with his right, the hem of her silken robe. It is the moment in which the two protagonists have their most intense and intimate eye contact. Syrinx's expression conveys surprise and anxiety but cannot be described as terrified. The palm of her right hand is held out to ward off Pan. Her left hand draws her transparent silken robe over her genitalia, much in the manner of the *Venus de' Medici.* Her flawless, pinkish-white skin contrasts sharply with the dark green of the reeds and with Pan's complexion, made brown by sun and wind. This very realistic treatment of complexion and bodily posture concords with Rubens's general view that it was the vocation of a painting to "bring its subjects to life", in a way that sculpture could not manage (Warnke et al. 2006). The small red cloak that is fluttering in the wind, down one side of Syrinx's body, serves to concentrate the viewer's gaze on the two protagonists.

Rubens's second wife, Hélène Fourment, often posed as his model, the first time as an angel, at the age of only 11. The best-known pictures of Hélène bear his pet name for her, which was "*Pelzchen",* meaning "Little Fur". She was not, however, the model for his Syrinx because she was too young at the time. Her body type, however, naturally corresponds with the typically Baroque physique, which we see in this painting.

Collaboration between two great artists is a rare and fortunate thing. Rubens's work on the figures dominates the painting but Brueghel's detailed representation of Nature, with water lilies and other plants and with ducks fleeing from the erotic struggle, is also a delight to the eye. The allegorical use, here too, of yellow irises, as a symbol of Syrinx' chastity, and of blooms of the forget-me-nots, surrounding the goat feet of Pan, brings a smile to the lips of the viewer. There are other pictures resulting from the collaboration of these two artists, in some of which Rubens's style dominates, in others Brueghel's. One assumes that the leading painter did an initial version of the picture, while Rubens drew sketches of the figures of the protagonists, which were then brought to full execution either by him or by artists training in his studio.

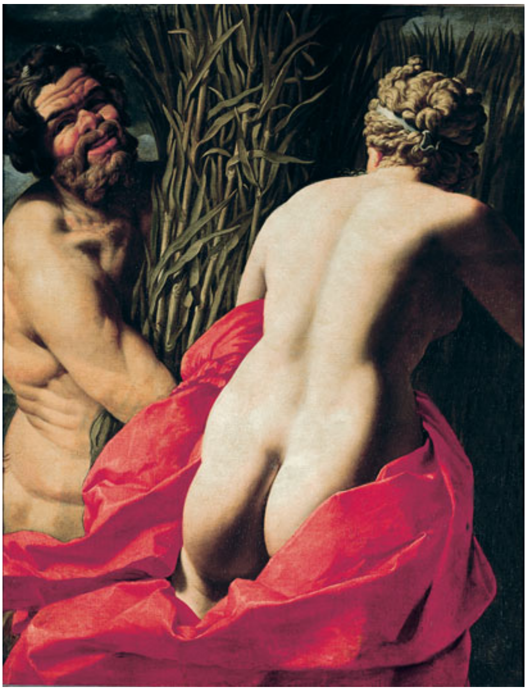

Fig. 22.6 Pan and Syrinx, Abraham Janssen, circa 1618/1619 (Kunstsammlung Böttcherstraße, Museum im Roselius-Haus, Bremen, Germany)

For the other Antwerp artists, Janssen and Jordaens, the "Kassel picture" was a catalyst for creating their own work on the theme. Janssen increased the size of the format to 120×98 cm and concentrated on the scene represented by the heads and upper bodies of the two protagonists (Fig. 22.6). This has the effect of making the viewer feel as if he is being drawn into the scene. The decisive effect, however, is achieved by the painter's having Pan establish eye contact with the viewer. His joyously flashing glance and vaguely triumphant smile appears to convey a desire to win the viewer's complicity in his intended act. This effect is further intensified by the fact that Syrinx, who appears to be fleeing from the gaze of the viewer, presents her retreating back, such that the viewer may be drawn into the dynamics of the represented action. Her back bears a strong resemblance to that of the *Venus* *de' Medici*. It can also be compared to another famous Roman copy of a Hellenistic sculpture, the *Venus Kallipygos*, or "Venus of the beautiful buttocks" (Lange et al. 2004). It is obvious that the dramaturgical form of the picture was influenced by Janssen's study of Caravaggio in Rome.

Jordaens also took part in this rivalry with Rubens and Janssen. The technical art-historical term for when a painter sets out to awaken greater interest in the viewer, by intensifying and emphasising certain visual details, already present in earlier paintings on the same theme, is "amplificatio". Thus, the first thing that strikes the viewer about Jordaens's painting of 1618–1619 is that it is an "amplification" of earlier treatments, in the most literal sense of this term. The size of the canvas is now increased to 176 × 136 cm (Fig. 22.7). Janssen's outdoing of Rubens's 40 × 61 cm canvas with a canvas of 120 × 98 cm is thus here itself outdone, with a canvas of such a scale that the figures in Jordaens's picture attain almost life-size dimensions. Furthermore, Jordaens arranges the principal subjects quite differently and adds a wealth of allegorical details. The figure of Syrinx, raised to her full height, appears to be actually rushing past the viewer. She stands out clearly, across almost all the space of the canvas, through the bright illumination of her fair skin. Pan is attempting to spring in pursuit of her, from the right side of the picture but the expression in his eyes is of both disappointment and desire. The arms already fallen to his sides and the breathlessly open mouth together tell the viewer that he has recognised that the chase is now hopeless.

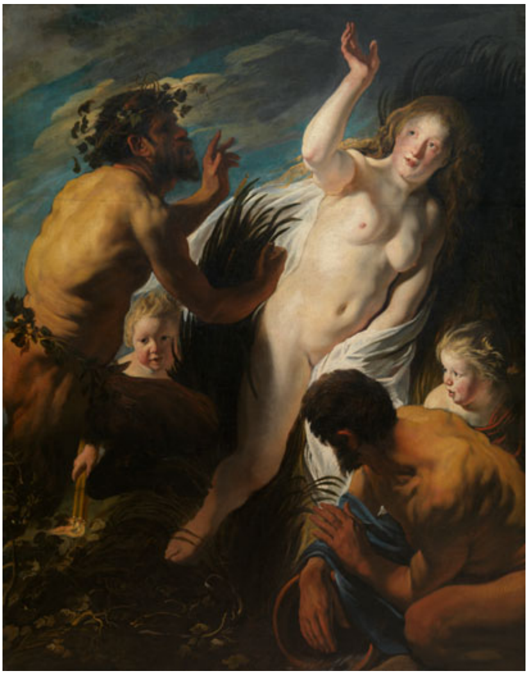

Fig. 22.7 Pan and Syrinx, Jacob Jordaens, 1618–1619. © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (Photographer J. Geleyns / www.roscan.be)

The artist also performs a second type of "amplificatio", by introducing additional figures into the events portrayed. Thus, we see Syrinx's father, Ladon, crouching in the foreground on the right, with one of Syrinx's sisters just behind him. We also see the child Cupid as a direct participant in the action, placed between the two protagonists. The dynamic quality of the scene is emphasised by the painter's portrayal of Syrinx's father and sister as being barely able to dodge out of the way, in order to avoid being trampled by the fleeing Syrinx.

The viewer also cannot help but note a third "amplificatio" in Jordaens's picture, this time bearing on its allegorical content. Amor holds the torch of love with the flame facing downward, an iconographic detail which signifies that the emissary of the goddess of love wants, once again, to make it clear to Pan that his erotic pursuit is in vain. A similar but more obvious iconographic idea is employed by Pierre Mignard, (1612–1695), who in his "Pan and Syrinx" (circa 1690, Louvre, Paris) simply has Cupid blowing out the torch of love. This image is also one, which Mignard painted twice. What impresses the viewer in these paintings, in contrast with Rubens's treatments, is their powerful realism. Syrinx's flight before Pan is portrayed in a way that recalls the flight of a refugee before the horrors of war.

One variation on the theme, which is quite unique in its iconographic content, is the 1638 painting by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), also in the Louvre. In Poussin's treatment, Cupid aims Love's arrow, not at Pan but rather at Syrinx, as if he is attempting to help Pan realise his intentions.

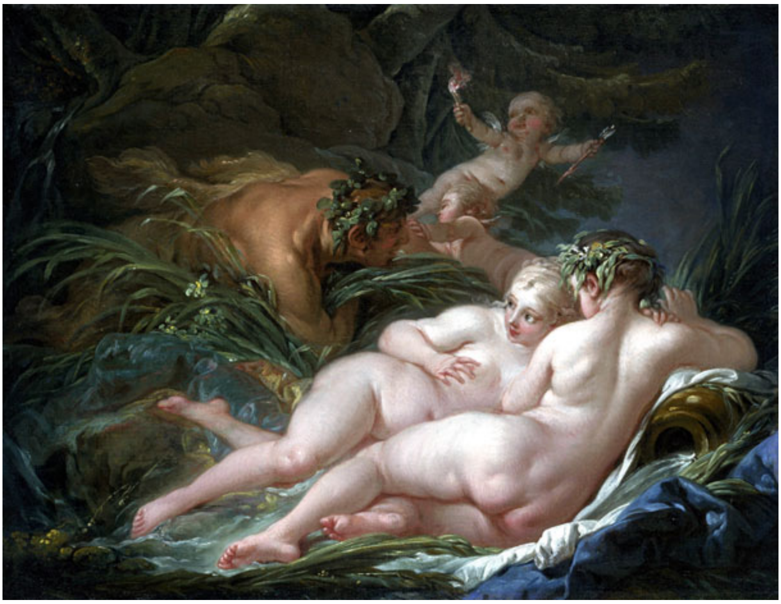

Fig. 22.8 Pan and Syrinx, Francois Boucher, 1759 (National Gallery, London, England)

Finally, representation of the erotic aspect of the episode culminates in the unambiguous image produced by an artist like Francois Boucher (1703–1770), court painter to King Louis XV (Fig. 22.8). This might be described as a fourth, content-related “amplificatio”. In contrast, not all images of Syrinx depict Pan and his erotic intentions. The painting by the Victorian artist Arthur Hacker (1858–1919) instead links Syrinx solely and intimately with the reeds to which she gave her name (Fig. 22.9). Pan is only represented as her shadow.

In essence, the “Pan and Syrinx” story tends to be depicted in paintings as compositions containing either two or more than two human figures. With the exception of Jordaens, the Flemish painters tend to favour two-figure compositions. In the case of the French artists, including Francois Boucher, Michel Dorigny (1617–1665) and Francois Marot (1666–1719), composition with more than two figures is predominant. Treatments of the *motif* were made frequently in France but rarely in Italy and Spain. The most famous painting on the theme in Spain is a work by Rubens, which was originally displayed in the hunting lodge of King Philip IV. Unfortunately, this illustration only survives in the form of an initial sketch, made in oils.

Brueghel the Elder died in 1625 and Rubens in 1640. The “Pan and Syrinx” paintings which emerged subsequently, from the Antwerp School, seem to be tired swan songs, in comparison with the earlier works. Brueghel the Younger, apprenticed to Rubens, became his father’s successor, as Rubens’s collaborator and, finally and in turn, Rubens’s successor. He went on to paint three further pictures on the “Pan and Syrinx” theme, in collaboration with other painters, who also trained under Rubens. In these pictures, however, the landscape and the associated animals increasingly dominate the compositions, whereas depiction of the principal figures becomes repetitive and monotonous. Indeed, the third picture represents no more than a mirror of the earlier image. The artists of the paintings that followed were also less interested in the psychological aspect of the Pan and Syrinx myth. G. Hoet’s (1648–1733) version, for example, executed around 1700, favours a luxuriantly painted landscape over the main subjects.

The Syrinx paintings take their place in a long history of the representation of the female form and of the background psychological factors in such representations. The earliest example of figurative art hitherto discovered, anywhere in the world, is the spectacular “Venus” of the “Hohle Fels” cave, in the Danube valley, in the Swabian Alps of southwestern Germany. She is about 40,000 calendar years old, made of mammoth-tusk ivory and symbolises fertility (Conard 2009).

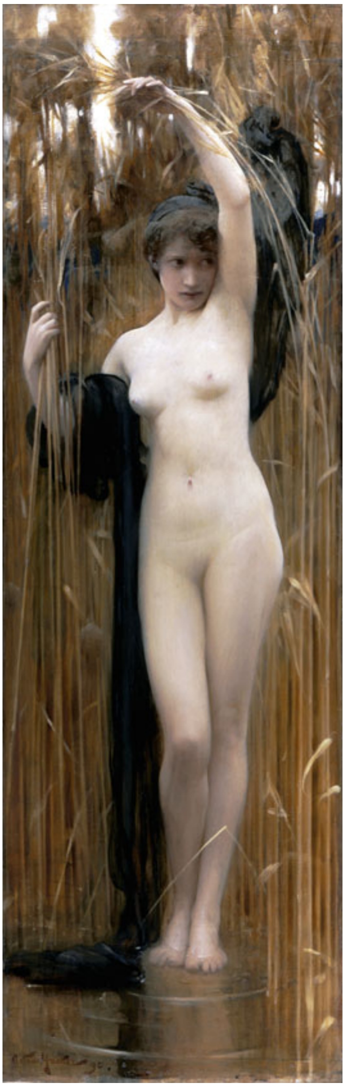

Fig. 22.9 Syrinx, Arthur Hacker, 1892 (Manchester Art Gallery, England)

Somewhat ironically, the name of the Roman goddess of love was attached to this very ancient sculpture by modern archaeology. The fundamental longing that is embodied in this figure also came to be embodied in many later images of goddesses, which can be traced continuously across several millennia, in the Near East and in the Mediterranean, down to the classical period of Greece. Greeks of this period are distinguished by their great enthusiasm for representing the beauty of the human body (Fox 2009), and, here too, it is mythological figures that predominate. This longing for beauty culminates in Praxiteles' (390–320 BC) famous statue, the "Aphrodite of Cnidus", a sculpture, which was considered by the Greeks themselves to be "breathtaking". The Romans took over this ideal of beauty, which endured until the very end of the Roman Empire.

This attitude of mind and spirit was connected with the liberal secular philosophy of such authors and thinkers as Epicurus and Lucretius (Greenblatt 2011). Sadly, in the Middle Ages, it vanished under the influence of the Christian churches (Greenblatt 2011). The fear of death and of the torments of hell dominated the minds of men, as is reflected in apocalyptic images like those in the works of Hieronymus Bosch. Only in the late Gothic period did the image of a human face that smiled on life and the world begin to feature once again in European artworks. Then, in the Renaissance, the wish to represent artistically the beauty of the human form exploded, once again, onto the European cultural scene. The milestone for this development in occidental culture is, of course, Boticelli's painting "The Birth of Venus". This is the first life-size representation of a naked female form in the modern era, and it contains a plenitude of allegories inspired by Greek and Roman mythology. It was used at that time, quite literally, as an "election poster", by one of the sons of the powerful Florentine family of the Medici, when he was standing for election to the city's Senate.

In our present era, with its massive surfeit of available images, it is both charming and stimulating to trace out, stage by stage, the development of the representation of our emotions in art.

References

Conard NJ (2009) A female figurine from the basal Aurignacian of Hohle Fels Cave in southwestern Germany. Nature 459:248–252

Fox RL (2009) Travelling heroes: Greeks and their myths in the epic age of Homer. Penguin, London

Greenblatt S (2011) The swerve: how the world became modern. W.W. Norton, New York

Lange J, Schnackenburg B, van Mulders C et al (2004) Pan & Syrinx – eine erotische Jagd : Peter Paul Rubens, Jan Brueghel und ihre Zeitgenossen. Staatliche Museen Kassel, Kassel

Warnke M, Rubens PP, Warnke M (2006) Rubens Leben und Werk. DuMont, Köln