FRUITS of DESIRE

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CARVED IVORY CUP

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Essay by Eike D. Schmidt

Photography by Jack Ross

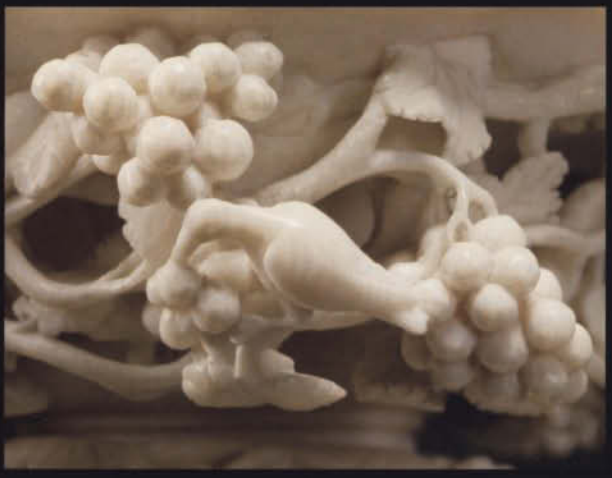
The J. Paul Getty Museum
Los Angeles

At once a celebration of wine and an exhortation to philosophically reflect on devotion to sensual pleasures, the seventeenth-century ivory goblet by Balthasar Griessmann at the J. Paul Getty Museum combines narrative and allegory in a characteristically Baroque way. A photographic essay, which documents the goblet's abundant details, is followed by a discussion of the significance and historical context of this unique work of art.

Balthasar Griessmann (German, ca. 1620–1706), *Ivory Goblet*, ca. 1680. Ivory, 52.5 cm (20⅝ in.). Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006.26.

View of the lid from above

View of the inside of the cup from above



Views of the cup without the lid and unscrewed from the stem

Fruits of Desire A Seventeenth-Century Carved Ivory Cup

A superb example of virtuoso carving, this seventeenth-century ivory goblet, now at the J. Paul Getty Museum, was sculpted in Salzburg, Austria, by Balthasar Griessmann (about 1620–1706), an artist originally from Wasserburg am Inn, a small town in Bavaria, Germany. His identity was established in the local archives only in 1994. Since he had signed several works with the monogram *BG*, it was known even before the discovery of his name and the reconstruction of his career that he was among the most eminent ivory sculptors of the Baroque period.

Imported from Africa and India via the large European seaports, ivory was cherished as a precious and exotic material during the Baroque age. Griessmann was a specialist in ivory sculpting who combined the skills of turning geometrical shapes on the lathe with an extraordinary ability to carve intricate figures by hand. As is particularly evident when viewing the uncovered cup from above, this allowed for an extremely subtle coordination between the turned surface and the figures carved from the same piece. At some points the ivory ground is no thicker than a millimeter and is translucent (pp. 8–9 and 22–25).

The carving varies from very low relief to parts sculpted fully in the round (pp. 10–11). At a height of 20⅝ inches, the Getty Museum's goblet is Griessmann's largest known ivory vessel and must have been made for a very important patron and event—perhaps as a diplomatic gift for a young prince or a wedding present. But nothing certain is known of its original destination and use, since it is documented from only the mid-1800s, when it was first recorded

(and photographed) in a private collection in England. Since the goblet's shape is adapted from precious drinking vessels in silver, the best of which were produced in Nuremberg and Augsburg, it may be assumed that it was used as a centerpiece on a table during a festive banquet. The delicate carvings would not have survived intact if it actually had been used for drinking.

The goblet is decorated with no fewer than twenty-eight human characters and satyrs, cast on a stage decorated with vine leaves, grapes, and tendrils. It is composed of four different parts: a foot, which is decorated with resting infants (or putti), both human and satyrs (with hooves and pointed ears); a stem, made of plentiful vine tendrils spiraling upward in the shape of a double helix; a cup, which is screwed to the stem and is decorated with a large frieze of figures above a base zone of vines, which camouflages the connection between the stem and the cup; and, finally, a detachable lid, which is composed of various geometrically shaped parts with a crown of dancing infants on the rim and an infant on the top. Amazingly, each of the main components (such as the base, stem, cup, and lid) is carved from a single piece of ivory, without any attached or joined parts.

The goblet's theme—the virtues and risks of wine—is epitomized by the little boy who stands on top of the lid (p. 1), wearing a wreath of vine leaves around his head and another around his waist. With his left hand he raises a bunch of grapes, and in his lowered right, he holds a flat bowl, which is inspired by an ancient *kylix*. The putto is already tipsy from the wine he drank so far—given his wobbly, bent legs, one fears that he may fall from his narrow plinth. With his tilted head, he seems to have taken a break from drinking to look inquisitively and somewhat concernedly at his own mirror image, which may be reflected on the wine's surface in the cup—perhaps wondering whether he can take another couple of gulps. An erudite Baroque beholder may have immediately associated the ancient Greek poet Alkaios's characterization of wine as "mirror of man" with this representation. This moment of pause and reflection will

turn out to be crucial for the allegory, in which the cup's narration culminates.

Underneath the boy, who may be seen as a sort of cheerleader or *symposiarch*—that is, the elected ruler of the feast—two circles of infants vividly demonstrate the effects of wine on the human psyche. The putti around the lid's rim exemplify the stimulation and excitement that follows from drinking a few sips. Different in appearance, action, and bearing, ten putti engage in a merry dance, carrying a garland composed of vine, pomegranates, and other fruits. Transported by delight, they boisterously run and leap, shouldering the garland or grasping it with their hands. Many of their mouths are open as if singing. But perhaps some of them actually scream at each other, as the dance seems to have turned into a tug-of-war. The garland's irregular, three-dimensional oscillation up and down and back and forth reflects the rapidity and energy of the frolicking infants. One of them even has strands of hair flying freely in the air from the quick movement of his head.

By contrast, at the goblet's foot, all the merriment and energy has dissipated. Five putti—half the number of those at the top—crawl, sit, or lie on the ground. Exhausted, they sleep or doze, or lazily reach out for more grapes. These infants exemplify the opposite, sedative effect of wine. While the putti on the lid evidently had less alcohol than their cheerleader—who is shown at the threshold between tipsiness and drunkenness—those at the base clearly had more than he, and more indeed than appears reasonable. They represent two phases of drunkenness: light and joyful putti dance around the lid, whereas heavy-limbed drunkards lie around the base. Elation is expressed in the upper region, drowsiness in the goblet's lower part. In fact, three of the putti down on the ground are actually not human, but little satyrs, with pointed ears and hairy, hoofed goat legs. They represent a lower kind of being, an existence that is driven by instincts and not reason. The mingling of drunken human and satyric putti at the base show that drinking too much wine may reduce the mind's capacities to an animal-like state.

Griessmann's use of infants to illustrate the effects of wine follows an artistic tradition that began in the early Hellenistic period (late fourth century B.C.), when hosts of infants were first introduced in the iconography of Bacchus and Venus. From the realms of these two gods, who are associated with the sensual worlds, the employment of putti eventually expanded to a wide range of contexts and a variety of activities and trades. For example, on a late Roman sarcophagus showing a bacchic vintage festival (below), numerous putti are busy cutting ripe grapes (on the left side) and crushing them with their feet in a winepress (on the right side). Even the birds picking grapes in the tendrils around the base of the cup can be traced directly to similar Roman examples. In the Getty sarcophagus, the same detail is represented on the upper rim.

Rarely depicted during the Middle Ages, naked or barely clad infants were reintroduced into art during the Renaissance. In keeping with the broad range of meanings established for them in antiquity, they were known as *spiritelli*, or airy sprites, suggestive of the playful innocence and carefree impetus of youth. As such, they frequently carry coats of arms or torches, garlands, and other festive paraphernalia, including musical instruments.

Sarcophagus Representing a Dionysiac Vintage Festival. Roman, A.D. 290–300. Marble, H: 53.1 (20⅞ in.); L: 190 cm (74¹³⁄₁₆ in.). Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008.14.

The illustration of the effects of wine embodied by the putti on the lid and the base is but a prelude for a narrative that unfolds on a much larger scale on the cup, which is held by the spiraling tendrils of vine that constitute the stem. On the cup's cylindrical surface, inhabited by twelve different figures, the wandering eye easily finds its starting point where the armed woman, wearing a cuirass, and the male nude decidedly turn their backs to each other (pp. 23 and 26–27). Assisted by a female figure who is elaborately coiffed and draped in a light, billowing cloth, the muscular nude twists in the signature movement of Mannerist art known as *figura serpentinata* and carries a large vase toward the left. Although his athletic physique does not correspond to the ancient image of Silenus (the usually chubby companion of Bacchus who dedicated his life to every sensual pleasure), the vine wreath he sports on his head clearly identifies him as a follower of Bacchus. The woman who helps him must be a maenad. The large vase, the specific shape of which reflects designs for goldsmith's works circulating in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century engraved pattern books, is just one of four instances in which the artist incorporates the representation of other types of vessels into the decoration of this goblet. The other examples are

the cheerleader's *kylix* (p. 1), a chalice shown among the drunken putti on the base (p. 18), and one held by Bacchus (p. 25). Similar to the heraldic device of *mise en abyme* (incorporating a copy of an element into itself), the depiction of vessels on the goblet's surface draws attention to its typology and fictive function as a container of wine.

Two children, who appear to be slightly older than the infants of the base and lid, precede the pair of Bacchus's adult worshippers to the left. Griessmann naturalistically captured the asymmetrical facial expression of the satyr infant, who grimaces at the adults with his mouth opened in a crooked, clumsy way, perhaps singing, talking, or nagging (pp. 29 and 31). He also wears a wreath of vines around his head and a ring of leaves over his shoulder, like the garland that decorates the vase carried by the adults behind him (pp. 23 and 26–27). His fat-bellied human companion sports the vine wreath over a scarf, holding a trumpet in his left hand and apparently a sausage in his right—possibly misinterpreting a plectrum (a device used to pluck the strings of an instrument) from an ancient bacchic representation, but appropriately adapting it to the banquet theme (p. 28). Next to these children, an adult satyr with pointed ears carries bunches of grapes in a braided basket (pp. 22 and 34–35). He leans over the shoulder of Bacchus, who leads the procession of his worshippers (known as *thiasos*), and at the same time participates in an allegorical representation that occupies more than half of the cup's cylindrical surface.

The characters are particularly densely grouped around a reclining youth with closed eyes, and their limbs are intricately interwoven (pp. 25 and 53). The bacchic procession comes to a halt. But differently from the goblet's crowning putto, who pauses to reflect in the middle of the celebration, the *thiasos* is interrupted before the feast has even begun. In a tour de force of carving, wine—with individual grapes within the stream—is poured by Bacchus onto the youth's hip, as if to wake him. At the same time, a female figure beneath the god of wine pulls with both hands at

the young man's clothes, apparently trying to drag him over to Bacchus's side. Her attributes—a sheaf of wheat, a head of cabbage or lettuce, and a bone she chews in the left corner of her mouth—are clearly associated with food. According to the verses that accompany the engraving that Griessmann adapted for this allegory (pp. 51 and 52), she represents Famine rather than Ceres, the goddess of agriculture. Above and in front of Bacchus, a naked woman adorned with precious jewelry bends over the sleeping man, drawing attention to her dangling breasts with her right hand. This is certainly Venus, assisted by her son Cupid, who flies in front of her. With both hands he turns the sleeping youth's head toward the goddess of love to ensure that his gaze fixes upon her when he awakens (p. 53).

But on the other side, Saturn—the aged, long-bearded god of time, winged and clasping his scythe—stops Venus's approach and pushes her back. The splayed fingers of the two juxtaposed hands of Venus massaging her own breast and Saturn grasping her shoulder form a beautiful visual rhyme (p. 38). The old god is an ally of Minerva, who in full armor has entered the scene to ward off the attack of the senses with her shield (p. 24). Again, the artist takes the opportunity to create a poetical counterpoint by pairing Cupid's youthful face with the wrinkled skin and suffering expression of Medusa's snake-covered head, which adorns Minerva's shield. With her right hand, with which she also holds her spear, the goddess of wisdom grasps the sleeping figure's hand as though to console him, while also symbolically pulling him to her side. Evidently, the parental characters of Minerva and Saturn attempt to save the sleeping figure on the ground from the temptations of the senses, personified by Venus (who aims to attract him sexually) and Bacchus (who entices his thirst with his mind-altering liquid). In addition, his appetite might be stimulated by the food arranged around Ceres-turned-Famine. The allegorical fight—which ultimately draws upon literary examples such as the *Psychomachia* by Prudentius—would have been effortlessly understood by a contemporary viewer. Frequent subjects, such as Hercules at the crossroads (with a path of

virtue opposing a path of vice) and the temptation of Saint Anthony (with demons trying to scare or physically excite him, in antithesis to his hermetic existence), made use of a similarly structured visual formula, with a sleeping, dreaming figure in the center. But who is this figure on the ground that all the others fight about?

The goblet's allegory ultimately goes back to a painting by Peter Paul Rubens's teacher in Antwerp, Otto van Veen (above). Thanks to an engraving by Pieter Perret (p. 51), dedicated to the Spanish court architect Juan de Herrera, van Veen's invention became instantly famous throughout Europe. A Latin poem was added in order to explain the composition, which is reversed from the original painting. Griessmann must have known (or perhaps even owned) the print, after which he also carved a rectangular ivory relief now in the Château Mouton Rothschild in Pauillac near Bordeaux, France (p. 49). For the goblet, he adapted the composition to the more horizontal, widescreen-like format of the curved surface. He eliminated

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Otto van Veen (Flemish, 1556–1629), *Allegory of Baffled Youth*, ca. 1595–1600. Oil on panel, 146 x 212 cm (57½ x 83½ in.). Photograph © Erik Cornelius / The National Museum of Fine Arts, Stockholm, NM 666.

the landscape view (with Minerva's temple) and all the flying figures who hover in the sky (such as the dove above Venus's chariot and two additional putti waving wreaths of honor). But in particular, he omitted the stream of milk, which in the painting and engraving Venus expresses from her right breast, aimed at the sleeping figure's face, but deflected by Minerva's shield. According to the goblet's overarching bacchic theme, only the stream of wine remains. As on the canvas and in the engraving, the fundamental opposition on the goblet is between Minerva and the protagonists of sensual pleasure.

In the painting, the cloth-pulling female personification (which in the print became Famine) leans above a gray shield with the picture's title *TYPUS INCONSULTAE IUVENTUTIS*, that is,

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Balthasar Griessmann, *Allegory of Baffled Youth*, ca. 1680. Ivory, 24.5 x 21.5 cm (9⅝ x 8½ in.). Photograph © Mouton Rothschild, Musée du Vin dans l'Art, Pauillac.

Allegory of Baffled Youth. A young man is also mentioned in the first line of the engraving's poem. On the goblet, the smooth and beardless face and the slender body indicate the sleeping figure's young age. Therefore, it is likely that the goblet's allegory principally addressed viewers on the verge of adulthood. But in a more general sense, the supine, besieged man invites any beholder of the goblet to identify with him.

Because of the detail and comprehensiveness with which Griessmann describes both the positive and negative effects of wine, it is clear that he does not flatly deny or condemn the pleasures associated with drinking. Rather, he invites the beholder to stop for a moment—like the putto on the lid's top or the dreaming youth on the cup—to consider the potential consequences of drinking and the benefits of moderation. Μηδὲν ἄγαν. *In medio stat virtus.* Don't exaggerate.

Eike D. Schmidt

PIETER PERRET (Flemish, 1555–ca. 1625) after Otto van Veen, *Allegory of Baffled Youth*, ca. 1595. Print, 31.7 x 21.7 cm (12½ x 8½ in.). Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet, RP-P-1904-2854.

Blanda Venus Iuvenem prædulci lacte iacentem

With her sweet, sweet milk, alluring Venus feeds the lying young man,

Lactat, cum Bacchus irrigat usque mero.

While Bacchus showers him with thick wine.

Immoderata Ceres comes est tantisper, Egestas

Immoderate Ceres had been his companion but now

Sordida dum miserum prendat humique premat

Foul Famine clutches the unfortunate youth and squeezes him to the ground

Dimovet at Tempus Venerem: eius et assecla Pallas

Time pushes Venus away, and so his ally Minerva

Obiicit huic remoras illici ubique Deæ;

—here, there, and everywhere—throws obstacles in the goddess's way,

Delitiis Iuvenem haec stolidis ne fascinet ultra,

For Venus no further should bewitch the youth with foolish pleasures,

Mox illum pigra tollit amanter humo,

And Minerva soon lovingly lifts him from the listless earth,

Quo per iter durum ad Virtutis Honoris et Ædem

So that relentless on the hard road to the temple of virtue and grace,

Impiger is tendat serta ubi honora ferat.

He may finally receive the floral garlands of honor.

Interlinear translation of the verses on Pieter Perret's print, *Allegory of Baffled Youth* (p. 51)

Acknowledgments

This publication would not have been possible without the help and advice of a number of colleagues and friends. I should first mention Sascha Mehringer, who brought Griessmann's ivory goblet and its upcoming availability on the market to my attention in the winter of 2005–6. It was purchased by the J. Paul Getty Museum a few months later thanks to the enthusiastic support of Michael Brand, director, and Antonia Boström, senior curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts. Jane Bassett allowed me to look over her shoulder in the conservation laboratory for many hours, when she disassembled and reassembled the goblet, measured it, and examined it under magnification and in ultraviolet light. Anne Woollett deserves particular mention, as she identified the print source for the allegory on Griessmann's goblet upon spotting a photograph of it on my desk. Lieneke Nijkamp and Huigen Leeflang kindly helped with the study of Perret's engraving, Jens Daehner graciously provided archaeological information, Maria Ausilia Pisano gave invaluable philological advice, and Felip Costaglioli refined the Latin translation. Julien Sereys de Rothschild graciously brought the ivory relief in Mouton to my attention and allowed me to publish it. The idea for this book was Mark Greenberg's, who nursed its production through all stages. The final chasing and polishing was left to the talented hands of Jesse Zwack. More than anything else, this volume is indebted to the aesthetic sense and sensibilities of Jack Ross, who took the photographs, and Kurt Hauser, who is responsible for its design.

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**Published by the J. Paul Getty Museum,
Los Angeles**

Getty Publications
1200 Getty Center Drive, Suite 500
Los Angeles, California 90049-1682
www.getty.edu/publications

Gregory M. Britton, *Publisher*
Mark Greenberg, *Editor in Chief*

Jesse Zwack, *Editor*
Kurt Hauser, *Designer*
Amita Molloy, *Production Coordinator*
Ruth Evans Lane, *Photo Researcher*
Jack Ross, *Photographer*

Typography by Diane Franco
Printed by CS Graphics Pte. Ltd., Singapore

5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schmidt, Eike D.
Fruits of desire : a seventeenth-century carved ivory cup / essay by Eike D. Schmidt ; photography by Jack Ross.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-89236-940-9 (hardcover)
1. Griessmann, Balthasar, c. 1620–1706. 2. Ivory carving. 3. Goblets. 4. Wine in art. I. J. Paul Getty Museum. II. Title.
NK5998.G75A67 2009
736.62—dc22

2008046014