

Alana Koontz

The Art and Artifacts Associated with the Cult of Dionysus

Alana Koontz is a student at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee graduating with a degree in Art History and a certificate in Ancient Mediterranean Studies. The main focus of her studies has been ancient art, with specific attention to ancient architecture, statuary, and erotic symbolism in ancient art. Through various internships, volunteering and presentations, Alana has deepened her understanding of the art world, and hopes to do so more in the future. Alana hopes to continue to grad school and earn her Master's Degree in Art History and Museum Studies, and eventually earn her PhD. Her goal is to work in a large museum as a curator of the ancient collections. Alana would like to thank the Religious Studies Student Organization for this fantastic experience, and appreciates them for letting her participate.

Dionysus was the god of wine, art, vegetation and also widely worshipped as a fertility god. The cult of Dionysus worshipped him fondly with cultural festivities, wine-induced ritualistic dances,¹ intense and violent orgies, and secretive various depictions of drunken revelry.² He embodies the intoxicating portion of nature. Dionysus, in myth, was the last god to be accepted at Mt Olympus, and was known for having a mortal mother. He spent his adulthood teaching the cultivation of grapes, and wine-making. The worship began as a celebration of culture, with plays and processions, and progressed into a cult that was shrouded in mystery. Later in history, worshippers would perform their rituals in the cover of darkness, limiting the cult-practitioners to women, and were surrounded by myth that is sometimes interpreted as fact.³

This myth of Dionysiac ritual comes from the Athenian playwright Euripides' *'Bacchae.'* This tragedy outlines several rituals of Dionysus that include the drunken hunt for the god in the woods, multiple sacrifices to the god, and wild moments of dance and drink. It was translated as a factual account of worship to Dionysus. The accounts in the Greek tragedy are vivid and recall the imbibed carousing of Dionysus, but the deep arguments between fact and fiction make the Greek tragedy unreliable. However, with the wide array of remaining art, artifacts and material culture associated with the celebrations and practices of Dionysus, a close examination can be used to gauge the true festivities of the god.

Art is an important part of any ancient culture, and the ever-changing elements, yet consistent Dionysiac worship creates fascinating visuals. Physical works were vital to Dionysiac worship, as it gave supplicatory events a grounded figure and symbol to behold. The body of work remaining is large and well preserved, and includes statuary, friezes, vase painting, and several other examples. The polar opposite portrait types of Dionysus explain the desires of the cult, ranging in worship from the archaic Greeks to late Romans. The vase-painting depicts what

Dionysiac festival experiences may have been in a biographical style, outlining processions, individual festivals, and general themes of Dionysus. And the beautiful, dynamic representation of *maenads*, Dionysus' female followers, display the reverence of devoted cult members and ritualistic goods show the true nature of the celebration. Not only did Dionysus surround his worshippers in nature, he was within them. Dionysus was a god who was worshipped richly, and with the great body of culture that remains, a recollection of the true worship of Dionysus can begin to be built.

The earliest mention of Dionysus is on Linear B tablets found in the site of Knossos of Crete,⁴ showing the early worship between 1500 and 1100 BC, but original origins of the worship are unknown. However, the central locus of Dionysus worship was mainland Greece, islands in the Cyclades, and later in southern Italy. The festivals associated with Dionysus were, as anticipated, colorful, loud, and theatrical. They followed a strict program of processions, theatrical events and parties. One of the greatest festivals dedicated to Dionysus was the 'Great Dionysia,'⁵ a multi-day event that took place in Athens. In this festival, famed poets, lyricists and writers would compete in the categories of tragedies and comedies in the Odeon of Dionysus on the Athenian Acropolis. Some victors of these ritualistic contests include Sophokles, Herakleides, and Euripedes,⁶ as discovered on victory tablets in the Athenian agora.⁷

Great Dionysia was celebrated in March, when the leaves began to reappear on the vine. This festival came after the Rural Dionysia, which celebrated the cultivation of vines,⁸ and was a lesser festival of Athens. However, before the readings of plays and the various games were to commence, the festival must suitably begin. The use of material objects was necessary in all parts of the celebration, but especially important in the procession, or *pompe*.⁹ The main focal point of the pompe was the cult statue of Dionysus himself.¹⁰ It was usually of wood, or set in bronze, and would be processed up to the Theater of Dionysus on the Acropolis, and set there to observe the rituals. The statue itself is believed to have gone through quite a journey to arrive at the festivities. It would be taken from its original spot in the temple, removed from Athens, and then officially escorted down the mythical path Dionysus took, until it came to its final spot in the Theater of Dionysus.¹¹ This statue would be pulled on a wheeled ship,¹² or carried by faithful venerators, usually in elaborate costumes and masks, and they would perform dances and chants throughout the procession.

The wheeled ship represented triumph, as in the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*,¹³ which outlines how Dionysus outwitted a group of pirates who had taken him over. As seen in friezes (Figure 1) and vase-painting, this statue had a tapered foot which would smoothly lock into a base. This made the statue easily transportable, easily displayed, and able to be venerated during the celebrations. While the emergence of the statue back into Athens was celebrated with grandeur, it was not the main event preceding the Great Dionysia.¹⁴ The main, epiphanic procession was a welcoming of the god back into Athens. This festival of splendor included the carrying of phallic representations, either monumental or personal in size, which recalls the god's mythical acceptance and entrance into Athens. In myth, upon Dionysus' entrance into Athens he is rejected. In anger, Dionysus sends genital diseases to Athenian males.¹⁵ When an oracle is consulted on the issue, the Athenians are commanded to accept and honor the god. The phallic sculptures (Figure 2) and statues recollect the power and force of Dionysus, and of what he is capable. These were an important staple in Dionysiac cult art, representing the rejuvenation of the season, a new life. The phallic references suggest honor and are meant to please the god, and make him feel welcomed into Athens. Choruses and dancers of Dionysus' loyal venerators comprised the procession, already worked into a frenzy. The day after the procession is filled

with wine drinking competitions, followed by a drunken parade to the sanctuary of Dionysus in the marshes.¹⁶

In myth, the processors of Dionysus are satyrs and nymphs, as well as his female followers, his maddened women also known as *maenads*. In legend, the *maenads* are the ones who raised the young Dionysus, and are nymph-like beings who are angry and protective. The sculpture, dated 350 BC, by Greek sculptor Skopas, captures the image of the *maenad* with ease, and brings her to life. She is no longer a thing of myth and legend, but a true representation of a worshipper in the throes of celebration. These depictions show the vibrancy of Dionysiac worship and the movement from legend to true worshippers of Dionysus. Ancient Greek politician Kallistratos praises this work¹⁷ with admiration and astonishment in the capturing of the Dionysiac spirit inside the solid marble body of the *maenad*, he says:

When we saw the face we stood speechless, so clearly was perception expressed by one who had no perception, the Dionysiac possession of the *maenad* was manifest without there being any possession, and all that the soul displays when stung with madness, all the signs of passion, shone out through the sculptor's skill blended with secret reason.¹⁸

Her body is twisted in such a manner that could only be loosened by wine and dancing. The passion of the cult flourishes in this image, as the *maenad* loses herself in the dance, music, worship and wine. The posture of such depictions of maenads, in sculpture, vase painting and reliefs, is unnatural and broken, dancing into a state of near-collapse. The torso is twisted and head thrown back and arms are usually extended out to the sides or front. This consistency of movement demonstrates there may have been choreography specifically associated with Dionysiac worship. Notably, the *maenad* representations wear contemporary garments. Thin, loose, long-sleeved chitons and mantles¹⁹ draped over the shoulders allowed for movement and mobility. Some were freely fastened, barely covering the *maenad's* bodies. It was effortless attire that epitomizes the vision of the *maenad*.

The image of Dionysus had several manifestations. The earliest version, the one used in the Great Dionysia, was a bearded, mature god, which recalls a wise, worldly, and aged force. A beard in the classical Greek world symbolized manliness and power. In some cases, it even symbolized virility. This accurately frames Dionysus as the fertility god, and certainly embodies the festival of the vine. The beard of the mature statuary and vase painting is commonly shown in curled tendrils, which was contemporary fashion. The Greeks painted Dionysus as one of their own, like he was a wise philosopher, who was also never shown without a beard. The Greeks reveled in the human form, and gave the bodies of the gods just as much attention. His posture is more natural and relaxed, and in vase painting, is usually shown interacting directly with his worshippers. Dionysus in imagery was also dressed contemporarily. He is commonly in a long *chiton*, sweeping to his ankles, and a *himation* draped diagonally across his body. (Figure 4) The garments, though appearing heavy and dense, have a distinct sense of lightness and movement, as he moves with ease in his portraiture. His mature image is usually also accompanied by vines and ivy wreaths. Some images have them sprouting from his body, others have the representation of them adorning his tunic, and yet others have them tightly bound around his figure. The most popular, however, would be the image of vines floating in air around his body, sometimes with a hand reaching out to hold them close. Normally seen on vase painting, this is a reminder of

Dionysus' godliness and what he embodies. It also symbolizes Dionysus' power over the vine, and that he is the one who oversees the cultivation and creation of wine.

In addition to vines and ivy, the mature Dionysus is commonly seen with a staff, called a *thyrsus*. (Figure 5) This staff was not only seen in vase paintings, but also physically used in Dionysiac festivals. *Maenads* are pictured with the *thyrsus* clutched in their hands mid-dance, and are shown in processions. For the *maenads*, it is held casually, as if it was merely an extra limb.²⁰ It is also suspected that the staffs were thrown and tossed in the air as a part of the ritual itself. The shaft was made of *ferula*, a Mediterranean plant with a hollow stem, and was wrapped with vines of ivy, and on the apex of the *thyrsus* stood a pinecone. This is, again, thought to be a representation of a phallus, the pinecone acting as the seed, and the long staff producing it. From the *thyrsus*' role in the dancing, it can be hypothesized that the act of tossing and throwing was symbolic of fertilizing the land with a healthy crop, spreading the seed. The *thyrsus* is also wielded by Dionysus and *maenads* alike as a weapon. The *thyrsus* guarded these maddened worshippers and the vine as a symbol of Dionysus alone, unable to be controlled by any other. Another suggestion of Dionysus is the image of Infant Dionysus, usually pictured being held by Hermes, or a satyr. This recalls Dionysus' birth, and Zeus' entrusting of the child to Hermes and nymphs. This imagery is popular in Late-Hellenistic ages,²¹ and while not particularly used in ritual, was a popular adornment.

The final popular and common vision of Dionysus is the Youthful Dionysus. (Figure 6) In these younger images, Dionysus' body has become more languid and fluid, and distinctly more feminine than the previously.²² This beautiful masculinity mirrors portraits of Apollo, a youth who is always portrayed with heavy lids and lethargic posture. Popular with Roman worshippers, this young image mirrors the Roman appreciation of youth and beauty. No longer the god of cultural celebration, now more associated with blunt drunkenness and sexual promiscuity. For with the absence of beard and long garments, comes a clean face, long tendrils of drilled marble, and the nude form. This form, whom the Romans called, 'Bacchus', was most famous for appearing drunk, and was associated with the Bacchanalia, a drunken orgy. The worshippers, now consisting of mainly women under the age of twenty, had been suppressed in an Italian decree of 186 BC.²³ They were now said to be those most driven to commit crimes of murder, sexual deviance, and general debauchery while influenced by the Dionysiac spirit. Livy tells of the Bacchanalia and its downfall:

From this store-house of villainy proceeded false witnesses, counterfeit seals, false evidences, and pretended discoveries. From the same place, too, proceeded poison and secret murders, so that in some cases, not even the bodies could be found for burial. Many of their audacious deeds were brought about by treachery, but most of them by force; it served to conceal the violence that, on account of the loud shouting, and the noise of drums and cymbals, none of the cries uttered by the persons suffering violence or murder could be heard abroad.²⁴

With this outlaw of the cult of Dionysus, the Roman cult became secretive and more violent than the seemingly tame Athenian festivals to the god. Vase paintings now show violent themes of Dionysus with *maenads* tearing fawns apart with their bare hands, showing this height of violence. Most visuals of Youthful Dionysus do, in fact, show him drunk. Leaning against trees for support, relaxing leisurely, and letting satyrs pour him cup after cup of wine.

From the early Athenian rituals of Dionysus, to later Roman Bacchic festivities, come a collection of artifacts, symbols and themes that can be compiled to accurately depict the true worship of Dionysus. The journey this cult took from celebrations of culture to secret societies of violent worship can be recollected from the remaining culture. The body of art is an important part of any ancient cult, as it is a reflection of the worshipper's nature and ideas of who their god truly was. And though, as the cult developed, it was shrouded in mystery and surrounded by violence, the ever-lasting depictions of maenads and satyrs as faithful, loyal components of Dionysiac worship never surrenders. The shifting of Dionysiac portraiture reflects the contemporary thoughts and desires of Greeks and Romans. The moving from a wise god of fertility, to one who relished in the fruits of his own labor paint a delicate picture of ancient veneration, one that was ever-evolving. Though worship of Dionysus had significant deviations and alterations to the original themes, the venerators and observers applied the scenes of worship to rich material culture, something so imperative to ancient votary practices. One idea never wavered; that Dionysiac worship was not only from the outside, but from the inside out. Politician Postumius Albinus, as quoted by Livy, leaves us with the final words on the dynamic representations of the cult, and the apparent transformation in Dionysiac worship throughout its history:

Romans, to no former assembly was this solemn supplication to the gods more suitable or even more necessary: as it serves to remind you, that these are the deities whom your forefathers pointed out as the objects of your worship, veneration, and prayers: and not those which infatuated men's minds with corrupt and foreign modes of religion, and drove them, as if goaded by the furies, to every lust and every vice.²⁵



Figure 1:
Relief of Dionysiac Procession with statue²⁶



Figure 2:
Phallic procession vase painting²⁷



Figure 3:
Maenad²⁸



Figure 4:
Mature Dionysus²⁹



Figure 5:
Dionysus with thyrsus³⁰



Figure 6:
Youthful Dionysus³¹

¹ Frederic Will, "Athens: City of Dionysus", *The Antioch Review* 22:1 (Spring, 1962), p. 65-82.

² Ross S. Kraemer, "Ecstasy and Possession: The Attraction of Women to the Cult of Dionysus", *The Harvard Theological Review* 72:1/2 (January-April, 1979), p. 55-80.

³ Scott Scullion, "Nothing to Do with Dionysus: Tragedy Misconceived as Ritual", *The Classical Quarterly* 52:1 (2002), p. 102-107.

⁴ F. H. Stubbings, "Myceanaean Deciphered", *Greece and Rome* 4:2, (October, 1957), p. 114-124.

⁵ Simon Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107, (1987), p.58-76.

⁶ Edward Capps, "Greek Inscriptions: A New Fragment of the List of Victors at the City Dionysia", *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 12:1 (Jan-Mar 1943), p. 1-11.

⁷ Capps, 2.

⁸ J. Vurtheim, "The Miracle of the Wine at Dionysos' Advent: On the Lenaea Festival", *The Classical Quarterly* 14:2, (Apr. 1920), p. 92-96.

⁹ Otto Brendel, "Procession Personified", *American Journal of Archaeology* 49:4, (Oct-Dec 1945), p. 519-525.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 522.

¹¹ Guy Hedreen, "The Return of Hephaistos, Dionysiac Processional Ritual, and the Creation of a Visual Narrative", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 24, (2004), p. 38-64

¹² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³ Martin L. West, "The Fragmentary Homeric Hymn to Dionysus", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 134, (2001), p.1-11.

¹⁴ Hedreen, 47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "Maenad", Kallistratos, accessed March 17, 2013. <http://fvankeur.myweb.uga.edu/classical/ancient/text39.html>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Lillian B. Lawler, "The Maenads: A Contribution to the Study of Dance in Ancient Greece", *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 6, (1927), P. 69-112.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

²¹ George M. A. Hanfmann and Charlotte B. Moore, "Hermes and Dionysus: A Neo-Attic Relief", *Acquisitions (Fogg Art Museum)*, (1969-197), p. 41-49.

²² Hugh G. Evelyn White, "Dionysus and the Satyr of Tripod-Street", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 29, (1909), p. 251-263.

²³ P.G. Walsh, "Making a Drama out of a Crisis: Livy and the Bacchanlia", *Greece and Rome*, 43:2, (Oct. 1996), p. 188-203.

²⁴ Livy, "History of Rome".

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Sarcophagus Relief of Great Dionysia. Greek Holidays, <http://reneeconnorfan.pixel51.com/xenaera/greekholidays/>. (Accessed March 25, 2013).

²⁷ Unknown Painter. Phallic procession vase painting. 450 BC. <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/bourgeois-the-phallic-woman11-3-10.asp>. (Accessed March 23, 2013).

²⁸ Skopas. *Maenad*. 350 BC. <http://wheredionysosdwells.tumblr.com/post/23997583074/asweetuniverse-raging-maenad-skopas-as>. (Accessed May 29, 2013).

²⁹ Unknown Sculptor. Mature Dionysus. 325 BC. <http://mythagora.com/bios/dionysos.html>. (Accessed March 24, 2013).

³⁰ Christie Painter. Dionysus with *thyrsus*. 450-425 BC. <http://my.opera.com/JohnWilliamGodward/blog/dionysus>. (Accessed March 23, 2013).

³¹ Roman copy of Hellenistic original. <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Mythology/DionysosSatyrAltempsInv8606.html>. (Accessed May 28, 2013).