

Fruits and Vegetables as Sexual Metaphor in Late Renaissance Rome

AS RENAISSANCE CULTURE GREW more secular in the wake of the Reformation, painters and poets expanded their thematic repertoires to include subjects drawn from the natural world and from daily life. In the visual arts, landscape and still life slowly emerged from narrative representation despite the low status held by such subjects in the aesthetic hierarchy. With history painting remaining so dominant, artists drawn to genre frequently “justified” their efforts by overlaying them with historical and allegorical allusions. Thus, in the realm of still-life painting, some pictures were made in imitation of ancient *xenia*, others incorporated relevant moral and social commentary, and still others fashioned clever visual puns from ordinary foodstuffs. One sixteenth-century artist, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, went so far as to make a career of creating human “portraits” out of common produce, while a handful of painters made pointed references to the sexually suggestive shapes of certain fruits and vegetables. Highlighting the erotic associations of figs, peaches, melons, and squash was particularly common in the era that began with Raphael (1483–1520) and ended with Caravaggio (1571–1610).

Witty puns of all kinds flourished in the sixteenth century, a period whose political and spiritual instability led to unresolved tensions between a nominally empirical epistemology and a propensity for allusion and dissimulation that never lay far beneath the surface. Renaissance “learned erotica,” as opposed to popular pornography, was especially steeped in metaphors, puns, and elaborate rhetorical devices.¹ Already in the fifteenth century, Poggio Bracciolini anthologized the best jokes of his day—some of them quite naughty and anticlerical—in a volume he called the *Facetiae* (1450). Three-quarters of a century later, Baldassare Castiglione devoted a long section of his *Book of the Courtier* (1528) to cataloging the many forms of wit with which he thought a gentleman should be familiar. Many of these turned upon what, in his words, was “a hidden meaning quite different from the one we seem to intend,” as “when one thing is said another is tacitly understood.”² More than

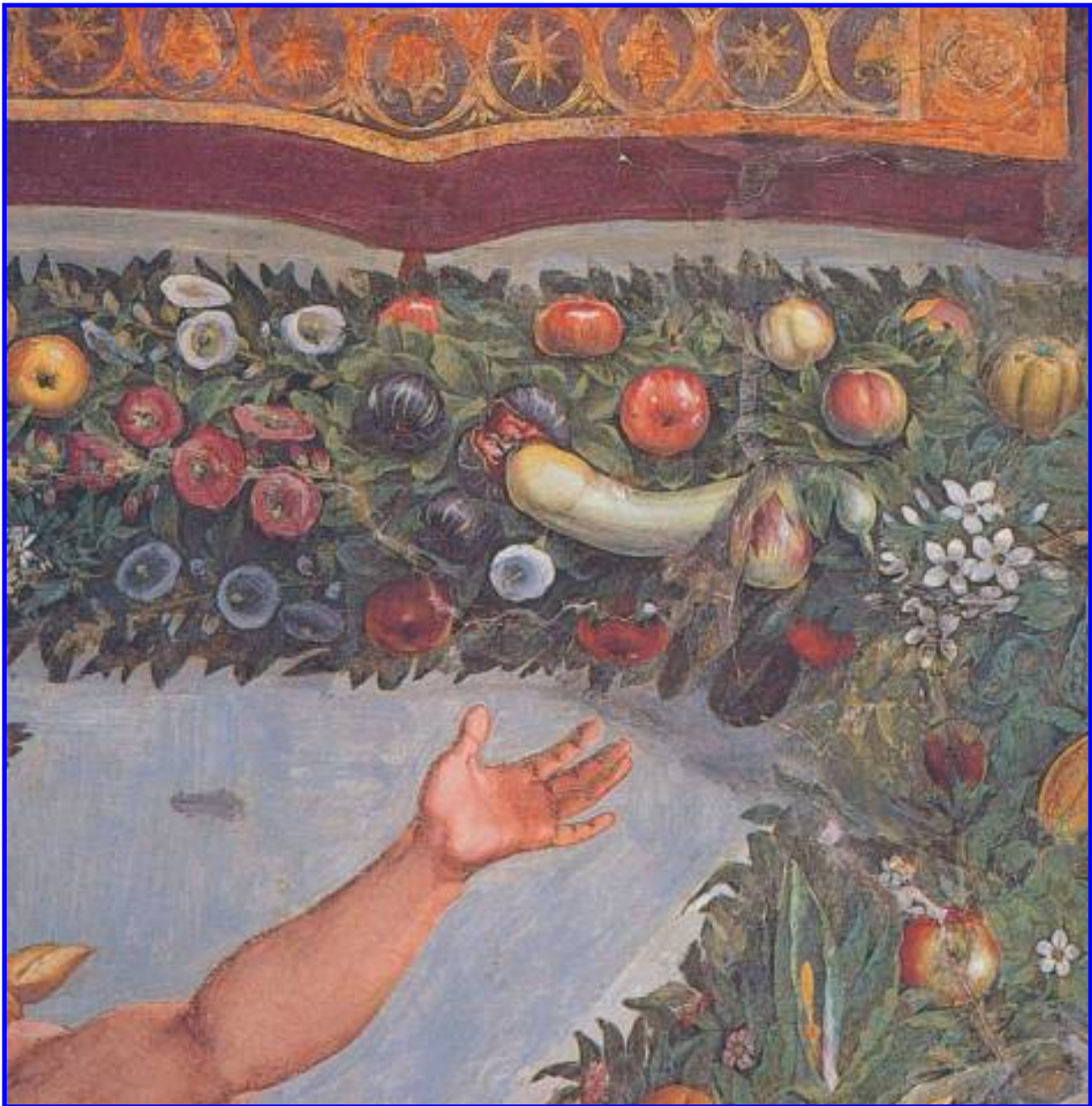
one modern study has examined Renaissance erotica with this perspective in mind.³

The humorous potential of fruit and vegetables may have been further grounded in the popular belief that the shapes of certain plants were inherently anthropomorphic. This notion, the so-called doctrine of signatures, had been known for centuries by herbalists searching for signs to the efficacy of God’s creations.⁴ The idea gained currency in

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1588 with the publication of Giambattista Della Porta’s *Phytognomica*, a semiscientific volume with illustrations that compared various botanical species with human organs.⁵ Together, wit and pseudoscience sustained the metaphorical play of food and sex for nearly a century, beginning in the High Renaissance and ending in the early years of the seventeenth century. In papal Rome, demographically the most male of European cities, sexual puns were more widespread than anywhere else.

The first painted still lifes to carry an erotic charge seem to have originated within the circle of Raphael. Garlands of fruit and flowers abound in the decorative surrounds of frescoes in the *Loggia di Psyche* at the former Villa Chigi (now



Farnesina), painted in 1517–1518.⁶ Framing Raphael’s narrative scenes of classical deities, Giovanni da Udine’s suggestive depictions of fruit and vegetables (above) embellish the classical iconography with a coarse and lusty wit. Half a century later, the biographer Giorgio Vasari acknowledged the conceit in his *Life* of the artist, observing

Above the flying figure of Mercury, he fashioned a Priapus from a gourd and two eggplants for testicles...while nearby he painted a cluster of large figs, one of which, overripe and bursting open, is penetrated by the gourd.⁷

Above: *Giovanni da Udine, detail of border surrounding Raphael’s Cupid and Psyche, Villa Farnesina, Rome.*

NICOLE DACOS AND CATERINA FURLAN, GIOVANNI DA UDINE, 1487–1561, UDINE [ITALY]: CASAMASSIMA, 1987, VOL. 1, P. 26

“But why say more?” Vasari concludes, his disdain apparent for what by the middle of the century had become a popular comic genre. By then compositions framed with garlands of tumescent fruits and vegetables could be found in the most respectable locations, sometimes even in chapels and churches.⁸ It did not take long for the imagery to emerge from the margins onto the main stage. The practice gained further momentum in northern Italy, far from the church



Above: Niccolò Frangipane, *Allegory of Autumn*, Civici Musei e Gallerie di Storia e Arte di Udine. **Overleaf:** Caravaggio, *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, Private Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

OVERLEAF: PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE ANTONIUS GROUP

censors. A Friulian follower of Titian, Niccolò Frangipane, made something of a specialty in depicting allegorical and musical scenes containing overt sexual metaphors. His *Allegory of Autumn* in the Museo Civico in Udine (above) leaves little to the imagination. A leering satyr pokes a finger into a split melon and with his other hand grasps a sausage that lies near a cluster of cherries, his gestures vividly evoking the erotic dreams of the youth napping next to him. In another work, *The Madrigal Singers*, Frangipane satirizes the refinement of music by arranging the singers around a table suggestively festooned with peaches and sausages.⁹ Other northern Italian artists, like the Cremonese Vincenzo Campi, went on to expand the display of food-stuffs to include fish and fowl, but the sexual allusions remained no less obvious.

Sixteenth-century authors were equally drawn to the congruities of food and sex. As with painters, the locus of the genre was in Rome, where the *Accademia dei Vignaiuoli* (Academy of Vintners) was founded in 1527.¹⁰ This group was renowned for celebrating the harvest season with recitations of bawdy poems keyed to sexually suggestive crops.

Identifying themselves with pseudonyms like Signor Radish, Carrot, or Cardoon, the poets' humor was usually fairly crude, but a few academicians like Francesco Berni and Francesco Molza published verse that at times could be quite clever. Berni, in one poem, singled out the velvet-skinned peach as his subject. Although his poem was written around 1522 and the first Italian-English dictionary published only in 1598, the definition of *pesca* as "a young man's bum" and *dare le pesche* as "to give one's taile, to consent to buggerie" had probably not changed during the intervening years.¹¹ Accordingly, Berni addresses his peach:

Oh fruit blessed above all others
 Good before, in the middle and after the meal,
 But perfect behind.¹²

Berni's poem goes on to suggest that priests were especially fond of peaches, sexual jibes at the priesthood being a common staple of the genre. Molza, in turn, composed a poem upholding the desirability of "feminine" figs over "masculine" peaches and apples. The sixteenth century's fascination with the penis occasionally expressed itself directly, in numerous portraits of "dickheads" and with particularly explicit homoeroticism in Antonio Vignali's little treatise *La Cazzaria* (*The Book of the Prick*).¹³ Sodomy itself seems to have been treated lightly in this era, for despite the strict proscriptions leveled against it, only the most flagrant violations seem to have been prosecuted.¹⁴

Anthologies of burlesque poetry printed in the sixteenth century include the work of luminaries like Pietro Aretino and Benedetto Varchi as well as a handful of artists like Michelangelo and Agnolo Bronzino.¹⁵ Bronzino switched as effortlessly between Petrarchan and burlesque modes of expression as he did between painting and poetry. His odes to the "blessed" onion and the radish are marvels of sexual innuendo, combining humor, wit, equivocal meanings, and capricious literary allusions.¹⁶ In the same vein, a border he designed for the tapestry *The Meeting of Joseph and His Father*, now in Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, depicts phallic bottle gourds cavorting with abandon.¹⁷

In painting, the eroticized still life reached its climax around the year 1600 in a work recently attributed to Caravaggio, the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* (p.12).¹⁸ An empiricist by nature, Caravaggio painted no fewer than a dozen pictures that contain seventeen different fruits and vegetables. Botanists claim these canvases offer a unique perspective on horticulture at the time, replete with identifiable insect predations and disease damage.¹⁹ The fruit carries minimal iconographic significance in most of these depictions, but the message in the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* is undeniably sexual. In a dramatic composition as aggressive as any of his altarpieces, Caravaggio arranged the display of melons, pomegranates, gourds, figs, and other fruits to suggest sexual tumescence and receptiveness to penetration. Once one notices the stem of the central melon aimed toward a burst fig and the two meaty bottle gourds lying languidly over a pair of freshly sliced melons, is any other reading possible?

This is the first erotic still life to stand alone, its imagery no longer confined to the margins or overshadowed by the human presence. Caravaggio had painted at least one independent still life before this—the small though monumental *Basket of Fruit* in Milan—but the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* is formally and expressively more ambitious in intent.²⁰ Fulfilling, as it were, the erotic promise he invested

in figural compositions like the *Bacchus* and the *Victorious Love*, Caravaggio may here—and here alone—have given vent to the ambivalence of his own sexual preferences. Just as the phallic stems and gourds seem somewhat aimlessly pointed, the cleft peaches that surmount the basket are every bit as enticing as the vulvar figs, melons, and pomegranates strewn beneath them.

According to his earliest biographer, Giovanni Baglione, Caravaggio's personality was "proud and satirical... quarrelsome and belligerent."²¹ Baglione had reason to know, since he had himself been the target of some scurrilous verses composed by Caravaggio and his friends. The verses—which contained no references to fruit or vegetables—were composed in 1603, the same year the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* is believed to have been painted. Suing for libel, Baglione took the matter to court, and the testimony from that trial along with a host of other documents attest to Caravaggio's lifelong inclination to aggressive and frequently violent behavior.²² Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing if the *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge* was intended to "give the fig"—a euphemism for an obscene gesture first found in Dante—to a particular individual or was merely a generic visual pun.²³ Whatever the motive, Caravaggio's provocative fruits represent the full maturation of what remained a puerile form of humor. Later, Dutch and Flemish painters took up the genre for themselves, but the erotic still life was the invention of the Italian Renaissance. Its off-color wit was perhaps the perfect metaphor for the culture of post-Reformation Rome, a culture whose quest for religious and political orthodoxy frequently led to further uncertainties, and where humor alone offered an acceptable outlet for transgressive desire. ◉

NOTES

1. The difference between learned and popular erotica during the Renaissance is discussed by David O. Frantz, *Festum Voluptatis: A Study of Renaissance Erotica* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), especially ch. 1, "In Praise of Apples, Figs, and Keys: The Learned Tradition." Barbara C. Bowen, in *One Hundred Renaissance Jokes, An Anthology* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 1988), translates witticisms from twenty-seven different authors, the majority of whom were Italian.

2. *The Book of the Courtier*, Charles S. Singleton, trans. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 2:169, 177.

3. In addition to the titles listed in note 1, see also Bette Talvacchia, *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), esp. 88ff.; and Paul Barolsky, *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978).

4. M.L. Bianchi, *Signatura Rerum: Segni, magia e conoscenza da Paracelsus a Leibniz* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1987), provides an excellent introduction to the theory that was definitively set forth in the seventeenth century by Jakob Boehme, *Signatura Rerum [The Signature of All Things]* (1621; repr. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1912).

5. Giambattista Della Porta, *Phytognomonica* (Naples: H. Salvianum, 1588), book III. Several plates from this treatise are illustrated in Giulia Caneva, *Il Mondo di Cerere nella Loggia di Psiche* (Rome: Fratelli Palombi Editori, 1962), figs. 2.4–2.11.





6. P. Barolsky, *Infinite Jest*, 84, credits Ulrich Middeldorf and Konrad Oberhuber for having suggested in private conversation that “in the sumptuously painted festoons the figs and cucumbers, traditional sexual symbols, may have been intended as playful sexual illusions, appropriate to the iconography [of the Loggia].” Nora Galli de’ Paratesi, *Le brutte parole: Semantica dell’eufemismo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1969), especially part 2; chapter 1, “L’interdizione sessuale,” provides a glossary of sexual euphemisms. For a detailed study of Giovanni da Udine’s conceits, see Philippe Morel, “Priape à la Renaissance: Les guirlandes de Giovanni da Udine à la Farnesina,” *Revue de l’art* 69 (1985): 13–28.
7. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori: Scultori e architetti*, R. Bettarini, ed. (Florence: Sansoni, 1984), 452–453. The translation is more or less my own.
8. Perino del Vaga, another student of Raphael, trimmed an allegory of *Theology* in the Sala Paolina of the Castel Sant’Angelo in this very fashion (illustrated by Morel, “Priape à la Renaissance,” fig. 19). G.P. Lomazzo, author of the strict Counter-Reformatory *Trattato dell’arte de la pittura* (1584; repr. Hildesheim: George Olms, 1968), 402, lamented the presence of such imagery in sacred settings.
9. For the career of Frangipane, see Bert Meijer, “Niccolò Frangipane,” *Saggi e memorie* 8 (1972): 151–191.
10. Adrienne von Lates, “Caravaggio’s Peaches and Academic Puns,” *Word and Image* 11 (1995): no. 1, 55–60, discusses the cultural context in which much of the bawdy verse was written.
11. John Florio, *A worlde of Wordes, or Most Copious and Exact Dictionarie in Italian and English* (London: Arnold Hatfield, 1598), 271, 96.
12. Von Lates, “Caravaggio’s Peaches,” 57. The poem was first published in *Opere burlesche del Berni, Casa, Varchi, Mauro* (Florence: Bernardo Giunta, 1548).
13. For a recent and illuminating study of the subject with full bibliography, see Timothy Wilson, “Un ‘intricamento’ tra Leonardo ed Arcimboldo: Iconografie sessuali nella ceramica rinascimentale,” *Ceramica Antica* xv (2005): no. 2, 10–44. Vignali’s discourse, written in Siena ca. 1525, is now available in a new translation by Ian Frederick Moulton (New York: Routledge, 2003). Moulton’s introduction to this volume, entitled “The Greatest Tangle of Pricks There Ever Was: Knowledge, Sex, and Power in Renaissance Italy,” should be read by anyone with an interest in the subject.
14. Unpublished inventories of Roman trial records indicate relatively few prosecutions for sodomy during the sixteenth century (Archivio di Stato di Roma, Tribunale Criminale del Governo, vol. 280, *Processi [1505–1599]*). See also John K. Brackett, *Criminal Justice and Crime in Late Renaissance Florence (1537–1609)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
15. Deborah Parker, *Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 18–19.
16. Parker, *Bronzino*, 31. The last lines of the poem parody Dante’s opening of *Paradiso* 25.
17. Charles McCorquodale, *Bronzino* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), colorplate xi.
18. John T. Spike, “Caravaggio erotico,” *FMR* xv (1995): no. 75, 14–22. Although the attribution of this privately owned picture has not been universally accepted, the cleverness of its conception points to no other artist as clearly as it does to Caravaggio.
19. Jules Janick, “Caravaggio’s Fruit: A Mirror of Baroque Horticulture,” www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/caravaggio/caravaggio_1.html. In a short essay Professor Janick has also reviewed some of the material first presented by Morel (see note 5) and Spike (note 16) regarding the suggestiveness of bottle gourds (“Erotic Use of Lagenaria in Renaissance Art,” *Curcubit Network News* (Fall 2004): 7.
20. For Caravaggio’s career in general, see John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2001).
21. For a transcription and translation of Baglione’s remarks, see Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 354.
22. The trial testimony is found in Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 270–279. Sandro Corradini, *Caravaggio: Materiali per un processo* (Rome: Alma Roma, 1993), publishes a vast array of documents—mainly from the police archives—that attest to the artist’s antisocial and unruly behavior.
23. See Robert Palter, *The Duchess of Malfi’s Apricots, and Other Literary Fruits* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 160–165, for the history of what the author calls “the fig gesture.”