

4. Sacred and profane sleep

In the history of art, nothing separates the sacred and the profane in any definitive fashion. Over the centuries, as political systems evolve, their relative weight varies: One sees itself in the mirror of the other; they fade out to reappear in new guises, according to changes in ideology, belief and economic fortune.

A Cypriot idol dedicated to maternity (chapter 2, fig. 3), a Khmer stele dedicated to the creation of the World (chapter 2, fig. 8), Indian reliefs of a Buddha who breaks off his pleasures to withdraw from the world (chapter 2, fig. 9, 10)—all these works show that sleep figures in the founding religions, be they archaic or secular. Only its meanings and its modalities in the media that express it change. Regarding motifs related to beliefs, it is rarely represented in China and Japan, and it almost never appears in the figurative representations of ancient Egypt, pre-Columbian America, and even in the lands where Islam reigns. Very early, the fantastic element in the sacred texts inspired, in generations of artists, recurrent themes. Malleable to multiple variations, these themes were drawn from both the canonic and apocryphal Gospels, as well as from the vast repertoire of Oriental, Greek and Latin religion and mythology. The themes intersect and interpenetrate each other (see also chapter 3, fig. 16-37; chapter 6).

From legend, an anonymous artist in the twelfth-century drew a touching bronze panel, *The Creation of Eve*, in which we see Eve emerging from the side of Adam, sleeping under a tree (fig. 46). God himself reaches across from his isolation to take Eve's hand, while below the naked couple stands off against the serpent wound around the Tree of Knowledge, tempting them.



Figure 46.- Anonymous (Italy, 12th century). *The Creation of Eve*. Bronze panel, portal of San Zeno Maggiore Church, Verona - Italy

Adam sleeping during the creation of Eve is one of the rare representations of sleep in the Orthodox Church (fig. 47). This theme has been taken up by painters right up to the

present time. According to the Quran, God created *Hawwa* (Eve) from Adam's lowermost rib on his left side, but no image of this event is known to exist.



Figure 48.
School of Samokov and Bansko
(Bulgaria, 19th century).
The Creation of Eve.
Mural painting.
Church of the Rila Monastery -
Bulgaria

The birth amongst men of representatives of God, in the great monotheistic religions, is associated with more or less fantastic legends, but only representations from the Buddhist tradition are linked to sleep. Similar to that of Christ, the birth of Siddhartha, the future Buddha, was made possible by a sacred being, a white elephant that, in an act of Immaculate Conception, penetrated Queen Maya through her side while she was sleeping (fig. 48).



Figure 48. - *Anonymous (India, Gandhara, 2nd-3rd centuries). The Dream of Queen Maya: the conception. Stupa Pane, schist, 19.3 x 32.4 x 6.5 cm.*
British Museum, Oriental Art, London - G.B.

This, as those familiar with Buddhism will know, is a Bodhisattva preparing his supreme reincarnation, leading him to Buddhahood and ultimate deliverance through the attainment of Nirvana. Maya, wearing a diadem of flowers, is lying on her left side. The Bodhisattva, in the guise of an elephant, is enclosed within an aureole, the tip of his trunk sticking out at the bottom. Outside, the woman standing guard raises her right hand, perhaps in a sign of astonishment; above her, wearing a turban, floats a celestial spectator, and on either side of the scene stands a plump attendant. This stupa panel represents the quintessence

of Gandhara art, an art which, thanks to Alexander the Great's expedition to Asia during the 4th century BCE, happily married Indian and Hellenistic influences.

The Annunciation to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive and become the mother of the son of God is the subject of many admirable works. Both Mary and the Archangel Gabriel, who made the announcement, were wide awake. Divine intervention, however, furnished clarification of the circumstances of the conception. In crucial circumstances, Joseph, Mary's husband, was visited by angels at least three times during his sleep. The scene represented by Georges de la Tour, in its depiction of light from a candle flame, is a real marvel (fig. 49). But what exactly is the scene shown here? Is it the one in which the angel announces that Mary is pregnant by the agency of the Holy Ghost? Or the one where the angel charges Joseph to flee into Egypt to escape Herod's murderous scheme? Or the one where the angel, after Herod's death, commands Joseph to return to Israel?

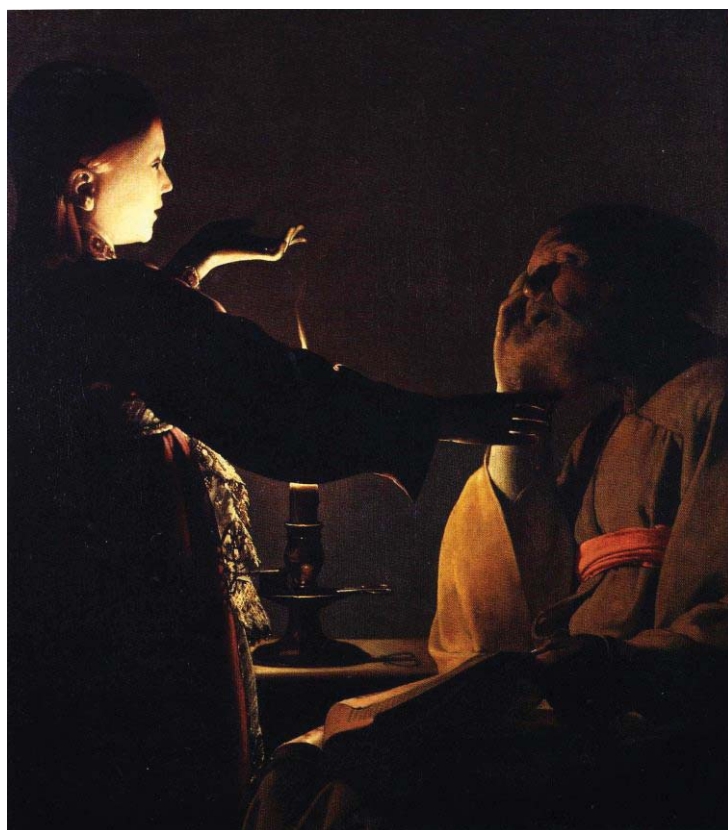


Figure 49.

*Georges de La Tour
(France, 1593-1652).*

*Appearance of the angel to St.
Joseph, also called The Dream
of Saint Joseph, circa 1640.
Oil on canvas, 93 x 81 cm.*

*Museum of Fine Arts,
Nantes – France*

The unity of the two figures is striking: the supernatural presence of the child, an angel without wings whose luminous face lights the darkness; the old man in the depths of sleep, less real than the miraculous apparition.

In the Bible, according to an American study, sleep is mentioned 113 times in 105 verses. Guided by our fancy and the hand of chance, let us examine a few of the masterpieces inspired by these Biblical scenes.

In his time, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) immersed himself in a dramatic event dear to the Romantics, an event related in the Gospel of Mark (4:35-41) that he took up time and again:

Christ on the Sea of Galilee (fig. 50). The painting is an exalted account of this famous episode in which Christ, asleep in the boat while a storm rages, is awakened by the worried disciples. He orders the wind and sea to calm down: Wind and sea obey immediately.

It is a small-format painting, and it perfectly expresses the strong, quick-tempered character of the painter. Echoing Géricault's note of tragedy and reflecting the Venetians' intense colours, he executes a gesture as violent as it is vivid. Look again: Into the trough of a wave of dark, turbulent green, the crowded boat is hurled. One of the characters, trying to keep his balance, stands with his arms raised in terror; another holds on to his whirling white robe, while a third reaches forward as if preparing for a fall. Jesus, his blue-tinted toga open, a bluish-white froth at his feet, sleeps peacefully. Delacroix, whose every brush stroke speaks of a tormented spirit, generates a powerful lyricism that leaves itself open to improvisation. The lines of the drawing (the "daring contours" in Delacroix's own words) are nevertheless preserved: The colours remain confined within them.



Figure 50. - Eugene Delacroix (France, 1798-1863). Christ on the Sea of Galilee, circa 1840-1845. Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 54.6 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (Missouri) - USA

A less lugubrious version of this scene was painted some years later (fig. 51). This time, under a mass of dark, low-lying clouds that black out the sky, the waves are a silvery green and a black mountain rises on the horizon. A scintillating halo circles Christ's head in gold; as in the first version of the scene, here too Jesus rests his head on his hand. But, unlike in the first version, here salvation, in the form of a mountain, is in sight.



Figure 51.
Eugene Delacroix
(France, 1798-1863).
Christ Asleep during the
Tempest, circa 1853.
Oil on canvas,
50.8 x 61cm.
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
New York - USA

While the disciples, overcome by sleep, sprawl out at the foot of a fence, the angel informs Jesus of the Passion he will soon undergo.

Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), a Medici protégé who once portrayed himself among the men of this famous lineage, painted the episode of Christ in the Garden of Olives (fig. 52), a mythical scene that has echoed through the centuries. The fence is painted with striking realism, the disciples meticulously drawn. Wearing a red robe, Christ is depicted on his knees, praying on an elliptical platform of rock. The symbolism of sleep is here renewed: The scene, with its underlying anguish, is set in framework of idealized nature. Familiar to the Tuscan painter, olive trees, a symbol of peace and concord, ring the garden.



Figure 52.
Sandro Botticelli
(Italian, circa 1445-1510).
Christ in the Garden of Olives, circa 1500.
Tempera on wood, 53 x 35 cm.
Capilla de los Reyes, Granada - Spain

El Greco's (1541-1614) version of this episode (fig. 53), in its abandonment of the corporality so strong in the Italian models, breaks with the still archaic implausibility of the representation in Botticelli, while the supernatural elements of the landscape (void of olive trees or decorative foliage) acquire a prodigious presence.



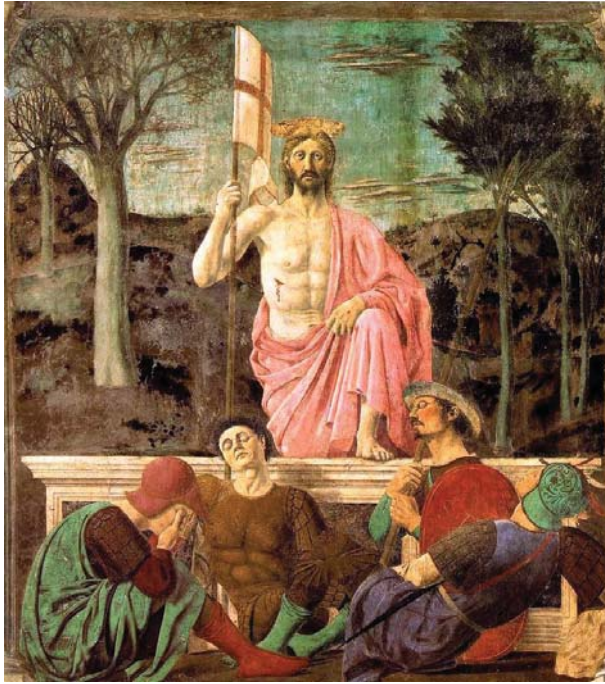
Figure 53. -El Greco (Greece, 1541 - Spain, 1614).

Christ in the Garden of Olives, circa 1595.

Oil on canvas, 102 x 114cm. Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo (Ohio) - USA

The angel in its robe of green-tinted yellow stands on the cave in which the disciples, depicted in unrealistic proportions, sleep. The angel overlooks the transfigured Christ who, bathed in light, is directing his gaze both at the angel and inward. A rock behind Jesus seems to be shielding him from a cloud closing in, while the henchman below remain a shadowy presence. Destiny, in its inevitability, is suggested by the veiled eye of the moon surveying the scene. The work's almost fantastical degree of "surreality" contributed to its being rediscovered at the beginning of the 20th century. Thus took place the second birth of this painter whose works—with their undulating forms and elongated figures with hallucinatory eyes—abound in mysticism.

It is via the mediation of sleep that the premonitory vision of Christ's sacrifice and the mystery of His resurrection on the third day appear in all their clarity. While his Roman guards are conveniently neutralized by sleep, the risen Christ leaves the tomb. This is how things appear in the mental prayer that is Piero della Francesca's Resurrection of Christ (fig. 54), a fresco that has come down to us intact from the fifteenth century. The English writer Aldous Huxley, for one, considered it a supreme masterpiece. It is the guards' sleepiness that enables Christ in his majesty to triumph over darkness.



In a rigorously delineated space, standing impassive and perfectly still, He forms the apex of a triangle that stands out against an imaginary landscape of infinite tenderness: Perhaps it is a recollection, an evocation of the fantastic. This very astute structuring of the picture gives the Resurrected Christ, ready to regenerate the world, a concrete presence, frontal and direct.

Figure 54.

*Piero della Francesca
(Italy, c. 1416-1492).*

*Resurrection of Christ, circa 1460.
Fresco, 225 x 200 cm.*

Museo Civico, Sansepolcro - Italy

Three generations later, Titian painted a miraculously aerial version of the Resurrection (fig. 55):

Here, raising his right hand in benediction, indicating the heavenly realm, the fully reincarnated Christ is suspended against a dawn sky of lustrous bronze and resplendent greys and blues, while beside the tomb (note the cleverly exposed angles) guards lie asleep or, awakened, adopt postures of self-defence and stupefaction..

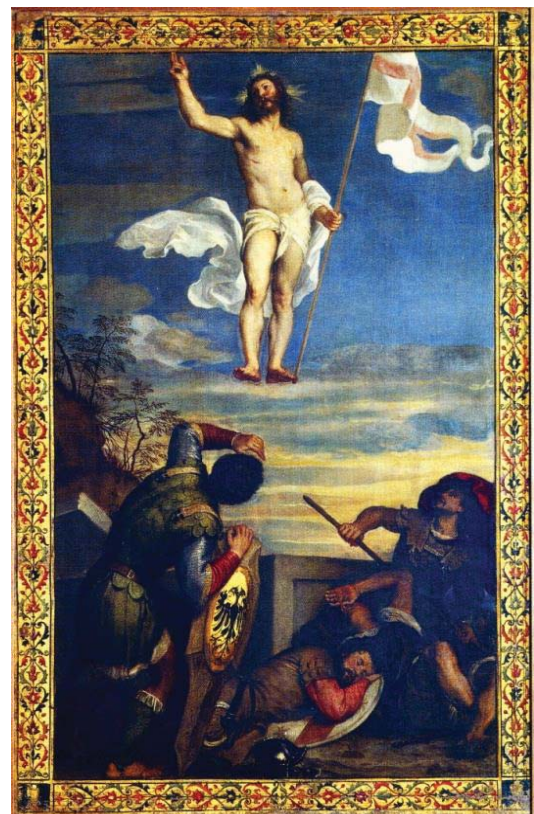
Figure 55.

Titian (Italian, 1488/89-1576).

Resurrection.

Painting.

Palazzo Ducale, Urbino - Italy.



Greco-Roman mythology, for its part, is particularly rich in sleep-related events. We already mentioned (in chapter 2) the deeds and misdeeds of the indefatigable twins, Hypnos and Thanatos (fig. 5), and the protective wisdom that Hygieia, Goddess of health, offered the child-God Hypnos (fig. 7).

Now we turn to consider the Furies, the infernal divinities. They appear as soon as a crime is committed in a family, and in the event of a parricide or matricide, they literally rush in: The murderer will not escape their clutches. In Athens they were the object of a particular cult. Indeed, in memory of the way they treated the matricidal Orestes when he sought refuge in the city, they are called the Eumenides, the Kindly Ones.



*Figure 56.
Workshop of the Painter of
Judgement (Greece, Southern
Italy, 4th century BCE).
The Eumenides.
Ceramics with red figures,
h. 36 cm, d. 39.3 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston - USA*

In the finely-drawn depiction on the bell-krater from the workshop of the Judgement Painter, they are shown asleep in the foreground (fig. 56). Athena and Apollo, standing respectively at the left and the right, have come to assure Orestes (in the center, brandishing his sword and clasping the omphalos) that the Furies will be transformed into beneficent being, the Eumenides.

As for Endymion—an Aeolian king for some, a shepherd or hunter for others—his beauty inspired a violent love in Selene, goddess of the moon. Selene entreated Zeus, Olympian Ruler, to cast him into eternal sleep that he may remain forever young and perfect in his beauty: Zeus granted her wish. Every night, without waking him, Selene meets her beloved in a cave. Together, they had fifty daughters, but this passion only brought to Selene pain and sorrowful sighs.

A delicate, Greco-Roman medallion from the Bagram treasure (fig. 57) shows the interest this theme aroused and testifies to the relations on the Silk Road between Asia and the Roman Orient.



Figure 57.
Anonymous
(Afghanistan, 1st century).
Selene and Endymion.
Bagram Treasury.
Emblemata, plaster, 16 cm.
National Museum,
Kabul - Afghanistan

Much later, in the nineteenth century, Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson (1767-1824) painted his interpretation of this mythological scene, *The Sleep of Endymion* (fig. 58). Deep shadow and bright moonlight, with a vaporous effect around the idealized body, characterize the composition. Brilliant, Girodet's vision is also prudish, given its ethereal, seraphic aspect. As in Ingres, it is above all drawing that accounts for beauty; here, precision and finesse of line make for a beauty at once angelic and strange.



Figure 58.
Girodet-Trioson Roucy, Anne
Louis, called Girodet
(France, 1767 - 1824).
The Sleep of Endymion, 1790-1791.
Painting on canvas,
198 x 261 cm.
The Louvre, Paris - France.

In comparison with *Aurora and Cephalus* by Pierre-Narcisse Guérin (Aurora is set to abduct Procis' husband, Cephalus, with whom she is in love), the dreamer, as an effeminate Adonis, is shown to advantage in Aurora's light (fig. 59).



Ravishingly contoured, he is coyly presented to Aurora's gaze. True to life, palpable, sensual, the drawing is dazzling, while the palette of colours is dense and studied. On the evidence of this painting, one could be forgiven for thinking that Guérin found everyday reality too trivial for one who has celestial dreams.

Figure 59.

*Pierre-Narcisse Guérin
(France, 1774-1833).*

*Aurora and Cephalus, 1810.
Oil on canvas, 254.5 x 186 cm.
The Louvre, Paris - France*

For the ancient Greeks, the cult of beauty and ecstasy, the excessiveness inherent in the doings of the all-powerful gods, were favorite themes. Indeed, the Dionysian (Bacchanal) festivals they participated in were occasions for ritual madness and revelry. Gods and mortals, the sacred and the profane, existed side by side and sometimes intermingled.

Dionysus (Bacchus), god of wine and ecstatic liberation, is the son of Zeus (Jupiter) and the mortal Semele. He was thus a demi-god, and it took him many struggles to win acceptance of his divinity. The pregnant Semele, tricked by Zeus' jealous wife Hera (Juno) into asking Zeus to show himself in all his glory, was consumed in the blaze of the undisguised god. Before the mother-to-be died, however, Hermes (Mercury) rescued the divine child and sewed him into the gash he had cut in Zeus' thigh (and thus we have on record the first description of an incubator for premature babies), before releasing it some months later (whence Dionysus' cult title Dimetor, "twice-born"). Dionysus, in one version of the myth, was raised by the nymphs of Nysa who taught him winemaking. Hera, however, remained jealous; she sought vengeance for Zeus' infidelity by striking Dionysus or those looking after him with madness. Thus this beautiful demi-god, eternally youthful, wandered around the world, accompanied by Sileni (elderly companions), Maenads (Bacchantes) and Satyrs. Together, they celebrated Bacchanals, orgiastic festivals of frenzied dancing and wild release.

These Bacchanals, where wine and fatigue inevitably led to sleep, were a favorite subject of artists both in Antiquity and in the Renaissance.



Figure 60. - Nicolas Poussin (France, 1594-1665). *The Childhood of Bacchus*, also known as *La Petite Bacchanale*, from 1630 to 1635.
Oil on canvas, 97 x 136 cm. The Louvre, Paris – France

In *The Childhood of Bacchus* (fig. 60), Nicolas Poussin draws on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to show a young Bacchus drinking the juice being pressed from a bunch of grapes by a Satyr. The mythological themes that appear in Poussin's work are often only pretexts for the painter to develop vast idyllic landscapes. During his long stay in Rome, Poussin was somewhat influenced by Italian painting, in particular—as the sleeping nudes here in the foreground show—that of Titian.



Figure 61.- Luca Giordano (Italian, 1634-1705). *The young Bacchus asleep*, 1680.
Oil on canvas, 246.5 x 329 cm. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg - Russia

Luca Giordano, in *The Young Bacchus Asleep* (fig. 61), shows the youthful god sleeping on a leopard skin, his face and upper body in shadow, surrounded by Bacchantes, animals, Satyrs and cherubs. Amidst the play of transparent shadows, light insidiously reveals all there is to see.

The Bacchanal revels gave rise to depictions of unrestricted pleasures. One such scene is evoked in the decorative painting on a ceramic hydria from the 4th century BCE (fig. 62), where we see two satyrs ready to satisfy themselves on a luxurious Maenad asleep, a thyrsus (a staff crowned with a pine cone, a fertility phallus used as a prop in the Maenads' dance) in her hand.

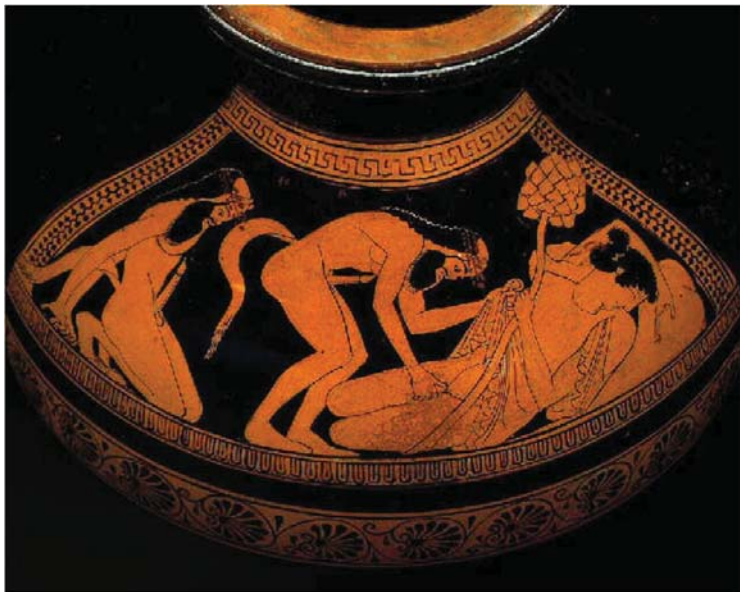


Figure 62.
Painter Kleophrades
(Greece, 6th century BCE).
Satyrs and Maenad asleep
(detail).
Ceramics (hydria).
Museum of Antiquities in
the Seine-Maritime,
Rouen - France.

Giambologna's (1609-1674) *Sleeping Nymph and Satyr* (fig. 63) was inspired by the discovery of a sculpture from ancient antiquity, placed in the garden of the Vatican. The theme of a satyr molesting a sleeping nymph was a popular motif in the Renaissance.



Figure 63.
Giovanni da Bologna
(Italian, 1529-1608).
Sleeping Nymph and
Satyr.
Bronze, 19.3 cm.
Boymans-van
Beuningen Museum,
Rotterdam - Holland

Bacchus is seen in a good light in his encounter with Ariadne, daughter of Minos, king of Crete, and Pasiphae. Ariadne, in love with Theseus, gave him a ball of thread to guide him out of the Labyrinth once he'd killed the Minotaur. Theseus, having promised to marry Ariadne, sets sail with her towards Athens. On the way, he puts in at the island of Naxos, but then continues on to Athens without her, having left her sleeping on the shore.



The scene is depicted on a jar from about 400 BCE (fig. 64). It shows Athena seated with her spear in her right hand; Hypnos, the winged boy dropping what may be poppies on Ariadne's head, and Theseus, his nude body turned frontally and his face in three-quarter view. From such depictions in Antiquity right up until today, the theme Ariadne on Naxos, abandoned asleep, has haunted the artistic imagination.

Figure 64.

*The Painter of Ariadne
(Greece, southern Italy, 400-
390 BCE). Theseus abandons
Ariadne. Ceramics with red
figures, h: 30 cm, d: 26 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston -
United States*

A Roman copy of a lost Greek sculpture of Ariadne sleeping (perhaps like the one in figure 65) influenced Giorgio de Chirico in his painting *Ariadne* (fig. 66).



Figure 65.- Anonymous (Hellenistic Greece, Roman copy, 1st half of the second century). Girl (Ariadne) asleep. Marble, 58 x 150 cm. The Louvre, Paris - France.

In a geometrically delineated space, stark monolithic arches cast a dark shadow into a deserted public square; casting a similar shadow, Ariadne, seen from overhead, sleeps on a bed of stone (figure 66). Deep brown, ocher, white, and green make up the palette of colours, while dry, thin lines characterize the drawing. It was paintings such as this one, with their magical, dreamlike quality, that made de Chirico a forerunner of the Surrealists.



Figure 66.
Giorgio de Chirico
(Greece, 1888 - Italy,
1978).
Ariadne, 1913.
Oil and graphite on canvas,
135.6 x 180.5 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum
of Art,
New York - USA.
 ©ADAGP, Paris, 2012

Naxos, then, was where Dionysus (Bacchus) found Ariadne, fell in love with her, then took her to Olympus as his wife. The delicate painting by the Le Nain brothers, Bacchus discovering Ariadne on Naxos (fig. 67), evokes their first encounter. The young demi-god, coming upon Ariadne lost in sleep, shows his emotion. Pictorially, the young woman asleep is the luminous pivot around which a composition at once dynamic and free organizes itself.

Figure 67.
The Le Nain Brothers
(Louis?, France, 17th
century).
Bacchus discovering
Ariadne on Naxos,
before 1635.
Oil on canvas, 102x152 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts,
Orleans - France.



Other scenes of sleep drawn from Greek mythology will be examined in the following chapters.