

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Fact Sheet

### The Story of Cupid and Psyche by Jacopo Del Sellaio



Title:	The Story of Cupid and Psyche: Part I
Maker:	Jacopo del Sellaio (1441 - 1493)
Medium:	Tempera and gold on panel
Date:	c. 1473
Dimensions:	h. 58.6 x w. 178.8 cm
Museum No:	M.75
Gallery:	6

### The Artist

Jacopo del Sellaio was born and worked in Florence at a time when the city was emerging as the cultural and artistic centre of Europe. Vasari describes him as a pupil of Fra Filippo Lippi and Botticelli and his brittle linear technique and light, pastel palette are clearly indebted to his masters. His first documented commission dates from 1477 and Vasari mentions three paintings by Sellaio in Florence, including one in Santa Maria del Carmine, where Lippi completed a series of frescoes.

His work is characterised by a flair for narrative which is apparent in his religious paintings but used more effectively in his secular work, such as the scenes he painted for *cassoni* (marriage chests) and other pieces of furniture. In subject matter as well as style, he seems to have relied heavily on Botticelli for inspiration and the work of the two painters has sometimes been confused.

## The Subject

This panel was painted to decorate a *cassone*. These bridal chests were made to commemorate a marriage and were paraded through the streets to the bride's new home. The nobility and rich mercantile classes of Florence often commissioned elaborate and richly decorated chests to display their wealth and status. Such works reflected not only the family's status but also the importance of marriage as a means of making alliances and gaining power in 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy.

At this time, cassoni also became a vehicle for the expression of secular subjects, in an age when most art was religious. The subject matter of this panel reflects its function. It illustrates the first half of the story of Cupid and Psyche, the ancient romance in which the mortal princess Psyche is married to the god of love, Cupid. Here is a brief account of the story. The scenes of the story which are in italics are shown in the panel in the Museum.

Psyche was born as a result of *the union between her mother Endelechia and Apollo. As a baby she was cared for by her sisters.* Psyche grew into the most beautiful of women and *was courted by many suitors.* It was said of Psyche that she was more beautiful even than Venus. This made Venus very jealous and she sent her son Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with the ugliest man on earth.

*Cupid sees Psyche and falls in love with her himself.* With so many suitors, Psyche's parent consult the oracle to help them decide who she should marry. The oracle instructs them to take Psyche *to the top of a high mountain.* At the top, she is blown down by *Zephyr, the west wind.* *She floats down to a valley and falls asleep on a bed of flowers.* On waking she sees the palace of Cupid and goes in. *She sleeps with her new lover, Cupid,* but he only visits her at night so that Psyche never sees his face. Psyche gets lonely and begs Cupid to let her sisters visit her (at this point Sellaio uses his artistic licence *and includes a scene of Psyche pleading with Cupid*).

*Her sisters visit her and are jealous.* Telling her that she must be married to a monster, they persuade her to take a look at her husband while he sleeps. *The sisters depart, carrying gifts.* *At night Psyche lights a lamp* and, gazing upon her sleeping lover, is struck by his beauty. Unfortunately, *a drop of hot oil from the lamp wakes Cupid and he flies away.* *Psyche tries to stop him.* An interactive version of this story can be found at [www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos).

The story continues on a second panel (in a private collection). Cupid returns to his mother. Psyche searches for him and is captured and enslaved by Venus. Cupid pleads with Jupiter to free Psyche, and Cupid and Psyche are married.

At it's most simple, this is a story of the triumph of love over adversity, but it also has a moral resonance – a call for obedience in marriage directed particularly at the new wife. However, in Sellaio's day, the story had been recently retold by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio, reflecting the revived interest in the Classical (Ancient Greece and Rome) that was one of the sparks of the Renaissance. Boccaccio recognised that for the Renaissance mind the story went deeper. Psyche could be seen to represent the rational soul whose quest was to be united with divine love (Cupid) – an idea found in Plato and adapted by Christian thinkers in Renaissance Europe.

What is astounding about Sellaio's painting is that he manages to tell fifteen episodes of a complicated story within one panel, divided into three different spaces. It is told as a continuous narrative, rather like a comic strip. Psyche is shown eleven times, once as a baby and ten as a grown up beauty in a white dress. The painting reads from left to right and Sellaio uses deliberate devices to make sure that we read it in this way. The light falls from the left and so the shadows point the way for the viewer, as do the horizontal strips of grass. The composition is carefully balanced with the two buildings on either side acting as the 'bookends' to show the beginning and the end of the narrative, while the rocky outcrop in the middle of the scene pulls our eye into the space.