Francesco Furini's "Hylas and the Nymphs"

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The relationship between antique art and Baroque painting is a complex maze of ancient myth and *seicento* allegory. The highly sophisticated tastes of 17th century antiquarians were seldom satisfied with a mere copy of an ancient sculpture or a straightforward presentation of a mythological scene. Much of what appears ambiguous to today's viewer once held many layers of meaning. Though the allegorical intent of major mythological figures such as Hercules and Apollo is still understood, the significance of many of the minor mythological heroes to seventeenth century patrons has been lost. The object of this present study, therefore, is to offer a few suggestions for the sources of Francesco Furini's *Hylas and the Nymphs* and possible reasons for the sudden popularity of the myth in Florence during the 1630s.

According to Baldinucci, Furini's *Hylas* (Fig. 1) was created in Florence in the early decades of the seventeenth century as a private commission for Agnolo Galli:

> Assai quadri dunque ebbe egli a fare per diversi gentiluomini, fra quali troppo bello e troppo vero riusci un quadro da sala per Agnol Galli, ove egli rappresentò il giovanetto Ila e'l bagno delle Ninfe, tutte, quanto il naturale, in varie attitudini . . .[1]

The painting has since been sold many times.[2] Today the work is on permanent display in the Palatine Gallery of the Palazzo Pitti.[3] Measuring 7 ft. 6½ in. by 8 ft. 6¾ in., it is one of Furini's more ambitious early works and is generally dated between 1630 and 1633.[4]

A smaller replica of the Pitti *Hylas* which was executed either by Furini or by one of his students, may be seen in the Milltown Collection in the National Gallery in Dublin, Ireland.[5] In addition, there are two preparatory drawings by Furini for *Hylas*. One is a small red chalk sketch auctioned by Christie's in 1969[6] and the other is a larger, more finished study (Fig. 2) which is housed in the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe in the Uffizi.[7]

Hylas and the Nymphs is typical of Furini's early period during which he displayed a marked proclivity for mythological or literary subjects which allowed him to exhibit his not inconsiderable gift for depicting flesh. *Hylas* gave the painter an opportunity to indulge in a hedonistic and overtly erotic rendition which undoubtedly says a good deal about the private tastes of Florentine aristocracy in the early *seicento*. Furini's painting portrays six water nymphs surrounding a turbaned androgynous youth. Long sinuous arms of two sprites entwine the youth to drag him down into the tempestuous green waters. As Hylas attempts to drive off the passionate embrace of one nymph, he turns his face with vexation and knitted brows towards a second nymph who rises fully out of the waters to fling her arms about his neck. Her auburn hair which falls down her back is adorned by strands of pearls and streaming ribbons. Stiff folds of drapery, dropped in her rush to capture the boy, encase her thighs.

To the right of this central group are four more naiads, two of whom swim through tinted swells to join the struggle for possession of the youth and who are engaged in a bizarre *pas de deux*. With uncharacteristic humor Furini depicts one nymph shoving the head of her competitor under the breaking wave. In the background the remaining two undines watch the abduction scene with nonchalance but at any moment may be aroused to join the others in the seduction of Hylas.

The figure of Hylas is clothed in an exotic costume of red velvet relieved at the sleeve by a slash of white undergarment. The enormous white plume which rises out of his cap is a repetition of the one in Furini's *Acis and Galatea* and is used again in his *Youth in a Plumed Hat* and it has been suggested that the same model was used for all three paintings.[8] Hylas' outfit is completed by a huge black cape which swirls behind him, almost indistinguishable against the dark sky which looms ominously in the distance. An engraving after the painting by Benedetto Enredi (Fig.3)[9] defines the dark shape to the left of Hylas as a rock formation, something difficult to see in the original work due, perhaps, to the layers of varnish which discolor the surface.

All the figures are placed close to the picture plane with little attempt to define pictorial depth. Drapery has been kept to a minimum – the small wisps of drapery are almost cellophane in their transparency, heightening the sense of eroticism. The soft creamy flesh of the nymphs dissolves seductively into the velvety shades of ultramarine *sfumato*, an effect for which Furini was famous.[10] Hylas' ornate brass pitcher, abandoned during the amorous struggle, may be seen in the lower foreground. A stormy nocturnal sky illuminated by cool lunar rays completes the eerie melodrama of the scenario[11] and acts as a theatrical backdrop to the aquatic theft.

The story of Hylas is tragically brief. Set within the larger story of Jason, our episode begins not long after the Argonauts set sail in their quest for the Golden Fleece. The adventure had scarcely begun when the Argo was forced to land temporarily on the Bythnian coast to allow Hercules to replace a broken oar. Upon making camp, Hercules sent his squire, Hylas, in search of water. The boy soon found a sacred spring inhabited by nymphs. As he knelt to draw water in his brass pitcher the nymphs caught sight of his lovely countenance and were seized by a sudden passion for the youth. They dragged him into the waters and Hylas was never seen again. Hercules, overcome by grief at the loss of his loved one, continued to

search for the boy long after the Argo sailed on without him.[12]

Antique literary sources for the myth are numerous[13] but two Greek poems (Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* and Theocritus' *Idyll* XIII "Hylas") are the most complete accounts of the legend. The *Argonautica* version[14] carefully describes the plot and differentiates the single nymph who captures Hylas from the blithe spirits who dance in the waters and who are described as being of varied habitat, *i.e.*, naiads (fresh water nymphs), nereids (salt water nymphs), oreads (nymphs of mountains and grottoes) and hermadryads (wood nymphs associated with springs). This water nymph:

> was just rising from the fair-flowing spring; and the boy she perceived close at hand with the rosy flush of his beauty and sweet grace. For the full moon beaming from the sky smote him. And Cypris made her heart faint, and in her confusion she could scarcely gather her spirit back to her. But as soon as he dipped the pitcher in the stream, leaning to one side, and the brimming water rang loud as it poured against the sounding bronze, straightway she laid her left arm above upon his neck yearning to kiss his tender mouth; and with her right hand she drew down his elbow, and plunged him into the midst of the eddy.[15]

The short pastorale *Idyll* XIII by Theocritus[16] differs basically by raising the abducting ante to three specifically named naiads:

> And bright-haired Hylas took a brass pitcher
> and went in search for their supper,
> for Heracles himself and steadfast Telemon,
> who were his comrades in arms and messmates.
> He soon discovered
> a spring in a low-lying spot, thick with rushes,
> and lustrous kingcups, pallid maidenhair,
> swelling celery, and coarse marsh grasses.
> In the deep of the pool, three nymphs threaded
> dance—
> the unsleeping nymphs, dread of the countryside—
> Eunice and Malis, and Nycheia with spring in her
> glances.
> Intent on filling his thirsty pitcher, he lowered it
> close to the surface, and they laid hands on him,
> all
> by Eros fancy-struck for the Argive boy.
> Headlong he fell, under the black water,
> as a flaming star falls headlong under the sea.
> (And some sailor, seeing it, says to his mates,
> 'lighten the tackle, boys; the wind sits fair')
> The nymphs were trying to soothe the weeping
> boy
> with gentle words, holding him on their laps.[17]

A Roman version of the story is less clear in its interpretation and meaning.[18] The short poem by Propertius is dedicated to the Roman citizen, Gallus, a name which had appeared in one of Propertius' earlier poems.[19] The body of the poem departs from the traditional text of Theocritus and Apollonius only slightly but the introduction to the tale is particularly interesting in which he warns Gallus, "Fortune oft proves adverse to the heedless lover."[20]

> Thou has a love most like to Hylas, child of Theiodamas, one not less fair nor of humbler birth. Beware then, whether thou wanderest by the holy streams of Umbrian forests, or Anio's waters lave thy feet, or walk'st thou on the marge of the Giant's strand, or wheresoe'r a river's wandering waters welcome thee, beware and from thy love ward off the hands of nymphs that burn to steal (the Ausonian Dryads love as warmly as their sisters loved), lest it be thy fate ever to visit cruel mountains and icy crags and lakes, that thou hast tried to thy cost. Such woes the ill-starred wanderer Hercules suffered in a far land and bewailed by the shores of the relentless Ascanius.[21]

Both poets and painters discovered the myth's pictorial possibilities as evidenced by the large number of ancient illustrations on the subject.[22] A particularly colorful mosaic from the Basilica of Junius Bassus in Rome (Fig. 4)[23] depicts the Theocritan version with three nymphs. Other ancient illustrations of the myth appear on wall frescoes, sarcophagi and coins. Invariably the illustrations include a struggling youth, a water vessel and one or more agressive nymphs in an aquatic setting. Occasionally Hercules is also included in the background.

During the Renaissance the theme was revived in Florence in the poetry of Lorenzo de' Medici.[24] It also found its way into a number of cassone paintings which illustrated portions of the legend of the Golden Fleece. The choice of the Argonaut adventure would have been a pleasing one to a successful wool merchant with its allusions to the more heroic purveyor of woolen goods, Jason.[25]

A painting by Piero di Cosimo traditionally known as *Hylas Abducted by the Nymphs* (Fig. 5) and commissioned in Florence by the wool merchant Pugliese was re-titled in the 1930s as *The Fall of Vulcan on Lemnos*.[26] Panofsky's greatest objections to the "Hylas" identification were the lack of bronze vase, lack of a water supply and the elaborate costuming of the young ladies since water nymphs could not be expected to be clothed. While his arguments for the painting to be identified as *Vulcan on Lemnos* are convincing, it must be pointed out that an earlier cassone painting by Biagio de Antonio (1465) had already created a precedent for well-dressed nymphs on dry land abducting Hylas with no vase in sight (Fig. 6).[27] Perhaps Piero meant his painting to represent the *Argonautica* version with only one nymph taking posession of the youth, placing one arm above his neck and one hand on his elbow. Since Apollonius does not specify that the nymphs are all naiads and are, in fact, of varied habitat, they need not be nude or even dressed the same. In any case, Peiro's painting may have already achieved the *Hylas* title by the early seventeenth century or served as a model to Furini as an untitled example of six nymphs and a young boy.

Nymphs and nymph lore seemed to fascinate the Florentines and an endless variety of paintings, poems, plays, fountains and water festivals were commissioned in the city and many of the creations were peopled with these fascinating creatures. Another possible Florentine "Hylas" is the sixteenth century marble plaque which decorated a fountain (Fig. 7).[28] Water originally gushed from the overturned vessel and from the mouths of the two sea creatures. Although the dolphins probably do rule out the

scene as taking place in a fresh water spring, the aggressively amorous action of the nymph who kisses the passive youth on her lap recalls Theocritus' closing line in which "the nymphs were trying to soothe the weeping boy with gentle words, holding him on their laps."[29]

The Florentines were not the only ones to illustrate the Hylas myth.[30] The German engraver Joachim von Sandrart[31] and his pupil Renier van Persyn[32] both illustrated the subject while in Rome during the early 1630s. Whereabouts of these engravings are presently unknown but it is likely that they were done after the famous Roman mosaic (Fig. 4) which was still in place in the church of Sant'Andrea in Catabarbara.[33]

Furini may have seen these engravings after van Persyn by Sandrart or he may have viewed the original work of marble inlay himself while working in Rome with the fellow Florentine, Giovanni de San Giovanni.[34] Either way, Furini's painting is clearly based on the ancient work. Though the Roman piece shows but three naiads, only two are actively attacking the boy. Furini's painting likewise shows two nymphs with arms about a youth while multiplying the third nonchalant nymph of the Roman work into four equally insouciant naiads. In both cases Hylas is balanced on one knee on a rocky shore with his other leg cast into the water while turning his head and alarmed gaze to the nymph on the left. The nymph directly to the right of Hylas is in both cases seated on a rock formation. The backgrounds are equally undifferentiated with exception of a rocky hill that rises to the left, more easily viewed in the engraving after Furini by Enredi (Fig. 3). Furini has obviously revised the composition and details. The red cape of the Roman mosaic has been changed to a black one and the red color lavished on Hylas' velvet costume. But there can be little doubt that Furini has borrowed heavily from the older illustration.

Why Agnolo Galli commissioned the painting is a bit more difficult to ascertain. This wealthy young banker patronized many Florentine Baroque painters besides Furini and his tastes usually tended towards "cheerful" narrative paintings and landscapes.[35] His choice of this rather morbid subject needs further investigation. Galli lived in a society which actively pursued scholarly and literary accomplishment. Perhaps Galli was inspired by Marino's poem *Adonis* which was currently circulating about Italy and creating quite a furor.[36] The reference to Hylas in the poem is in the fifth canto and at least forty lines are given to the tale. Marino's smoky eroticism had much in common with Francesco Furini's specialization in sensuous female nudes and the styles of the two contemporaries, one poet and the other painter, were noted for their similarity during the seventeenth century even as they are today. On the other hand, Galli might have recognized the family name in Propertius' poem[37] which warned Galle against the loss of his lover and commissioned the work as a visual pun that sophisticated associates would recognize. However, the size of the work would seem to demand a more serious reason for the incentive to commission such a huge painting.

In later years Agnolo Galli was to commission several works from Lorenzo Lippi. Some of these paintings contained portraits of members of his family portrayed as biblical characters.[38] This tendency to have himself, wife, children, servants and friends painted into narrative scenes no doubt began early in his career as a patron. But if Hylas is a portrait of someone other than Furini's favorite male model there is no remaining documentation to indicate who it might have been. The large painting may have been created in fond memory of a beloved young cousin, friend or trusted page who died in the terrible plague which struck Florence from 1631 through 1633.[39] Galli would, thereby, have cast himself in the role of Gallus or, more likely, as the heroic grieving Hercules.

Furini's *Hylas* gained instant notoriety and the artist could not resist using it as a calling card and signature on his *Childbirth of Rachel* by painting the tiny Hylas scene on a bronze vase in the lower foreground (Fig. 8).[40] The story became immensely popular in certain circles of society. The homo-erotic possibilities of the myth were wasted on the family-oriented Galli but this was not the case with other members of Florentine aristocracy, particularly those in the Medici court. Baldassare Franceschini, called il Volterrano, was to fully exploit the allegorical connotations of the Hylas story and the presumed relationship between Hercules and Hylas. He painted at least four of these allegorical works[41] one of which is known to have been done after the likeness of Marchese Altoviti, *paggio di valigia* to Francesco Parrocchiani who commissioned the work.[42] The painting shown here (Fig. 9) shows Volterrano's typical presentation of a young page-boy dressed up as Hylas in half length and holding a bronze or gold pitcher. On occasion the vase is decorated in a *repousée* illustration of the rape of Hylas.[43]

This type of allegorical portraiture of pretty young boys in the guise of Ganymede and Hylas found ready acceptance in the hot-house society of Florence after Ferdinand II gained his majority in 1627.[44] If casual relationships between minor nobility and their pages were not publicly flouted, they were at least privately winked at since even Ferdinand II was a known pederast.[45]

Francesco Furini's *Hylas and the Nymphs* was a high point in Florentine Baroque painting and sparked the imagination of many. This work instigated the creation of a new iconographic presentation of the Hylas myth as allegorical portraiture by the contemporary painter, il Volterrano. The theme enjoyed popularity for a brief period in Florence during the 1630s and early '40s and then did not re-emerge until the late nineteenth century in England and America when poets and painters rediscovered the disquieting, poignant qualities of the tale.

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1 Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie dei Professori del Disegno da Cimabue a Qua*, vol. IV, (Florence: Batelli, 1846), p. 631.

2 Giuseppe Cantelli, *Disegni di Francesco Furini*, (Florence: Unione Fiorentina, 1969), p. 19.

3 Anna Maria Francini Ciaranfi, *Le Gallerie Palatine*, (Novara: Instituto Geografico de Agostini, 1957), p. 113.

4 Baldinucci was never certain in the chronology of Furini's paintings and the problem of dating persists. For more information on the career

of Furini see: L. Buerckel, "Francesco Furini," *Jarbuch d. Kunst Samm. d. all. Kaiser. Wien* 27 pt. 1(1908): 55-90. G. Corti, "Contributi all vita e alle opere di Francesco Furini," *Antichità Viva* 10 n. 2 (1971): 14-23. A. Stanghellini, *Francesco Furini, pittore*, (Siena: Biblioteca di Vita d'Arte vol. XII, 1914). E. Toesca, *Francesco Furini*, (Rome: Tumminelli, 1950).

5 Michael Wynne, "The Milltowns as Patrons," *Apollo* 99 (February 1974): 108-109. See also: The National Gallery of Ireland Catalogue no. 1658.

6 *Apollo* 90 (November 1969): xxi. Advertisement for a sale at Christie's on February 12, 1969.

7 Giuseppe Cantelli, *Disegni de Francesco Furini*, (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1972), p. 252.

8 Toesca, (see note 4), p. 9. See also: J. Nissman and H. Hibbard, *Florentine Baroque Art from American Collections*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1969), p. 43.

9 Buerckel, (see note 4), p. 56. No later than 1633.

10 According to Baldinucci (Vol. IV, p. 642) Furini stayed in debt because of extravagant expenditures on highly paid models and costly "azzuro oltramarino" to create his characteristic blue mists.

11 Ellis Waterhouse, *Italian Baroque Painting*, (London: Phaidon, 1962) has suggested the lighting effect is the result of a flash of lightning.

12 Hercules cries of "Ila, Ila, Ila" were the origin of a modern Greek expression meaning to attempt something in vain.

13 For complete listings of literary and pictorial examples of the Hylas myth in the antique world consult Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexicon der Griech. und Rom. Mythologie*, (Leipzig: Tuebner, 1880-1890), pp. 2794-5 and Pauly-Wissowa, *Real Encyclopädie*, (Stuttgart, 1914).

14 George W. Mooney, editor, *The Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius*, (Dublin: Longmans, 1912).

15 Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica* Book I, (English trans. by Loeb Classics), pp. 87-91.

16 Anna Rist, *The Poems of Theocritus*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), pp. 120-122.

17 *Ibid*.

18 L. Richardson, *Propertius: Elegies I-IV*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1977). Liber Primus, XX on pp. 52-53.

19 The name of Gallus appears in earlier poems in the first book by Propertius (1.10) but it is not evidently the same person. The sex of Gallus' lover is not mentioned and perhaps only the name was similar to that of Hylas. Richardson (cited above, p. 207) suggests that "if we are meant to understand it, it must mean that Gallus is to keep his love from the watering spots of Italy . . . We may also ask whether Gallus has not been deliberately parading a boy of great beauty before the world of fashion and is now being taken to task for this by the poet."

20 *The Elegies of Propertius, Book I*, English translation by H. F. Butler, (New York: Putnam, 1929), p. 53.

21 *Ibid*.

22 *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica, classica e orientale* XII, (Rome: 1961), pp. 103-104.

23 *Ibid*, colorplate p. 102.

24 Lorenzo de' Medici, *Poesie: Sonetti e Canzoni*. New edition. Foreword by Carducci (Florence: G. Barbera, 1859), p. 127.

25 Langton Douglas, *Piero di Cosimo*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946) has suggested that the Hylas theme is connected with the wool trade in Florence.

26 Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, (New York: Icon Editions, 1939, 1962), pp. 34-39.

27 In the 1940s a series of letters to the editor of *Art Bulletin* were written by Douglas (cited above) and Panofsky arguing the identification of the subject of Piero's painting. Curiously, neither cited the *Argonautica* nor the cassone painting published by Paul Schubring, "Cassone Pictures in America," *Art in America* 11 (1923): 231-243; *Cassoni*, Textband (Leipzig: Hiersmann, 1915), p. 286, Tafelband, (1923), Tafel LXXI. Also see: John Pope-Hennessy and Keith Christiansen, "Cassone Panels," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 38 n. 1 (Summer 1980): 29, figs. 21-24.

28 Decorazione di Fontane, Sec XVI Florence, Bargello Inv. 281.

29 Rist, p. 122.

30 Andor Pigler, *Barockthemen*. Eine Auswahl von Verzeichnissen zur Iconographie des 17. und 18. (Budapest: Akádemiai Kaidó, 1956) p. 126 (1974 edition), p. 135.

31 *Ibid*. See also Thieme-Becker.

32 Charles Le Blanc, *Manuel de l'amateur d'estampes*, (Paris: P. Jannet, 1854. Reprint Amsterdam: G. W. Hussink, 1970) Vol. II, p. 174 "Persyn: no. 4. Hylas accueilli par les Néréides: J. Sandrart."

33 Ernest Nash, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, 2d edition, Vol I, (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. 190. The Junius Bassus basilica was built in mid-fourth century and then converted to the Christian Church of Sant'Andrea in Catabarbara in mid-fifth century. The ancient marble decorations remained intact and drawings from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries show them still in place. The Hylas decorations were moved in the seventeenth century to a private collection in Rome.

34 Baldinucci, p. 630.

35 Sheila Rinehart, "Cassiano dal Pozzo," *Italian Studies*, Manchester, England (1961): 35-59. Correspondence between Agnolo Galli and Cassiano dal Pozzo, the famous Roman art dealer.

36 James Mirollo, *The Poet of the Marvelous: Giambattista Marino*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963). See also: Giovan Battista Marino, *Adonis*, verses 72-107, reprinted in *Opere Scelte*, Vol. I, (Torino: Tipografia Temporelli, 1954), pp. 401-402.

37 Richardson, p. 52.

38 Rinehart, p. 48.

39 Eric Cochrane, *Florence in the Forgotten Centuries, 1527-1690*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) Book Three, Florence in the 1630s, pp. 165-231.

40 Evelina Borea, *La Quadreria di Don Lorenzo de' Medici*, (Firenze: 1977), pp. 44-45. Commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici for the Villa della Petraia in 1633. A copy of the work exists (including the Hylas detail on the bronze basin) by Leonardo Ferroni, a student of Furini.

41 Gerhard Ewald, "Unknown works by Baldassare Franceschini, called il Volterrano (1611-1689)," *Burlington* (1963): 272-283. On page 283 Ewald lists Volterrano's paintings according to Baldinucci: "Vincenzio Vettori, cavaliere gerosolimitano (Bald. V. p. 179) ha un belissimo ritratto di medesimo, fatto dal Volterrano, alla presenza del mentovato cardinale Gian Carlo (de' Medici), in tempo che esso Vettori era suo paggio di valigia" and "Colori alla presenza di questo principe (Mattias de' Medici) un bel ritratto d'Orazio Piccolomini senese, suo paggio di valigia" (Bald. V., p. 176) "Jacopo del Turco ebbe un Ila con vaso, che poi fu del marchese Carlo Gerini" (Bald. V., p. 177) and "Per Cosimo Citerni dipinse a olio in un ovato un Ila con vaso" (Bald. V., 161).

42 Baldinucci, V., p. 161.

43 This is the case in the painting illustrated in yet another work reproduced by Charles McCorquodale, *Painting in Florence* 1600-1700, (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum, London: Royal Academy, 1979) p. 72.

Fig. 2, Francesco Furini, *Study*, Florence: Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe.

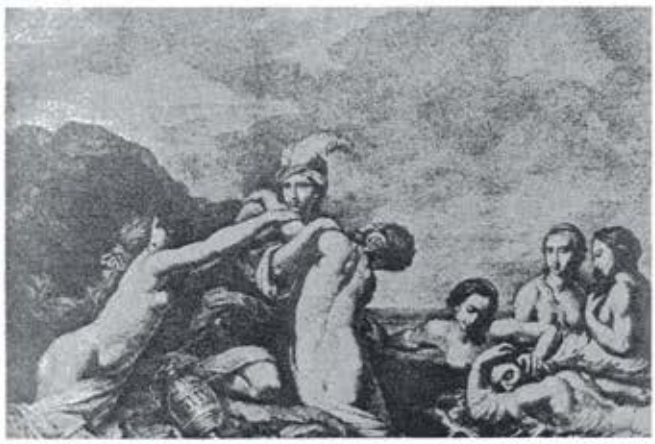

Fig. 3, Benedetto Enredi, *Hylas and the Nymphs*, engraving.

Fig. 4, *Rape of Hylas by the Nymphs*, Roman ca. 350, Florence: Palazzo Vecchio.

Fig. 5, Piero di Cosimo, *Hylas Abducted by the Nymphs* or *The Fall of Vulcan on the Island of Lemnos*, Hartford, Connecticut: Wadsworth Atheneum.

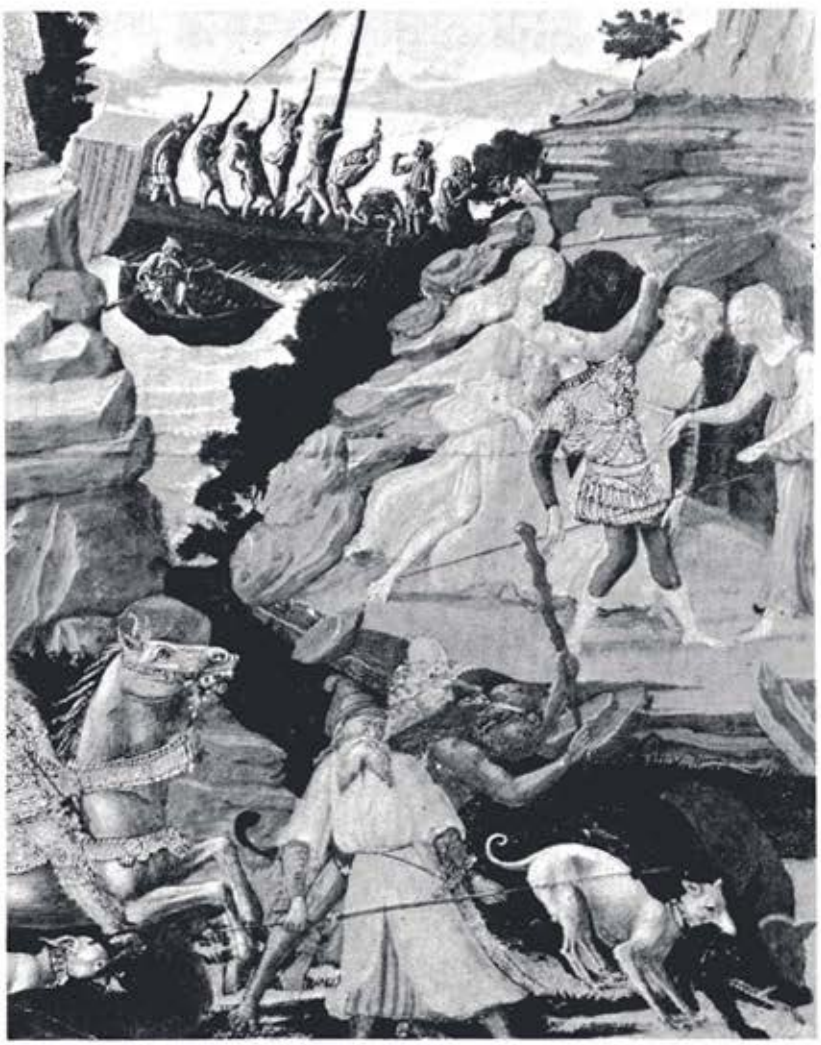

Fig. 6, Biagio di Antonio, *Jason and the Argonauts* (detail), New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 7. Marble fountain decoration, Florence: Bargello.

Fig. 8. Francesco Furini, *The Childbirth of Rachel* (detail), Munich: Castle of Schleissheim.

Fig. 9. Il Volterrano, *Hylas*, Florence: Gallerie Statali.