



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Pentheus et Dionysus

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

In the spring of 405 BCE, a new play premiered at the annual Athenian festival in honor of the god Dionysus. The grisly tragedy, *The Bacchae*, won playwright Euripides first prize, but his successful drama was destined to become controversial for the next two millennia, leaving it largely excised from American university syllabi until after the 1950s. The disturbing tale related an account of Dionysus' revenge on the arrogant King Pentheus of Thebes, who had slandered the god's worship. As the play opens, an exotic, long-haired foreigner arrives in the city, causing the Thebans to fall under the "maddening sting of Dionysus." Outraged at the

stranger's power, and threatened by his seductive androgyny and "otherness," Pentheus derides him, and threatens his decapitation. In reality, the stranger is no acolyte of the god, but Dionysus himself in disguise. In the exchange that follows, Dionysus slowly lures the hubristic king into a deadly trap by increasingly confusing him, addling his senses, and thus humiliating him in front of the citizenry. Delirious and detached from reality, Pentheus fails to realize the gravity of the terrible situation in which he finds himself. He is then led deep into the forest where the Bacchae, the female followers of Dionysus, are goaded into a murderous bloodbath. Pentheus is ambushed, slaughtered, and dismembered by the frenzied women, who then play a game of catch with his severed body parts. In Mohr's painting, the artist has shown us a continuous narrative illustrating two scenes from the play. On the left, Dionysus appears with a bull's head, one of several disguises he assumes to confuse Pentheus. On the right, bacchantes attack the doomed king, as he collapses to the ground.



Alexander Carl Adrian Mohr (German, 1892–1974)
Pentheus et Dionysus (Pentheus and Dionysus), ca. 1930s
Oil on canvas
Gift of Marianna Monaco in memory of Elsa Kahn Mohr (95.4)

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Alexander Mohr was chiefly known as an expressionist, though his later work reflected Cubism. He trained under the German expressionist, William Straube (1871–1954), who in turn had been taught by Henri Matisse (1869–1954), the artist synonymous with the famed French branch of the movement. One of the early twentieth century's most significant groups of modernist painters, expressionists increasingly strayed from reality, instead concentrating on pure emotional response through shape and color. Their canvases boldly assailed viewers with dreamlike scenarios, distorted spatial relationships, and fantastic, arbitrary color. But whereas Matisse was prone to organic, sensuous line, Straube and Mohr were brash and angular. Indeed, Mohr's angular harshness and lurid color lend themselves well to Euripides' shocking subject. In the nightmare world of Pentheus' final moments, reality seems to dissolve as images fragment. Is the ambiguous central figure straddling a panther yet another disguise of Dionysus or one of the Bacchae? Or is this strange, fractured figure representative of both? The panther is the god's vehicle, and he is frequently shown riding it, but the figure almost appears bi-gendered. This may not be surprising if we consider that one epithet of Dionysus used by the Greeks was "man-womanish." On the other hand, the Bacchae are one with the power and spell of Dionysus as they kill Pentheus, so the figure may represent a fusion of both. In a watercolor of this subject by Mohr, also in the Museum's collection, the figure is more clearly a bacchant but here it seems deliberately vague.

In the early 1930s, Alexander Mohr made a trip to Greece, where he fell in love with not only the country, but also Elsa Kahn, whom he married and remained with until his death. For the next forty years, he and Elsa would spend their time between Germany, France, and Greece. The mythology of the ancient Greeks greatly colored the corpus of Mohr's work, and he would die in Athens in 1974, where he was buried, at his request. This painting was donated to the Museum of Art and Archaeology in memory of Elsa Kahn Mohr, who died in 1984, and was interred beside her husband in Athens. ■