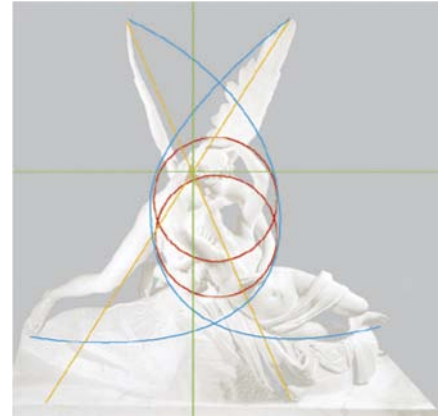


Antonio Canova

Love and Psyche, 1788-1793**One Theme, Several Interpretations**

Artists in the Neoclassical Era were attracted to the **subject of Love and Psyche** because its symbols allowed more refined philosophical interpretations with respect to other mythological scenes. Canova himself **returned to the theme several times** in the early part of his career, sculpting the figures not only on their own but also as they contemplate a butterfly, in the work known as *Love and Psyche Standing* (1796). He also completed two versions of *Love and Psyche reclining*, one of which is the piece we see here, commissioned in 1787 and preserved in the Louvre Museum.

Inspired by the story taken from Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, the sculpture captures the moment when **Love, with a kiss, revives Psyche** after she had been wrapped in a cursed sleep for having gone against Venus' orders and opened the box containing some of the beauty belonging to Persephone, goddess and queen of the underworld. The artist's inspiration for the figuration probably came from wall drawings seen in Pompei or from a Herculaneum painting of a faun and a Bacchante. Canova had already used that image for a preceding group of *Venus Grieving for Adonis*.



Figg. 1, 2, 3 Antonio Canova, *Psyche Revived by Love's Kiss*, 1788-1793. Marble, 155x168 cm. Paris. Musée du Louvre. View of the whole, compositional diagram (above) and detail (on the next page).



Structure and Symbolic Meaning

The marble grouping is constructed according to a series of **complex compositional geometries** in which even **the use of voids** assumes a formal valence similar to the sculpted mass. The very narrow space separating the lips of the two figures is the central point of the entire composition, the point of intersection between two diagonals that cross like an X. One diagonal runs through Love's body, from his right wing tip to the toe of his foot while the other, on the left, starts at his left wing tip and runs down through Psyche's body to the drapery arranged along the base. Therefore the two bodies are arranged along a diagonal and form a pyramid structure that has been drawn upwards by the triangular figure formed by Love's extended wings.

The composition's centre focuses on another geometric construction generated by the two intersecting circles drawn by the lovers' arms inscribed inside two arches. One is formed by Psyche's body together with one of Cupid's wings, while the other is drawn by the god's right leg, Psyche's left arm and by Cupid's other wing. The work's structural complexity is easily seen in a frontal viewing of the piece but also it offers various new orientations as the viewer circles around it. Seeing it from all sides allows observers to fully gather correspondences, **different readings and points of view**.

The sculpture reflects **Wickelmann's aesthetic principles**: Love and Psyche are captured in the moment before their lips meet in a lovers' kiss, a moment charged with tension which is purified of any passionate quality, of any spontaneous emotion. The process of **abstraction** tends towards the achievement of an ideal form and harmony; it is rationally conducted without, however, erasing all traces of a human, sensual and vital realm. This is best seen in the soft rendering of the flesh of Psyche's body and in the expressive tenderness of Love's gesture, as well as in the faces' restrained tension. The art work was conceived to have **different layers of meaning**. It can be seen as a representation of *amor divinus*, that is the love that unifies divinity and mortal; as an idyllic representation of youth, represented in its transparent innocence; but, on a deeper level, it is also the symbol of the bond between *eros* (love) and *thanatos* (death) in which the loving embrace becomes the state of an almost mystical union (H. Honour).



How Canova Worked

The execution of a sculpture required **various stages of work**. The first was the one that Canova termed of **"invention" and "arrangement"** and it consisted in the creation and study of the subject via preparatory sketches. Canova's sketches are hasty, general, and focused on finding the best solutions in the lines of profile and in the relationships of plasticity and luminosity. This phase was followed by the realisation of **models in terracotta** in which the artist evaluated the three-dimensional rendering of his sketches. The models for *Love and Psyche* show us Canova's repeated attempts to achieve an ideal form through the exploration of new compositional solutions as well as via a tiring work of purification from the most immediate, realistic and passionate elements. Once the model was realised on the same scale as the final artwork, a plaster cast was made. To **transfer the plaster image to marble** many metallic spots were marked as reference points. Once the plaster cast was placed next to the marble, the same points were repeated on the block of stone via the use of compasses, pantographs, and plumb-lines on a scale of 1:1. This method allowed a quite faithful transposition and reproduction of the original design in plaster.

The **conclusive phase** was reserved for Canova, who called it **the "sublime execution"**, and that his process of idealising the statue's parts, rendering them more sublime. This was the part of the process in which Canova used all of his technical expertise to clean and polish the surfaces and forms, giving the statue its definitive aspect. Moreover the sculptor usually used a mixture of wax and other substances to give the marble a slight coloration that evoked the flesh's softness and eliminated the stone's shiny quality.

Fig. 4 Antonio Canova, *Love and Psyche*. Pencil on paper. Bassano del Grappa, Museo Civico.
Fig. 5 Antonio Canova, *Love and Psyche*, 1787. Terracotta, 25x42x28 cm. Venice, Museo Correr.

