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WINE IN EUROPEAN PAINTING

Abstract

Images of wine can be seen in many European paintings. The aim of this paper is to explore different types of paintings depicting wine and wine related subjects such as grapes, grape harvests, wine merchants and people who love to drink wine. Religious and mythological artworks, still lifes, portraits and everyday life paintings present wine. Noah is considered to be the first wine drinker and the first person to discover the soothing effects of wine. Grapes are included in some portraits of Virgin Mary and Jesus child. The first miracle attributed to Jesus is the transformation of water into wine at a wedding in Cana. Saint Martin’s Day involves drinking the first wine of the season. Bacchus is the god of the grape harvest, winemaking and wine.

Keywords: Wine, European painting, Noah, Jesus, Bacchus
AVRUPA RESMİNDE ŞARAP

Öz


Anahtar kelimeler: Şarap, Avrupa resmi, Nuh, İsa, Baküs

Introduction

Alcohol is a fundamental part of Western culture. It is the most controversial element of our diet, simultaneously nourishing and intoxicating the human frame. Proof that people were cultivating plants to manufacture alcohol first appears in the so-called Fertile Crescent, a geographical area curving between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. In such communities, winemaking was the best technology they had for storing highly perishable grapes (Gately, 2008, 1-3).

Vine is a common symbol of Christ and the Christian faith from its use in biblical metaphor. The vine was constantly used as a decorative motif in religious art and architecture. It is found on early Christian sarcophagi, in wall painting in the Roman catacombs, in Byzantine mosaics and in medieval stained glass and stonework (Hall, 1974, 322).

Vine is one of the most vivid symbols in the Bible and is used to express the relationship between God and his people. The vine sometimes refers to the vineyard as being protected place where the children of God flourish under the tender care of God. “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant” (Isaiah 5: 7). The vine as the emblem of Christ follows from His words expressing the new relation between God and man through Him. “I am the true vine, and my father is the husbandman” (John 15: 1). (Ferguson, 1989, 39-40).

Bunches of grapes with ears of grain were sometimes used to symbolize the wine and bread of Holy Communion. In general, the grape, like the Eucharistic wine, is a symbol of the Blood of Christ. Representations of labor in the vineyard sometimes signify the work of good Christians in the vineyard of the Lord; the grape vine or leaf is used as an emblem of the Saviour, the ‘true vine’ (Ferguson, 1989, 31-32).

In Old Testament tradition, wine was first and foremost a symbol of joy in the books of Psalm1 and Ecclesiastes2 and then, in more general terms, of all the gifts which God lavishes

1 He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate, bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts (Psalm 104: 14-15).
2 Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do (Ecclesiastes 9: 7).
upon mankind in Genesis. Since wine was the drink of the gods in the religions which surrounded them, it is understandable that the Children of Israel should have acknowledged its sacred properties and employed it in their worship (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, 1113).

Generally wine and the vine are signs of prosperity and joy. The Promised Land, in fact, is a land of vineyards, and the vine a symbol of fertility. It was treasured and became a symbol of Israel, which God chose to be his vineyard, even though it betrayed the Lord’s expectations. (De Capoa, 2003, 68).

It is intriguing to survey the reflections of wine through holy narratives of the Bible, mythological stories, centuries and different types of paintings.

**Religious Paintings**

“The drunkennes of Noah” is a narrative in the Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. After emerging from the ark with his family, Noah begins to farm and to cultivate a vineyard. One day, after drinking too much wine, he becomes inebriated and lies naked in his tent. Ham, his youngest son, sees him and tells his brothers. At this point, Shem and Japheth take up a cloak and approach Noah, walking backward so as not to see his nakedness, and they cover his body. When Noah awakens from his state of drunkenness and learns of Ham’s actions, he curses Canaan, Ham’s son saying, “Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” (De Capoa, 67). Italian Renaissance painter Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516) (Figure 1) depicted this scene in 1515. The sleeping Noah is surrounded by his sons.

![Figure 1: Giovanni Bellini, Drunkennes of Noah, 1515, oil on canvas, 103 x 157 cm, Museum of Fine Arts and Archeology, Besançon.](image)

With the exception of Christ, no other figure is so frequently portrayed in Renaissance art as the Virgin Mary. As well as being the personification of grace and purity, she is the merciful mother. Numerous double portraits of Virgin Mary and Jesus Child have been produced

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3 May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine (Genesis 27: 28).
4 “This is what you are to offer on the altar regularly each day: two lambs a year old. Offer one in the morning and the other at twilight. With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives, and a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering (Exodus 29: 38-40).
5 Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father’s naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked (Genesis 9: 20-23).
over the centuries. Different symbols and attributes are used to identify her outstanding characteristics (Ferguson, 1989, 94). Northern Renaissance artist Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) (Figure 2) created portraits of the Virgin and Child many times. It was the most stable of Cranach’s religious themes. It is evidence that love for the Mother of God was no less strong in Protestant hearts than it was in Catholic ones (Stepanov, 1997, 89). Cranach put grapes in the hands of the holy mother and child and they stand in front of vines. It refers to the image of Christ as the true vine as stated in the Gospel of John.

Figure 2: Lucas Cranach the Elder, Madonna and Child, 1520, oil on panel, 46 x 58 cm, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

The first miracle performed by Christ was at a wedding in the town of Cana to which he and his mother, Mary and his disciples were invited. Jesus gave instructions that six waterpots of stone be filled with water and that these be carried to the governor of the feast. When the governor tasted the contents of the waterpots, he discovered that all were filled with the finest wine (Ferguson, 1989, 82). Northern Renaissance artist Gérard David (1460-1523) depicted this scene in exquisite detail. The highlight of the episode recorded in the bible, the jars that contain water transformed into wine, are placed in the center of the picture.

6 On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus’ mother said to him, “They have no more wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.” They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine (John 2: 1-9).
One of the most famous scenes of the bible that depicts the last meal that Christ had with his disciples before his betrayal by Judas Iscariot is called the Last Supper. It was at this meal that Christ broke bread and handed it to his disciples. This ceremony is the basis for the Christian rite of Communion\(^7\) (Ferguson, 1989, 85). French Baroque artist Philippe de Champaigne (1602-1674) created realistic faces of the figures surrounding Christ at a dramatic moment (Figure 4). A strong light typical of Baroque period brightens Christ holding a bread and a goblet of wine standing on the table.

European art includes numerous depictions of saints. The Saint who comes to mind in relation to wine is Saint Martin of Tours. The 11th of November, the saint’s feast day, was celebrated by eating “Saint Martin’s Goose”, coinciding with the autumn pig-killing, while the new wine made from the recently picked grape harvest, known as Saint Martin’s wine, was sampled. Saint Martin’s Day became associated with a free distribution of wine to country people outside city gates. Northern Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569) created a genre scene (Figure 5) where the focus of the composition is the celebration of Saint Martin’s Day as it took place in Flanders and in the Germanic world at this period. In the centre the artist has located an extremely large barrel of wine. Around it are a crowd of varied figures: young and old men, women, some with children, peasants, beggars and thieves, all attempting to obtain the largest possible quantity of wine. The composition is completed on the opposite side on the left by the figures who are clearly suffering from the effects of the wine, and here Bruegel depicts those who have been carried away by the sin of gluttony rather than following the path of virtue, in contrast to Saint Martin. Examples of such figures include one vomiting, another lying unconscious in his own vomit on the ground, two men fighting and the woman offering her baby wine (www.museodelprado.es).

\(^7\) While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them. “Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” (Mark 14: 22-25).
Dionysus or Bacchus is the god of wine and intoxication, of ritual madness and ecstatic liberation from everyday life identity. Homer calls him “a joy of mortals” (Iliad 14, 325) and Hesiod “he of many delights” (Theogony 941). He introduced wine to men, says Euripides, “which, when they drink their fill, banishes the sufferings of wretched mortals and brings forgetfulness of each day’s troubles in sleep. There is no other cure for sorrow” (Bacchae 278-83).

When he grew to manhood, Dionysus was driven mad by the still hostile Hera and wandered the world, through Egypt and Syria to Phyrgia, where he was cured by Rhea. He traveled on even as far as India, before returning to Greece, spreading his worship and dispensing knowledge of the wine and its pleasures (March, 2014, 162).

Woodland spirits usually accompanied Dionysus. Of these, the Sileni were hairy men with horse’s ears, who were wise but very drunken; the satyrs were horse or goatlike men who were lustful and also very drunken. His human followers were women known as Maenads meaning the frenzied ones. The cult of Dionysus was famous for its orgiastic revelries. Dancing, singing and drunken shouting easily spiraled out of control in a frenzy of joy. Despite bits image of hedonistic indulgence, there was a religious purpose to these ritual practices. It was believed that by drinking excessive amounts of wine, members of the cult could shed their social inhibitions and become liberated in a realm of divine abandonment (Day, 2007, 70-71).

European artists have been keen on depicting the figures of Dionysus, sileni, satyrs, maenads and the festival of drunken followers of Dionysus called Bacchanalia. Italian Baroque artist Guido Reni (1575-1642) created a cute and chubby boy as Bacchus (Figure 6) drinking wine heartily and peeing at the same time.

**Figure 5:** Pieter Brugel the Elder, *The Wine of Saint Martin’s Day*, 1566-67, glue size on twill, 148 x 270 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.
The seasons cadence the fundamental moments of human life: birth (spring), maturity (summer), decline (autumn) and death (winter). In medieval and Renaissance iconography they are represented by the agricultural labors associated with each season: sowing, mowing, harvesting and hunting (Battistini, 32). Autumn is the season of Dionysus. The vine was celebrated in the month of September, during the festive rites of the grape harvest (Battistini, 2005, 39).

Allegorical depiction of autumn is closely related to grape harvest and therefore wine. Spanish Romantic artist Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) created a luminous landscape with harvesters (Figure 7). Dressed in yellow clothes that symbolize autumn, a young man sitting on a stone offers a cluster of black grapes to a lady. A boy is eager to reach the offered fruit, which is reserved for the adults. A woman stands next to them, holding a grape basket on her head, much like the classical allegory of the goddess Ceres with fruit on her head. Some grape harvesters are behind them, next to the grapevine that leads to a valley crowned with the suggestion of mountains in the background. This is one of the most beautiful and best-known compositions from all of Goya’s cartoon series. This cartoon was for one of the tapestries intended for the Prince of Asturias’ dining room at the El Pardo Palace (www.museodelprado.es).

Figure 6: Guido Reni, *Drinking Bacchus*, 1623, oil on canvas, 56 x 72 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden.

Figure 7: Francisco de Goya, *The Grape Harvest or Autumn*, 1786, oil on canvas, 190 x 267 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.
Portraits

Group portraits of august guilds and members of governing bodies were among the best paid commissions of 17th century Dutch painters. Dutch Baroque artist Ferdinand Bol (1616-1680) who mainly produced portraits created a group portrait of the governors of the wine merchants’ guild (Figure 8) probably in the founding year of the Amsterdam guild in 1659 (Baumstark, 2002, 79).

Figure 8: Ferdinand Bol, Governors of the Wine Merchants’ Guild, 1659, oil on canvas, 193 x 305 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

Dutch Baroque artist Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) created many portraits of women living indoors conveying moral messages. Women who had become intoxicated on wine were considered to be the embodiment of sin, and this is a motif central to Vermeer’s work. According to Jacob Cats, a famous popular teacher of the 17th century, women should be forbidden drink altogether, as alcohol was the first step towards whoring (Schneider, 2004, 31).

Vermeer’s painting entitled The Wine Glass (Figure 9) reminds the spectator of the risky aspects of wine. The image painted on the window shows the figure of Temperance holding a bit in her hand, an admonition to moderation and restraint of the passions. The offer of a glass of wine is equivalent to a sexual proposition, underscored by the man’s insinuating attitude. The girl’s ambiguous expression gives one to understand that she is inebriated (Impelluso, 2004, 34).

Figure 9: Johannes Vermeer, The Wine Glass, 1660, oil on canvas, 66 x 76 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

French Impressionist painter Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894) included a bottle of wine in his work Wood Floor Planers dated 1875 (Figure 10) which is one of the first representations of urban proletariat. Whereas peasants (Gleaners by Jean François Millet) or country workers (Stone Breakers by Gustave Courbet) had often been shown, city workers had seldom been
painted. Unlike Courbet or Millet, Caillebotte does not incorporate any social, moralising or political message in his work (www.musee-orsay.fr).

**Figure 10:** Gustave Caillebotte, *Wood Floor Planers*, 1875, oil on canvas, 102 x 146 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

In 1906, Norwegian Expressionist artist Edvard Munch painted a self-portrait in a restaurant, his back turned to all except a bottle of wine (Figure 11). Four years earlier, when he attempted to break off with his lover Tulla Larsen and shot two of his own fingers, the alcohol consumption of the artist became even greater (Southgate, 1991, 102). His sad face reflects how unhappy and restless he is. The bottle of wine seems to signal how alcohol accompany his loneliness.

**Figure 11:** Edward Munch, *Self-Portrait with a Bottle of Wine*, 1906, oil on canvas, 110,5 x 120,5 cm, Munch Museum, Oslo.

**Still Lifes**

Dutch Baroque painter of still lifes Pieter Claesz (1597-1661) is among the numerous artists who included wine in their compositions. Claesz in his painting called *Still-Life with Wine Glass and Silver Bowl* (Figure 12), presented a monochrome “banketje”, which is dominated by shades of grey, green and silver and the elements of the painting have been reduced to a small number of vessels. There is an overturned silver goblet, a half empty wine glass and two pewter plates. Although this is a so-called breakfast still life (an onbijtje), hardly any food is shown, but only the rare left-overs of a meal, such as the olive on the plate. Unlike the overabundance of food in earlier Flemish still-lifes, this painting emphasizes a refinement of taste. Naive consumerism has been replaced by aesthetic sublimation under the influence of Protestant introspection and asceticism (Schneider, 2003, 115).
Conclusion

Wine has been a prominent drink for humanity throughout the centuries. Almost all major types of paintings in European art, namely religious and mythological pictures, portraits, still lifes and genre scenes offer the image of wine.

Wine and vine have been mentioned in the narratives of both Old and New Testaments. Therefore, European artists of especially Renaissance and Baroque periods who created paintings reflecting these stories included the wine with sacred connotations. Scenes such as “Drunkenness of Noah”, “Virgin Mary and Jesus Child with Grapes”, “Marriage at Cana” and “Last Supper” introduce wine in religious compositions. Among the saints, Saint Martin is the one whose feast day coincides with the first wine of the season, for this reason he can be seen in wine related pictures.

Dionysus or Bacchus would be the first name that comes to mind regarding wine in Greek and Roman mythological framework. As being the god of wine and winemaking, he appears in numerous canvases and frescoes with wine, vine or grapes. Mythological figures such as Satyrs and Maenads related to Bacchus may also be depicted with wine.

It can be seen that wine may also play a significant role in portraits. References to wine makers and merchants and individuals from various layers of the society offer a wide range of possibilities for wine pictures. Artists suggest different symbols and attach diverse meanings to wine. Vermeer blames wine for immoral behaviors while Caillabotte shows wine as a joy and energy giving drink to workers. When it comes to self portraits, wine may allude different states of mind and soul. Munch depicted wine in a desperate mood while Russian artist Marc Chagall (1887-1985) created a romantic scene with his wife celebrating life with a glass of wine.

Since all people consume wine, including the members of the royal families, bourgeois, country and urban workers, it is natural to conclude that wine is a drink that had been most frequently depicted. Peasant Family Having Bread and Wine by Johannes Lingelbach (1622-1674), Crown Prince Ludwig in the Spanish Wine Tavern in Rome (1824) by Franz Ludwig Catel (1778-1856) and Luncheon of the Boating Party (1880) by Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) are further examples showing how widespread is the love for wine.

Wine has been a significant element in still lifes. The inclusion of a glass of wine in still lifes can be traced back as early as 62-69 dated ancient Roman wall paintings in Herculaneum. Baroque artists such as Claesz and Willem Kalf (1619-1693), 19th century realist painter Henri Fantin Latour (1836-1904) and 20th century surrealist artist Juan Gris (1887-1927) displayed wine in different styles reflecting the art of their times.
When European art is scanned through the perspective of alcoholic drinks, beer and absinthe would be the next most appreciated drinking images in the pictures. Wine’s leading status may be claimed to owe to its many biblical and mythological references.

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