

## **DIONYSUS**

**Photographs by Lorenzo Scaramella**

**Commentary by Deborah Wesley**

**ARCHETYPAL COMMENTARY**

The ancient Greek myths tell us of the god Dionysus, who would lead people out of their orderly city existence into a life in the wilds, where wine, music, dance and sexuality flowed, animals and nature were close companions, and there arose an ecstatic joyousness which on occasion could tip over into suffering and madness. Perhaps some of the same spirit was felt in 1960's U.S., when a movement away from the conservative 1950's led into a period of sexual freedom, return to nature, use of psychedelic drugs, interest in ecstatic spiritual experience. "Tune in, turn on, drop out" was the theme. This ancient spirit is pictured here in Roman images of the god Dionysus as a beautiful young man and as a lordly mature one.

Dionysus had a great deal of difficulty at birth: his mother Semele was killed when she was pregnant with him, and he spent his last three fetal months sewed up in the thigh of his father Zeus—a substitute womb. After his birth he was set upon by Titans who tore him to pieces and ate all of them but his heart, from which he was recreated and reborn. After that, he was cared for by Persephone and other feminine beings, which perhaps left a slight feminine trace.

As an adult, he was a wanderer who, accompanied by his retinue of maenads and satyrs, would appear suddenly, unexpected and uninvited. Powerful and mysterious, he would bring excitement, joy and terror to the new place and challenge the status quo. Of course, he was feared and resisted by the local rulers, often to their ultimate humiliation. Dionysus was known for wild, spontaneous behavior. To a culture which idealized moderation and balance, he brought the

enlivening freedom of excess. As the god of wine, he offered the release of everything that had been locked up. He was connected, as well, with inspired creativity—not ordinary craftsmanship, but the creativity that comes when the unconscious wells up and takes over, so that one is possessed.

Dionysus' divine intensity and power drew people to him in ways that were revelatory and enlivening, but could also overwhelm them, especially when they entered into his rites in a casual or superficial way. Then they could lapse into madness or mayhem. It was essential to acknowledge his power respectfully, but not to identify oneself with it; to remember that he was a god.

This god could also bring people to reconciliations and communion and a sense of the basic unity between human and nature and between human and human. The mythologist Mircea Eliade points out that Dionysus is in relationship to all parts of life. His appearances and unexpected disappearances reflect the appearance and concealment of life and death and ultimately, their unity. This is because, he says, quoting Heraclitus, “Dionysus and Hades are one.”

-Deborah Wesley



**TITLE:** Dionysus

**ARTIST:** Unknown

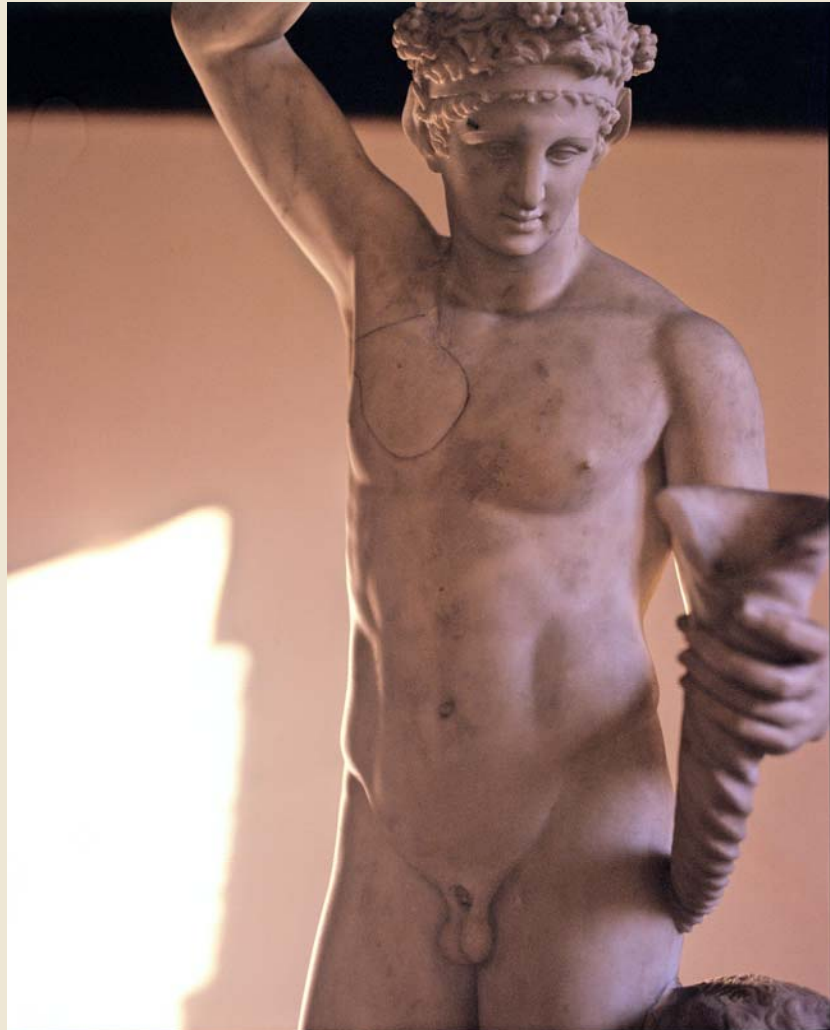
**MEDIUM:** Bronze

**DATE:** Second half of first century BC

**LOCATION:** Naples, Archeological National Museum

**COUNTRY/SITE:** Ercolano, Villa dei Papiri, Italy

**PHOTOGRAPHER:** Lorenzo Scaramella



**TITLE:** Dionysus or Satyr pressing grapes

**ARTIST:** Unknown

**MEDIUM:** fine-grained crystalline marble

**DATE:** Second century AD

**LOCATION:** National Museum, Palazzo Altemps, Rome

**PHOTOGRAPHER:** Lorenzo Scaramella



**TITLE:** Young Dionysus

**ARTIST:** Unknown

**MEDIUM:** marble

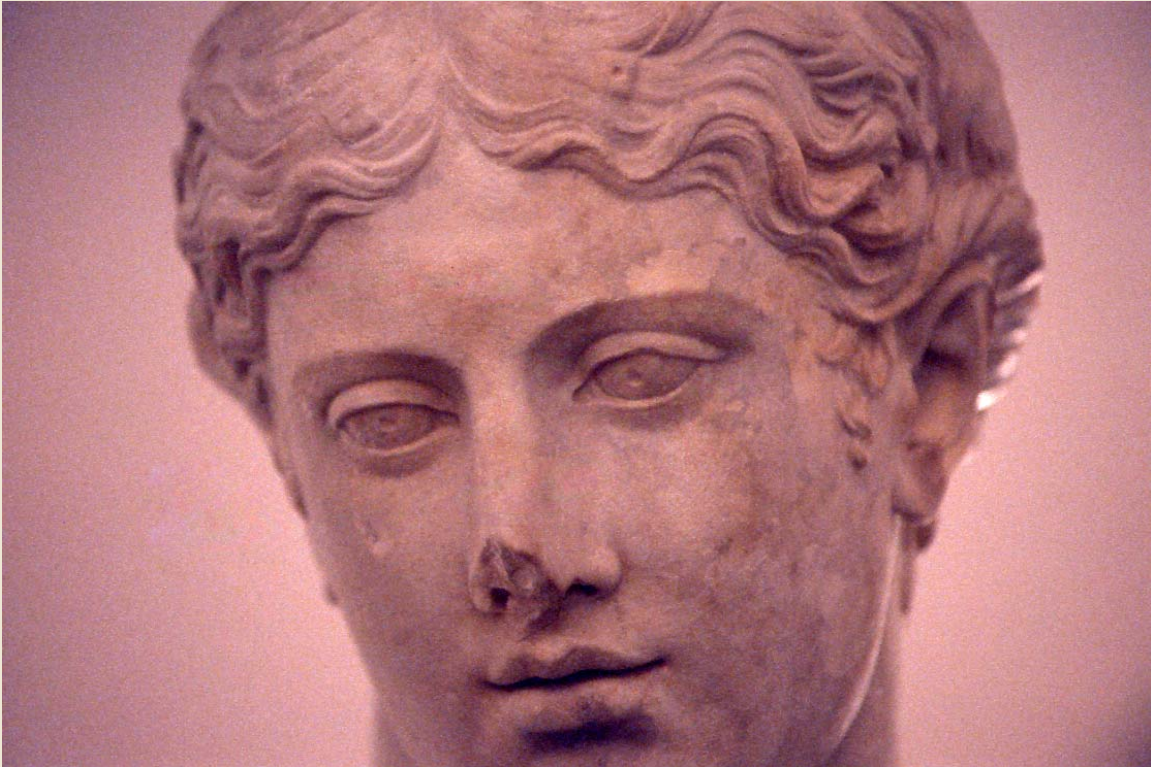
**DATE:** Second half of second century AD

**LOCATION:** Museum of the Palatine, Rome

**SITE:** Palatine Hill

**PHOTOGRAPHER:** Lorenzo Scaramella





**TITLE :** Young Dionysus (part.)

**ARTIST:** Unknown

**MEDIUM:** “Lunense” marble

**DATE:** Half of second century AD

**LOCATION:** National Museum, Palazzo Massimo, Rome

**COUNTRY/SITE:** Courtyard of the Libraries of Hadrian's Villa, Tivoli

**PHOTOGRAPHER:** Lorenzo Scaramella



**TITLE:** Erma of Dionysus

**ARTIST:** Unknown

**MEDIUM:** “Lunense” marble

**DATE:** unknown

**LOCATION:** Museuem of Montemartini Powerplant, Rome

**COUNTRY/SITE:** The Roman Forum

**PHOTOGRAPHER:** Lorenzo Scaramella