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## From Viewer to Voyeur: Victimizing the Barberini Faun

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## From Viewer to Voyeur: Victimizing the Barberini Faun

### Abstract:

This essay explores the connection between the Barberini Faun and sexual predation. Often referred to as a hypersexualized statue, the Barberini Faun is a Hellenistic piece that relies on viewer-stature interaction to communicate ideas involving ancient Greek sexuality. By utilizing literary and material evidence, this essay suggests that the highly sexual yet vulnerable depiction of the Barberini Faun forces its viewer into a position as voyeur, transforming him or her into a potential sexual predator. The Barberini Faun turns the traditional depiction of a satyr on its head, making the statue an object of sexual desire – a potential sexual victim.

Dr. Susanne Turner, Curator at the Museum of Classical Archaeology in Cambridge, refuses to draw much attention to the Barberini Faun (fig. 1) when presenting visitors with a tour of the museum. She states, “So maybe, really, I just like to keep him to myself.”<sup>1</sup> Turner’s infatuation with this statue developed while she was writing an essay, which she compares to a love letter. She describes the faun’s chiseled face and how the bend of his leg suggests a fitful sleep; the positioning of his arm behind his head leaves the faun vulnerable and inviting.<sup>2</sup> Though unconscious, he appears ready to leap forward at any given moment.<sup>3</sup> Turner mentions the faun’s life-like qualities, drawing specific attention to his pose and his splayed limbs; the positioning of his features is hard to ignore.<sup>4</sup> The Barberini Faun can be referred to as a sexual object because of the revealing nature of his pose.<sup>5</sup> The gap between his legs both displays and frames the faun’s genitalia,<sup>6</sup> which Turner mentions when discussing her love for the statue. She admits her desire to approach the faun, disregard the artificial boundaries that separate a viewer

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<sup>1</sup> Turner 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Turner 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Turner 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Turner 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Herring 2016, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Herring 2016, 37.

from a work of art, and sit on his lap.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Turner wonders what kinds of things the faun dreams of and what might happen if she were to wake him.<sup>8</sup> “I love the Barberini Faun. There, I said it,” Turner admits when reflecting on the strange effects the faun has on her.<sup>9</sup> As is evidenced by Turner’s claims, by depicting a faun in a relaxed and unconscious position, and by exposing the entirety of his naked form, the unknown artist of the piece transforms the viewer into a voyeur—and a potential sexual predator.

A common artistic motif in ancient Greece from the early Archaic period and into late antiquity (c. 600 BCE to c. 400 CE), the faun, also known as a satyr, is a mythological creature that the Greeks created in an attempt to explore the animalistic impulses humans seem to have.<sup>10</sup> Half man, half beast, these creatures were ubiquitous in Greek vase-paintings, especially those made in and around Athens.<sup>11</sup> Scenes of satyrs were particularly prevalent during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE,<sup>12</sup> and their presence in art is important to note when thinking about the Barberini Faun. Satyrs are traditionally depicted as unattractive, obvious hybrids of both human and animal, usually a goat or a horse.<sup>13</sup> Typically portrayed as mature and bearded, a faun has the upper body of a human, though the details of pointed ears, noses, and horns clearly mark them as non-human.<sup>14</sup> The lower body is usually comprised of two hairy, hooved-legs, a long horse-like tail, and an exposed, and often erect, penis.<sup>15</sup> By morphing the body of a human with the body of an animal, the Greeks have visually constructed a creature that embodies both human and animal impulses.

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<sup>7</sup> Turner 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Turner 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Turner 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Sorabella 2007, 231.

<sup>11</sup> Sorabella 2007, 231.

<sup>12</sup> Sorabella 2007, 231.

<sup>13</sup> Herring 2016, 39; Turner 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Herring 2016, 39

<sup>15</sup> Herring 2016, 39.

Along with their tails, hooves, and horns, one of the most iconic characteristics of ancient Greek satyrs and their animalistic nature is their genitalia.<sup>16</sup> This portion of the satyr's anatomy is often exaggerated and shown in a constant state of erection (fig. 2).<sup>17</sup> When compared to idealized ancient statues of humans, the faun's phallus is much larger, emphasizing his non-human status, as well as his insatiable sexual appetite. Statues of male youths created throughout ancient Greece are both idealized and modest, promoting the importance of self-control in the individual's mind, physical body, and emotions.<sup>18</sup> The satyr's erect penis is more than a simple anatomical object. It is symbolic of the satyr's lack of self-control and tendency to overindulge, and it represents his overabundance of lust and desire. The satyrs on Greek vase-paintings lack not only self-control, but also the ability to view their actions as inappropriate.<sup>19</sup> As a result, it is fair to view satyrs as slaves to lust, with the oversized phallus being one of their defining physical features.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of actions and behaviors, fauns in ancient Greece were not usually shown resting or asleep. They were most commonly known for their mischievous antics and can be seen dancing, indulging in wine, and causing mayhem throughout the vases on which they were displayed (fig. 3).<sup>21</sup> Fauns are notorious for their overindulgent acts, especially in the domains of drinking and sex.<sup>22</sup> They are almost never shown wearing clothes or adhering to socially acceptable behaviors.<sup>23</sup> In order to understand how the Barberini Faun undermines traditional depictions of fauns, it is also crucial to note how visual depictions of fauns typically showed

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<sup>16</sup> Lissarrague 1990, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Lissarrague 1990, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Herring 2007, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Herring 2007, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Herring 2007, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Sorabella 2007, 231.

<sup>22</sup> Herring 2016, 41.

<sup>23</sup> Sorabella 2007, 231.

them interacting with animals and humans. The satyr is sometimes depicted as a sexual aggressor who chases his subjects with clear sexual intent,<sup>24</sup> while other depictions show them trying to coerce their victims into sexual behaviors (fig. 4). In some instances, vulnerable sleeping females fall victim to the faun's lustful desires, as seen in a representative example of Athenian vase-painting (fig. 5).<sup>25</sup>

In order to better understand the Barberini Faun and how it differs so radically from other depictions of satyrs created in the Classical world, one must compare the statue to other pieces that feature satyrs in their compositions. There are specific activities and environments that the satyr is often associated with in Greek paintings—activities and environments that the Barberini Faun is not. Lively scenes of partying and drinking are commonly utilized when depicting satyrs, and the resulting environments are often chaotic and busy, usually featuring multiple fauns within the work. Depictions of restful satyrs are not seen as often as lively ones. Along with their exuberant tendencies, the other subjects who share scenes with the faun are important to note, especially in terms of the faun's interactions with them. By examining ancient Greek vessels, it becomes evident that satyrs typically interact with their counterparts in vulgar ways. Subtle coercion is often employed by satyrs (fig. 6), along with the more obvious tactic of chasing their victims (fig. 7). There are also paintings that present satyrs engaging in explicitly erotic activities. It is in these scenes that the satyr's iconic phallus becomes more than a symbol and is used to achieve sexual gratification. This can be seen on vessels that contain non-satyr figures, such as maenads (female followers of the Greek god Dionysus) (fig. 8), and in some cases, nonliving objects, such as statues (fig. 11). It is through the study and comparison of these

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<sup>24</sup> Sorabella 2007, 231.

<sup>25</sup> Sorabella 2007, 232.

vessels to the Barberini Faun that viewers can begin to understand why this statue's subject is unusual and how it portrays a faun in a subversive way.

One scene that accurately displays the satyr's obsession with wine and revelry comes from an ancient black-figure amphora from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE (fig. 9).<sup>26</sup> A group of five satyrs fills the composition, each of whom is contributing to the festive atmosphere in one way or another. The grapevines indicate that the setting of the narrative is a vineyard, which is further enhanced by the satyrs located at the far right of the composition; they are gathering grapes and treading on them with their feet to make wine.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the subjects located on the left side of the piece are playing musical instruments and transferring the wine to other vessels.<sup>28</sup> The artist conveys the satyr's playful nature by incorporating both alcohol and music into his work. In addition to this narrative, there is also a small frieze that runs along the upper portion of the amphora. A parade of satyrs lines the left and right halves of the frieze as they dance along to the music being created in the scene below them. The enthusiastic satyrs flank a centralized figure: the seated god of wine, Dionysus.<sup>29</sup> This piece speaks to the commonly understood connection between satyrs and wine, and the resulting drunkenness and debauchery that comes from their overindulgent tendencies.

One type of figure that often appears alongside satyrs in Greek vase paintings are maenads and other unidentified women.<sup>30</sup> Though interactions between satyrs and maenads vary in nature depending on the vase, scenes that show them rejecting a satyr's attention began to increase in quantity during the start of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE,<sup>31</sup> which exhibits the female subject's

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<sup>26</sup> Classical Art Research Centre 2013, 24 November.

<sup>27</sup> Classical Art Research Centre 2013, 24 November.

<sup>28</sup> Classical Art Research Centre 2013, 24 November.

<sup>29</sup> Classical Art Research Centre 2013, 24 November.

<sup>30</sup> Osborne 2018, 194.

<sup>31</sup> Osborne 2018, 194.

blatant disinterest in the satyr's provocative advances. An image of a satyr in sexual pursuit of a woman covers the surface of one vase from Athens (fig. 10), and the lustful satyr does not attempt to hide his enlarged phallus. Torch in hand, the woman shifts her upper body toward the attacking satyr, all while keeping her legs and torso moving in a forward direction. This is an example of a satyr being depicted as a sexual aggressor. This further supports the idea that satyrs were not thought of as docile or reserved; they were wild, bawdy, and sometimes threatening, and were typically the subjects instigating actions within their narratives.

An example of a scene that portrays the satyr's over-the-top sexual nature comes from an ancient red-figure cup (fig. 11).<sup>32</sup> This scene is notable because of the complexity in its figures and the actions in which they are involved. All five living creatures within this piece are satyrs, all of whom are naked, energetic, and lacking sexual inhibition, and they are flanked by statues of sphinxes. Contrary to the portrayal of the satyrs, the sphinxes are nonliving and simply function as frames for the scene, thus they are not intended to play an active role in the narrative.<sup>33</sup> The satyrs comprise the surface of the cup with their erect phalluses and their acrobatics.<sup>34</sup> Obviously sexual in nature, the satyrs fill the surface of the vase with motion and energy. Their bodies twist into unnatural positions. The satyrs are falling victim to their lust, and the faun farthest right positions himself directly behind the sphinx statue, phallus in hand, preparing to assault it.<sup>35</sup> The satyr's lust is so powerful that he chooses to have sex with a nonliving object. This relates to the Barberini Faun because the viewer is living and the statue is nonliving. By painting a scene full of satyrs, the artist of this cup perfectly captures the satyr's urge to indulge, no matter the environment or the victim.

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<sup>32</sup> Mitchell 2004, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell 2004, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell 2004, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell 2004, 5.

Looking at the Barberini Faun in this traditional context offers a distinct contrast in subject matter. He is not a wild creature drinking wine or participating in festive antics, he is not sharing a space with another figure, and he is not forcing his lustful desires onto another object. Instead, he is a human-like figure positioned atop a rock-like support, and the ivy wreath around his head suggests he has passed out after a night of drinking. At first glance, his hybrid identity remains a mystery. His reclined position invites viewers into his space and allows them to examine his body in detail. Seemingly humanistic in every physical aspect, the Barberini Faun lacks most of the defining characteristics of ancient Greek satyrs. His legs are not those of a goat or horse, and his feet are obviously human; they are not hooved. If he possesses the pointed ears of a satyr, they are indistinguishable beneath his locks of hair.<sup>36</sup> His only obvious faun-like characteristic is the tail that has been discretely positioned along his left side (fig. 12).<sup>37</sup> It protrudes from behind the rear of the figure and lies along the surface of the rock. Though easily mistaken for a tuft of fur belonging to the animal skin on which he lays, the figure's tail secures his faun identity.

The Barberini Faun's human-like characteristics are also evident throughout his genitalia and upper body. Legs splayed, the figure reveals his penis without any hint of shame or awareness of his viewers (fig. 13), but despite being a satyr, his genitalia is subdued in comparison to the phallus that is usually seen on these creatures. There is heavy emphasis on his muscular physique, particularly throughout his torso, where his abdomen appears flexed and exceptionally tense.<sup>38</sup> Serving as the apex of the statue, the figure's right arm is draped behind his head, which rests sleepily upon his left shoulder (fig. 14). His facial features are much more

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<sup>36</sup> Herring 2016, 38.

<sup>37</sup> Herring, 2016, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Sorabella 2007, 222.



reserved when compared to his torso. With eyes closed and mouth slightly open, the figure implies a soft moan, making the faun rather suggestive and erotic. Waves of hair hide his temples and ears from view, and a band consisting of grapes and ivy is wrapped around his head, associating the figure with wine and Dionysus.<sup>39</sup>

The positioning of the Barberini Faun's right arm speaks to his actions and provides information to the viewer about his behaviors. By extending his limb behind his head, the artist implies that the faun is asleep.<sup>40</sup> This Greek gesture was introduced late in the Archaic period, and it was often utilized when depicting maenads on vase-paintings.<sup>41</sup> In one particular scene, two satyrs can be seen approaching a sleeping maenad (fig. 15). The leftmost figure is lifting the woman's garments and begins to position himself between her legs. The figure on the right side of the composition is approaching the upper portion of the maenad, and both satyrs can be seen with their enlarged phalluses between their legs. Maenads were commonly seen lying on the ground while they were sleeping; their eyes were painted shut, and their right arms were positioned behind their heads.<sup>42</sup> Though symbolic of slumber, this gesture also represents vulnerability and helplessness.<sup>43</sup> Maenads were notorious for fighting off sexual predators, largely satyrs, making them easily accessible targets only when asleep.<sup>44</sup> The Barberini Faun's unconscious state, along with the seductive positioning and depiction of his body, presents him as a sexually vulnerable object to his viewers, just as the sleeping maenad described above was left vulnerable to the satyrs.<sup>45</sup> This statue's sculptor has reversed the ordinary roles of the faun and the maenad by placing the faun in a provocatively vulnerable situation. The faun now plays

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<sup>39</sup> Sorabella 2007, 223.

<sup>40</sup> Herring 2016, 43.

<sup>41</sup> Herring 2016, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Herring 2016, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Herring 2016, 42.

<sup>44</sup> Herring 2016, 42.

<sup>45</sup> Herring 2016, 42.

the role of the potential victim, while the viewer of the statue plays the role of the potential sexual predator. This role reversal also applies to the vase containing the satyrs and the sphinxes. The viewer of the statue becomes the potential sexual aggressor, while the nonliving Barberini Faun becomes the powerless victim.

By simply viewing ancient Greek works that employ satyrs as subject matter, it is evident that sexual imagery was fairly commonplace in both pottery and statues alike; the number of clay vessels that have been discovered throughout the Mediterranean, specifically in Attica and Athens, is particularly high,<sup>46</sup> and historians have utilized these objects to gain valuable insight into ancient Greek life.<sup>47</sup> The scenes that have been painted onto these vessels vary in subject matter, but a recurring theme is the inclusion of erotic images.<sup>48</sup> By depicting sexually explicit content within their work, the Greeks have painted a picture of their contemporary social practices.<sup>49</sup> The scenes do not convey traditional historical practices, but rather express the views and the mindset of the people living in Greece at the time. The satyr and the maenad, for example, were often used by the Greeks to portray the inherent differences in the human nature of males and females.<sup>50</sup> As a result, these ancient vessels have become a primary source of information when it comes to understanding various aspects of social life in Greece.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, by comparing the Barberini Faun to the recurring images of erotic fauns during this period, the differences, along with the purposes of each piece, become evident.

There is much debate over whether certain erotic artwork mirrored normal Greek behaviors, or if each piece was personally commissioned and was simply a portrayal of a specific

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<sup>46</sup> Parker 2015, 29.

<sup>47</sup> Banner 2003, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Banner 2003, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Banner 2003, 8.

<sup>50</sup> McNally 1978, 101.

<sup>51</sup> Banner 2003, 8.

individual.<sup>52</sup> The sexually explicit scenes found within ancient Greek art take many forms, including a variety of ages and numbers of participants, as well as various sexual behaviors. A few themes within erotic vase art include interfemoral intercourse (non-penetrative sex), homosexual intercourse, pederasty, courting, the orgy, fellatio (oral sex performed on men), and cunnilingus (oral sex performed on women).<sup>53</sup> Judging from this list of behaviors, the ancient Greeks appear to have been comfortable with sexuality, and they embraced the expression of sexually explicit acts. Likewise, by creating the Barberini Faun, and by referencing the relationship between satyrs and maenads on pottery, the Greeks offered insight into views of voyeurism and sexual predation within their ancient society.

When thinking about the Barberini Faun, the positioning of the faun's body denies the viewer the ability to look at the statue from a single optimal viewpoint. An irregularly positioned profile and multi-faceted composition both contribute to the complexity of the statue,<sup>54</sup> The faun was not intended to be viewed from one angle, but was created to be inspected from as many different perspectives as possible. This is important in understanding the curiosity and longing that Dr. Turner experiences when viewing the piece. The variety of viewpoints that the statue offers directly relates to the faun's ability to capture its viewers and, in Turner's words, "make [them] work for [their] viewing."<sup>55</sup> The faun's enticing position and multiple viewpoints contribute to the lustful feeling that some viewers experience when in the faun's presence, and the marble material from which it is made provides a three-dimensional, lifelike interpretation of the figure that a painting cannot. This lifelike component is a feeling that assigns the viewer the role of a voyeur and a potential sexual predator.

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<sup>52</sup> Parker 2015, 28.

<sup>53</sup> Parker 2015, 25.

<sup>54</sup> Sorabella 2007, 223.

<sup>55</sup> Turner 2019.

Similar to the ways in which ancient Greek vase paintings can be difficult to interpret in today's context, the Barberini Faun is just as mysterious and thought-provoking, adding to the wonder of the piece. The faun's absence of a backstory, though it is implied, makes it more engaging and compelling, and the nature of the subject provokes intimate questions from the viewer. How did he end up in the position he is in, and why is he depicted so differently when compared to other Greek satyrs? Despite not knowing the intentions for this work, the mysterious nature of the piece intrigues viewers and leaves them wanting more, leading to actions that will result in them getting what they want from the faun. The viewer succumbs to behaviors—or thoughts, at the very least—deemed lustful and impulsive, but since the statue is not actually human, those behaviors often go unrecognized. Turner asks, “And what might he do if you were to wake him?”<sup>56</sup> By posing this question, Turner confronts the sexually aggressive nature of the faun, which mirrors her own views when she thinks about him; it is an invitation for the faun to awaken and satisfy the sexual urges that he has made present within her. Dr. Turner's experience with this statue serves as one example of the overwhelming power of its subject. The sexual nature of this statue was intentionally employed by its artist in an attempt to lure in its viewers. By studying the traditional behaviors of fauns and their presence on Greek vases, the Barberini Faun can be categorized as unusual, and the viewer's reaction to him becomes more faun-like than the statue itself. As a result, the Barberini Faun reverses the typical roles of satyrs and their counterparts, forcing the viewers of this piece to grapple with their own ideas of voyeurism and sexual predation in regard to the statue.

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<sup>56</sup> Turner 2019.



Figure 1: The Barberini Faun, c. 220 BCE  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 2: Faun on a red-figure vase, c. 500–490 BCE  
Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 3: Dancing satyr on a Greek drinking cup, c. 500–450 BCE  
Photo: Flickr



Figure 4: Satyr coercing a maenad on a Greek drinking cup, c. 490–480 BCE  
Photo: Harvard Art Museums



Figure 5: Satyr approaching a sleeping maenad on a Greek lekythos, c. 430–410 BCE  
Photo: OpenEdition Journals





Figure 6: Satyr coercing a maenad on a red-figure kylix, c. 490–480 BCE  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 7: Satyr pursuing a maenad on a Greek drinking cup, c. 500–400 BCE  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 8: Satyr and maenad on a red-figure amphora, c. 500–400 BCE  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 9: Satyrs making music and drinks on a black-figure amphora, c. 600–500 BCE  
Photo: Beazley Archives



Figure 10: Satyr pursuing a woman on a red-figure jar, c. 430–420 BCE  
Photo: The British Museum

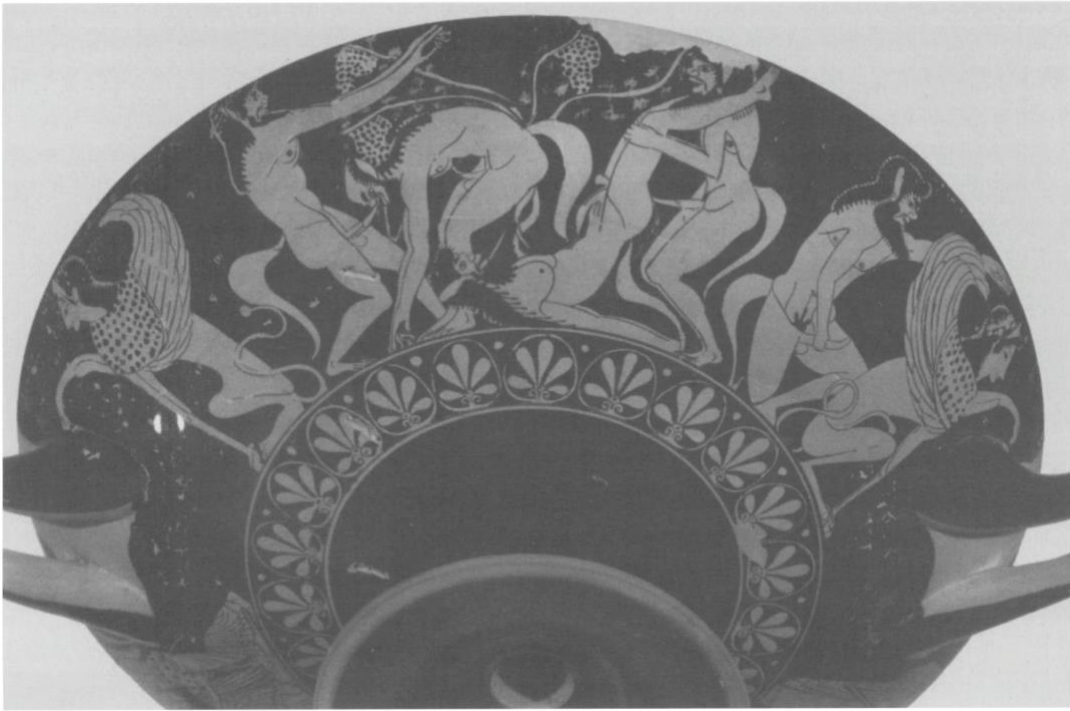


Figure 11: Satyrs partaking in sexual acrobatics on a red-figure cup, c. 500–400 BCE  
Photo: JSTOR



Figure 12: Detail of the Barberini Faun's tail, c. 220 BCE  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 13: The Barberini Faun in his exposed position, c. 220 BCE  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 14: Detail of the Barberini Faun's face, c. 220 BCE  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 15: Satyrs attacking a sleeping maenad on a Greek drinking cup, c. 490 BCE  
Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



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Quentin Clark graduated from Coastal Carolina University in December 2020 with a BA in Art History and a minor in Psychology. As an Edwards College Research Fellow, Quentin worked on various research projects with faculty mentors. The primary focus for his projects has been Greek sculpture, and his specific research interests lie in both Classical art and Italian Renaissance art. Quentin was accepted as an intern at the Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth in Greece for the summer of 2020, and also worked as a Peer Mentor for freshman students in Coastal Carolina's Visual Arts Department. Quentin plans to pursue a graduate degree in Art History and Museum Studies.