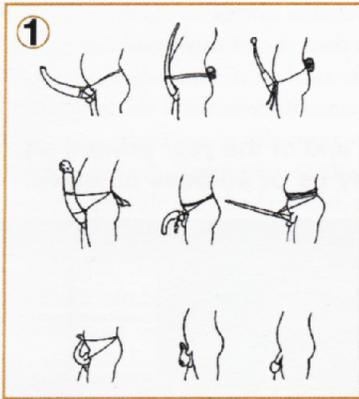


# Erotic Use of *Lagenaria* in Renaissance Art

by Jules Janick, Department of Horticulture & Landscape Architecture, Purdue University

The bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) has become one of the most important and widespread nonfood crops of humans. The use of the fruit as culinary utensils, containers, musical instruments, masks, pipes, floats, as well as food, has been chronicled by Charles Heiser (1979). Certainly its most unusual use has been as a penis sheath by the aborigines of Africa, South America, Polynesia, and New Guinea, a practice that appears remarkable and strange to the West because it is often the only article of clothing worn by men (Fig. 1). The penis sheath, similar to the modern brassiere, serves the triple function of concealing, revealing, and enhancing—all at the same time.



The bottle gourd is native to Africa, but spread to Asia and the Americas in prehistoric times. It probably reached Europe in the Middle Ages. The word *gourdys* first appeared in 1303, as *goordis* in 1382, and *goorde* in 1440 in *Promptorium Parvulorum*, the first English-Latin dictionary, where it is translated as “cucumber,” “cucurbita,” and “coloquintida.” Harry Paris informs me that the first European painting of bottle gourds appears in 1475. The fruit was illustrated on a tapestry entitled *Benjamin Received by Joseph* (created between 1549 and 1553) based on a cartoon by Agnolo Bronzino (who lived during 1503–1573) (Fig. 2).



The phallic symbolism of the bottle gourd has not been lost on the West. This can be seen in the festoon painted



by Giovanni da Udine (1494–1564), probably about 1517, surrounding Raphael's fresco of *Cupid and Psyche* (Dacos and Furlan 1987). The paintings are replete with melons, often split, and bottle gourds of two predominant shapes, the bulbous and the serpentine. In a prominent position, above the outstretched arm of Mercury, painted by Raphael, Udine paints a gourd representing a phallus in the sexual act of entering a split fig (Fig. 3). The fantasy was noted by Georgio Vasari in 1568 in his biography of Giovanni da Udine (Vasari 1878):

*Above the flying Mercury, he simulated a Priapus out of a gourd crossed by vines and two eggplants for testicles; and near to the gourd's flower he has feigned a bunch of large figs, one of which has opened and the stem of the gourd enters inside it.*

The same passage was later bowdlerized in a translation by A.B. Hinds (Vasari 1927). The relationship of these paintings to celebrations surrounding Priapus—God of Orchards and Vineyards—as well as the personification of the male generative organ is discussed in detail by Morel (1985).

The erotic conceit of the bottle gourd can also be found in the Vatican Palace in Bay 2 on the west wall of *Raphael's Loggia* painted by Giovanni da Udine in 1517–1519. It was imitated by Jacopo Zucchi (1540–1596) in a frieze of the chamber of Dominio Fiorentino (1585–1587), Villa Medici, Rome, with a split melon replacing the fig (Fig. 4). There is a similar representation of the serpentine bottle gourd (as well as a melon stem) in a later painting (1603) attributed to the great Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio entitled *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, which now resides in the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida (Fig. 5). Art historians, including J. T. Spike (2001), Peter Robb

(1998), and Catherine Puglisi (1998), have all commented on the erotic imagery of this painting, although the authors are somewhat circumspect. Robb refers to the phallic writhing gourds atop the cut melon, while Spike (personal communication) refers to the juxtaposition of the melon stem and the cut fig. Seen in isolation, the erotic nature of this painting might be questioned; but observed in light of the Udine and Zucchi depictions, the erotic content seems incontrovertible.

What are we to make of the sexual imagery of gourds? The use of plants and vegetables in graphically human terms is common in literature and especially so for cucurbits in general. [See Palter (2002) for a general discussion of melons and watermelons in literature.] The similar uses of bottle gourds for phallic symbols by primitive New Guinea cultures and the sophisticated milieu of the Renaissance gives credence to the universality of humans of whatever age or whatever culture.



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