

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Dora and Erwin Panofsky, *Pandora's Box: The Changing Aspects of a Mythical Symbol*, Burlington Magazine, Vol. 99, 1957, pp.280 [Trapp no.1957F.1]

THE LITERATURE OF ART

Pandora's Box, The Changing Aspects of a Mythical Symbol. By Dora and Erwin Panofsky. 158 pp. (60 figs.) (Routledge & Kegan Paul), £1 10s.

Iconography was, or is, the handmaiden of art history. Iconology is not. It may and does use works of art as evidence, but no more so than works of literature, oratory or propaganda. The art lover, therefore, has no right to be disappointed if he finds no great paintings reproduced in this book devoted to the changing aspects of a mythical symbol. One half of its sixty illustrations reproduce prints of varying artistic merit, including printers' marks and an illustration to a nineteenth-century children's book. It is a pity that many engravings appear somewhat smudged in the half-tone blocks which are even less kind to the paintings. Henry Howard's ceiling decorations in the Soane Museum (here reproduced for the first time), James Barry's ambitious *Creation of Pandora* and Etty's or Rossetti's visions of the *femme fatale* look perhaps even less attractive here than they really are.

But if the illustrations somewhat lack lustre there is no lack of sparkle in the text. The fireworks of the authors' erudite wit light up the unsuspected historical and philosophical background of this imagery and illuminate the forgotten contexts of court pageantry and emblematics, of illustrated cycles and works for the stage; from the text they cascade into footnotes on such diverse subjects as the origins of Flaxman's linear style, the manuscript tradition of Plotinus, and Pandora in the Manhattan telephone directory. For this is essentially a *jeu d'esprit*. A glance at the names on the title page will show that Pandora is for the authors what the language of heraldry calls a 'canting device'. What prompted them to subject their private *impresa* to public scrutiny was presumably the one striking fact, emphasized before by Jane Harrison, that Pandora's proverbial 'box' was unknown to the ancient world. The myth, therefore, becomes an instance of that phenomenon which Professor Panofsky has so brilliantly explored in the past: the continued creativity of mythological invention after the official demise of paganism.

The bare outlines of this development are easily summarized. Hesiod tells us that when Prometheus (Forethought) had deprived the Olympians of their monopoly of Fire for the benefit of mankind, the Gods retaliated by jointly creating a woman of irresistible beauty, Pandora (the All-Gifted). Epimetheus (Afterthought) had been warned by his wiser brother not to accept any gifts from that quarter, but he succumbed and admitted Pandora, who then opened a large storage jar (presumably kept in Epimetheus's household) in which all the Evils had hitherto been imprisoned. They escaped to fill the earth where they are still rampant, only Hope, caught by the lid, remained to man. The authors modestly disclaim any right, as art historians, to pronounce on the interpretation of this earliest version, but they accept the verdict of classical scholars who regard it as absurdly incoherent and prefer the tidier fable, transmitted by Babrius, according to which the jar contained all *Goods*, including Hope, and was opened by Man. But is the psychological meaning of Hesiod's tale really so inexplicable? Was not Hope really given to man only when Evil was born? Are not the Gates of Paradise as firmly closed to her as are those of Hell? Apparently the homely wisdom of this parable was puzzling to the Romans, who hardly referred to it. It would have vexed the medieval allegorizers even more, for though the parallel between Eve and Pandora was not lost on patristic writers, Hope, to them, was one of the Christian virtues and incompatible with evil. Be that as it may, when Erasmus,

in his *Adagia* (1508), had occasion to tell the tale he omitted Hope altogether and made Pandora bring the box with all the Evils. This process of rationalization necessitated the replacement of the mysterious storage jar by a portable vessel or receptacle, and it was this attribute of the fair temptress that captured the imagination of mankind – despite the fact that the learned Alciati introduced Hope sitting on a barrel into his *Emblemata*. What follows is not entirely unexpected: there were humanists who knew too little and others who knew too much. The first variety fastened on the etymology of the name and bestowed it on queens and cities they intended to praise as all-gifted. The other group remembered yet more mythological receptacles, the vase carried by Psyche to Olympus, and the jars with the good and evil lots which Homer makes Zeus dole out to mortals, and either intentionally or unintentionally mixed them up in various ways.

As one watches the practised fingers of the authors unravelling these tangled skeins and weaving a great drawing by Rosso, an enigmatic painting by Cousin, an etching by Callot into the tissue of these varied traditions, one admires the perfection of their craftsmanship and hopes that none of the fine threads will break. And yet one regrets that the myth never inspired a transcending masterpiece to challenge their ingenuity; the one exception, Goethe's fragment *Pandora*, shows what they can do with such material, but even this, perhaps, is more memorable for the beauty of its word music than for its interpretation of the symbol. But may not this stimulating book in its turn fertilize the imagination of a great artist? There is always hope.