

A Virtue Personified

Fortitude, 1597



LOOKING at *Fortitude*

A woman carrying a heavy pillar is not an everyday sight.

Who is she?

What makes her look strong?

Fortitude
1597
From the Virtues
Jacob Matham
Dutch, 1571-1631
After Hendrick Goltzius
Dutch, 1558-1617
and
Monogrammist M.Ö.
German, late sixteenth century
Signed "M.Ö. 1598"
Engraving with transparent washes and body colors, highlighted with gold and silver
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Pose

- Is the woman straining under the weight of this pillar? Or is she bearing the burden easily?
- How does the woman's stance suggest that she is able to support a great weight? Would she be able to balance a large, heavy column on her shoulder if her feet were close together?

Clothing

- The woman wears three garments: an orange cloak, a blue tunic, and a lavender gown. Which garment makes the woman's body appear to be much larger and mightier than it really is?
- Which fabric is so sheer that it reveals the lines of the woman's body underneath? Do the woman's legs appear shapely? Or do they resemble strong pillars?
- Which fabric hangs in vertical folds (like the *fluting* on a classical column)?

Point of View

- If you were standing next to this woman, would she be taller or shorter than you?
- Which part of her body would be at your eye level: her face, shoulder, waist, knees, or toes?

Foreground/Background

- How much of the woman's body is seen against the sky above the mountaintops? Would she appear as mighty if she were seen against a backdrop of tall trees?
- Compare the size of the woman's foot to the size of one of the houses.

What is a PERSONIFICATION?

If you were a bookish person who lived in the sixteenth century and enjoyed looking at prints, you would easily recognize that **Fortitude is a personification of Strength.**

In art, a **personification** may be a human figure that represents a *moral quality*, a *physical condition*, or a *place* rather than a real person.

- *Moral Quality*: A woman in fancy clothes, peering at herself in a mirror could be a personification of vanity.
- *Physical Condition*: A shivering woman with icicles for hair could be a personification of cold.
- *Place*: A muscular man sitting on a sea monster might personify the ocean.

What is an ATTRIBUTE?

Personifications often hold objects (or wear pieces of clothing) that help us identify who they are and what they stand for. Such an object or piece of clothing is called an **attribute**.

- VANITY'S attribute may be a MIRROR.
- CUPID'S attribute is an ARROW

Fortitude's attribute is a pillar.

Carrying a marble pillar around is something that most of us will never have to do. However, at certain times in our lives, we bear burdens that seem very heavy. These challenges require resilience, guts, staying power, grit, stamina, and determination. *Fortitude* appears to be a person who is coping well under difficult circumstances. Not only is she carrying her burden with apparent ease, but her strong columnar legs and the "fluted" folds of her gown suggest that she has become a solid, steadfast pillar herself.

DISCUSSION

The Latin inscription at the bottom of the print is a commentary on the meaning of *Fortitude*. The first word of the inscription is *Fortis*, from which the English word "fortitude" is derived. It means *strong, brave, powerful, robust, steadfast, courageous, and valiant*. In everyday contemporary English, the word *fortitude* suggests the ability to stand up to difficulty.

What kind of situation in your life might require:

- *Physical* fortitude?
- *Emotional* fortitude?
- *Moral* fortitude?

Write an essay about an experience in your own life that required fortitude.

The Seven Virtues and the Seven Vices

Fortitude is one of the Seven Virtues. Long ago, ancient Greek philosophers and medieval theologians pondered the question of good and bad behavior. They made lists of men's (and women's) admirable and not-so-admirable traits. These lists of personal strengths and flaws became known as the Seven Virtues and Seven Vices.

Many artists have used **personification** as a device to represent the Seven Virtues and the Seven Vices. Each of the Virtues and Vices has his or her well-known **attribute** that viewers will be able to identify easily.

DISCUSSION

Hendrick Goltzius, a Dutch artist who drew the image of *Fortitude*, made several series of the Seven Virtues and the Seven Vices. The fourteen Virtues and Vices are listed below in alphabetical order along with the attributes that Goltzius used.

- Discuss the meaning of each word, and determine whether it is a “virtue” or a “vice.”
- Discuss whether the traditional attribute of each is appropriate.
- Suggest some modern attributes that might serve equally well.
- Design your own PERSONIFICATION OF A VIRTUE OR VICE. You can use one of the traditional attributes listed below, or make up your own.

	Attribute	Virtue or Vice?
Anger	Drawn sword	
Avarice	Treasures	
Charity	Little children	
Envy	Serpent devouring a heart	
Faith	Bible and crucifix	
Fortitude	Pillar	
Gluttony	Plate of food	
Hope	Anchor, shackles; eyes looking into the distance	
Justice	Pair of scales; blindfold	
Lust	Exposed breast	
Pride or Vanity	Mirror, fancy clothing	
Prudence	Two snakes	
Sloth	Snail	

