To the Most Beautiful, 1881
Francesco Vinea (Italian, 1845-1902)
Oil on canvas

To the Most Beautiful was recognized during the Francesco Vinea’s lifetime as his outstanding achievement. Writing in 1889, eight years after the painting was completed, Angelo de Gubernatis stated in his book on Italian artists of his day (Dizionario degli Artisti Italiani Vivendi): “Among those who have recorded the best painting in the press, there is a bacchanal of soldiers and women in a cellar under the title of To the Most Beautiful, called such because there is the apotheosis of the most beautiful girl presented.”

A smiling red-haired maiden sits high on top of a wine keg. She looks down upon the rowdy soldiers who toast to her beauty. The revelers are dressed in showy capes and gold-striped shirts, costumes from the 17th century. In the foreground a man blows his horn to flirt with another maiden, but she shies away from him. Empty wine flasks litter the floor. On the right side of the painting, a soldier leans over with this pitcher to get wine from the keg. A rowdy group of men jostle, waving their hats and one lifts a drum.

The sparkling contrast of black with orange-red, adds to the liveliness of the depiction. Vinea also deftly paints details, contributing to the complexity of the bacchanal. Precision of treatment ranges from the flowers in the female’s hair to the fur of the dog.

Vinea’s theme was a popular for European painters in the 19th century. For the first time, artists painted images in homage to feminine beauty in its own right. All classes of beautiful women became the subjects of artists. In this painting, Vinea praises a simple country girl who is presented as gentle, sweet, and somewhat coy.

Vinea studied first at the Academy of Fine Arts of Florence, but had to discontinue his studies due to his lack of finances. He worked for a photographer, also as a designer of illustrated magazines, but returned to Florence and studied under Enrico Pollastrini, for a year.

In his book, Gubernatis described Vinea’s approach to subject matter. He wrote: “Nothing serious, nothing solid, no classical concepts, no robust, no lofty ideas, no deep thoughts. His canvases, like the genre paintings of Meissonier, are well-designed witticisms, smiling color, interiors full of life and of panache, costume scenes preening with grace and trivial levity: everything exudes the fashion of the past salons.”

Nancy Miller Batty