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Valentin de Boulogne, *The Four Ages of Man* (1626–9). 96 x 134 cms. Oil on canvas. National Gallery, London. Photo Public Domain.

UNFREEZING TIME

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It may seem obvious that the year has four seasons, but that number is as arbitrary as dividing a clock dial into twelve hours. When it came to phases in a human life, William Shakespeare famously opted for seven, declaring in *As You Like It* that

> All the world's a stage…
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
> His acts being seven ages.

A well-educated man, Shakespeare knew that envisaging seven stages of existence was a relatively recent innovation, introduced by mediaeval scholars to conform with Christian references, such as the days of the week or the seven virtues and their corresponding deadly sins. The traditional figure was four, as decreed by Aristotle and other classical authorities, and perpetuated most influentially in Ovid's long poem, *Metamorphoses*. On the other hand, sometimes the ancient Greeks did attach particular significance to seven, the number of planets circling the earth and of strings on a lyre. Inspired by Pythagoras's pronouncement that there are seven notes in the musical scale, Isaac Newton decreed that there are seven colours in the rainbow – and so it has remained ever since, although with no further rationale.

Valentin de Boulogne (c. 1590–1632), a French artist living in Rome, was a generation younger than Shakespeare, but his *Four Ages of Man* is steeped in symbolism dating back a couple of millennia. The style is so naturalistic that this might be a real-life scene of four characters sitting round an antique stone block as if they were commiserating about life at a tavern table. Valentin had quite a reputation for leading a dissolute life, and he often painted musicians and drinkers and

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card-players. Yet this is an allegorical scene rather than a literal one: painted in muted tones, the canvas is suffused with a gloomy air, while the small boy's prominent wooden box emphasises that this is not a straightforward image of reality.

Ostensibly depicting the present, this painting refers to the past and to the future, to the might-have-been and to the inevitable. Most obviously, the four men represent different stages in life – or perhaps this is the same person shown four times? They are not arranged in chronological sequence: the young boy reclines opposite the old man, who is flanked by a romantic youthful musician on his right and a disillusioned middle-aged soldier to his left. None of them interacts with his neighbours, instead confronting us – the viewers – directly as if throwing out a challenge to recognise that, as human beings, we too are subject to alteration over time. As Ovid put it, 'our own bodies are always ceaselessly changing, and what we have been, or now are, we shall not be tomorrow.'

When Valentin and Shakespeare were alive, the prevailing model of nature was a Christianized version of Aristotelianism. The earth lay at the centre of a harmonious universe in which the living and non-living were bound together in sets of four. Ovid explained that the four seasons reflect our own lives, so that here the old man in a fur-collared coat personifies winter, while the child is spring and the other two represent summer and autumn. In addition, Planet Earth (but not the heavens) was composed of four idealized elements – two light ones of air and fire, two heavier of earth and water; these were related to four humours affecting the human body and character, although the precise details varied.

The silent soldier with his downcast eyes is weighed down by melancholy. Even though his laurel wreath, cuirass and drawings of fortifications indicate a successful career, the dog-eared pages suggest that these triumphs were merely temporary: he is fated to die like any other mortal. In contrast, the intense fiery young man sitting on the other side is gripped by desire and ambition, his body tensed for love and adventure. Evidently a prisoner of his passions, he may be a portrait of Valentin himself, who was nicknamed 'Amador', or 'lover boy'. He stares out over the head of the boy, who clutches an empty cage in allusion to the care-free innocence of childhood; once adult lust enters his heart, he will be trapped like a bird behind bars.

Ovid opened *Metamorphoses* by describing the Four Ages of Mankind, now replaced by epochs such as the Stone Age or the Bronze Age. First came the Gold Age of peace and harmony – the unsullied infancy of humanity – followed by the Silver Age, after paradise had been disrupted; in Valentin's painting, the boy's golden curls rest against the youth's leg, which is clad in silver and echoes the feathers in his hat. Next came Bronze, the era of warfare signalled by the soldier's all-enveloping suit of armour; and finally Iron, when greed and deceit replaced modesty and truth. Dressed in ragged clothes, Valentin's miserly old man slouches over a pile of coins, vainly seeking to regain his lost youth as he clutches his leaning glass, emblem of life's fragility.

A few years after completing this picture, Valentin died suddenly of an acute fever when he was only 41 years old. Perhaps he recollected these words from Ovid: 'Time, the devourer, and the jealous years that pass, destroy all things and, nibbling them away, consume them gradually in a lingering death.'

Main Sources and Further Reading

Lemoine, Annick and Christiansen, Keith. *Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio* (Yale: Metropolitan Museum / Yale University Press, 2016).

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (transl. Mary M Innes) (London: Penguin, 1955).

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