

When one door closes

January is a time of beginnings and endings and the two-faced Janus was god of both: an emblem of change, hopes and fears, discovers
Deborah Nicholls-Lee

JANUARY is the month that has us looking in two directions as we review the past year—its sweet moments as well as its sadness—and crane our necks forward in anticipation of what the year ahead holds. The Romans found a way to cope with this transitional moment by focusing their energies on pleasing a god that could straddle both time dimensions and ease them into the new year with all its unknowns.

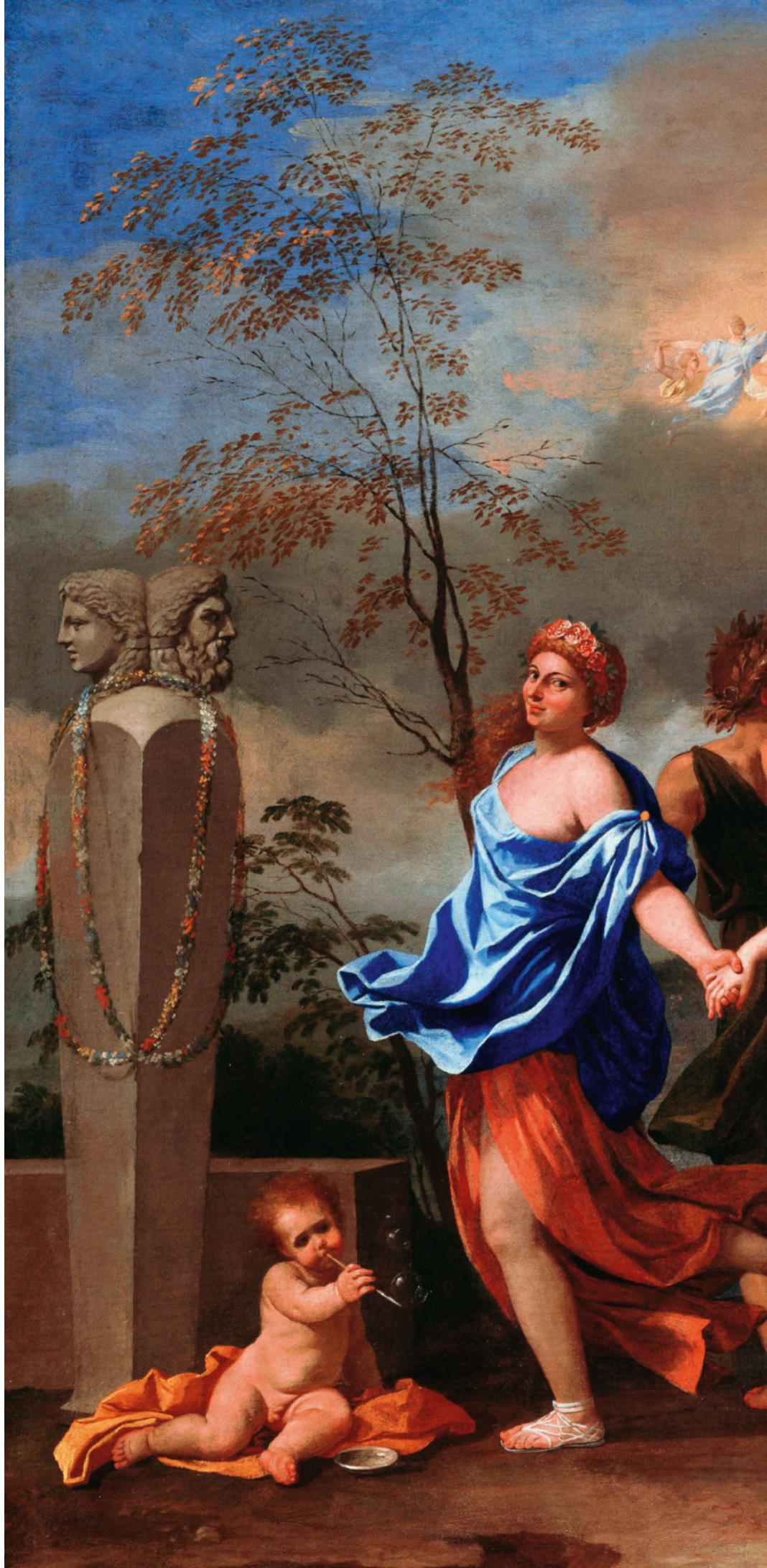
'You give birth to the swiftly rolling years, and recall with your presence centuries long past,' writes the Roman poet Martial of Janus, the eponym of January: a twin-faced god who looks both forward and back, occupying this liminal space in the minds of ordinary Romans.

Known as the god of gods (*divom deus*), Janus was the first to be invoked during religious ceremonies, providing a conduit to other gods, receiving offerings such as dried fruit, wine, barley cake, spelt and sacrificed animals. He was a minister of multiple portfolios, ranging from agriculture to war, but, above all, he was the god of beginnings and endings, entrances and exits. It was Janus who watched over the walls of people's homes and guarded the gateways to the city; he takes his name from the Latin *janua*, meaning 'door'.

As the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow writes in 'January' of *The Poet's Calendar* (1882):

Janus am I; oldest of potentates;
Forward I look, and backward, and below
I count, as god of avenues and gates,
The years that through my portals come
and go. →

**Janus watches from the wings in Poussin's
A Dance to the Music of Time, 1634–36**





The ins and outs of Roman mythology: the 4th-century Arch of Janus in Rome, Italy

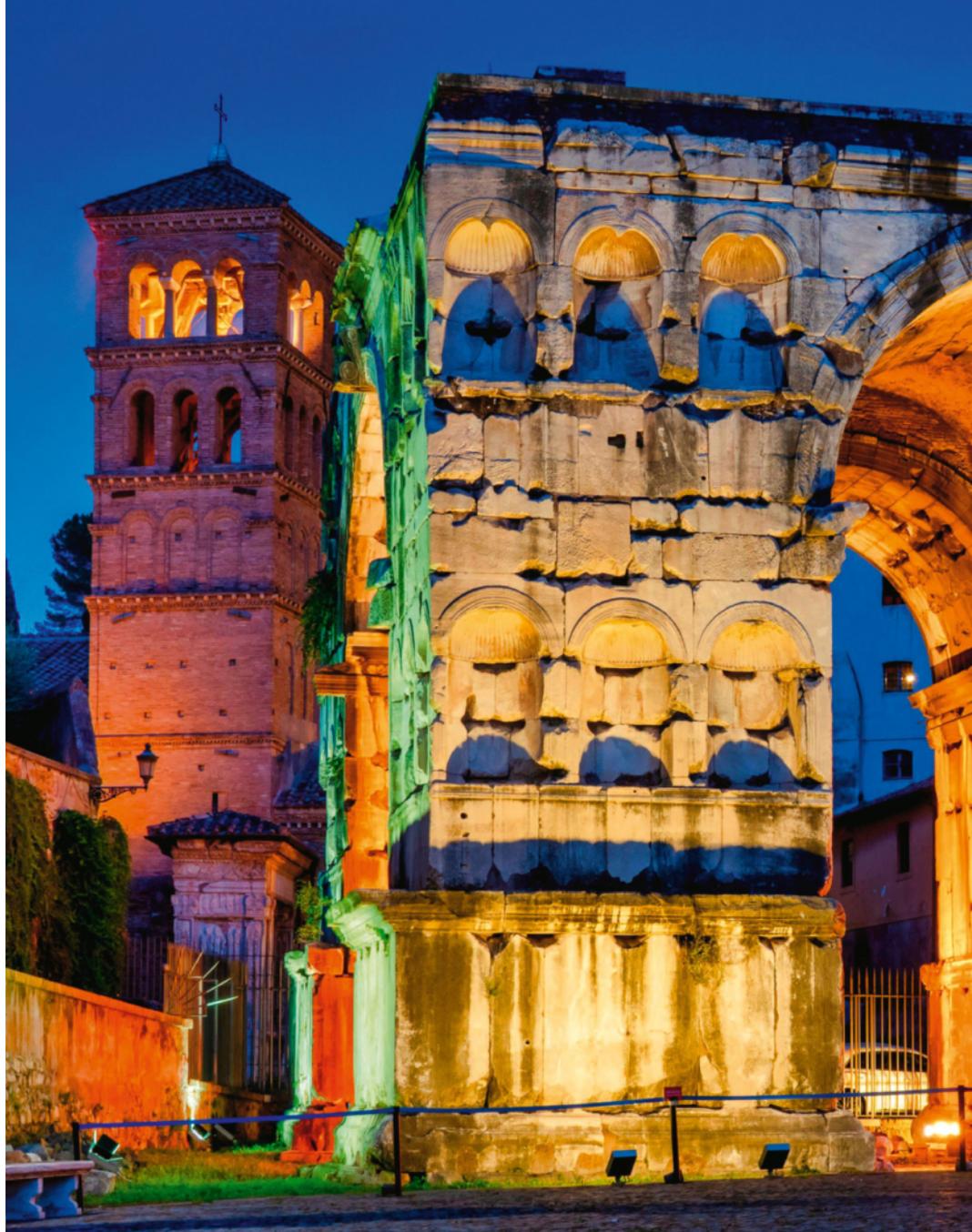
Rome's constant threat from enemies meant entrances took on a special significance in the minds of its citizens as portals of both fear and hope and its superstitious soldiers would march through the city's ceremonial gateways in a bid to bring good luck. The Janus Geminus (Temple of Janus) in the Forum, now lost, was perhaps the most visual embodiment of this belief. This temple dedicated to Janus, the doors of which would only close during those rare periods when the city was at peace, is described in Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid*:

There are twin gates of War (so they are named), sanctified by religion, and by dread of fierce Mars: A hundred bars of bronze, and iron's eternal strength, Lock them, and Janus the guardian never leaves the threshold.

‘The Romans placed great importance in thresholds’

As Bessie Rebecca Burchett writes in her 1918 thesis *Janus in Roman Life and Cult: A Study in Roman Religions*, ‘the door-way was a strategic point, since it was the place at which attacks from foes were most to be expected’. Entrances had a poignancy that is hard to imagine today. ‘The Romans placed great importance in beginnings and thresholds,’ explains Dr Lewis Webb, departmental lecturer in Roman History at Merton College, Oxford, where a Janiform herm watches over the college gardens. Places—be they public, sacred or domestic—were ‘defined by boundaries,’ he continues. ‘Passage through such boundaries was considered a beginning’ and ‘often required that people perform certain rites of passage’. One such rite still practised today is the carrying of the bride over the threshold of the newly weds’ home, to avoid the ill portent of stumbling or falling. In Roman times, the doorposts were decorated with wreaths of flowers, branches and coloured ribbons and anointed with oil and fat ‘to conciliate spirits and keep out evil’, he reveals.

Martin J. Dougherty, author of *Roman Myths: Gods, Heroes, Villains and Legends of Ancient Rome* (2022) describes the gods as ‘a bunch of cosmic gangsters’, each in charge of a different area and each needing to be ‘propitiated and venerated... whenever you ventured onto their turf’. He continues: ‘When you went through a transition you were expected to venerate Janus and if you didn’t,



dark things might happen to you.’ These rituals were not all negative, but helped to guide our ancestors through challenging life events. ‘You now know how to deal with that situation to avoid problems... and that would be reassuring and comforting,’ Mr Dougherty explains. ‘When you’re coming out of winter, at that point when you are transitioning to the new year, getting that right, in a lot of different societies, is really important.’

Time was another form of passing from one space to another and Janus was evoked for important life events. Whether children were born into a household or the dead carried out of it, the procedure was paramount. As the Roman poet Ovid tells us in *Fasti*, book I: ‘Omens attend upon beginnings/Anxious, your ears are alert at the first word/And the augur interprets the first bird that he sees.’

On January 9, Janus’s feast day, Romans believed that their every action set the tone for the year ahead. They greeted their neighbours

enthusiastically, abstained from fighting and swearing and exchanged gifts such as dates and figs to welcome in a sweet new year. Centuries on, we’re still attached to the idea of a positive start and see January—the month leading the British calendar year since the 18th century—as the moment to take out gym membership, give up alcohol or make other well-intended resolutions. Although the tradition of exchanging gifts has largely been subsumed by Christmas, the Scottish festival of Hogmanay has stuck firmly to January. The tradition emphasises, as the Romans did, the importance of threshold-crossing with the custom of ‘first-footing’ (being the first one to enter a friend or neighbour’s house with gifts) and celebrates our emergence from the winter solstice, when we move from deepest darkness towards the light.

Less inclined than the Greeks to worship gods in human form, the Romans left little trace of the figure of Janus beyond bronze and silver coins smoothed by time, but still



The god next door

It's not only Janus's twin faces that make him unusual—he is a rare example of a Roman god with no counterpart in Greek mythology. In the calendric poem the *Fasti*, Ovid writes: 'Yet what god shall I say you are, double-formed Janus? For Greece has no deity equivalent to you.'

Janus is also exceptional in Roman mythology because he is said to be based on a real person. According to one telling, Janus was a ruler who governed peacefully over the region of Latium on the banks of the River Tiber, named after his son Tiberinus. Under Janus's rule, writes Macrobius, 'everyone's homes were well fortified by an aura of holiness and religious scruple: for that reason, it was decreed that he be [posthumously] worshipped as a god.'



Two-faced Janus in The Summer Garden at St Petersburg, Russia

bearing his image, and a rare bust on display at the Vatican Museums. Later, artists would take inspiration from the myth and his sculpted form would feature on the façade of the medieval Chartres Cathedral in France and in paintings such as Peter Paul Rubens's *Temple of Janus* (1634) and Nicolas Poussin's *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1634–36).

Where Janus appears as a human figure, he often wears the faces of youth and old age. A 1698 engraving by Jacobus Harrewyn is a case in point. Here, as in many prints, Janus clutches a large key, suggesting the opening of doors to the past and the future, the security of citizens and even the unlocking of the mysteries of the universe.

Sharp-eyed visitors to Waltham Abbey Church in Essex may spot the young and old Janus in a colourful ceiling painting where the words 'past' and 'future' sit alongside an open and a closed book. The same dichotomy features in Anton Raphael Mengs's fresco

The Triumph of History over Time (1772), where, in the foreground, a Father Time figure bearing a scythe further stresses the brevity of life.

It seems that Janus, this 'source of the silently gliding year' (Ovid), who forms a bridge between yesterday and today, is full of life lessons. Perhaps, as at the Janus Geminus, our peace is also found by closing the door. For Jas Elsner, senior research fellow in the faculty of Classics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, making gifts to gods such as Janus was not only about influencing the year ahead. 'I think a lot of religion (then and now) is about shaping the past—reparation, atonement, making wrongs into rights,' he reveals. 'Janus looks both ways in part because if you sort the past, you free up the future.' 🐉