SPHINX FINE ART



Carle van Loo (Nice 1705 - Paris 1765)

Bacchus and Ariadne

oil on canvas laid on board
110.5 x 142 cm (43½ x 55⅞ in)

This fine example of Carle van Loo's early work was painted in Turin *c.* 1732-1734. It depicts the famous mythological story of the god Bacchus falling in love with the Greek princess Ariadne. According to the myth, Ariadne had eloped from her native Crete with the Athenian hero Theseus. However, Theseus abandoned Araidne whilst she slept, and so she woke alone on the island of Naxos to see his ship sailing away. She was discovered grief-stricken by Bacchus, god of wine, who immediately fell in love with her. In some tellings of the story, Bacchus removed Ariadne's crown and threw it into the heavens, where it became a constellation of stars. In other versions Ariadne herself became a star.

Van Loo has depicted the moment Bacchus and Ariadne meet on the shore of Naxos. They look adoringly into each other's eyes and the god gently takes the young princess by the hand. Above Ariadne's head a *putto* has taken her crown, ready to be thrown to the heavens. Bacchus is dressed in his traditional leopard skin cloak, and the wreath of vines around his head reminds the viewer of his role as god of wine, as does the bunch of grapes in the lower left corner. Ariadne is dressed in beautiful silks and rests on a large luxurious pillow, reflecting her royal status. In her hand she suggestively holds Bacchus' thyrsus, another of the god's traditional attributes. A complex narrative has been condensed into an extremely concise and effective pictorial composition.

We know from an eighteenth-century auction catalogue that *Bacchus and Ariadne* originally formed part of a pair of paintings, the other being a depiction of *Clytie and Apollo*.[1] Unfortunately, *Clytie and Apollo* is currently lost, but we have a good idea of the composition from one of van Loo's preparatory sketches (Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne). The works clearly shared similar features and techniques, such as the use of trees as framing devices, or the animation of putti to contrast with the

dramatic poses of the main protagonists.

In 1982 Hans Ost wrote an article on the rediscovery of *Bacchus and Araidne*.[2] As he shows, the work is unmistakeably that of van Loo, comparable to many of his best works. For example the figure of Ariadne can be directly compared to the artists depiction of *Euterpe* (1745, Bibliothèque National de France, Paris). Building upon the research of Marie-Catherine Sahut and Pierre Rosenberg,[3] Ost explores the likely circumstances of the painting's creation, *c.* 1732-1734. This was during van Loo's Turin period, when his paintings are notable for their cool colours, precision of execution, and grace of draughtsmanship, particularly in his depiction of female heads. These are all qualities evident in *Bacchus and Ariadne*, and the treatment of faces and drapery are consistent with other paintings by van Loo from the 1730s, such as *Castor and Pollox*[4], *Mars and Venus*,[5] or the Rouen *Madonna and Child*. Similarly the depiction of the tree in *Bacchus and Ariadne*, is almost identical to that in another of van Loo's Turin pictures, *Armida Chaining Rinaldo*.[6]

Although van Loo painted *Bacchus and Ariadne* in Turin, it seems it was almost immediately sent to Paris, to enter the collection of Victor Amadeus I, Prince of Carignano (1690-1741).[7] Victor Amadeus was an Italian nobleman who had once been a great favourite of his father-in-law, Victor Amadeus II, King of Sicily and Sardinia (1666-1732). However, his profligate lifestyle meant that the young prince eventually quarrelled with the King, and left Italy to settle instead in Paris, where he owned extensive property. Over the years, Victor Amadeus filled the Hôtel de Soissons with an extensive art collection, and became a major figure in Parisian cultural life. He was a great patron of the van Loo family, in particular Carle's elder brother Jean-Baptiste (1684-1745), who also served as his artistic advisor. He initially focused on collecting perennially sought-after sixteenth-century Italian paintings, but his tastes soon developed to encompass Dutch and Flemish work as well. Alongside this, Victor Amadeus was one of the leading patrons of contemporary French artists, including the van Loo family, Jean-Baptiste Pater (1695-1736) and Nicolas Lancret (1690-1743).

Although our painting is the primary version, it seems that van Loo may have painted a number of other variations of *Bacchus and Ariadne*. A 1766 Parisian auction sold a larger depiction of Bacchus and Ariadne, which, like our work, was also paired with a version of *Clytie and Apollo*.[8] There is also a version recorded in the collection of van Loo's brother-in-law, Lorenzo Somis, a resident of Turin.[9] More recently an inferior variation appeared on the art market, which given slight compositional differences, and the much quicker and looser manner of execution, was perhaps a *modello* for our painting.[10] Also worth noting is an engraving of Bacchus' head by Louis-Marin Bonnet, which appears to derive from our painting.[11] Finally, there is a drawing in the Louvre, which also appears to depict Bacchus and Ariadne, along with two putti holding the crown. It has many significant differences from our work, most notably of course the vertical format.

However, given that it does not relate to any other known painting, there is a possibility that it represents van Loo's early thoughts for the composition of our work, before opting for a horizontal format. In his article on our picture, Ost discusses several artistic sources that van Loo may have turned to in his planning of *Bacchus and Ariadne*, some contemporary and some ancient.[12] Sebastiano Ricci (1658-1734) had set a template for the depiction of this narrative, in a picture which sets the protagonists in a frieze-like composition focused, in a similar manner to van Loo, on the moment Bacchus tenderly takes Ariadne's hand.[13] Van Loo would also have known the treatment of the subject by one of his former teachers, Nicolas Vleughels (1668-1737), in which the figure of Bacchus is used to inject energy into the composition. Van Loo has taken elements from both this artists, so that the central tender moment, where the lovers are entranced by each other, is enhanced by the dynamism of Bacchus. However, for the figure of the god, rather than look to contemporary examples, van Loo seemed to have looked to the

antique for inspiration, specifically the famous *Discobolus*, an ancient Greek sculpture known through later Roman copies. This image of coiled energy, centred around a twisted torso, clearly influenced the present work.

Carle van Loo was part of a great dynasty of Franco-Flemish painters descended from the genre painter Jan van Loo (b. 1585). His father, the painter Louis-Abraham van Loo (1653-1712), died when he was still a child, and so Carle was sent to live with his brother, Jean-Baptiste, who at the time was working in Turin for patrons including the Prince of Carignano. In 1714, Jean-Baptiste was sent by the Prince to Rome, and so there the young Carle began formal artistic studies with the painter Benedetto Luti (1666-1724), and the sculptor Pierre Le Gros the Younger (1666 -1719). After five years the brothers returned to France, where Carle continued and excelled within the rigorous French academic system for painters, culminating in him winning the prestigious *Prix de Rome.*

Van Loo returned to Rome in 1728, and quickly gained favour. He developed an artistic style that merged refined classicism with a sense of fluid dynamism, encapsulated by *Bacchus and Ariadne*. After a few years he moved to Turin, where he painted some of his best works, including our painting, alongside various commissions from Charles Emanuel III (1701-1773), the newly crowned King of Sardinia and Duke of Savoy.

Returning to Paris in 1734, perhaps as a result of the escalating war in Piedmont, van Loo's career flourished further. He was admitted to the French Academie Royale upon submitting his famous work *Apollo Flaying Marsyas*.[14] Demonstrating both his fondness for exploiting such stories, as well as a keen mastery of anatomy and classical antiquity, the painting resulted in numerous commissions. The most famous of these was instruction to decorate the apartments of Louis XV at Versailles and the further works for the chateau of Fontainebleau.

Van Loo spent the rest of his career in France, and was sought after by both royalty and high society. He never lacked for commissions and was greatly acclaimed by his contemporaries. Among his many achievements he was appointed *Premier Peintre du Roi* in 1762. The famous art critic Baron von Grimm (1723-1807) referred to him as 'premier peintre de l'Europe' and according to abbé Marc-Antoine Laugier (1713-1769), he was the 'premier peintre du siécle'.[15]

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[1] Jean-Baptiste-Guillaume de Gevigney's sale, A.J.Paillet, Paris, 1 1779. lots 569 (*Clytie and Apollo*) and lot 570 (*Bacchus and Ariadne*).

[2] Ost, H., 'Carle Van Loo, Bacchus und Ariadne retrouvé' in: *Pantheon*, XL, 1 (1982), pp. 13-16. In his article Ost states that Pierre Rosenberg agreed with the attribution of the present work to Carle van Loo.

[3] Sahut, M-C, *Carle Vanloo: Premier peintre du roi (Nice, 1705 – Paris, 1765)*, exh. cat. (Nice, Clermont-Ferrand, Nancy, 1977).

[4] Archives Nationales, Paris.

[5] Archives Nationales, Paris.

[6] Palzzo Reale, Turin.

[7] For an extensive discussion of the Prince of Carignano's collection, see Ziskin, R., *Sheltering Art:*

Collecting and Social Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris (Penn State Press, 2012) pp.173-195.

[8] Sahut, p. 100, nos. 252a & 254a.

[9] Ibid., no. 253.

[10] Sotheby's, Paris, 21 June 2012, lot 49.

[11] Sahut, p. 155, no. 498.

[12] Ost, pp.15-16.

[13] Schloss Weißenstein, Pommersfelden, Germany

[14] Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

[15] Cited in Ost, p. 13.

Provenance:

Victor Amadeus I, Prince of Carignano (1690-1741);
Jean-Baptiste-Guillaume de Gevigney (1729-1802);
his sale, A.J.Paillet, Paris, 1 1779, lot 570 (to Rabillon, 239 livres);
Dr. Karl-Jürgen Schumacher, Cologne;
Private Collection, Germany.

Literature:

Michel-François Dandré-Bardon, *Vie de Carle Vanloo*, (Paris 1765), p.68;

Alessandro Baudi di Vesme, 'I Van Loo in Piemonte', in *Storico dell'Arte*, VI, 1893, p. 350;

Marie-Catherine Sahut, *Carle Vanloo: Premier peintre du roi* (Nice, 1705 – Paris, 1765), exh. cat. (Nice, Clermont-Ferrand, Nancy, 1977), p. 100, no. 252b;

Hans Ost, 'Carle Van Loo, Bacchus und Ariadne retrouvé' in: *Pantheon*, XL, 1 (1982), pp. 13-16.

Artist description:

Carle was from the great Franco-Flemish dynasty of painters. He and his family were the French descendants of the genre painter Jan van Loo (b Sluis, nr Bruges, 1585).

After his father's death in 1712, Carle travelled to Turin to join his elder brother, Jean-Baptiste, who took charge of his education. When they moved to Rome in 1714, Vanloo began formal studies with the painter Benedetto Lutti and the sculptor Pierre Legros le jeune. In 1719 the brothers moved to Paris, where the younger artist gained practical experience by assisting his brother on such commissions as the restoration of the Galerie François I at the château of Fontainebleau. He also studied at the Académie Royale, where he won first prize for drawing in 1723. The following year he was awarded the Prix de Rome, but the money that was to finance his studies in Italy was withheld, and he was forced to raise the necessary funds himself by painting society portraits and stage decorations for the opera in Paris. His few extant paintings from this period demonstrate, by their combination of Mannerist figural proportions with a fashionable Rococo palette, Vanloo's ability to assimilate various stylistic influences (e.g. the *Presentation in the Temple*, 1728; Lyon Cathedral). In early 1728 he was at last able to set out for Rome, in the company of his nephews Louis-Michel Vanloo and François van Loo, and of his friend and future rival François Boucher.

In Rome, Vanloo quickly gained favour. By December 1728 one of his drawings had taken first prize at

the Accademia di S Luca, and he had attracted the attention of Cardinal Melchior de Polignac, the French Ambassador to Rome, who intervened to obtain for him his long-delayed pension. While in Rome, Vanloo developed the two distinctive styles that he employed throughout his career. His small *Marriage of the Virgin* (1730; Nice, Musee Beaux-Arts), probably executed out of gratitude to de Polignac, exhibited a sweet, refined classicism reminiscent of Raphael and Carlo Maratti; he was also capable, as in his *Aeneas and Anchises* (1729; Paris, Louvre), of an altogether more dynamic, fluid style that invoked his contemporary Placido Costanzi. His most important Roman work was the illusionary ceiling fresco of the *Apotheosis of St Isidore* (1729; Rome, S Isidoro), which both established his reputation as a painter in the Grand Manner and set the stage for future large-scale decorations.

In 1732 Vanloo decided to return to France via Turin; by a tragic mishap his nephew François was jolted from the carriage and trampled to death by the horses. This may have been why Vanloo stayed on in Turin, where he produced some of his most elegant works in the service of Charles-Emanuel III, Duke of Savoy and King of Sardinia. Characteristic of this period is his ceiling fresco for the Palazzo Mauriziano, Stupinigi, of *Diana and her Nymphs Resting* (1733; in situ), a graceful and witty display of Olympians. He also decorated a salon in the Palazzo Reale with 11 paintings (1733; in situ) illustrating scenes from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. These works were strikingly situated between mirrors and subsequently became so famous through engravings that Turin became an obligatory stop on the Grand Tour.

In 1733 Vanloo married Christina Antonia Somis, a celebrated opera singer. A year later the couple left for France, probably to escape the escalating warfare in Piedmont. His return to Paris marked the beginning of a brilliant career. In 1735 he was admitted (reçu) by the Académie Royale with a painting of *Apollo Flaying Marsyas* (1735; Paris, Ecole Nationale Supérieure Beaux-Arts) that demonstrated his Italianate mastery of anatomy and Classical antiquity. Official commissions immediately followed. He contributed, along with Boucher and Charles Parrocel, two Rubensian paintings of a *Bear Hunt* (1736) and an *Ostrich Hunt* (1738; both Amiens, Museu Picardie) to a decorative series of exotic hunts for the Petits Appartements of Louis XV at the château of Versailles. He also produced a succulent, Watteau-like *Rest on the Hunt* (1737; Paris, Louvre) as a pendant to a work by Parrocel for the Petits Appartements at the château of Fontainebleau. His other royal commissions included a cartoon of *Theseus Overcoming the Minotaur* (1746; Nice, Musee Beaux–Arts) for the Gobelins, and the *Allegory of Painting* (1752–3; San Francisco, Palace of the Legion of Honour) for Mme de Pompadour's château of Bellevue. With the versatility of his period, Vanloo also produced a number of portrait paintings that included sitters from the royal family (e.g. *Queen Marie Leczinska*, 1747; Versailles, Chateau). His most dramatic portrait was that of *Mlle Clairon as Medea* (exh. 1759 Salon; Potsdam, Park Sanssouci).

Besides his work for the court, Vanloo produced paintings for Parisian high society. To appeal to its taste, he often employed a sensuous Rococo style that rivalled that of Boucher. His five history paintings for the decoration of the Hôtel de Soubise, Paris (e.g. *Castor and Pollux*, 1737; Paris, Archives Nationale), demonstrate this ability to tailor styles to patrons' demands. His most popular paintings, however, were *turqueries*, a type of genre scene that depicted contemporary figures in Turkish or other exotic dress. The collectors Jean de Jullienne and Louis Fagon commissioned respectively the *Pasha Having his Mistress Painted* (c. 1737; Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) and the *Sultan Giving a Concert to his Mistress* (c. 1737; London, Wallace Collection). Mme Geoffrin, whose salon Vanloo frequented, also ordered two exotic scenes as pendants: the *Spanish Conversation Piece* (1754) and the *Spanish Lecture* (c. 1758; both St Petersburg, Hermitage); in these Vanloo portrayed his wife in Spanish costume.

Vanloo also made a significant contribution to religious painting. His early Parisian works continued the stylistic diversity of his Roman period, as in the refined *Virgin and Child* (1738; Rouen, Musee Beaux-Arts) and the more dynamic and agitated *Martyrdom of St Stephen* (1740; Valenciennes, Musee Beaux-Arts). By the 1740s, however, a new emphasis on grandeur and monumentality had begun to appear, as in his Rubensian altarpieces of *St Denis and St George* for the charterhouse of Champmol. By the 1750s he had developed a style of religious painting that fully incorporated the Italian Grand

Manner, while moving beyond it in its uniquely French idiom of clarity, nobility and compositional reserve. This style is best exemplified by the six scenes from the *Life of St Augustine* that he painted between 1746 and 1755 for the choir of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, Paris. Still *in situ*, these enormous paintings transform their stylistic precedents in Raphael, Eustache Le Sueur and Bon Boullogne into an unparalleled, 18th-century orchestration of monumental form, grey-blond colour harmonies and dramatic pictorial light. The cycle's *St Augustine Preaching before Bishop Valerius* is one of the artist's most admired works.

While Vanloo's stylistic eclecticism and the wide range of his subjects make him difficult to categorize in 18th-century art, it was precisely these qualities that his contemporaries admired. To them, he seemed to possess a total mastery of artistic traditions, and as a consequence he was immensely successful. Baron von Grimm called him the greatest painter in Europe, and Voltaire compared him to Raphael. He never lacked commissions, and his works were generally acclaimed at the Salons. He also enjoyed many prestigious appointments, such as professor at the Académie Royale (1737); Director of the Ecole Royale des Elèves Protégés (1749); Premier Peintre du Roi (1762); and Director of the Académie Royale (1763). He was ennobled in 1751. He was highly regarded by his students, who included Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Gabriel-François Doyen, Bernard Lépicié and Louis Lagrenée. His considerable reputation was short-lived, however; even before his death he began to witness an increasing vogue for Neo-classicism among the precursors of Jacques-Louis David. Two decades later, at the height of the Davidian revolution in painting, Vanloo's eclecticism was blindly condemned in the purging of the Rococo style, giving rise to the derisive slogan 'Vanloo, Pompadour, Rococo'. His reputation has only begun to be re-evaluated in the late 20th century.

Collections

Carle van Loo is represented in the following collections: Fine Arts Museums, San Francisco; Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Louvre, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Chi-Mei Museum, Taiwan; Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia; Harvard University Art Museums, Massachusetts; Musées de Lorraine, France; National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan; The Wallace Collection, London; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, amongst others.