SPHINX FINE ART

Attributed to Hendrick van Balen I (Antwerp *c.*1575 - Antwerp 1632)

Herse and her Sisters with Mercury

oil on panel 9.2 x 21 cm (11½ x 8¼in)

...so all the rest of the virgins were put in the shade by Herse... Her beauty dumbfounded Jupiter's son [Mercury]' - Ovid *Metamorphoses* ll.724-726.

This playful and sensuous work, similar both in style and theme to a number of others executed by van Balen and his circle, presents the Ovidian myth of the beautiful Herse. The Roman messenger god, Mercury, can be seen, gleaming in his golden robes, bending down perhaps to remove his winged sandals. Grasping in one hand his carefully wrought staff, the god is also identifiable by the helmet that he wears. Whilst this vignette, set in a sunlit alcove, seems inconsequential to the depiction of Herse which dominates the composition, its artful positioning ensures that the viewer alights upon it almost immediately. The figure crouching at Mercury's feet is possibly Herse's avaricious sister, Aglauros, whose role in the story is mentioned by Ovid.

As with so many transpositions of art from literature, this painting almost certainly borrowed its subject matter from the vivid retelling of a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* In Book II, Ovid tells of Herse, the daughter of Cecrops, catching the eye of the infatuated god, Mercury. To gain the love of Herse, Mercury tries to engage Herse's sister, Aglauros who asks for a mass of gold in return. A charming description of Mercury preparing to meet Herse is narrated by Ovid: 'He assumed no disguise, as beauty is always so full of confidence. Justly sure of his charms, he still took care to enhance them by smoothing his hair and adjusting his cloak to make quite sure it was hanging correctly, with all the gold on the border showing. He checked his staff, which raises and lowers the curtain of sleep, had a polished look, [and] that his feet were clean and his sandals gleaming.'[1]

This present work has much in common with van Balen's other mythologically orientated subjects, particularly, *The Judgement of Midas.* Here the carefully rendered, half clad women and intricate costume detailing is strikingly similar to the same details in *Herse and her Sisters with Mercury.* The beautifully rich colouring and shapely nudes are also hallmarks of van Balen's oeuvre.

Hendrick van Balen was a leading Antwerp painter who specialised in small cabinet pictures which often depicted mythological scenes. He travelled to Italy in 1592 where he may have met Hans Rottenhammer (1564-1625), who exerted a great deal of influence upon his style. In Antwerp, he collaborated not infrequently with his contemporaries, Joos de Momper II (1564-1635) and Jan Brueghel I (1568-1625). Indeed, he often provided for Brueghel the figures for his landscapes and the fruit and flowers for garlands – evidence of his great skill in this area can be seen in the exquisite detail of a garland suspended by a hovering cherub in this present work. A testament to his artistic ability can be deduced from the pupils under his tutelage: in 1609, the year in which he was appointed dean of the Guild of St. Luke, van Balen taught Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) as well as Frans Synders (1579-1657).

[1] Ovid, *Metamorphoses II*.731-738 (ed. Raeburn, D., 2004).

Provenance:

with Lawrence Steingrad Fine Arts, New York.

Artist description:

Hendrick van Balen was a leading Antwerp painter who specialised in small cabinet pictures which often depicted mythological scenes. He travelled to Italy in 1592 where he may have met Hans Rottenhammer (1564-1625), who exerted a great deal of influence upon his style. In Antwerp, he collaborated not infrequently with his contemporaries, Joos de Momper II (1564-1635) and Jan Brueghel I (1568-1625). Indeed, he often provided for Brueghel the figures for his landscapes and the fruit and flowers for garlands – evidence of his great skill in this area can be seen in the exquisite detail of a garland suspended by a hovering cherub in this present work. A testament to his artistic ability can be deduced from the pupils under his tutelage: in 1609, the year in which he was appointed dean of the Guild of St. Luke, van Balen taught Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) as well as Frans Synders (1579-1657).