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JACQUES BLANCHARD 1600 - 1638

Venus and Adonis Departing for the Hunt c.1631-32

oil on canvas

128 x 136 cm

Provenance:

private collection, France

Literature:

The Matthiesen Gallery [text by Andrea Gates and Patrick Matthiesen], *Myth and Allegory*, London 2008, in particular pp. 20-25

Kazerouni, Guillaume *Jacques Blanchard, au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes*, 2015

Related Work:

Jacques Blanchard 1600 – 1638

Mars and the Vestal Virgin 1638

oil on canvas

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As is so often the case with Blanchard, the subject of this picture is delightfully self-evident. It is taken from Ovid^[1] and illustrates the moment that the goddess, begging Adonis not to leave her for the hunt, knowing that he will never return, entreats a kiss from her reluctant and very mortal lover. Painters since the renaissance had recognised in this particular subject the inherent opportunity to showcase their skills as it demanded a strong command of male, female and infant anatomies (largely nudes) landscape motifs, pathos, and, given the hunting motif, possibly dogs. These demands having been fulfilled, any sense of narrative tension was often overlooked if not dismissed. The lovers therefore could equally be interpreted as engaged on their return from the hunt, sated by sport and languorously pursuing their relationship. But in Blanchard's treatment we see a definite focus on this tension, the lovers' efforts are clearly unmatched and a specific drama has been depicted. The idea that Blanchard may have been inspired by Shakespeare's popular poem *Venus and Adonis*^[2], is tempting. Here, as in the poem, Venus clings vainly to the youth, pleading with him not to leave for the hunt with its dangers. Adonis, exasperated and impatient for sport, tears himself away and is found the next morning gored by a boar. Venus curses love and vows that to those who love truly and best (like her) love will only bring sorrow; ergo, love and pain are inseparable.

That we can detect faint but clear echoes of the Fontainebleau schools in the work is unsurprising; like so many of his contemporaries, Blanchard could not help but be informed by these earlier painters. This is evident in the figures' attenuated joints, and the stylisation of the hair and costumes, which reflect some residual influences of the Fontainebleau artists (most obviously Primaticcio and Amboise Dubois) and of the French mannerists in general. However, Blanchard's main inspiration for the painting is plainly Titian's composition, which by the first quarter of the 17th century had been disseminated in countless workshop copies and print versions. But while Blanchard's formal debt to Titian may be obvious, his own ambitions for the subject appear to have been very different. Instead of trying to imitate Titian's complex and considerably larger composition - which, in any case would have been unsuitable to his specific decorative purpose - Blanchard focuses tightly on the lovers. Indeed, so much so that his composition is almost solely dependent on their anatomy. Their intimacy is emphasised by a complete lack of recession, or horizon line. They are anchored at the very front of the picture plane by the crude Cyclopaean masonry they sit upon. This is contrasted with the thick tree trunk winding sinuously behind them, suggesting their eventual division. The landscape itself is communicated with barely more than two feathery scirms of foliage. Venus's yearning and Adonis's attendant lack of pity is beautifully captured by the kinetic interplay of their limbs and draperies. Equally, while Venus appears almost weightless with abandon, Adonis's resolution is plain in his clenched right hand, and firmly planted left foot; he is braced against her embrace.

Adonis's male ruddiness, which also reflects his impatience and mortality, contrasts with Venus's milky white skin. This is a characteristic less obvious in French painting of the time, but was the stock in trade of Titian and Titianesque Venetian painters in general. Having said this, the painting is far from a slavish imitation of Titian's final period, because it is also, in fact so appreciably French. Apart from the audible echoes of Fontainebleau in the anatomy, Blanchard employs a silvery blue/yellow colour scheme (used so often by Vouet in his own work as to be considered a sort of

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signature) with great subtlety throughout the work, in hue, texture, and contrast. The ice-blue of Venus's mantle and the rose-gold and yellow-orange of Adonis's costume simmer and glow without overwhelming the virtuoso under-painting in the flesh tones, or the soft yellow-greens of the landscape motifs. Indeed, the picture vividly illustrates Blanchard's mastery of texture, both in drapery and flesh tones.

The painting's strongly baroque rhythm of interlocking limbs, so characteristic of the Venetian school, was achieved by only a few northern artists, Rubens being the most successful in this regard. It is interesting to note in fact just how similar Blanchard's *Venus and Adonis* is to Rubens's painting of the same subject, which he, in turn had based on Titian's picture in the Prado.^[3] Our picture is most likely at least three years earlier than Rubens's, so it is debatable who inspired whom, if at all, but the compositional similarities are remarkable. Both works depict the lovers caught in the same vain embrace, both pictures include the upright figure of Cupid to allude to the central theme of love and its stings, as well as to serve as a formal device which emphasises the strong intersecting diagonals of the lovers. Rubens's picture was painted in his later career, when he was settled in Antwerp, so any possibility that Rubens was inspired by Blanchard's picture, would depend on an engraving after it, and at present none exists.

Although, the picture's lack of provenance prevents it from a definitive identification with the documented decoration of the hôtel Le Barbier, a *Venus and Adonis* does appear there mentioned as no. 6 in the list of square pictures forming part of the decoration.^[4] On stylistic grounds, the picture ought to be associated with this lost decoration; there are no other works currently known of 'presque carre' format as described by Dézallier d'Argenville which might fit into this cycle. The square format of the painting and its intended low view point makes it virtually certain that this too, like the *Bravo Disturbing a Sleeping Nymph* was intended as part of a decorative scheme. Richard Beresford has also kindly stated that in his opinion the painting might be associated with the hôtel Le Barbier.^[5] Moreover, Beresford pointed out that the *Venus and Adonis departing for the Hunt*, is consistent in subject matter with another work which he associates with the hôtel Le Barbier, a *Diana and Endymion*, currently in a French private collection.^[6] The latter picture would appear to have been, according to Dézallier d'Argenville's description, one of the eight 'upright' compositions and is no.14, the last on his descriptive list.^[7]

The lack of concrete documentary evidence aside, on stylistic grounds the painting fits to exactly this moment of the artist's development during the mid-1630s. It should be compared with the Louvre *Charité* of 1633 in the treatment of both the flesh and the draperies, and the muscular structure of Adonis with his unusually stocky figure seems to derive from a model similar to those figures as seen in the *Flagellation*. In its lyrical aspects, and sense of romantic tension, the picture also approaches the Nancy *Bacchanal* of 1636.

Formally, Blanchard's depiction of Venus and Adonis fits comfortably within a visual tradition that stretches back to early mannerism. Stylistically and technically, however, the painting marks a notable turning point in French art. Blanchard's brushwork, colourism and sense of composition are derived from the finest of the Venetian golden age, but they have been imported and translated into a very discerning French idiom. Moreover, Blanchard succeeds in expressing an origin myth

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without a trace of didacticism. Perhaps he understood that while his wealthy patron may have appreciated this subject as a romantic paradigm, he might be less charmed were the subject depicted as a warning or justification of the consequences of love. Therefore, instead of being a scripted scene of the theatrical baroque, *Venus and Adonis Departing for the Hunt*, with its deliberate sensuality and dramatic tension, is a true *epyllion*, a sort of erotic elegy. Working within the often very narrow remit of decorative painting, Blanchard achieved in this work that delicate balance between the poetic and the sensual, which is one of the delights of the baroque.

Andrea Gates, The Matthiesen Gallery, London

[1] *Metamorphoses*, Bk X: 708-739, 'She warned him' ... 'but his courage defied the warning.'

[2] W. Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, ed. 1593, Stanza 39, ll. 229-234:

"Fondling," she saith, "since I have hemm'd thee here

Within the circuit of this ivory pale,

I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer...'

The poem was first published in 1593 and in a quarto edition, published and printed by Richard Field, who released a second edition before transferring the copyright to John Harrison. By 1640, at least nine subsequent by editions of *Venus and Adonis* had been printed, with five more to follow that same year - making the poem, with 16 editions in 47 years, one of the great popular successes of its era. Apart from the poem's structure, one of Shakespeare's great narrative innovations of the myth was to emphasize Adonis's romantic ambivalence. Recognizing this, Erwin Panofsky argued that Shakespeare might have seen a copy of Titian's 'Venus and Adonis', (Cf: J. Doebler, 'The Reluctant Adonis: Titian and Shakespeare', in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1982, pp. 480-490).

[3] Rubens had seen Titian's picture in the Prado in 1628-9 and had made a copy, upon which he then based his own *Venus and Adonis*, painted by the mid- or late 1630s, oil on canvas; with added strips, 77 3/4 x 95 5/8 in. (197.5 x 242.9 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Harry Payne Bingham, 1937 (37.162)

[4] The painting is no. 6 on the descriptive list in Dèzallier d'Argenville's *Abrégé* of 1762, *loc. cit.*

[5] R. Beresford, priv. comm., 17 January 2008, 'I think your *Venus and Adonis* is an earlier picture and comes from the hôtel le Barbier'.

[6] Thuillier, *op. cit.* cat. no. 47, p. 170-172, illus.

[7] (R. Beresford, 2008, email, 7 February).

Related Work:

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Mars and the Vestal Virgin 1638

oil on canvas

130 x 110 cm

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Blanchard is noted as a painter of mythological and allegorical subject, many of these painted on commission as part of decorative schemes in the houses of a newly wealthy administrative class. ... The unusual upright, squarish format of the canvas [Mars and the Vestal Virgin] strongly suggests that the painting was originally part of a decorative scheme. It would have been set into the panelling of a room along with other paintings on related themes. It is probable that the scheme as a whole treated the history of Rome or, perhaps more likely given Blanchard's favoured subject matter, the Loves of the Gods.

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Mars and the Vestal Virgin 1638, oil on canvas, 130 x 110 cm by the same artist in the collection of The Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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