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Francisco de Goya y Lucientes
Sacrifice to Priapus, 1770–71

FRANCISCO DE GOYA Y LUCIENTES
(Fuendetodos 1746 – 1828 Bordeaux)

SACRIFICE TO PRIAPUS, 1770–71

Oil on canvas
40.4 x 30.3 cm
15 ⅞ x 11 ⅞ in.

Provenance

Private collection, Paris, until the 1950s;
Marie (Molly) Balkany (1928–2015), Lake Geneva, Switzerland;
Her posthumous sale, Piguet Hôtel des Ventes, Geneva, 6 May 2017, lot 519 (as French School, 18th century);
Private collection, Spain, since 2017.

Literature

Gassier, P. and Wilson, J., *Goya: His Life and Work*, New York, 1971, pp. 74, 82, no. 24, illustrated.
Gudiol, J., *Goya 1746–1828. Biography, Analytical Study and Catalogue of His Paintings*, New York, 1971, p. 233, no. 16.
De Angelis, R. (ed.), *L'opera pittorica completa di Goya*, Milan, 1974, p. 90, no. 18.
Camón Aznar, J., *Francisco de Goya*, 4 vols, Zaragoza, 1980, vol. I, p. 54.
Mangiante, P. E., *Goya e l'Italia*, Rome, 1992, pp. 58, 116, note 42.
Ansón, A. (ed.), *La estela de Corrado Giaquinto en España: de González Velázquez y Bayeu a Goya*, exh. cat., Museo Goya – Colección Ibercaja, Zaragoza, 2021, no. 35, illustrated.
Tabar Anitua, F., 'Los "sacrificios" romanos del joven Goya', *Ars Magazine*, no. 56, 2022, pp. 70–77, illustrated.

Exhibitions

La estela de Corrado Giaquinto en España: de González Velázquez y Bayeu a Goya, Museo Goya – Colección Ibercaja, Zaragoza, 24 June – 26 September 2021, no. 35.



This extraordinary canvas represents one of only about a dozen known works produced by the artist during his stay in Rome.[1] Rediscovered by Xavière Deparmet Fitz-Gerald in 1964, the work depicts a sacrifice to Priapus, the Roman God of fertility. A priestess dressed as a vestal virgin (the high priestesses of Ancient Rome) offers up a dish of libations to a statue of the god, in front of which there is a rectangular altar with cups and liturgical ornaments and, to the right, a lit incense burner. Another female figure, crouching down with her back to us, has her right arm around the statue while her left hand is holding a sacrificial goat. The statue of Priapus features an erect phallus and is adorned with floral garlands.

In 1770, a young Francisco de Goya y Lucientes arrived in Rome from his hometown of Zaragoza to absorb all the Eternal City had to offer. Despite Goya going on to become the premier Spanish artist of his time, very little is known about his early Roman sojourn. Without any sponsorships or bursaries from an artistic academy, the paper trail relating to this period is scant. Even his Roman address has thus far been hard to come by.

The canvas shows the myriad artistic debts the young Spanish artist held, particularly to eighteenth-century French painting. Besides the work's incredibly warm palette and thick woody foliage evocative of French Rococo painters such as Fragonard (see, for example, the exactly contemporary *Meeting* at the Frick Collection, fig. 1), the work also takes a great deal of inspiration from the burgeoning neoclassical trend which had taken hold in the city. Here too, Goya looked toward its French current, represented *in primis* by the sculptor Claude Michel, known as Clodion.

Clodion (1738–1814) is counted amongst the finest and most sought-after sculptors in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Along with Jean-Antoine Houdon, he is responsible for disseminating a particularly French take on neoclassical sculpture across Europe and America. From 1763 and 1766, Clodion was a resident artist in the French Academy in Rome, having won the prestigious *Prix de Rome* for his work. After the end of his official tenure in the Academy, the sculptor stayed in the Eternal City until 1771, the same year Goya left Italy to return home.[2]

During his Roman tenure, Clodion produced several small, highly sought-after figures depicting pagan sacrifices. In the case of Goya's *Sacrifice*, Lopez-Rey noted an affinity to a *Vestal* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington (fig. 2)[3] and a strikingly close resemblance to the (slightly later) *Offering to Priapus* now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (fig. 3).

[1] Sureda, J. (ed.), *Goya & Italy*, exh. cat., Museo de Zaragoza, Zaragoza, 2008, p. 93.
[2] Ansón 2021, p. 260.
[3] Lopez-Rey 1979.

The light, ethereal pagan sculptures made by Clodion during his Roman period created a market for this type of genre imagery in the visual arts across all visual media, and it seems that Goya's *Sacrifice* is the young artist's response to local Roman taste. Out of the small nucleus of Goya's known Roman production, two other paintings – another *Sacrifice to Priapus* and a *Sacrifice to Vesta* (figs. 4–5) – portray extremely similar subjects. De Angelis and Gudiol both noted[4] that Goya likely made these canvasses to support his artistic activity in Rome.

The other *Sacrifice to Priapus* presents the opportunity for a close confrontation with the present work. The other canvas, formerly in the collection of José Gudiol was long known as the *Sacrifice to Pan* before the discovery of the work under consideration here, due to the absence of the phallus on the statue. Other small variations in the smaller canvas include the absence of flower garlands around the herm, a wine jug instead of a sacrificial goat, and a square platform instead of a round one. The pictorial manner in the smaller work is slightly more closed, whereas the handling in the present work is fresher and more effortless, especially in the rendering of the semitransparent fabrics worn by both figures.

Though Goya made this before his tenure as official court portraitist to King Charles III, and well before the debilitating illness that caused the artist to develop his dark, disturbing manner for which he is most known, certain seeds of his mature style (or rather *styles*) are clearly visible in this rare work. The aforementioned verdant, fluffy foliage, along with the bright and fresh colour palette expressed in the *Sacrifice* can also be seen in his court masterpiece *The Parasol* (1777, Museo Nacional del Prado, fig. 6).

Goya's appropriation of pagan sacrifices this early marked his production and influenced his mature fascination for the occult in celebrated paintings such as *Witches' Sabbath* (Madrid, Museo Lázaro Galdiano, fig. 7) and his canvases from '*The Forcibly Bewitched*' (of which one is in the National Gallery, London, fig. 8). For an *oeuvre* so multifaceted and complex as that of Goya, this canvas holds the seeds for almost all the currents that would diverge so just a few years after its production.

[4] De Angelis 1974, p. 90; Gudiol 1971, p. 233.



Fig. 1: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Progress of Love: The Meeting*, 1771–72, oil on canvas, 317.5 x 243.8 cm (125 x 96 in.), The Frick Collection, New York, inv. no. 1915.1.46



Fig. 2: Claude Michel, called Clodion, *A Vestal*, 1770, marble, 95.5 x 42.1 x 35 cm (37 ⅝ x 16 ⅝ x 13 ¾ in.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, inv. no. 1952.5.99



Fig. 3: Claude Michel, called Clodion, *Offering to Priapus*, ca. 1775, terracotta, 45.1 x 33.5 x 21.9 cm (17 ¾ x 13 ¼ x 8 ⅝ in.), The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



Fig. 4: Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Sacrifice to Priapus* (formerly known as *Sacrifice to Pan*), 1771, oil on canvas, Private collection



Fig. 5: Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Sacrifice to Vesta*, 1771, oil on canvas, Private collection, Spain



Fig. 6: Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *The Parasol*, 1777, oil on canvas, 104 x 152 cm (41 x 59 ⅞ in.), Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, inv. no. P000773



Fig. 7: Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Witches' Sabbath*, 1797–98, oil on canvas, 43 x 30 cm (16 ⅞ x 11 ¾ in.), Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid, inv. no. 2006



Fig. 8: Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *A Scene from 'The Forcibly Bewitched'*, 1798, oil on canvas, 42.5 x 30.8 cm (16 ¾ x 12 ⅛ in.), The National Gallery, London, inv. no. NG1472

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