COLNAGHI



Northern Italian Painter
Perseus and Andromeda

NORTHERN ITALIAN PAINTER
(First half of the 17th century)

PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA

Oil on paper
38 x 32.5 cm; 15 3/8 x 12 3/4 in.

Provenance

Private collection.

Literature

Unpublished



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Although much of her body is concealed from the viewer's prying gaze, the central figure of this work on paper is readily identifiable as Andromeda, the legendary Ethiopian princess, daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia. She was offered as a sacrifice to a sea monster sent by Poseidon to ravage the kingdom's shores: divine punishment for Cassiopeia's boast that her beauty surpassed that of the Nereids, the alluring sea nymphs. The innocent daughter thus pays the price of her mother's vanity. According to an oracle, she must be fed to the monster to appease its wrath.

A dramatic intervention, however, restores the moral order. Returning in triumph from his encounter with Medusa, Perseus sees the sacrificial victim and comes to her rescue. Perseus, the archetypal rescuer of the imperilled princess, is shown before Andromeda as he prepares to act. Wearing only a helmet, he leans towards the danger to which she points beyond the picture's edge. This inventive device leaves the appearance of the fearsome sea creature to the imagination of a viewer already familiar with the story's outcome. Andromeda's nudity belongs to a well-established pictorial tradition, represented by Titian, Paolo Veronese, Vasari and Rubens, and informed by successive readings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (IV, 663-752). Her rescuer's nudity is less expected, since it is not required by the literary source. The fetter in the foreground, chaining the princess to the rock, confirms her identity, while the wing projecting from Perseus's helmet alludes to his arrival by air, whether by means of winged sandals or on Pegasus, according to the version followed. Such compelling narrative elements inspired not only numerous painters but also the Ferrarese poet Ludovico Ariosto, whose Orlando furioso recasts the myth for a sixteenth-century audience. In canto X, another princess, Angelica, is rescued from a sea monster by Ruggiero.

The work's excellent state of preservation is matched by an unusually high degree of finish. This suggests that the artist may have intended more than a preparatory study, conceiving the painting as an independent work, complete in its own right. In the early seventeenth century, works on paper of this kind, often associated with workshop practice and preparatory study, were beginning to be valued by discerning collectors independently of that function. In some instances, their survival owes much to this emerging appreciation. This is particularly significant given the fragility of paper, which makes such works rarer today than they were when first produced.

The anonymous artist demonstrates an exceptional command of the medium and its expressive possibilities. The fluid paint is handled with a sophisticated, calligraphic touch, characterised by rapid, assured brushwork. This is evident both in the metallic reflections on the ankle fetter and the links of the chain, defined almost entirely by highlights, and in the remarkable precision of the tufts of grass in the foreground. The handling becomes progressively more complex as the eye moves from the rocks to

the bark of the tree, slashed by a stroke of blood-red paint. These passages reveal a freedom of execution that coexists with the meticulous finish of the figures.

The same freedom of touch finds its fullest expression in Perseus, particularly in the striking gleam across the polished surface of his helmet. Here the scene is at its most painterly, the fluid application producing effects of light and texture that would be difficult to retain in a more fully elaborated composition. Equally telling are the warrior's fingers, drawn with a single brushstroke across his beloved's shoulders, and the slender thread of white paint that marks the edge of the seawater against the rock. Colour reinforces the dramatic tension. Andromeda's cool flesh tones, flushed in patches by the cold, are set against a sombre, storm-laden sky, deliberately darkened to heighten the drama of the composition.

The work's complex stylistic character offers clues to its date and geographical origin. Its formal language points to northern Italy, particularly to the painting of Parma. Although the work dates to the first half of the seventeenth century, the conception of the figures remains indebted to Mannerist conventions, notably in their slender, elongated and twisting anatomies. Andromeda's pose is especially revealing, as is the pronounced elegance of her raised arm, with its relaxed hand and tapering fingers. More distant echoes of secular painting north of the Alps enrich this stylistic synthesis. While the artist remains unidentified, the composition attests to the sophistication of his pictorial thinking.

The painter's departure from conventional iconography is equally revealing. The episode is commonly organised around three elements: Andromeda on the rocky shore, the monster beside her and Perseus descending from above. Here, the omission of the monster gives particular prominence to the heroine's carefully staged pose. Its ultimate source can almost certainly be identified with the celebrated *Crouching Venus*, a Hellenistic sculptural type transmitted through numerous Roman versions. Among the most admired is the second-century AD marble known as the *Lely Venus*, now in the Royal Collection and on loan to the British Museum. In the early seventeenth century, it belonged to the Gonzaga collection in Mantua, where it provided Peter Paul Rubens with a model for the figure of Ceres in his *Venus, Cupid, Bacchus and Ceres*, c. 1612-1613, now in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel, inv. GK 85 (fig. 1).

Once the probable prototype for the present work has been recognised, Perseus's role becomes clearer. His presence serves as a narrative device, identifying the female figure as Andromeda, yet he remains a subsidiary figure in the background rather than the compositional focus. The painting centres instead on the transformation of a bronze statuette, or of the classical sculptural model it transmits, into a mythological scene. This hierarchy suggests that the composition originated in

the interpretation of the sculptural prototype, with Perseus introduced to give that adaptation its specific narrative identity.

The present figure belongs to this wider tradition of adaptation, although this need not imply the painter's direct knowledge of the Gonzaga marble. Marcantonio Raimondi's *Venus Crouching by a Plinth on Top of Which Stands Cupid*, after Francesco Francia, c. 1510-1527 (fig. 2), is one of the earliest known adaptations of the antique type. Related seated and bathing figures occur in the Raphaelesque repertory disseminated through prints, including Marcantonio's *Venus Drying Her Foot*, traditionally associated with Raphael, and Marco Dente's *Venus Wounded by a Rose's Thorn*, connected with the decoration of Cardinal Bibbiena's *stufetta*. Another pictorial parallel is Luca Cambiaso's *Venus and Cupid at Sea*, c. 1560-1565, in the Galleria Borghese, Rome (inv. 123), in which the goddess adopts a similarly turned pose.[1] These related inventions draw on more than one antique prototype and exemplify the Renaissance practice of adapting sculptural poses to new narratives.[2]

This learned allusion to classical antiquity supports the possibility that the painting was conceived for private collecting, perhaps for a *studiolo*, where its classical reference could have been appreciated alongside a bronze statuette adapting the same model. A pertinent example is the Florentine *Crouching Venus* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 3), now dated to the seventeenth century and catalogued as after a model by Giambologna. The composition is recorded in a Medici inventory of 1584; the statuette listed there has been associated with the bronze in the Bargello, although the identification is not securely documented.[3] Its relationship to Giambologna's invention illustrates the continued circulation of the type during the period to which the painting belongs. In a private collection, Andromeda's pose could thus have invited comparison between painted flesh and sculpted form, adding an antiquarian dimension to the mythological narrative.

A detail in Ovid's narrative lends further resonance to this sculptural reference. On first seeing Andromeda, Perseus would have taken her for a marble statue, had a light breeze not stirred her hair and warm tears not flowed from her eyes (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 670-675: "When Perseus her beheld as marble he would deem her, but the breeze moved in her hair, and from her streaming eyes the warm tears fell"). The passage offers a suggestive literary counterpart to the painter's transformation of an antique sculptural type into a living protagonist.

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[1] Iommelli 2022b, inv. 123.

[2] Thompson 2004, pp. 36-37. The figure in *Venus Drying Her Foot* is associated with the *nymph alla spina*, rather than exclusively with the *Crouching Venus* type.

[3] Mozzati 2022, pp. 344-347, cat. 120 and 121, especially p. 344 for the inventories of 1584 and 1609 and especially p. 347 for the provenance and technical observations.



Fig. 1. Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus, Cupid, Bacchus and Ceres*, c. 1612-1613, oil on canvas, 140.5 × 200 cm. Kassel, Hessen Kassel Heritage, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, inv. GK 85.



Fig. 2. Marcantonio Raimondi, after Francesco Francia, *Crouching Venus*, c. 1510-1527, engraving, 21.7 × 14.2 cm (print, made up). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 49.97.110.

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Fig. 3. After a model by Giambologna, *Crouching Venus*, Florence, seventeenth century, bronze, 26 cm high. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 68.141.25.

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