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Review

Reviewed Work: *Poussin's Et in Arcadia Ego*

Review by: Anthony Blunt

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NOTES AND REVIEWS

POUSSIN'S ET IN ARCADIA EGO.

Poussin's two paintings of the Arcadian shepherds have recently been the subject of learned articles by Professor Panofsky,¹ Mr. Jerome Klein,² and Dr. Weisbach³; but one fact which has not so far been mentioned by any of these writers may be worth adding, since it throws some light on Poussin's intention in one of the two versions of the theme.

The earlier painting of the *Et in Arcadia ego* subject, now in the collection of the Duke of Devonshire (Fig. 1), was not conceived as a single piece but as one of a pair of pictures. In the Palazzo Massimi delle Colonne in Rome there is a copy of it, identical with the original except that it has been greatly added to in height. It is balanced by a pendant, which is a copy, also increased in height, of the so-called River Gods in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 4). Fortunately the inventory of the palace made in 1677 gives the clue to the subject of this painting, which turns out to be Midas washing at the source of the Pactolus.⁴

This episode in the story of Midas is familiar. Midas being offered by Bacchus the satisfaction of any one wish, asked for the power to turn everything that he touched to gold. Then finding himself in danger of starving, since all his food turned to gold before he could eat it, he came back to Bacchus and begged that the gift might be taken away from him. Bacchus told him to wash at the source of the Pactolus. Midas carried out this advice, and was cured, but the waters of the Pactolus have contained grains of gold ever since. The moral of the story is, therefore, that happiness is not to be obtained by the possession of material wealth. But the exact nuance of the ideas expressed in the painting can best be seen by considering it in connexion with other pictures belonging to the same group.

Poussin painted the story on another occasion. In the Alte Pinakothek in Munich is a canvas (Fig. 5) which shows Midas kneeling before Bacchus and begging to be relieved of his power to turn everything into gold. In the background Midas appears again, washing in the Pactolus. This is the only occasion when Poussin breaks the unity of time so completely as to introduce the same figure twice in the same picture, and this practice, which was altogether rare in the seventeenth century, was a survival of a habit

fairly common in the Mannerist period.⁵ The fact that Poussin does it here is one reason for dating this painting early in his career, when he had not entirely shaken off the Mannerist characteristics which he had acquired during his training in Paris. For this reason and also on general stylistic grounds the painting should be dated about 1628-29.⁶ But this painting in its turn is one of a pair. It forms a pendant to another picture in the Pinakothek, representing Apollo and Daphne (Fig. 6).⁷

The morals of the two paintings are related. For the Apollo and Daphne also sets forth a story of disillusionment and shows the disappointments following the pursuit of purely sensual love, which may at any moment turn to dust and ashes. Moreover, the impermanence of love is a recurrent theme in Poussin's painting at this time (cf. the Death of Adonis at Caen and the two versions of the Narcissus story).⁸

Now it has been pointed out by Mr. Klein that the great difference between the two versions of the *Et in Arcadia ego* theme lies above all in the fact that in the first there is only regret and disillusionment shown at the transitoriness of life, whereas in the second there is resignation. The particular tone of the earlier painting is brought out even more clearly by the context in which we have now been able to set it. All the paintings which we have considered deal with themes of disillusionment, and in none of them is there any idea of stoical resignation or of calm, such as is expressed in the second version of the *Et in Arcadia ego*. The Midas subjects show only disillusionment about the value of wealth, the Apollo and Daphne disillusionment about the frailty of physical love, and the *Et in Arcadia ego* in the first treatment shows nothing but regret at the impermanence of human happiness.⁹

5. E. g. Pontormo (the *Story of Joseph* in the National Gallery) and Dutch Mannerists like Stradanus.

6. Grautoff dates the painting 1632-36 (see under No. 56 in his catalogue in the second volume of *Nicolas Poussin*, Munich, 1914). But at this date the mixture of purely Titianesque elements like the figure of the nymph in the foreground, with figures taken from ancient sculpture, like the Bacchus, and others based on contemporary Roman painting, like the Midas, is unthinkable. After about 1630 the various elements are always more completely fused. Friedländer (Thieme-Becker, s. v. Poussin) dates it before 1631 on the grounds of the reference to a painting of Midas in that year, and though this might equally well refer to the New York painting, I see no reason to disagree with his opinion. The New York and Chatsworth pictures I should be inclined to date a little later, c. 1630. The Chatsworth painting can hardly be as early as Panofsky suggests (*loc. cit.*), namely 1626-28, or as Jamot would date it, 1625-28 (cf. *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1925, II, p. 100), for at that time Poussin was still in a purely experimental phase.

7. These two paintings are said in the catalogue of the gallery to be pendants. Their sizes are almost identical (98 x 130 and 97 x 131), and they seem both to have been in the Electoral collection since the eighteenth century. Friedländer (*Nicolas Poussin*), Munich, 1914, p. 113) also accepts them as a pair. Moreover, on purely stylistic grounds they appear to go together, particularly since, if they are arranged with the Midas on the left and the Apollo on the right, they form a combination in which the asymmetry of the separate compositions, which is rather surprising in Poussin even at this date, is lessened, and the large masses of figures and trees on the left in the Midas and on the right in the Apollo produce a balance.

8. Louvre and Dresden.

9. It is perhaps worth noticing that in the generation after Poussin his French followers tend to keep more to the type of the second version of the theme when they treat it, whereas the Italians prefer to make of it a more romantic and picturesque subject. The

1. *In Philosophy and History*. Essays presented to Ernst Cassirer, Oxford, 1936, pp. 223 ff.

2. *Art Bulletin*, XIX (1937), pp. 314 ff.

3. *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1937.

4. See Orbaan, *Documenti sul Barocco*, p. 521. I am indebted to Mr. Ellis Waterhouse for identifying these pictures in the inventory. We may imagine that the paintings in the Palazzo Massimi were copies made for Cardinal Massimi of paintings which he had seen and admired in the house of some collector in Rome, perhaps Cassiano del Pozzo, who was a friend of Massimi and was Poussin's best patron at the time when these paintings were executed, that is to say about 1628-30. The fact that the two paintings at Chatsworth and New York were intended as pendants is made almost certain by the existence of these copies; but it is further confirmed by the similarities of style, and the closeness of the dimensions. The size of the Chatsworth picture is 101 x 82, that of the New York canvas 99 x 71.5, but it is easily possible to imagine that the composition has been slightly cut on the right, where one of the *putti* comes surprisingly near to the edge of the canvas.

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