

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

GIULIO CARPIONI

(VENISE, 1613 - VICENCE, 1678)

Iris asks Hypnos to send Morpheus to Alcyone

Oil on canvas, 291/8 x 251/2 in (74 x 65 cm)



PROVENANCE

Milan, private collection

LITERATURE

Daniele D'Anza, "Su Giulio Carpioni: una nota, due dipinti e un dubbio", *Arte Veneta*, 67, 2010, p. 166.

The scene is inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book XI) and shows the narrative that precedes the episode of Alcyone's dream, in which Morpheus appears as King Ceyx (Alcyone's husband) to inform her of his death in a shipwreck. The context involves Juno, who has wearied of Alcyone's incessant prayers and decides to reveal the truth to her through the subterfuge of a dream, sending her messenger Iris to request the apparition from the god of sleep, Hypnos (or Somnus). This is the moment depicted by the artist: "As soon as Iris entered that dread gloom, she pushed aside the visions in her way and instantly, that sacred cavern of the god of Sleep was all illuminated with the glow and splendour of her

garment. Out of himself the god with difficulty lifted up his languid eyes. From this small sign of life relapsing many times to languid sloth, while nodding, with his chin he struck his breast again and again. At last he roused himself from gloom and slumber; and, while raised upon his elbow, he enquired of Iris why she came to him – he knew her by her name. She answered him, ‘O, Sleep, divine repose of all things! Gentlest of the deities! Peace to the troubled mind, from which you drive the cares of life, restorer of men's strength when wearied with the toils of day, command a vision that shall seem the actual form of royal Ceyx to visit Trachin famed for Hercules and tell Halcyone of his death by shipwreck. It is Juno's wish.’ Iris departed after this was said. For she no longer could endure the effect of slumber-vapor; and as soon as she knew sleep was creeping over her tired limbs she flew from there, and departed by the rainbow, over which she came before.” (tr. Brookes Mason, Boston 1922)

The setting is the realm of Sleep himself, a cave with a deep entrance never touched by the sun's rays, where silence reigns. The god rests on a couch of “night-black ebony” and “around him there in all directions, unsubstantial dreams recline in imitation of all shapes – as many as the uncounted ears of corn at harvest” – which serves to explain the presence of what appears at first sight to be a startling and disparate assembly of figures.

The subject is rarely treated in painting, but it was among Carpioni's favourites. Our picture, as Daniele D'Anza pointed out in article of 2010 in *Arte Veneta*, corresponds exactly to a black and white photograph in the Fondazione Zeri in Bologna (no. 56931), where the work is listed as in an unknown location, and without dimensions. With respect to other versions of the subject, painted by the artist by Carpioni in a horizontal format¹, our vertical, tightly- arranged composition lends the numerous dwellers of Hypnos' grotto a true sense of overcrowding amid the general drowsiness. Our canvas demonstrates the fertile imagination of this cultivated artist, whose invention was prompted by Ovid but no doubt also by an author of his own era such as Vincenzo Cartari², who succeeded in giving life to a multitude of allegorical images, some of which still remain mysterious³. The structure of this painting is undoubtedly founded on a solid conceptual design, in which the drawing of figures, faces, hands, gestures and drapery derive from classical models. The compact assemblage is created with beautiful effects of light and the use of pure colours – blues, whites and saffron yellows – which enhance the depiction and reading of the rare mythological episode. Bearing in mind these stylistic features, Daniele D'Anza dates the work to the 1660s, when Carpioni's linear, purist approach typified his description of an ideal world, drawn from a lost Arcadia.

A native of Venice, Giulio Carpioni moved to Vicenza in 1636 where he had a very successful career painting this sort of classicizing image, in the wake of his apprenticeship with Padovanino (1588-1649) in the early 1630s. This evolved through a profound study of the early works of Titian (1488/90-1576), and in particular the *Bacchanals*, which were originally in the collection of Alfonso d'Este in Ferrara, and then in Rome until 1638, when they left for Spain (now Madrid, Museo del Prado); not to mention Carpioni's awareness of the paintings – similar in style but less light-hearted in spirit – of his French contemporary Nicolas Poussin (1594- 1665), probably through the prints of Pietro Testa (1611-1650).

Notes:

1- Venice, Ca' Rezzonico – Museo del Settecento veneziano; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum; Pommersfelden, Graf von Schönborn-Wiesentheid Kunstsammlung; Yale University Art Gallery.

2- Vincenzo Cartari, *Le immagini de i Dei degli antichi nelle quali si contengono gl'idoli, i riti, le ceremonie ed altre cose appartenenti alla religione degli antichi*, Padua, 1603.

3- Another version of our composition, similar in size (72 x 64 cm) but with a number of variants (especially the allegorical figure at upper left, who lacks the snake) is currently in a private collection and was exhibited at Rovigo in 2010. See R. Cevese, “Quattro dipinti sconosciuti di Giulio Carpioni”, *Arte Veneta*, XXXII, 1978, pp. 322-325; and *Tesori dalle dimore storiche del Veneto. Capolavori dal '400 al*

'700, exh. cat., Rovigo, Museo dei Grandi Fiumi, ed. by P.L. Fantelli, Padua, 2010, p. 124, no. 18.