Oil painting - Philemon and Baucis entertaining Jupiter and Mercury

Object: Oil painting

Date: late 18th century (painted)

Artist/Maker: Jordaens, Jacob the elder, born 1593 - died 1678 (painter (artist))

Materials and Techniques: Oil on paper laid on canvas

Credit Line: Bequeathed by Constantine Alexander Ionides

Museum number: CAI.93

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678) was trained in Antwerp by Adam van Noort and began his career as a waterschilder (a painter of watercolours on canvas or paper, which were used as substitute tapestries) but rapidly turned to oil painting. He was a prolific and successful painter, draughtsman and tapestry designer and became the leading painter in Antwerp after the death of Rubens (1640) and Van Dyck (1641). He received important commissions from private and public institutions such as the Royal Court in The Hague and the Clergy.

This painting is a copy of a now lost original painting even though some close compositions have survived. The story of Mercurius and Jupiter in the house of Philemon and Baucis is told in Ovid's Metamorphosis (VIII, 620-724) is a story of rewarded piety. Mercurius and Jupiter, disguised as men, seek refuge as strangers and only received it from an old couple Philemon and Baucis. As Jupiter wants to reward them, they only ask to be the guardians of his temple and when the time will come, to die together.

Descriptive line

Oil Painting, 'Philemon and Baucis Entertaining Jupiter and Mercury (Ovid, Metamorphoses, VIII, 620-724)', after Jacob Jordaens, late 18th century

Physical description

Mercury and Jupiter seated at a table in a humble cottage interior, being served by the elderly couple Baucis and Philemon.

Dimensions

Height: 52.3 cm estimate, Width: 63.5 cm estimate,

Museum number

CAI.93

Object history note

Peter Norton collection, Christie's sale 29 January 1869, Lot 1913 (sold together with 'Daedalus and Icarus'); bought by Constantine Alexander Ionides for £1. 14s., described as a painting of 'Pirame [sic] and Thisbe' by Jordaens, valued at £100 in Nov 1881 (his inventory, private collection). Bequeathed by Constantine Alexander Ionides, 1900

Historical significance: This painting is a late 18th-century copy after a well-known composition by Jacob Jordaens Jupiter and Mercury visit Philemon and Baucis, of which many copies and replicas were made. It was engraved (in reverse) by N. Lauwers (died 1652).

The earliest painted version of this composition may be that in the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh (No. 52.9.99). This varies from the present composition; Mercury is seen from the front and not the back, Philemon is pouring wine and not offering fruit, while Jupiter reaches towards the glass. The Raleigh composition is also richer in details such as the cat resting on the right hand-side foreground, the sparks from the fire and the depiction of the beams of the ceiling.

The present painting is much closer to the engraving, and is presumably based on it. A canvas in the Atheneum, Helsinki (No. 405) depicts a similar composition to the V&A painting, with a slightly different background.

Jordaens was inspired for the treatment of this subject by a Rubens' composition which in turn is based on an engraving after Otto van Veen in the Emblemata Horatiana published in Antwerp in 1607 (W. Stechow, 'The myth of Philemon and Baucis in art' in J. W. C. I., iv, 1940-41, p. 107 ff., pls. 26a-b).

Historical context note

History paintings of events based on classical, literary or allegorical sources became a major genre in the Netherlands during the 17th century, owing principally to the activity of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), his pupil Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641) and sometime collaborator Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678). Jordaens was born in Antwerp. He was a pupil of Adam van Noort from 1607 and was accepted as a master in the Antwerp guild in 1615. He collaborated with Rubens on several large commissions and was much influenced by him.
The story of Mercury and Jupiter in the house of Philemon and Baucis, narrated in Ovid’s Metamorphosis (VIII, 620-724), is a tale of rewarded piety. Mercury and Jupiter, disguised as men, visit Phrygia where they seek refuge as strangers. Only an old and poor couple, Philemon and Baucis, welcome them into their home and show them hospitality. As a reward, Jupiter grants them their wish to live as guardians of his temple, and to die at the same time as each other.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O127657/philemon-and-baucis-entertaining-jupiter-oil-painting-jordaens-jacob-the/