

BEAUTY, SEDUCTION AND SHARING

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Art Collection
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

14 JUL – 05 OCT
2022



Sebastiano Ricci
(Belluno, 1659 - Venice, 1734)

Artemis appears to Admetus and Alcestis

c. 1710-1725

Oil on canvas

58,5 × 51 cm

Fundação Gaudium Magnum

© Jorge Simão
(photo arrangements: José Ventura)

Iphigenia in Aulis

c. 1710-1725

Oil on canvas

58,5 × 51 cm

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(photo arrangements: José Ventura)

Iphigenia in Aulis, a tragedy by Euripides, based on *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus – and probably founded in Greek oral tradition – and the mythological tale of Alcestis and Admetus, characters who were later all popularised in Ovid’s Latin poem, *Metamorphoses*, inspired a remarkable range of artworks in European culture from the 17th to the 19th century: poetry and literature, sculpture and painting, and particularly opera, all revisited these classical themes, thus retaining an enduring place for ancient culture in the repertoires of European art.

The size and more concise rendering of the two small paintings presented here, which should be regarded as a complementary pair, or part of a larger, unidentified cycle, never exhibited and almost unknown in art historiography, makes it quite certain that they were created as models for works of greater scope. Furthermore, their pictorial style, with its vibrant and agitated brushstrokes, has allowed them to be attributed with confidence to the Venetian painter Sebastiano Ricci.

Born in Belluno, in the Veneto region, Ricci carried out his apprenticeship in the lagoon city, in the workshop of Federico Cervelli, before moving to Bologna in around 1678, with periods for training – also motivated by passion – in Parma, Pavia, Milan, Turin and Rome. In the papal city, in 1691, he ended up lodging in Palazzo Farnese, receiving commissions from Ranuccio Farnese and Pope Innocent XII. He is thought to have returned to Venice in 1698.

The years that followed were a period of hard work and great recognition: as well as responding to countless requests from other Italian cities, he was called to Vienna (1702) and to England, where, sponsored by the young Lord Burlington, he produced a large group of paintings for his mansion in Piccadilly and also for his Neo-Palladian villa, Chiswick House, at the time located in the suburbs of London.

On his way back to Venice, Ricci had the opportunity to meet Watteau in Paris and to join the *Académie Royale de Peinture*, an invitation that was only ratified in 1718, an auspicious event to round off a glorious career. After 1720, he painted for the Duke of Orléans, the King of Sardinia and Emperor Charles VI, but it was his admission to the *Accademia Clementina* in Bologna, in 1727, that filled him with delight during the final years of his life. It is possible to date these paintings to the late 1710s or

early 1720s, meaning that they were likely to have been made during his time in England.

There is a notable eclecticism to Ricci’s visual references, from the colourist tradition of Venetian artists to the influence of Alessandro Magnasco, from Genoa, and Luca Giordano, from Naples. He was no stranger to Florentine painting either, nor to the solemnity of Veronese, again in the Venetian environment, in some of his more ambitious compositions. Nor would his fleeting encounter with Watteau, who already employed the codes of representation of what we can call *rocaille* painting, have left him unaffected.

To this mix, the painter added a refined classical culture. Along with religious painting, to fulfil the plentiful commissions for Italian churches, monasteries and convents, ancient mythological cycles were also frequent in his work, inspired by the most diverse literary sources, of which he demonstrated a good knowledge. This is the case with the two pieces exhibited here. The story of *Iphigenia in Aulis* tells of the imminent sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter, offered by her own father to placate the anger of Artemis, who was preventing the Greek fleet from leaving Aulis. It is also the Greek goddess of hunting, later Latinised as Diana, who appears in the second canvas suspended in a cloud, in the same scenic arrangement. The tragic story of Admetus and Alcestis, depicted here, was also popular in erudite circles of antiquarian culture. The daughter of King Pelias, Alcestis had been promised in marriage to whomsoever could drive a chariot pulled by lions and boars, a feat achieved by Admetus, King of Thessaly, with the help of Apollo, his protector. An unfulfilled promise to Artemis sentenced him to death, years later, but he was allowed to sacrifice someone else in his place. Of all those close to him, only Alcestis offered herself, saving him *in extremis* and thus making amends, before Artemis, for her husband’s omission.

While, once again, this episode points to a specific literary source, the *Bibliotheca*, a mythographic compendium by an author from the 1st century CE known by the fictitious name Pseudo-Apollodorus, it cannot be denied that the sacrificial theme evident in both works was well-suited to Christian piety due to its allegorical dimension, which Sebastiano Ricci thus sought to connect to mythological literature, modernising it, nonetheless, with his loose brushstrokes and vivid colours, unmatched among his peers.

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