

# BEAUTY, SEDUCTION AND SHARING

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Art Collection  
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

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2023



**Luca Giordano**  
(Naples, 1634-1705)

*Apollo and Marsyas*

c. 1660-1665

Oil on canvas

80 × 125 cm

Gaudium Magnum Foundation /  
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão  
Collection

Born in Naples in 1634, son of the painter Antonio Giordano, Luca Giordano showed his talent at an early age and went on to become one of the most productive and renowned European painters of the 17th century. Naples had established itself as a significant artistic centre in the first half of the 17th century, with Caravaggio spending periods there and Ribera settling in the city, along with others such as Massimo Stanzione, Bernardo Cavallino, Francazani and, in the middle of the century, Mattia Preti, all of whom worked on large commissions for the counter-reformist church, sponsored by nobility linked to the Spanish viceroyalty. The presence of these artists, at a time when important art *marchands* with links to the main European collectors were setting up in the city, led to Neapolitan painters becoming known and admired throughout Europe.

Luca Giordano grew artistically amid this ebullient atmosphere and benefited considerably from it, particularly when, in the middle of the century, with Ribera's death in 1652 and the flight from the city of some of the best-known painters due to the plague of 1656, Luca became, inarguably, the central figure of the city's artistic life. Faced with revolts in Portugal and Catalonia, the Spanish monarchy looked with renewed interest at its Neapolitan territory. Viceroy's including the 7th Marquis of Carpio, Gaspar de Haro y Gusmán, and the 9th Count of Santistebán, Francisco de Benavides, launched administrative reforms and promoted a series of prominent public works to reaffirm the Spanish monarchy. Both were knowledgeable aficionados of painting and keen collectors and sponsored and supported Luca Giordano a great deal.

His fame also increased thanks to the fashion for the "Ribera style", which permeated European tastes in the mid-17th century and which Giordano managed to assimilate like no other, as we can see in the magnificent *The Ecstasy of St. Francis*, from the collections of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga. His reputation was also enhanced by his legendary facility for working fast, which earned him the nickname *Fa Presto* (does it quickly). In a biographical account of his life, which he dictated in 1681, before he was even fifty, he calculated that, as well as countless fresco commissions, he had already

sold more than five thousand paintings, scattered not just through Italy but all around Europe. He was immensely famous in Spain and King Carlos II admired him so much that he appointed him his main court painter, which led to him staying in Madrid almost until his death.

Ribera's influence is visible in this *Apollo and Marsyas*, from the Maria and João Cortez de Lobão Collection, which, as well as the intense chiaroscuro and the strong expressionism characteristic of the Spanish master, echoes, in the foreshortened position of the satyr Marsyas, the composition on the same theme painted by Ribera, now to be found in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, but once belonging to the art *marchand* Gaspar Rommer, an influential protector and seller of Giordano's works. The same museum has another painting by Giordano that refers even more obviously to the *Apollo and Marsyas* by the Spanish master.

The popularity, in the 17th century, of the representation of this Greek myth, in which the satyr dares to challenge the god Apollo to a musical contest between his flute and the god's lyre, after which he is brutally punished by Apollo, who flays him alive before a horrified crowd of satyrs, can be explained by both the expressive possibilities of the representation of the myth and the moral and political readings that can be extrapolated from the theme. Ovid, in Book 6 of his *Metamorphoses*, gives a particularly dramatic description of the scene, with Marsyas crying out in repentance, 'with nerves and veins and viscera exposed' as his skin was ripped off. The message about what might happen to those who dare to challenge the gods or those in authority was clear, but the theme also served to demonstrate the dominance of the cultivated art of Apollo's lyre over the barbaric music of the satyr and his crude rustic flute. In one of the dialogues in Book 3 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates uses this very myth to demonstrate the need to follow "good style" and "good harmony", but also the superiority of urban culture over rusticity: "the lyre and the zither [...] will be useful in town, and in the fields the herdsmen may have a pipe". Both readings undoubtedly pleased the nobles and courtiers who commissioned paintings to Luca Giordano.

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