Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson, *Sleeping Bacchus*, 1790/1791

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson, French 1767–1824</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td><em>Sleeping Bacchus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Object Date</td>
<td>1790/1791</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alternate and</td>
<td><em>Le Berger endormi</em></td>
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<td>Variant Titles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Oil on panel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dimensions</td>
<td>14 11/16 x 18 1/4 in. (37.3 x 46.4 cm)</td>
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<td>(Unframed)</td>
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Catalogue Entry

Citation

Chicago:


MLA:


Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson first studied drawing in his native Montargis before moving to Paris, approximately seventy miles to the north, with the aim of becoming a professional artist.¹ In late 1783 or early 1784, after a period of training with architect Étienne Louis Boullée (1728–1799), Girodet joined the atelier of history painter Jacques Louis David (1748–1825), where his compatriots and rivals included the most promising young talents of his generation: Jean Germain Drouais (1763–1788), François Xavier Fabre (1766–1837), François Gérard (1770–1837), Antoine Jean Gros (1771–1835), and Jean-Baptiste Joseph Wicar (1762–1834). Girodet competed for the Prix de Rome for history painting, which funded an extended stay in Rome, every year from 1786 onward, and he was finally awarded the prize in 1789, for *Joseph Recognized by His Brothers* (École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, PRP 28). He arrived in Rome on May 30, 1790, and with one interlude in Genoa, remained there until 1795.²
In 1791, in fulfillment of his obligation to paint a figure study as his annual envoi (submission) to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Girodet submitted *Endymion: Moonlight Effect*, better known as *Sleeping Endymion* (Fig. 1). It illustrates the Greek myth of Selene, goddess of the moon, who so loved the mortal youth Endymion that she appealed to Zeus to preserve his beauty by keeping him in a state of perpetual sleep. Girodet produced a large sketch of Endymion, focusing on the protagonist alone (Fig. 2). In the final painting, the goddess is represented by a burst of light. The picture was well received when first exhibited at the Villa Mancini, seat of the French Academy in Rome, in 1791, and then at the Paris Salon of 1793. Its overt sensuality was a deliberate departure from David’s stoic Neoclassicism, embodying Girodet’s conviction that the artist’s imagination should take priority over the practice of idealizing nature based on the emulation of antique sources. Recent scholarship, moreover, has focused on the undisguised sensuality of *Sleeping Bacchus* and *Endymion*, tracing it to the all-male, or homosocial, environment of David’s studio and the French Academy in Rome.

All scholars have recognized that *Sleeping Bacchus* relates closely to *Endymion*, but there has been an apparent reluctance to define the relationship between the two works. It is here argued that *Sleeping Bacchus* represents an intermediate stage in *Endymion’s* evolution.

In a grotto at dawn, the nude Bacchus, god of wine, reclines on a mossy rock, asleep. The curves of his languid form contrast with the simple, straight staff that rests on his shoulder. A leafy wreath pokes through his tousled hair. Other attributes that signal his identity are a leopard skin; assorted gold vessels, including a golden ewer from which wine is spilling; and a tambourine. Bacchus is surrounded by three figures, including two similarly athletic youths and a juvenile faun, all sleeping off a night of revelry. In the distance is a sign that the previous evening’s goings-on are not entirely over: a lusty satyr pursues a female figure who barely manages to evade him.
The subject and composition of Sleeping Bacchus would have been well suited to the primary function of an envoi as a figure study, and its mythological source served as a fitting pretext for its presentation to the Academy. It was Girodet’s prerogative, as an aspiring history painter, to display his knowledge of antique sources and his ability to transpose them into a new context as a means of elevating his art. It has been shown that at least two key elements of the picture derive from ancient Roman sculpture. Girodet seems to have modeled his sleeping Bacchus on a large bas-relief, Sleeping Endymion, then as now in Rome’s Capitoline Museum (Fig. 3). The partial figure in the left middle distance in Girodet’s sketch has been linked plausibly to another sleeping Endymion, this one situated (in reverse) at the lower right of a relief that originally formed part of a sarcophagus (Fig. 4); it was installed on the façade of the Villa Borghese, Rome, when Girodet first saw it. The satyr and nymph in the background may have been the artist’s invention, but they may also derive from a specific source: for example, the lost Apollo and Daphne by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), with which Girodet may have been familiar through an engraving.

Sleeping Bacchus is a successful exposition of Girodet’s skill and erudition. However, the artist did not add finishing touches or develop the composition into a finished painting. It remains in a state known as an esquisse or ébauche—a sketch. As such, it falls comfortably into a category that was well established in French practice of the period, one that nevertheless leaves open the question of its actual function.

With the hindsight afforded by Sleeping Endymion, one can gain a sense of why Girodet may not have been satisfied enough with Sleeping Bacchus to proceed with it. Despite its strengths, the sketch represents a balanced and harmonious accumulation of motifs rather than a pictorial conception whose visual impact surpasses the sum of its parts. It was evidently Girodet’s objective to produce something more ambitiously original. That is what he achieved in Sleeping Endymion, with its unbridled sensuality attained through the reduction of the number of figures from six to two, both brought into the same plane, and the animating, ecstatic role of light that makes the daybreak in Sleeping Bacchus seem conventional by comparison. Yet key elements of Sleeping Bacchus were not abandoned in the latter work; rather, they were transformed. Crucially, the two antique sculptures illustrated here share Endymion as a common subject, and thus Girodet was demonstrably preoccupied by the theme. Many years later, Girodet would recall:

The first painting I completed after 1789 is Endymion, painted in Rome in 1790, one year after I won the grand prize for painting. The composition was inspired by a bas-relief at the Villa Borghese [Fig. 4]. I almost copied the [entire] antique Endymion [figural group], but I thought it my duty not to include the figure of Diana [or Selene, because] it seemed to me inappropriate to depict
a goddess renowned for her chastity in a scene devoted solely to the contemplation of love. The idea of the ray of light seemed to me more delicate and poetic, and novel besides. The thought came to me whole, as did the cupid in the form of a zephyr, who smiles while pulling aside the foliage. That is why the picture should not be known by the title some people have used, Diana and Endymion, but rather the Sleep of Endymion.7

Girodet’s testimony regarding the ray of light and zephyr coming to him “whole” may be expanded upon. One scholar has suggested that Girodet charged the protagonist of Sleeping Endymion with the energy of Ariadne Sleeping, a celebrated Roman marble installed in 1779 in the Pio Clementino Museum at the Vatican; Ariadne’s pose is close to that of Endymion in the Borghese relief (see Fig. 4).8 Another, even more rapturous work, the Barberini Faun, which was in the Palazzo Barberini until 1799, may be a further source behind Sleeping Endymion.9 In this way, Girodet amplified themes initially explored in Sleeping Bacchus, departing from the characteristic pose and sober illumination of David’s paintings in favor of a highly dramatic chiaroscuro.

The scene takes place in a grotto, the most common setting in Girodet’s repertoire, encompassing paintings, graphic works, and writings. Anne Lafont has observed that grottos perform a dual symbolic function in the artist’s work, alternately as a “sepulchral vault” or, as here, a sort of “voluptuous den.”10 The best-known example of the former type of grotto serves as the setting in a painting of 1808, Burial of Atala (Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 4958), which, given its fictionalized Native American subject—more remote in place than in time—is surprisingly similar to that of Sleeping Bacchus.11 More generally, the idealized natural setting of Sleeping Bacchus is suited to its Arcadian subject, fitting squarely into the tradition of Neoclassicism, whose roots can be traced to the seventeenth-century masters Poussin and Claude Lorrain (1604–1682). Northern artists who sojourned in Rome followed their forebears’ example by sketching out of doors, a practice that began to flourish in the period of Girodet’s residency, leading to the introduction in 1817 of a prix de Rome in the category of paysage historique (historical landscape). A sleeping figure closely resembling the one in the middle ground of Sleeping Bacchus is found in a characteristic, highly finished drawing dating to Girodet’s Roman years, Landscape with a Woman Frightened by a Serpent (Fig. 5).12

Sleeping Bacchus satisfied Girodet sufficiently for him to take it back with him to Paris. It first came to light in 1825, in his estate sale, which was catalogued by the critic Pierre-Alexandre Coupin (1780–1841), who described it as a “Study lightly painted from nature, and very piquant in effect. It represents, in a landscape illuminated by the setting sun, the sleeping Bacchus. Near him one sees a young faun and some overturned vessels. In the distance, one sees some lightly indicated figures.”13 Coupin would incorporate this text into the first monograph devoted to Girodet, published in 1829, in which Sleeping Bacchus is included among his sketches and dated to the years 1802–1814.14 The sketch was acquired at the Girodet sale by Alexis Nicolas Pérignon the Younger (1785–1864), a former pupil of the artist. Pérignon had a successful career as an art dealer; he formed an impressive collection that included three other oil sketches and some sixty drawings by Girodet.15

There is a copy after the painting, currently unlocated.16 There is also a related drawing, also unlocated, described as “a landscape with a very rich composition; of note are distinct planes, each with groups of nymphs and satyrs, and before them the sleeping Silenus. This drawing is on white paper.”17

As an oil sketch by a major figure in the circle of David, Sleeping Bacchus plays a foundational role in the trajectory of history painting as represented in the holdings of the Nelson-Atkins. Neoclassical in subject, style, and function, it anticipates the divide between Neoclassicism and Romanticism embodied in the oil
sketch The Oath of Brutus after the Death of Lucretia by Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) and the fully Romantic sketch Christ on the Sea of Galilee by Géricault’s successor, Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863).

Asher Ethan Miller
December 2019

Notes

1. Translations are by the author unless otherwise noted. The artist would adopt the name of his guardian, Dr. Benoît François Trison (d. 1815), long believed to be his biological father, in 1806.


3. For an account of Sleeping Endymion based on the artist’s correspondence between February 1 and October 24, 1791, see Bellenger, Girodet, 209–11.


9. See J. J. L. Whitely, “Light and Shade in French Neo-Classicism,” Burlington Magazine 117 , no. 873 (December 1975): 773, where Girodet’s Endymion is described as “the Barberini Faun viewed by artificial light.” On the Barberini Faun, now in the Glyptothen, Munich, see Haskell and Penny, Taste and the Antique, 202–05, cat. no. 33, fig. 105.

10. Lafont, Girodet, 39 (voûte sépulcrale; antre voluptueux).

11. The Burial of Atala is based on François-Auguste-René, vicomte de Chateaubriand’s novel Atala, first

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art I French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945
published in 1801, in Paris, and then included as part of *Le Génie du Christianisme* (*The Genius of Christianity*) in 1802; it was finally issued as part of *Les Natchez* in 1826.

12. See Bellenger, *Girodet, 231–32*, where the Nelson-Atkins painting is discussed primarily in the context of Girodet’s work as a landscape artist.


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**Technical Entry**

Technical entry forthcoming.

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**Documentation**

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**Citation**

**Chicago:**


**MLA:**


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**Provenance**

The artist, until December 9, 1824;

Purchased at his posthumous sale, *Tableaux, Esquisses, Dessins et Croquis, de M. Girodet-Trioson, peintre d’histoire, membre de l’Institut, officier de la Légion-d’honneur, chevalier de l’ordre de Saint-Michel; De divers ouvrages faits dans son école, De Tableaux, Dessins des trois Écoles, anciens et modernes; Estampes, Recueils, Ouvrages sur les Arts, Lythographies; Médailles et Objets divers d’Antiquité; Armures de tous les pays; Meubles rares, etc., etc., composant son Cabinet; de Figures, Bustes et Fragments divers, moullés en plâtre sur l’Antique; riches Costumes, PEAUX d’Animaux, Mannequins, Chevalets, Boîtes à couleur,
et objets divers, composant le mobilier de son Atelier, etc.,
etc., chez Périmon, rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, no. 55, Paris, April 11, 1825, lot 63, by Alexis Nicolas Périmon the Younger (1785–1864), Paris, 1825–September 10, 1864;

His posthumous sale, Tableaux et des Dessins Provenant de la Collection de Mr. A.-N. Périmon père, Ancien Commissaire-Expert des Musées Royaux, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, May 17–20, 1865, lot 40, as Le Berger endormi, 1865;

Probably a private collection, London, by January 1957 [1];

With Étude Couturier-Nicolay, Paris, by June 2, 1972;

Purchased from their sale, Dessins, Aquarelles et Tableaux Modernes, Dessins et Tableaux Anciens, Objets d’Art, Meubles et Sièges, Tapisseries, Tapis d’Orient et d’Aubusson, Palais Galliera, Paris, June 2, 1972, lot 92, as Bacchus endormi;


With E. V. Thaw and Co., New York;

Private collection, United States;

Purchased at the sale, Fine Old Master Pictures: The Properties of the Lady Anne Bentinck (removed from Welbeck Abbey); the late Theodore Besterman; P. Haigh, Esq.; the vicar and churchwardens of Hartland Parish, North Devon; the late the 4th Lord Leigh (sold by order of the Executors); R.E.D. Shafto, Esq.; Sir Sacheverell Sitwell, Bt., and from various sources, Christie’s, London, December 17, 1981, no. 121, as Bacchus asleep;

With Artemis Fine Arts Inc., New York, by October 20–December 15, 1997;


Notes

[1] Per Flora Allen of Christie’s, a painting with the Christie’s inventory number GK598, the same as on the back of the Nelson-Atkins painting, was brought into the auction house for advice in January 1957. However, the painting was not put up for sale through Christie’s and they did not make note of the artist, subject, or current owner. See email from Flora Allen, Old Master Paintings, Christie’s, to Ann Friedman, Nelson-Atkins, January 23, 2020, Nelson-Atkins curatorial files.


Studiolo 2 (2003): 36n36, which asserts that the painting’s owner after the Palais Galliera sale in 1972 was a Munich-based dealer. That is likely a reference to Arnoldi-Livie, who had it on consignment from David Carritt from summer 1977 to fall 1979. See email from Lea Peyruse-Boroffka, Galerie Arnoldi-Livie, to Ann Friedman, Nelson-Atkins, November 21, 1979, Nelson-Atkins curatorial files.

Related Works

Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson, Endymion: Moonlight Effect, also called The Sleep of Endymion, 1791, oil on canvas, 77 3/4 x 102 3/4 in. (198 x 261 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, INV 4935.

Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson, Sketch for Sleeping Endymion, 1792, oil on canvas, 19 1/8 x 22 1/16 in. (48.6 x 56 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, RF 2152.


Copies


After Anne Louis Girodet-Trioson, Sleeping Bacchus, ca. 1800, oil on canvas, 15 x 17 5/16 in. (38 x 44 cm), Boris Wilntskey Fine Arts, Vienna.

Exhibitions

Gemälde und Zeichnungen: Neuerwerbungen, Galerie Arnoldi-Livie, Munich, summer 1977, no. 13, as Schlafrunkener Bacchus mit Gefolge.

References

[Alexis Nicolas] Pérignon, Catalogue des Tableaux, Esquisses, Dessins et Croquis, de M. Girodet-Trioson, peintre d'histoire, membre de l'Institut, officier de la Légion-d'honneur, chevalier de l'Ordre de Saint-Michel; De divers ouvrages faits dans son école. De Tableaux, Dessins des trois Écoles, anciens et modernes; Estampes, Recueils, Ouvrages sur les Arts, Lythographies; Médailles et Objets divers d'Antiquité; Armures de tous les pays; Meubles rares, etc., etc., composant son Cabinet; de Figures, Bustes et Fragments divers, mouillés en plâtre sur l'Antique; riches Costumes, Peaux d'Animaux, Mannequins, Chevalets, Boîtes à couleur, et objets divers, composant le mobilier de son Atelier, etc., etc. (Paris: Pérignon et Bonnefons-Lavialle, April 11, 1825), 18.

Pierre-Alexandre Coupin, Œuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson, peintre d'histoire; Suivies de sa correspondance; Précédées d'une notice historique, et mises en ordre (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1829), 1:lxiv, as Étude légèrement peinte d'après nature et très-piquante d'effet.


Emmanuel Bénézit, Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs de tous les temps et de tous les pays (Paris: Gründ, 1976), 5:43, as Bacchus endormi.


Fine Old Master Pictures: The Properties of the Lady Anne Bentinck (removed from Welbeck Abbey); the late Theodore Besterman; P. Haigh, Esq.; the Vicar and Churchwardens of Hartland Parish, North Devon; the Late the 4th Lord Leigh (sold by order of the Executors); R.E.D. Shafto, Esq.; Sir Sacheverell Sitwell, Bt., and from various sources (London: Christie’s, December 17, 1981), 45, (repro.), as Bacchus asleep.


Anne Lafont, Girodet (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2005), 42, 45, 47, 61, 63, (repro.), as Bacchus endormi.


(ROCHESTER, NY: CAMDEN HOUSE, 2017), 101, as *Sleeping Bacchus*.