

T O M A S S O



Bartholomeus Spranger (1546 – 1611)

Jupiter and Antiope, c. 1600

Oil on canvas

87 x 69 cm

Born in Antwerp in 1546, Bartholomeus Spranger began his training in the workshops of the Netherlandish landscape painters Jan Mandijn, French Mostaert and Cornelis van Dalem. In 1565 he traveled via Paris and Lyon to Milan, where he was introduced to the fresco technique, and subsequently to Parma, where he worked with Jacopo Bertolotti and Bernardino Campi and had the opportunity to study the masterpieces of Emilian painters Correggio and Parmigianino, a lasting influence throughout his career. In 1566 Spranger arrived in Rome, where he joined the group of artists surrounding Federico Zuccaro and soon garnered the illustrious patronage of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese and Pope Pius V. Spranger reached the height of his fame when he headed north: first in Vienna, where he was appointed court painter by the Holy Roman emperor Maximilian II, and then in Prague, where he was summoned by Emperor Rudolf II, a notable patron of the arts, in the early 1580s. Once established in Prague, Spranger emerged as one of the principal artists at the Rudolfinian court and the most eminent Northern mannerist painters of his generation. His workshop was located within the imperial palace, which certainly allowed him to develop a close relationship with the emperor, often working under his direct supervision. The present painting can be dated to the last decade of Spranger's court employment at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Many of Spranger's Rudolfinian paintings depict mythological figures, mostly amorous couples or single nudes entwined in complicated poses, with a strong erotic charge.

Disguised a satyr, the god Jupiter holds the beautiful nymph Antiope in a sensual embrace, whilst Cupid and a young satyr witness the encounter in the background. This mythological scene derives from the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's widely known and greatly admired Latin poem (8 A.D.). This specific subject enjoyed great popularity amongst patrons as it allowed for the portrayal of beautiful idealised female nudes. Cupid is depicted holding a flaming torch in both his hands, one of his main attributes, which alludes to the burning passion between the two main characters.

A true virtuoso, Spranger excelled as painter, draftsman, and etcher. He was one of the major figures of the Prague School and represents an important force in European art in the late sixteenth century. Early in his career, Spranger distanced himself from the more classical, naturalistic canons of the Renaissance, developing a distinctive, personal late mannerist style, unique amongst his contemporaries, by drawing from diverse sources and coalescing elements of Netherlandish painting with Italian influences. He merged the colouring and taste for verdant landscapes of the Netherlandish tradition, the elegantly mannered and softly modelled forms of Emilian painting, the dramatic and serpentine figures of Michelangelo and the elaborate poses and compositions of Giambologna's sculpture. Especially the characteristics of the central Italian mannerists, such as Tibaldi and Parmigianino, are very apparent in the elongated proportions, graceful gestures, complicated content, artfully entwined bodies, decorative composition, strong light and shadow contrasts and the vivid colours that exude a pearly sheen of the present work. The beauty of the golden haired maiden fuses all the sculptural and painterly ideals from earlier generations of Italian Art. The vibrant colours, the *chiaro-scuro* and the bold, sculptural forms increase the drama of the scene. Compared to Spranger's preceding work the bushwork of the present picture is much freer and fuller in a Rubenesque sense.

Analogies with the present painting can be found in Spranger's oeuvre, amongst both religious and secular subjects. Spranger's work from the 1580s and 1590s often features – as in the present case – mythological figures, mostly amorous couples or single nudes, endowed with a provocative charge, which reflects the popularity of these subjects within the Rudolfine court. Our picture is a particularly striking example of the elegant compositions that Spranger created for the court and was very likely intended to be hung in a private chamber, possibly in the Emperor's own apartments. It is rare that a true Rudolfine masterpiece such as the present work can be seen outside a major public collection. A source of seductive imagery that Spranger was undoubtedly acquainted with and which must have inspired the present work is the print series *The Love of the Gods* (1527) engraved by Caraglio after drawings by Perino del Vaga and Rosso Fiorentino. Spranger's ingenious compositions that combines love, erudition and wit, may also be compared to the Renaissance epigram, short, playful, poems or statements with a moral message, often applied to erotic subjects.

Spranger's work can be found in numerous important public collections around the world, such as the Ambrosiana in Milan (*The conversation of St. Paul*), the Galleria Pallatina in Florence (*The Holy Family*) the Art Institute of Chicago (*Saint Dominic Reading*), Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (*Venus and Adonis*), the Louvre Museum in Paris, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the National Gallery in London (*The Adoration of the Kings*), the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (*Wedding of Cupid and Psyche*) and the Wawel Royal Castle in Poland (*Vanitas*), Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, in Brussels (*Flight into Egypt*).

Related Literature

E. Fucikova, *Rudolf II and Prague: The Court and the City*, London, 1997

J. Schultze, *Prag Um 1600: Kunst und Kultur am Hofe Rudolfs II*, exh.cat., Freren, 1988

T. DaCosta Kaufmann, *The School of Prague: Painting at the Court of Rudolf II*, London, 1988

Provenance:

Leonard Woodruff, Ardmore, Oklahoma

Exhibitions

Rudolfine Beauty, National Gallery, Prague 10 April 2007 – 20 February 2009