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Analysis of Jacques-Louis David's "Cupid and Psyche" 1817

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Jacques Louis David depicts the infamous couple of Greek mythology in a moment derived from the Roman book of poems *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. The oil on canvas exhibits a return to the classical subject matters of David's earlier pieces, such as the *Oath of the Horatii* of 1785, shifting from the contemporary history pieces of his Napoleon-involved era. Finished in 1817, *Cupid and Psyche*—also known as *Cupid Leaving Psyche*—was commissioned by a friend of David, Giovanni Sommariva, while the artist was exiled in Brussels following the fall of Napoleon. In creating this piece, David took inspiration from classical texts as well as the modern poem by Moschus, which portrays Cupid in a less than heroic and romantic fashion. Additionally, during his refuge in Brussels, David observed an interest in Flemish art, particularly Rubens' use of rich color. Due to these influences, David presents the couple in the painting in a different manner than what might have been expected based on the lore and his prior works. The following analysis discusses the formal qualities of the piece itself, its stylistic categorization, and its curation in its current place at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Formal Analysis

Two glowing nude figures, male and female, are the central focus captivating the eye of the viewer, as though the source of light effectively emanates from their skin. The couple lounges on an Empire-style bed, nested in an overflowing drapery of deep rust-orange and pure white bedsheets. The male, Cupid, meets the viewer's gaze with a twinkle of mischief in his eye and a very adolescent, dimpled smirk, an acknowledgement of the sex act that has occurred just before the present scene, the rust-orange cloth modestly obscuring his genitalia from view. The female, Psyche, lounges comfortably next to him resting atop one of his feathered wings, eyes still closed in sleep, in tribute to the myths where Psyche does not know the identity of her nightly lover Cupid. The curve of her hip connects to her outstretched legs, one crossed over the other at the ankles. Her form idealizes beauty. One arm folds up over her head, fingers loose in her hair, while the other settles on Cupid's leg. He is turned away from her in preparation to leave, evidenced by his foot on the floor and his body halfway out of the bed. His vaguely muscled arm helps him up while his other hand gently moves to separate himself from her by pushing her own limb off of his leg. Even his white-feathered wings gently lift in his effort to untangle their bodies. His coloring is more sun-kissed than his woman counterpart as she reclines, positively luminous, her soft body exhibiting the translucent glow of the moon in her nakedness, particularly surrounding the curve of her breasts. The crinkle of Cupid's eyes, tousled curly hair and clean-shaven, ruddy cheeks aid his boyish and proud expression, as though Psyche has been more of a conquest than anything else, in contrast to the generally romantic depictions of their affairs.

The ornate polished gold and royal blue bed frame upon which the couple lays takes up nearly the entire room. Proportionally, this large of a piece of furniture in the

perceived space forces viewers to focus on the figures sprawled over it. The lighting gives the blue a soft and velvety appearance, and it is sprinkled with details of golden stars and laurel branches. The base of the platform catches the light, causing it to shine, and features a butterfly encircled in a ring of tiny stars centered at the bottom. At the foot of the bed, following the curvature of the frame, David's signature with the year and city "L. David 1817. Bruxelles" is conspicuously placed as if engraved into the metal or woodwork within the painting itself. Beneath the structure, the legs of the bed frame meet the shadowed emerald green floor with the textured appearance of thin carpeting indicated by the subtle creases intermittently dispersed. Beyond the lovers' nest, fading into the background, darkened columns climb upward to the ceiling, bordering a window that opens to the landscape outside. Rising daylight coaxes the soft blue sky to faintly brighten against floating clouds. Morning light peaks over the silhouette of mountains on the horizon, bathing the window sill with the dim light of dawn to give dimension. One small structure, built with the triangular pediment and columns of a temple, a reference to the worship of deities, stands out among the muted green of the hilly tree line and open fields. The dark contrast of the shaded architecture and dampened colors of daybreak in the distance further spotlight the radiance of the couple at the forefront.

Tucked beneath the bedding near Cupid's leg, a polished and shining bow haphazardly leans against the bed. Cupid's royal blue and gold-detailed quiver, full of feathered arrows, gleams in the light, its harness hanging freely, partially hidden by the richly colored bed-curtains hanging from overhead and the bedframe it is propped up behind. The deep red and gold brocade-canopy hangs suspended above the couple, gently pinned open yet falling around their forms in swirls of draping folds. Above Psyche's sleeping head, a white butterfly floats, wings fluttering mid-flight, a small detail that starkly diverges from the deep shading of the red fabric behind it. The inclusion of these accoutrements serve to give identity to the individuals painted: the bow and arrows represent the power of Cupid as the deity of love and uncontrollable desire; the butterflies symbolize mortality and the freedom of the human soul as well as the name of Psyche herself since the Greek word for butterfly is *psyche*.

Stylistic Analysis

Qualifying to be categorized as a history painting in the Academy's hierarchy of genres, *Cupid and Psyche* depicts a scene from mythology requiring intense imagination by the artist. David commonly painted scenes of history and mythology and was an esteemed member of the French Academy, consistently showing in the Salon. Stylistically, the painting in question is very Neoclassical in the featured mythical subject matter and technique. Tightly painted, the composition exhibits very little textured brush strokes, providing virtually no sense of David's hand, typical of history paintings and neoclassical style. Acute attention to detail presents itself in the realistic forms of the figures as well as the small-scale detail work: David paints the individual strands of hair

of both Cupid and Psyche; the feathers of Cupid's wings are clearly visualized; idealized musculature subtly emerges in the bodies of the figures; the warmth of skin is nearly tangible in Psyche's rosy blush and Cupid's ruddy-cheeked grin; every fold of fabric is purposeful and distinct; the placement of shadows follows the source of light. Mainly Neoclassical, this piece does feature a few elements of romanticism, particularly regarding the ungodly appearance of Cupid. David's choice to paint Cupid with such adolescent and boyish features, curly hair, a smirking expression, a clean-shaven face, and underdeveloped muscle tone contradicts the deified ideal that David was capable of depicting. Here, Cupid presents as an average teenager with wings. The considered drastic opposition of Cupid's ungainly youth in comparison to the mature beauty and purity of Psyche his bed-partner was considered grotesque, some of David's contemporaries comparing Cupid's appearance to that of a lowly faun.

Influenced from his recent visit to Rome and involvement with Napoleon, David paints this scene of Greco-Roman mythology while also encompassing many references to the Empire. The coloration of the bed-frame in its royal blue and gold pays respect to that of the Napoleonic Empire. Additionally, the green carpeting, and the style of the furniture as well as the features of the laurel branches, stars and even the golden butterfly were used in designs David had made for Napoleon. David adopts a warm color palette common of many of his Empire-era pieces, noticeably absent from many of his earlier works and portraits, taking inspiration from Venetian artists as well as the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens.

Curation

Cupid and Psyche hangs on the walls of the Cleveland Museum of Art's European Myth, History & Portraiture room of the Sarah S. and Alex M. Cutler Gallery 201. David's oil on canvas from 1817 is ornately framed in gold-bronze with raised ornamental work around the perimeter. Every painting in the room features a similar framing. To the right of the analyzed piece, Charles Meynier's *Apollo and the Muses* command the main attraction of the showroom. Viewing these massive paintings straight on, they take up the entirety of the main wall and are flanked on either side by Jacques-Louis David's *Cupid and Psyche* c. 1817 on the left and Fulchran Jean Harriet's *Oedipus at Colonus* c. 1798 on the right. Facing the east wall, a marble portrait of Napoleon I's niece c. 1810 by Lorenzo Bartolini stands to the left of David's painting, possibly the curator's nod to David's alliance with the Napoleonic Empire. Opposite her, next to *Oedipus at Colonus* on the west wall, is a terracotta bust portrait of Christoph Willibald Gluck c.1775 by Jean-Antoine Houdon.

Two benches, centered at the entrances to neighboring galleries to the east and west, separate the sides of the room. The northern wall features the mythology scenes of Apollo, Oedipus, and Cupid, all painted by French artists of the eighteenth century. On the other side of the benches, the portraits of three aristocrats and a saint line the east and

west walls. The south wall features the side panels of Antoine-Jean Gros' *Battle of Pyramids*; the main piece resides in Versailles. Fittingly, Gros was a student of David. In this respect, the gallery is organized with a general chronology and style of Neoclassical European art from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Simultaneously the collection features a thematic placement as the mythological paintings are featured on the northern side while portraiture paintings are on the southern side, with the exception of the Gros' panels.

Every painting and portrait sculpture is displayed at about two to three feet above the ground, whether on the wall or on a pedestal. A majority of the featured artworks are impressive in size. Each painting is lighted with individual spotlights; however, the room maintains an organic atmosphere due to the natural light filtering in through the massive skylight on the ceiling. The skylight spans nearly the whole room and with the aid of the vaulted ceilings, establishes a sense of open air. Muted olive green walls neutrally fade to the background of the paintings, careful not to overpower any of the art. Marble flooring gives a decadent feel, consistent with the general theme of the museum architecture. The room opens to the south entrance of the museum through a huge arch with sconces on either side paired with marble ionic columns. Apollo and his Muses look out through these columns at a marble statue central to the inner rotunda, who is the muse of lyric poetry, effectively highlighting the dominance of Apollo and the Muses.

Jacques Louis David's depiction of *Cupid and Psyche* exhibits his return to classical subject matter in the neoclassical style. Featuring invisible brushstrokes, the glowing couple is seen in the aftermath of their lovemaking in the moments boyish Cupid prepares to leave the beautiful Psyche, having fulfilled another conquest. The un-idealistic appearance of Cupid in contrast to Psyche, whose reclining nude form is comparable to *Venus of Urbino* by Titian is a stark difference to the typical human form David would be expected to paint for godly figures. This result is partially due to David's inspiration by the ancient texts in an exploration of idealization versus actualization. Remnants of the artist's alliance to Napoleon present themselves in the style of the furniture and the warm color scheme. David also took influence from Venetian art and Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens, who valued rich colors featured in this oil painting. Residing at the Cleveland Museum of Art, the piece is effectively shown thematically with other mythological features and portraits of the same time period and style in Europe.

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