

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Johan Tobias SERGEL (Stockholm 1740 - Stockholm 1814)

A Dancing Maenad with a Sacrificial Lamb

Red chalk, within a drawn oval.

173 x 163 mm. (6 3/4 x 6 3/8 in.) [image]

202 x 183 mm. (8 x 7 1/4 in.) [sheet]

This study after an antique relief was drawn by Johan Tobias Sergel during his stay in Rome, between 1767 and 1778. The artist has here copied part of an ancient relief of bacchantes at the Villa Borghese, possibly working from an etched copy of the frieze by the printmaker Pietro Santi Bartoli, executed as part of Bartoli's *Admiranda Romanarum Antiquitatum* (The Wonders of Ancient Rome), published in 1693. Sergel has transposed the figure into an oval medallion format, and has altered some details of the frieze, notably the drapery and the lamb.

As has been noted of Sergel's time in Italy, 'It was Rome that set the genius of Sergel free... It is easy to understand why a young artist from a country, not abundant in art, should be overwhelmed by the art treasures of Rome – Classical, Mediaeval, Renaissance and Baroque – and bewildered by the different messages of the periods of style. But Sergel did not lose heart – for that his nature was too healthy... he embarked upon profound and methodical studies in museums and churches, adopting the plan of training which was then in use at the French Academy, which Sergel frequented as a guest, like so many other non-French artists. For close upon three years he drew and modelled from works belonging to old and recent times. Both Raphael and Michelangelo, the Carracci and Bernini interested him alongside of the Greek and Hellenistic artists, whose works were to be seen in the Vatican and other museums, mostly in Roman copies, but occasionally in originals.'

The present sheet belonged to the artist's son, Johan Gustav Sergel (1792-1858). Although his father had hoped he would follow in his footsteps and become an artist, and gave him drawing lessons, Johan Gustav seems to have preferred farming, and eventually settled at Spånga säteri in Ärla in Södermanland, on the southeast coast of Sweden.

Literature:

Ragnar Josephson, *Sergels Fantasi*, Stockholm, 1956, Vol.I, p.63, fig.55.

Artist description:

Johan Tobias Sergel was, like his younger contemporaries Antonio Canova, Bertel Thorvaldsen and John Flaxman, also a talented and prolific draughtsman. In 1756 he entered the studio of Pierre Hubert L'Archevêque, then the foremost sculptor in Sweden. His apprenticeship with L'Archevêque lasted about ten years, during which time he became the French sculptor's chief assistant. In 1767, at the age of twenty-seven, Sergel arrived in Rome on a royal stipend. He remained in Italy for eleven years, eventually moving away from the decorative Rococo style of his training with L'Archevêque in favour of a nascent Neoclassicism. In Rome Sergel became friendly with the Swiss painter Johann Heinrich Fuseli, and earned a number of important sculptural commissions that brought him great renown. Among his most famous Roman works was a Reclining Faun, executed around 1770, which was greatly admired and of which a version was acquired for the Swedish Royal collection. He enjoyed the patronage and support of several significant connoisseurs, not least Sir William Hamilton in Naples, who described Sergel to the Comte d'Angiviller as 'not only the foremost sculptor now working in the whole world but... also the greatest since the days of Michelangelo.'

Apart from his sculptures of classical and mythological subjects, Sergel produced a great number of drawings during his time in Italy; studies for sculpture (usually in red chalk, and close in style to the drawings of Edmé Bouchardon), and a far more numerous group of free and expressive pen sketches of figures and scenes from contemporary Roman life, as well as caricatures of fellow artists and friends.

Summoned back to Sweden by King Gustav III in 1779, Sergel found that despite his desire to create monumental works in sculpture, only a few important official commissions were available, and much of the remainder of his career was spent executing portrait busts and medallions for private patrons. The richest and most varied artistic expression of his art at this period, therefore, continued to be found in his drawings. A passionate observer of the contemporary scene, Sergel made numerous sketches of aristocratic parties, artists' gatherings, princely balls and other festivities. With their bold washes and spirited penmanship, these drawings - many of them in the form of caricatures - display the artist's inventiveness and imagination to great effect, and rank among his finest achievements. As one scholar, writing in 1943, noted, 'Altogether, the prolific pen of Sergel, through these marvelously vivid caricatures - done, in the intimacy of his home, for his friends and not for publicity - created a magnificent gallery of his contemporaries, a treasure house of pictures valuable as documents and iconographically, but above all artistically. Sergel the draughtsman must not be wholly eclipsed by Sergel the sculptor. His spontaneously improvised drawings help to complete the picture of the great Swedish sculptor.' Sergel died in 1814, at the age of seventy-four.