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Luca Giordano
(Naples, 1634 - 1705)

The Triumph of Galatea

c. 1675

oil on canvas, in a fine pine, 17th
century frame from the Veneto region

251 x 302 cm.;

98 7/8 x 118 7/8 in.

signed (lower right): 'Jordanus f.'

Provenance

Private collection, Venice.

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This recently discovered *Triumph of Galatea* by Luca Giordano, which comes from a noble private collection in Venice, is a magnificent addition to the artist's known *oeuvre*. It is very similar in size, and probably in date, to the *Triumph of Galatea with Acis turned into a Stream* in the Pitti Palace (fig. 1),¹ which is dateable between *c.* 1675 and 1677, when it was recorded in the house of the Florentine Senator and collector Ascanio Sanminiati.² Our painting can also be compared with the *Triumph of Galatea*, also dated to the mid to late 1670s, which is in the Hermitage Collection (fig. 2) and to a slightly later version of the subject, dated *c.* 1682 by Ferrari and Scavizzi, in the Duke of Devonshire's collection at Chatsworth, which belonged in the eighteenth century to Lord Burlington and hung at Chiswick House (fig. 3). Giordano also painted an earlier moment in the same story, the so-called *Galatea and Polyphemus* (Naples, Capodimonte, Museo e Bosco Reale) which was probably executed slightly earlier in the 1670s,³ which more plausibly shows the first encounter between the beautiful sea nymph and her lover, the shepherd Acis.⁴ Other versions of the subject by or attributed to Giordano are the *Galatea* (Musée des Beaux Arts, Bordeaux)⁵ of *c.* 1670, and the *Triumph of Galatea with Acis turned into a Stream*, a smaller version of the canvas in the Pitti Palace in the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts. There are also stylistic and iconographic parallels with the painting of *Aeneas rendered immortal by Venus* (Vicenza, Museo Civico di Palazzo Chiericati) dateable *c.* 1675⁶ and approximately the same size, where, through the intervention of his mother, the goddess of love, Aeneas is transformed into a stream. This also features a river god holding a paddle and framing one side of the composition alluding to the metamorphosis as also described by Ovid. Among the group of paintings illustrating the story of Galatea, ours and the picture in the Pitti Palace are the largest in scale, and arguably the present picture, with its slightly more elevated format, is the grandest and most resolved treatment of the composition.

The story of Acis and Galatea derives principally from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book 13, lines 740-898) and also from Theocritus (*Idylls VI and XI*). These sources tell of the love affair between the beautiful sea nymph Galatea, whose name in Greek refers to the milky whiteness of her skin and the young shepherd Acis. Like so many love stories involving goddesses or nymphs and mortals, this one ends in near tragedy when the monstrous one-eyed giant Polyphemus, who has also fallen in love with Galatea, serenading her with his

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enormous pan pipes made of a hundred reeds, is first spurned by her and then discovers the lovers in the course of one of their amorous encounters. Maddened by jealousy, he hurls a huge rock from the top of the cliff that he inhabits, killing the shepherd Acis, but, as Acis lies dying, his blood flowing from his body, he is turned into a stream by Galatea who 'did the only thing which the fates would allow' by giving her lover 'the powers of his mother's father, the river Symaethus' transforming him into a river and thereby rendering him immortal.⁷ *The Triumph of Galatea* therefore celebrates this metamorphosis and the triumph of love over mortality. The story of Galatea inspired four principal iconographies which are often combined: the first shows Polyphemus serenading Galatea, the second the discovery of the lovers and their flight from the angry Cyclops who throws a huge rock after them, the third shows the metamorphosis of Acis into a river god and the final scene celebrates the triumph of Galatea on a giant cockleshell drawn by dolphins with attendant mermen, nereids and flying *amorini*. Our picture shows this final scene of triumph which inspired Raphael's famous *Triumph of Galatea* (1511, Rome, Villa Farnesina, fresco), showing the nymph standing on her shell accompanied by *armorini* shooting arrows of love and being drawn towards the viewer. This composition was copied by Pietro da Cortona (c. 1620, Rome, Accademia di San Luca). Other episodes in the story were also represented around the turn of the seventeenth century by Annibale Carracci (*Polyphemus Wooing Galatea* and *Polyphemus Slaying Acis*, c. 1597-1600, Galleria Farnese, frescoes), Giovanni Lanfranco (*Polyphemus and Galatea*, c. 1620, Rome, Villa Doria Pamphilj), Nicolas Poussin (*Acis Transformed into a River God; Galatea, Acis, and Polyphemus*, c. 1620-23, drawings for an unpublished edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Windsor Castle, Royal Library) and by Francesco Albani (*Galatea on a Shell Chariot*, c. 1630, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden). The story also inspired a famous *oratorio*, *Acis and Galatea*, by Handel (*libretto* by John Gay), which was first performed in 1718.

According to the chronology proposed by Ferrari and Scavizzi,⁸ Luca Giordano's earliest treatment of the story is the *Galatea* in the Musée des Beaux Arts, Bordeaux. This picture is a relatively simple, frieze-like composition showing the seated Galatea on her shell being drawn by two dolphins and serenaded by a merman with a conch shell, but with no sign of Acis or Polyphemus. Next in terms of its probable date of execution is the painting in

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Capodimonte, the so-called *Polyphemus and Galatea*, which is believed by Stefano Causa⁹ to be slightly earlier than the *Triumph of Galatea* in the Pitti Palace and should therefore be dated to the early to mid-1670s. This painting, as is argued above, more probably shows the first encounter between Acis and Galatea. This was a period when Luca Giordano was resident in Naples painting a number of mythological pictures for Florentine and Venetian collectors as well as, in the case of the Capodimonte painting, the Avalos family, Spanish patrons resident in Naples. Some versions of the Triumphs of Galatea by Giordano currently unidentified are recorded in seventeenth-century sources. These included a *Galatea on a shell drawn by tritons* recorded in the inventory of the collections of Andrea, Ottavio and Lorenzo del Rosso in Florence taken on 2nd November 1689, and a further *Triumph of Galatea* recorded in the Petrosini collection in Rome in a letter of 15th April 1684 from Angelo Doni to the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Unfortunately the measurements do not tally with those of our picture, but they do give a general indication of how popular Giordano's paintings of the story of Galatea were in the seventeenth century and this popularity continued into the eighteenth century when the famous architect and collector Lord Burlington acquired the version of the subject which is now at Chatsworth, together with a painting by Van Dyck, for the very large sum of £1000 in Paris.

Probably executed around the same period are the four principal paintings by Giordano of *The Triumph of Galatea* in, respectively, the Hermitage Collection (fig. 2), the Pitti Palace (fig. 1), the Collection of the Duke of Devonshire, Chatsworth (fig. 3), and the present picture. The Hermitage painting has slightly warmer, more Titianesque tones than either our picture or the version in the Pitti Palace, the latter showing more the influence of Pietro da Cortona, who was later to serve as a fertile source of inspiration for Giordano's notable ceiling for the Gallery of the Medici-Riccardi Palace in Florence, painted in the following decade. Both the Hermitage and Pitti Palace paintings are more frieze-like in composition than our painting which is roughly the same width as the painting in the Pitti Palace, but not so tall. There are significant differences between the mood of the Hermitage painting, which has a tragic intensity expressed by the very direct gaze of the two lovers as Galatea looks back over her shoulder to take leave of her lover Acis, whose body sprouts bull rushes as he is turned into a stream as recounted by Ovid. She is borne reluctantly away on her seashell

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lifted out of the water on the shoulders of mermen and nereids. Similarly, the painting in the Pitti Palace also focusses on the leave taking of the two lovers and the metamorphosis of Acis into a river god of the stream which runs under Mount Etna, while in the version of the subject at Chatsworth, where Galatea is shown born in triumph among a large marine entourage including the figure of Neptune, her triumph is tinged with sadness due to the presence of her lover Acis who stretches his arms towards her.

By contrast the Colnaghi painting is more light-hearted and festal in mood, celebrating the triumph of love and looking forward to the almost rococo tonality of the *Triumph of the Medici* frescoes (1682-5) on the ceiling of the Gallery of the Medici-Riccardi Palace in Florence. In the sky Cupid, surrounded by putti, has loosed his arrow at Galatea, while she raises her eyes heavenward, indifferent to the serenading of Polyphemus, who can be seen playing his Pan pipes on the rock to the left of the composition. In the sky is an eagle, probably symbolising Jupiter with whom Galatea pleaded and through whose aid Acis has been turned into a stream running under Mount Etna. The slightly elevated proportions of the Colnaghi painting, and the lighter colouring of the picture compared with the version in the Hermitage, underscores this more celebratory mood, with the flights of cherubs celebrating the triumph of love over death and tragedy averted through the miracle of metamorphosis. Triumph rather than tragedy is the primary focus of the painting, as was the case in Raphael's seminal *Triumph of Galatea* fresco in the Villa Farnesina in Rome. Both the celebratory mood of the painting and Acis's metamorphosis are also underscored by the very fine Venetian frame, which is decorated with rushy plant motifs in the manner of Brustalon and which picks up on the iconography of Galatea's shepherd lover transformed into a river god.

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Figure 1. Luca Giordano, *The Triumph of Galatea, with Acis Transformed into a River God*, not later than 1677, oil on canvas, 262 x 305 cm.; 103 x 120 in.
Pitti Palace, Florence

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Figure 2. Luca Giordano, *The Triumph of Galatea*, mid 1670s, oil on canvas, 206 x 306 cm.; 81 x 120 in. Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

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Figure 3. Luca Giordano, *The Triumph of Galatea*, c. 1682.
Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth

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Addendum - The Frame

Veneto region, second half of the 17th century

Natural pine wood and traces of black tempera lacquer to imitate the veining

229 x 330 cm.;

90 1/8 x 129 7/8 in.

This elegant and elaborated frame presents a shrub of acanthus leaves. These unfold from the central lower part in vine, shoots and leaves. The final effect is a dynamic labyrinth.

The composition moves up from the two specular sides to the central upper part, where the leaves intertwine at the apex.

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Footnotes

¹ O. Ferrari and G. Scavizzi, *Luca Giordano, L'opera completa*, 2nd ed., Naples 1992, p. 289, fig. 303, A229.

² F. Bocchi and G. Cinelli in *Le bellezze della città di Firenze*, Florence 1677, p. 402. Although Bocchi and Cinelli misidentified the subject as the *Triumph of Venus* and the figure of Acis as Glaucus, the description is so close to the subject of the painting now in the Pitti Palace that it must be the picture described. This was corroborated later by Filippo Baldinucci, who correctly identified the subject. There is a smaller version of the Uffizi painting (Ferrari and Scavizzi *op.cit.*, A.230) considered to be an autograph replica now in the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts.

³ According to Stefano Causa in *Luca Giordano, Le triomphe de la peinture*, exh. cat., Petit Palais, Paris, 14th November 2019 - 23rd February 2020, cat. no. 67, pp. 206-7, the Capodimonte painting slightly predates the *Triumph of Galatea* in the Pitti Palace.

⁴ The painting was included in the major exhibition (*op.cit.*) which transferred to the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, 20th April - 26 July 2020, cat. no. 67 as *Polyphemus and Galatea*, but the fact that the male protagonist is clearly not a cyclops but a shepherd accompanied by his flock of sheep swimming in the water, and the ardour of the glances exchanged between him and Galatea, who was notably indifferent to the advances of Polyphemus, shows that this must in fact represent the first encounter between the lovers.

⁵ Ferrari and Scavizzi *op.cit.*, vol. I, p. 290, no. 72.

⁶ Causa *op.cit.*, cat. no. 70.

⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, (trans.) David Raeburn, London 2004, P.541.

⁸ Ferrari and Scavizzi, *op.cit.*

⁹ *Luca Giordano*, exh. cat., Castel Sant'Elmo, Naples, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Los Angeles County Museum, 2001-2, cat. no. 67, pp. 194-5.