

Apollo flaying Marsyas – Claude Lorrain



oil on canvas; 1645-46; 120.5 x 158cm; Collection of the Earl of Leicester, Holkham Hall, Norfolk

- Figure of Apollo catching the light
- Light used to pick out red cape
- Cape used as a symbol of the flaying of Marsyas?
- Perspective gained from size of people and animals in foreground compared to those in the mid-ground

Description

This painting shows a classical landscape with figures in the foreground depicting the flaying of Marsyas. Most of the figures are in shade although the central figure of Apollo is caught in sunlight. The real beauty in this painting to me is the sky. There is a beautiful blue patch of sky at the top and the light seems to shine through the clouds. The light gradually changes as it gets lower in the sky, there is a huge range of tones in the sky.

There are several ranges of hills on the horizon, lighter tones are used on the hills at the back to show their outline and give a sense of aerial perspective.

A considerable sense of perspective is conveyed in this painting, the viewer's eye following:

Trees and people at the front

Cattle in the pond

Smaller trees further away on the right

The viaduct on the right

The temple beyond this

The cliff and waterfall

The series of lakes in the distance

The plains beyond

First row of hills

Further rows of hills

Sky

The way in which aerial and linear perspective have been used gives great depth to the painting

Interpretation

This is a landscape typical of the artist. It depicts the mythological scene where the god Apollo, having triumphed over Marsyas in a musical contest, has him flayed.

Marsyas is tied to a tree with vines and with a red cape spread out in front of him. Perhaps Claude is using this as a symbolic device to represent the flaying rather than painting it in gruesome detail.

There is a deep contrast between the horrific act about to ensue and the idyllic setting. The panorama behind is a very classical landscape where linear and aerial perspective have been used to great effect.

Evaluation

Chilvers (2009 p132) describes Claude as “the most celebrated of all exponents of ideal landscape”. (an ideal landscape referring to the formal arrangement of natural elements used as setting for religious or mythological tales).

This picture is a good example of what Chilvers (2009 p133) describes as Claude’s “extraordinary sensitivity to light that does so much to unify his pictures and create their particular moods”.

Claude’s compositional scheme is evident throughout his ideal landscapes. It is described by Clark (1949) and also by Murray (1997 p105) as “a large mass of trees on one side counterbalanced by another mass on the other, a middle distance with some small features such as a bridge or form, and a distance of mountains, rivers or the Roman Campagna, in the most delicate atmospheric handling”. This painting is a classic example of such a compositional scheme.

Although this painting is nominally about Apollo and Marsyas, actually it is mainly about the landscape. There is little of the horror of the scene as depicted by Titian or Jose de Ribera, the main reaction to this painting being one of admiration for the beauty of the landscape.

530 words

References

Chilvers, I. (2009) *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* (4th edition). Oxford: Oxford University

Clark, K. (1991) *Landscape into Art*. London: HarperCollins

Murray, P. & L. (1997) *Penguin Dictionary of Art and Artists* (revised 7th edition). London: Penguin

<http://www.claudelorrain.org/Apollo-flaying-Marsyas.html>