

Jacopo Amigoni (attributed)

Italian, c.1682-1752

Bacchus and Ariadne

Date unknown, oil on canvas, 89.5x70.5 cm
Presented by the Neave Family 1932



About the work

Painted in a decorative Venetian rococo style, this scene from classical mythology involves Bacchus, the god of wine, and Ariadne, his wife who was leader of the Maenads, women revellers who danced and sang at the feasts of Bacchus. The bacchanalia (drunken revels) appear to be over, the wine urn is overturned and the cup is slipping from his hand as Bacchus leans in drunken sleep against Ariadne. She warns the cherubs, or putti, not to wake him.

Ariadne was the daughter of the king of Crete. It is said that she had helped the Athenian Theseus to escape from the Labyrinth of the Cretans, and had fled from her home with him. Theseus, however, abandoned her on the island of Naxos. It was there that Bacchus discovered and married her.

Jacopo Amigoni specialised in classical scenes and portraits and he was often commissioned to make decorative scenes on panels in the houses of wealthy patrons, particularly in England, when he lived there between 1730 and 1739. It is likely that *Bacchus and Ariadne* was originally part of such a set of paintings.

Amigoni completed many versions of the Bacchus and Ariadne theme. In this picture the emphasis is on Bacchus' drunkenness, which was fitting for the god of wine. Arranged in a well-integrated pyramid composition, the main figures are set with the attendant putti in a classical setting, with two fluted classical columns and a large urn behind them. In the

distance there is a glimpse of the sea, suggesting that this is a scene on the island of Naxos. There are other classical references, such as the wine cup and clay jar, or amphora. The grapes, too, are references to the wine. The staff Ariadne holds is the ceremonial staff signalling her leadership of the Maenads.

A strong light enters the scene from the upper left, making the white flesh almost luminous and creating strong shadows to define the forms. The reds and blues of the drapery are kept to the soft pastel shades favoured in 17th century works intended as part of a decorative scheme for a grand house. It is possible that pieces like this would have companion paintings, showing other Greek Gods, which would be displayed in the large rooms.

Amigoni's forms are soft edged, in a similar manner to the layered, seductive French rococo painting, such as the works of artists like François Boucher (1703 -1770) and Jean Fragonard (1732-1806). Amigoni's choice of colours and paint treatment show references to Venetian art. In the subject matter and pyramid composition it is also typical of late Renaissance works. The emphasis on the draped bodies, the use of fore-shortening and the rather relaxed figures having a diagonal movement back into the picture space were all features found in Italian works of the early 1600s.

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About the artist

Amigoni was born in Naples c.1682. He was based in Venice where he worked as a history and portrait painter and he also painted for some years for the Elector of Bavaria. From 1730 to 1739 Amigoni lived in London and during this period he had success painting decorative cycles and portraits. His decorative cycle commissions for the homes of the wealthy in England included the Manor of Rickmansworth, in Hertfordshire, a set for a grand dwelling in St James Square, London, and the altarpiece of Emmanuel College in Cambridge. Amigoni returned to Venice in 1739 with what was considered a small fortune. In 1747 he moved to Madrid where he was appointed Court painter. He died in Madrid in 1752.

It was Amigoni who persuaded the Venetian painter Giovanni Canaletto (1697-1768) to visit England where he was very popular and painted from 1746 to 1756.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are no other works by the artist in the Collection.

