

The Torment of Marsyas

Marsyas supplicé

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"Enter into my breast; within me breathe the very power you made manifest when you drew Marsyas out from his limbs' sheath.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia: Paradiso*

Introduction

For this presentation, I have chosen an artwork called The Torment of Marsyas, carved by an unknown artist. First of all, I will present this statue, describe and analyze it and then I will make a link between my work and our subject.

The artwork

This masterpiece of the Antiquity is called The Torment of Marsyas and was realized during the imperial Roman era, by an unknown artist. It measures now 126 cm but the original artwork height was about 256 cm. This important difference is the result of the ravages of time on the statue, which has lost many elements over the centuries. This artwork was discovered in the Baths of Diocletian in Roma, the Italian capital. For many years, it was the property of the Borghese family, a wealthy family close to the Church and power. It is currently kept in the Louvre museum.

Description of the artwork

In this artwork, we can observe Marsyas, a satyr or a silenus, hanging from a tree trunk. The wilderness of the character is indicated by the pointed ears, shaggy hair and the tail of an animal located in the back. The artwork is a Roman copy of a Hellenistic statue created in Pergamum, an ancient Greek city in modern-day Turkey, in the second half of the third century BC. We can see here the famous and popular style of Pergamum, the Hellenistic Pathos.

Analysis of the artwork

The story of Marsyas is quite sad and pathetic. It shows us the impossibility to fight against a “master”, here a god. The story of Marsyas can be divided in three acts.

1) The finding of a new instrument

Athena, the goddess of wisdom in ancient Greek mythology, created a new instrument called Aulos, a double-piped reed instrument, but

quickly she decided to get rid of this object because when she played this instrument, her face became ugly and distorted. Throw in nature, the object is picked up by Marsyas, a satyr, who became an expert in this instrument. Self-confident about his new talent, Marsyas decided one day, perhaps out of vanity, to challenge Apollo, the god of arts and creation. Once the challenge accepted, both parts were judged by the nine Muses, more or less servants of Apollo.

2) The duel

The rules were very clear; the winner could do whatever he wanted of the loser. The competition began, and of course Marsyas lost. Judged by the Muse, with a god as a rival, Marsyas hadn't any chance.

3) The torment

So, Apollo chose his trophy, the death of Marsyas. And he chose a very sadistic way to kill Marsyas, a real torment. The poor satyr was flayed alive as a punishment for his vanity. This is the moment just before the beginning of the torment which is showed in the statue.

Conclusion

The fight between Apollo and Marsyas can be seen as a metaphor: culture versus nature, civilization against primitivism. It also shows us the domination of the Olympian pantheon against the old and primitive ancient gods and nature spirits. But it also can observe differently. We are all the servant of something larger than us. And this story was probably created to make people understand that everyone must retain his/ her own place in the society.