

Temptation, by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (French), oil on canvas 1880, G357, 74.74 (D. Shatin)



Questions

1. How would you compare the foreground to the background of this painting?
2. What relationship do you think is shown between the two figures? What is taking place in this scene?
3. Please describe the use of colors. How do they make you feel?
4. How does the artist use light?
5. How would you describe the setting of the painting?

Main Points

- Bouguereau was an extremely popular artist during his time (the Second Empire followed by the Third Republic of France), but fell into disfavor during the decades that followed as various avant-gard movements were in vogue while academic and classical approaches were considered passe. Beginning in the 1970s he has been rediscovered, and is an artist listed in the current Sotheby auction catalogue.
- His style is described as academic, though (as this painting suggests) he also was concerned with the effect of light as shown by the atmospheric and hazy background, reflecting his admiration of the Venetian colorists.
- Bouguereau was inspired by Raphael in his approach to both composition and subject matter, and was awarded many honors. His art was purchased by wealthy Americans, his most ardent admirers, as well as European collectors. Most American collections have at least one Bouguereau art work.

Biography (1825 – 1905)

William-Adolphe Bouguereau was born in La Rochelle, an ancient seaport in France where his father was then a wine seller. An uncle, a cure or priest, provided his education, instructing him in Latin and instilling a love for the Old Testament stories and Greek myths which stayed with him through his life. During secondary school he received drawing lessons. At age sixteen, although he joined his father, now in the olive-oil business in Bordeaux, he continued to sketch voraciously. Through the entreaty of a business colleague of his father he then

entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Bordeaux. As a part-time student, he supplemented his income designing colored lithographic labels of jams and preserves. After winning a prize in figure painting his uncle arranged for wealthy parishioners to hire Bouguereau as a portrait painter. With money earned in this endeavor and matched by an aunt he went to Paris in 1846 where he was accepted into the studio of Picot (Gustav Moreau was another Picot student).

His academic training focused on drawing, first with casts and then live models. Color, in contrast, was not taught as it was considered “unteachable.” During his training he broadened his knowledge through study of architectural monuments, antique sculptures in the Louvre, Greek and Roman dress, and dissection.

During the revolution of 1848 he fought in the Garde Nationale, and subsequently became disinterested in political events (according to one bibliographic source). That same year he received the second prize for the Prix de Rome (no first prize was given due to lack of money). In 1850 he triumphed in sharing the Prix de Rome with another artist, and received sufficient funds to move to Italy. His work was again interrupted by the Franco-Prussian War (1870) when he enlisted. He escaped the Commune, spending that time in his hometown of La Rochelle.

As an incessant worker who spent almost every daylight hour at the easel, his nickname was Sisyphus. His reputation grew with pictures sent from Rome; his paintings were a highlight of the Salon and he received commissions to decorate houses and churches in Paris and La Rochelle from 1854-1888. He taught for many years at the Academie Julian, attended by many American pupils.

Bouguereau was married and had five children of whom only a daughter survived. After his wife died at a young age he moved to a home with a small garden where his mother kept house for him until her death at age 91. He began a long courtship with an American student, Elizabeth Jan Gardner (also an artist) from New Hampshire. As his mother objected to an American painter for a daughter-in-law they were finally married after his mother’s death in 1896.

Societal Context and His Art

As historical background in France, the July Revolution of 1830 seated Louis Phillipe of Orleans to the throne of France as a constitutional monarchy (called the “citizen king.” In 1848 he was deposed by revolution and the Second Republic was formed. The Second Empire started in 1852 when Louis Napoleon declared himself as emperor. Then in 1870, with the Franco-Prussian War Napoleon III abdicated and the Third Empire was established.

For Bouguereau the child was king, and expressed values that formed the heart of his philosophy of life – youthful hope, the warmth of the family circle and fraternal love. Since four of his five children died at a young age, I surmise this philosophy may reflect a longing in his life and an homage to the memory of his children. His painting also expressed the anticipation and occurrence of adolescent love. His art was a mirror of the culture of the time, reflecting the importance of women during the 19th century. That time period witnessed a growth of abandoned families, illegitimate children and male defections from the church, with fathers absent from domestic and religious activities. It also was a time of government promotion of the importance of family and the depiction of mothers with children, the subject of our painting.

Bouguereau completed numerous drawings and sketches for each major work. He was a serious student of nature, and followed the classical tradition with the elegance and idealism of Raphael and the symbolism and structure of Ingres. A subtle balance between the static and dynamic is seen in his painting. His art also reflected his admiration of the Venetian painters as colorists.

In the 1850s and 1860s his early career was devoted to the decorative cycles he painted of the houses of wealthy clients in Paris and La Rochelle. The subjects chosen included the history of Cupid, the Arts, and the Seasons in Arcadia, as well as secular Madonnas. With the end of the Empire his decorative commissions ceased. In the 1870s and 1880s he exchanged the “Greek” ideal for a more normal classicism, yet retained his subject matter of cupids, nymphs and shepherdesses. Bouguereau typically avoided signs of contemporary life, as in our Temptation painting. In these later years he lightened his palette with atmospheric clarity, a sign of 18th century influence. Much of his art was devoted to peasant scenes, an extension of classical subject matter – the genre of the “living antique.” He was able to translate heightened emotions (grief, love, joy) into domestic or rural scenes.

The art of Bouguereau languished after the turn of the century, with his name being purged from the new histories of French painting. However, in 1921 an exhibition was held devoted to his work, and the qualities of formalism and literary content of his art became esteemed by cubists and surrealists; Dali was a modern champion of Bouguereau. No new artists could produce a Bourguereau style painting as his type of training had been discarded and the living teachers who were academic were academic impressionists. However, in 1933 an exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum called “Back to Bourguereau” placed Bouguereau next to Picasso.

The Painting

After visualizing a picture in his imagination, Bouguereau would make a quick oil sketch, followed by a large-scale cartoon in charcoal. The actual execution of a painting would then be completed rapidly. If on a given day a picture was not going well, he would turn to another. With this approach to his art, many canvases remained in his studio in various states of finish. The date on a Bouguereau stands only for the year in which it was completed.

The current label suggests a biblical interpretation of the shiny apple, referring to the apple of knowledge and the innocence of the child on the right. Scholars have noted that the outdoor setting takes place in the landscape of Bouguereau's native La Rochelle, a coastal town in northern France. It has also been described as an Arcadian background, based upon the seventeenth century idyllic representations of the original Peloponnesian pastoral country of shepherds. His art combines empirical observation and abstract ideals of art and religion.

The Temptation is an excellent example of his painting style, utilizing such fine brush strokes that it appears to be a "licked surface." Some have described his work as over finished. Comparing the foreground with the background we notice an interesting contrast; while the figures in the foreground are shown in realistic detail (even to the bunion on the woman's foot) the background is more atmospheric. In looking closely at the relationship between the woman and the child their relationship can be interpreted in various ways, with no definitive answer. Is the woman the child's mother and warning her about temptation? Are they each looking at the other, or is the woman looking at something else in the background? Is the apple the apple of knowledge that the woman is transmitting to the child? Or is the child an earlier version of the woman who perhaps was led to temptation?

References

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