

July OOM, D. Shatin

Portrait of Mlle. Lange as Danae, 1799, Anne-Louis Girodet de Roucy-Trioson (known as Girodet), G306, 69.22



Danaë, Daughter of Acrisius, 1799. Oil on canvas. Minneapolis, The Minneapolis Institute of Art. (photograph from Brooks Beaulieu review of Girodet exhibit at The Louvre in 2006):

Girodet (1767-1824) traveling exhibition:

Musée du Louvre, Paris, 22 September 2005-2 January 2006

The Art Institute of Chicago, 11 February 2006-30 April 2006

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 22 May 2006-27 August 2006

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, 12 October 2006-21 January 2007



image from our own MIA

Anne-Louis Girodet (de Roussy-Trioson) or Girodet-Trioson, (1767 - 1824)

Succinct description from the 2006 Louvre exhibit: *The strange, poetic and sensual paintings of Jacques-Louis David's dissident pupil [Girodet], who witnessed both the Revolution and the Empire, broadened the horizons of French painting and introduced the world of immateriality and dreams.*

Questions

1. How would you describe the central figure?
2. What is going on in this painting?
3. Looking closely, what images do you see? What allegories and symbols do you see?

4. How do you think it would feel to have your portrait painted this way?

Key Points

- Although Girodet was trained by Jacques-Louis David in the Neo-Classical tradition, he fused this ideal with a Romantic vision (a 2006 traveling exhibition was titled “Girodet: Romantic Rebel”)
- His oeuvre reflects both original and diversity, with subjects ranging from mythological themes to portraits and representations of Napoleon’s military triumphs.
- Girodet’s career was shaped by dramatic social and political changes brought about by the French revolution. In his early years he emulated David’s Neoclassical model, with strong linear contours and sculptural modeling. After the Revolution in 1789 his artistic independence was shown in an austere Pieta for a provincial monastery. His final break was with the mythological *Sleep of Endymion* (Paris Salon 1793; see discussion below re the androgenous/erotic theme). He subsequently favored more imaginative themes and history paintings.
- The MIA’s painting, the portrait of *Mlle. Lange as Danae* was a satirical and allegorical replacement for an original rejected by the actress as not representative of her beauty. It caused a scandal, ruining Lange’s career and disgracing Girodet. It was not the only instance where his hatred of criticism soured his relationship with patrons, and also occurred with fellow artists.



Anne-Louis Girodet, self-portrait
(ca. 1790), oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia

Biography/Social Context: 1767-1824 (born, Montargis, Loiret, died, Paris)

Given the revolutionary events taking place in France during his lifetime, it is hard to separate his biography from the social context and the times. As we will see, his artistic activity was influenced by the changing political environment in France.

Girodet was named ‘de Roussy’ after a forest near the family home in Montargis. Note: in 1967 after a successful Girodet exhibition in his hometown the Musee des Beaux-Arts in Montargis was renamed the Musee Girodet. In 1806 he took the name Trioson when he was adopted by Dr. Benoit-Francois Trioson who was his tutor and guardian and most likely his natural father. According to one source his parents died when he was a young age. He took lessons with a local drawing-master in 1773 and was studying architecture in Paris by 1780 where he became a pupil of the Neo-classical architect Boullée. Boullée persuaded Girodet to study painting under

Jacques-Louis David (after his father's death in 1784). He placed second in the Prix de Rome of 1788, and in 1789 won with *Joseph Recognized by his Brothers*. He left for the French Academy in Rome in 1790 as a recipient of this prize, travel being delayed by the outbreak of the French Revolution of 1789. While in Italy he suffered from illness that plagued him throughout his life; a letter to David from Italy suggested his condition was tuberculosis (see bibliography). Like David, he was an avowed Republican and made drawings of the fall of the Bastille and its aftermath. In 1791 he created an original and impressive mythological painting, the *Sleep of Endymion*, the most successful painting of his career, showing originality, creativity, and individuality. The idealized nude is antique in inspiration but the moonlight and the mysterious, dreamlike atmosphere are hallmarks of an emerging sensibility. An unusual article, dated... (see James Smalls 1966 reference in bibliography) suggests that the androgenous and homoerotic aspects of this renowned painting (the elongated figure of Endymion exudes eroticism) were a first foray by an artist toward this direction in art history. Girodet claimed the depiction of Diana as a moonbeam was his creation, stressing the role of imagination as opposed to the imitation of Neo-classicism. This painting also showed the influence of the Italian artists Antonio Canova and Correggio.

In 1793 he narrowly escaped a violent attack on the French Academy provoked by the French Revolutionary Army's Italian campaign. Fearing for his life he fled Rome for Naples; now liberated from the constraints of the Academy he pursued a long-standing enthusiasm for the art of landscape painting and drawing exclusively out-of-doors. With his return to Paris in 1795 after a 5-year absence he abandoned landscape painting, drew the illustrations for Didot's editions of Virgil and Racine, and became known as a portrait painter including the painting *Jean-Baptiste* (a black Deputy from current Haiti and ex-slave). His first commission, for a Parisian hotel, was a decorative panel of *Danae*. This commission allowed him to demonstrate his gift for poetic fantasy and sophisticated erotic sensuality. Here he has modified classical literary sources, portraying Jupiter as a gallant seducer who descends to Danae as a gentle shower of precious jewels and perfumed flowers rather than a degrading downpour of gold coins (see section below for this myth). She stands in her bed, nude under a starry sky, with dainty flowers adorning her hair and bed (he had a lifelong interest in botany). [See also Girodet's *Summer* in the accompanying set of paintings). After the impropriety of Mlle Lange as Danae, discussed below, he then painted *Ossian and the French Generals* to decorate Napoleon's country retreat, though it was disliked by Napoleon and described by David as evidence of Girodet's insanity, "the fruits of a mind in delirium:" "He is mad, Girodet...He is mad, or I don't understand anything about painting. His figures are made of crystal...What a shame with his beautiful talent, he gives us nothing but insanities...He has no common sense". The painting was removed before the closing of the 1802 Salon.

His greatest success after *Endymion* was the *Burial of Atala*, inspired by Chateaubriand's novel *Atala*, representing the Catholic revival in France (exhibited at the Salon of 1808). Another Napoleonic work, the *Revolt at Cairo* (at Versailles), an outstanding work of the Salon of 1810, was an important example of early Romantic orientalism. Illustrating this episode from Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, Girodet gives free rein to the exoticism and violence of the emerging Romantic fascination with Orientalism. In 1815, Dr. Trioson died leaving him a sizable inheritance. He then concentrated on portraits, including leading figures of the time and family members, and spent increasing time composing didactic poems about painting and writing discourses on aesthetics. His work included imitations of classical poets, and essays on *Le Genie* and *La Grâce*, were published after his death (1829)

Girodet anticipated significant elements of Romanticism (the first great Romantic Salon was in 1824) through originality and individualism, deviation from Classical sources and ideals, and

propensity for the irrational and extreme. He later became reactionary and conservative, and he considered Romantic painting as unfinished. Girodet was a member of the Academy of Painting and of the Institute of France; a knight of the order of St. Michael, and officer of the Legion of Honour. Girodet had many students in his atelier, but never formed a school. He is often called a romantic precursor. He was fiercely independent and rebellious by nature. When misunderstood his art became brilliantly vindictive and manipulative, satirical and ironic...as seen in *Mlle Lange as Danae*. His radical individualism makes him a major artist of his time.

***Mlle Lange as Danae* (Note this painting has also been titled *Danae, Daughter of Acrisius*)**

Girodet returned to the theme of Danae, through a scandal related to his portrait of the celebrated actress Mlle Lange, entered into the Salon of 1799. The portrait was not well-received by the critics or the public, who found it an unflattering likeness. Consequently Mlle Lange asked Girodet to remove the portrait and would only pay half the fee, claiming it compromised her reputation as a Parisian beauty of the day. Girodet collected the picture, slashed it into four pieces, had it beautifully wrapped and delivered to Mlle Lange – with a note that he declined payment saying “I will pay myself in my own way.” Three months later, two days before the closing of the Salon, he reappeared with a new painting in the original oval frame entitled *Danae, Daughter of Acrisius*. A scandal ensued with this dazzling allegorical satire of the greed and immorality of the actress in this newly enriched Directoire society. Danae, as one of the mortals loved by the Greek god, Zeus, was chosen from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, The beautiful Danaë has been confined to a tower by her father Acrisius, who has been warned by an oracle that his daughter will one day give birth to his slayer. But Zeus, outsmarting Acrisius, descends to Danaë one night as a shower of gold and she bears him a son, Perseus. This painting is rife with symbolism, mythology, puns, and fables, including visual puns, creation of composite creatures, animalizing of human forms, and humanizing of animals. Taking fifteen days to paint, this Danae was presented in the original frame of Mlle Lange’s destroyed portrait. The original frame partakes of the satire with the four allegorical medallions in the corners (replacing the four in the first frame)--the woman with the fish tail (duplicity in love), the strange creature (Lane’s attributes), the butterflies feeding on gold, and the cow representing her impressions of grandeur.

Girodet’s modern Danae, Mlle Lange, is nude except for a bright orange turban and a jaunty aigrette. The likeness to Lange has been remarked upon. The naked Danae-Lange is staged as a harlot, wearing peacock feathers of vanity, but seated on a coarse blanket spread over a shaky pallet. She is holding a broken mirror which suggests her inability to see herself as she really is, an allusion to her rejection of Girodet’s first portrait. Lovingly collecting large gold coins that fall from a web above her, she is assisted by a similarly outfitted redheaded girl, her natural daughter with a previous lover (Hoppe). The coins reflect the money given to Lange for the education of her illegitimate daughter named Palmyra. At her feet stands an adoring turkey (symbolizing stupidity and vanity) with a wedding band, representing her husband Michel-Jean Simons, a rich arms merchant, whose tail feathers are being plucked by cupid. Beneath her couch sits the mask of a satyr blinded by gold coins lodged in his eye sockets. Her current lover, the marquis de Lethaud, was an unscrupulous speculator and wine-grower better known as the comte de Beauregard. [Leuthrop Beauregard, or “le trop beau regard”...the too beautiful glance]. A dove wearing a collar inscribed Fidelity has been winged by a falling coin and lies bleeding at Danae’s side. Another dove, whose collar is inscribed Constance, escapes to the edge of the picture where butterflies are burning their wings in the flame of a lamp set before a statuette of Abundance. The picture remained in Girodet’s atelier, unseen by others, until his death. It is one of the wittiest, most ingenious and beguiling pictures of its age.

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(after the Louvre Museum, “Romantic Rebel” exhibit went to Chicago, Ill; Metropolitan, New York; and Montreal, Canada)

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