

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM

FINE ARTS

GUSTAVE BOULANGER

Paris 1824 – id. 1888

French School

SUMMER BANQUET AT THE HOUSE OF LUCULLUS

Oil on canvas

H. 1,00 m; W. 1,45 m

Signed and dated lower right: *G. Boulanger 1877*

DATE: 1877

PROVENANCE:

Richard Green, London

Private collection

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Théodore Véron, *Dictionnaire Véron ou Mémorial de l'Art et des artistes de mon temps: Le Salon de 1878 et l'Exposition Universelle*, Paris and Poitiers, 1878, t. I, p. 86-87.

Charles C. Perkins & John Denison Champlin Jr, *Cyclopedia of painters and paintings*, vol. 1, New York, 1888, p. 190 (titled *Repast in House of Lucullus*, dated 1878).

Marie-Madeleine Aubrun, "Gustave Boulanger, peintre 'éclectique'", *BSHAF*, 1886, Paris, 1988, p. 204 and 207, no. 132 (as location unknown).

EXHIBITED:

Salon of 1878, no. 309.

RELATED WORKS:

Two red chalk drawings which prepare our painting appear in the artist's posthumous sale: *Un Patricien* (a *Patrician*) and *Homme couché* (*Man Reclining*), see Aubrun 1988, no. D.351 and D. 252 (both location unknown).

Boulanger was the painter who best knew how to illustrate the ancient madness of the Second Empire. He was one of the best representatives of Neo-Greek art and was highly successful with his historical and archaeological reconstructions.

In Delaroche's studio, Boulanger met his Neo-Greek friends: Henri-Pierre Picou, Jean-Louis Hamon, and especially Jean-Léon Gérôme. All four of them lived for a while on the Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs and were good friends. After winning the Prix de Rome in 1848, Boulanger spent six years in Rome where he was fascinated by archaeological research.

For Boulanger, Greco-Roman antiquity was no longer conceived as the severe school of Neoclassical virtue; for him it was an unlimited repertoire of forms and colours. He treated the themes of antiquity with great decorative fantasy, while including multiple archaeological

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details. His style is marked by a love of the lurid and bright colours with an almost metallic sheen.

Summer Banquet at the House of Lucullus

This painting shows a meal in the home of the super-rich Lucius Licinius Lucullus, a Roman figure of state and general, born around 117 B.C., who died around 57 B.C.. After successfully leading wars in the Orient, he withdrew from public life and became famous for his opulent lifestyle and entertaining. His name is also associated with magnificent gardens in Rome, on the site of which the Villa Medici was built. Plutarch refers disapprovingly to this luxury and attributes to him the fact of criticising his cook for having prepared only a simple meal in the absence of guests, declaring to him: “this evening, Lucullus shall be dining at the home of Lucullus.”¹

Triclinium

Lucullus’s guests are placed on a “summer triclinium”. In antiquity the term “triclinium” refers both to the bench used by Romans to eat and, by extension the dining room. Three inclined benches, each of which accommodates three people, are arranged in a U, the fourth side has been left free for serving. Lucullus installed his guests on surfaces covered in purple and he provided goblets decorated with precious stones. The dishes were refined and varied, each course being separated by musical interludes.² A crowd of slaves was mobilised to satisfy the diners.

Praised at the Salon

Our painting was exhibited at the Salon of 1878, and the praise bestowed on it by the painter Théodore Véron was without reservation: “On a summer triclinium, Lucullus is sitting casually with Horace and the great minds of the time; his guests are watching a young Roman woman dancing while tibicians are playing the flute and a child accompanies them with a drum. The setting of this feast in the home of the wealthiest patrician of the reign of Augustus, is among the most splendid. The architecture is magnificent; the vellum stretched above the guests, the columns, costumes, and accessories are all arranged like the various groups with the antique taste that was familiar to G. Boulanger whose skill in the Greco-Roman style has been noted for a long time here, alongside that of our old friend Gérôme.”³

¹ Plutarch, *Life of Lucullus*, LVI-LVII.

² Yann Le Bohec, *Lucullus: Général et gastronome*, Paris, Éditions Tallandier, 2019, note 126.

³ Théodore Véron, *Dictionnaire Véron ou Mémorial de l'Art et des artistes de mon temps: Le Salon de 1878 et l'Exposition Universelle*, Paris and Poitiers, 1878, t. I, p. 86-87.