

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

GÉRARD DE LAIRESSE

Liège 1640 – Amsterdam 1711

Flemish School

BACCHANAL OF CHILDREN

Oil on canvas

H. 0,86 m; W. 1,16 m

Signed and dated lower right: *G. Lairesse / Fecit 1668*

Inventory number lower left: *61*

DATE: 1668

PROVENANCE: Private collection

RELATED WORKS:

Gérard de Lairesse, *Children Dancing to the Sound of a Triangle*, about 1668, oil on canvas, H. 0,57 m; W. 0,76 m, signed *G. Lairesse in. et f.* and initialled *GL* on the vase, Mâcon, Musée Municipal des Ursulines (inv. 1421), Alain Roy 1992, P. 47.

Germaine Barnaud, "Sur quelques tableaux de Gérard de Lairesse", *Revue du Louvre*, no. 2, 1965, p. 59-67.

Johannes Glauber (1646/50-1726), etching after a drawing by Gérard de Lairesse, *Children Dancing to the Sound of a Triangle*, etching, H. 170 mm; W. 140 mm, *G. de L. in. / J. G. f.*, Alain Roy 1992, D. 184a.

A painter and printmaker from Liège active in Amsterdam, Gérard de Lairesse was one of the most fashionable artists in the second half of the 17th century. His art, which was mainly created for rich merchants, scholars and the Prince of Orange-Nassau (future William III) is highly intellectual, and relies on ancient culture and allegory.

Training in Liège

Gérard de Lairesse, who was born in Liège, was trained in drawing and painting by his father Renier de Lairesse. He also received an education in music and poetry and played the flute and violin very well. A lover of ancient texts, Ovid's fables especially, he avidly studied a copy of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* which his brother Ernest had brought him. The painter from Liège Bertholet Flémal (1614-1675), who had lived in Italy and France, influenced young Gérard significantly, guiding him with advice and talking enthusiastically about Roman antiquities. Lairesse never travelled to Rome, but discovered ancient art through albums of prints after the masters of the Renaissance and the contemporary Bolognese and French schools.

His brilliant start as a painter was suddenly stopped by a tragi-comic event that forced the artist to leave his home city in a hurry in April 1664.¹ He then married Marie Salme with whom he

¹ Faced with his parents' refusal, Gérard de Lairesse had gone back on a promise he had made to marry one of the two François sisters. Feeling seriously offended by the artist's volte-face, they lured him into an ambush in which he was forced to cross swords with the more "virile" of the two. Wounded in the no less virile part of his anatomy, Lairesse nevertheless managed to make the two spurned sisters retreat.

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moved first to Utrecht and then Amsterdam where he was working for the dealer Gerrit Uylenburgh (1626-1679)² in 1665.³

Lairesse the Printmaker

A skilful printmaker, Lairesse created a large number of prints during his early years in Amsterdam, between 1665 and 1670. His figures show the influence of antique sculpture that he knew through an album of prints by François Perrier⁴ whose plates he used frequently around 1670, especially in his mythological prints and allegorical frontispieces, in addition to using them as a repertoire for antique style drapery.⁵

A Love of Theatre

Shortly after attaining the status of bourgeois in Amsterdam, Lairesse met a group of wealthy intellectuals who shared and spread the ideas of French classicism and who in 1669 founded the Academy of the “Nil Volentibus Arduum” (Nothing is Difficult for those who Wish), dedicated to the progress of contemporary literature and the revival of theatre.⁶ In 1668, Lairesse created the illustrations for two plays by Andries Pels that were inspired by French theatre: *The Death of Dido* and the comedy *Julfus*.

The Painter of Profane History and Allegories

Lairesse was a history painter, especially of profane subjects: his move to Amsterdam deprived him of commissions for religious paintings. But he also created purely allegorical paintings, such as the *Allegory of the Five Senses*⁷ which illustrates his early and thorough knowledge of Ripa's text.⁸

The “Dutch Poussin”

Lairesse was sometimes nicknamed the “Dutch Poussin”. Did he Frenchify Dutch art? Bathed in French culture and a lover of classical Italy, he was Dutch by adoption, trained in the Franco-Italian circle of Bertholet Flémal. Although he praised classical art, especially Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), in his treatise published in 1707⁹, classical principles were nevertheless present in Holland well before him, as the art of Caesar van Everdingen (1616-1678) shows. His classicism and his criticism of Rembrandt put a stop to his prominence during the 19th century when Dutch art of the Golden Age was rediscovered, however Lairesse recovered his fame in the later 20th century and today he is considered the central figure of Dutch art in the second half of the 17th century.¹⁰

A Blind Painter becomes a Theorist

² A son of the dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh, with whom Rembrandt had started his career in Amsterdam about thirty years earlier.

³ Alain Roy, *Gérard de Lairesse (1640-1711)*, Paris, 1992, p. 48.

⁴ *Icones et segmenta signorum et statuarum, quae temporis dentem invidium evasere, urbis aeternae ruinis erepta*, Rome, 1638.

⁵ Alain Roy, *Gérard de Lairesse (1640-1711)*, Paris, 1992, p. 65-67.

⁶ Alain Roy, *Gérard de Lairesse (1640-1711)*, Paris, 1992, p. 67.

⁷ *Allegory of the Five Senses*, 1668, oil on canvas, H. 1,40 m; W. 1,83 m, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (Glasgow Museums), inv. no. 3635.

⁸ Alain Roy, *Gérard de Lairesse (1640-1711)*, Paris, 1992, p. 69.

⁹ Gérard de Lairesse, *Groot Schilderboek* [Great Book of Painting], Amsterdam, 1707 (numerous reprints and translations in the 18th century).

¹⁰ Lyckle de Vries, *How to create beauty. De Lairesse on the theory and practice of making art*, Leiden, 2011, p. 16; Josien Beltman et al. (éd.), *Eindelijk! De Lairesse: Klassieke schoonheid in de Gouden Eeuw*, exh. cat. Enschede, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, 2016-2017, Waanders & De Kunst, 2016.

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Lairesse suddenly went blind when he was at the peak of his glory, towards the end of 1689¹¹ and turned to teaching. The series of lectures he gave over many years were gathered by his sons and form the basis of his theoretical works: *Grondlegginge Ter Teekenkonst* (Foundations of Drawing) (1701) and *the Groot Schilderboek* (Great Book of Painting) (1707). This second treatise, conceived as a practical guide for apprentices to accompany the teaching of painting, was such a success that it was translated into English, French and German.



François Duquesnoy, *Bacchanal of Children*, marble, 1630, Rome, Galleria Spada.



Nicolas Poussin, *Bacchanal of Children*, 1626, gouache and oil on canvas, H. 0,56 m ; L. 0,77 m, Rome, Palazzo Barberini, Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica di Roma (inv. 2593).

A Bacchanal of Children

A *Bacchanal* is a painting or a bas-relief illustrating festivities in honour of the Roman god Bacchus, equal to Dionysos in Greek mythology. In our painting, the two semi-nude female figures on the left are maenads (or bacchantes), Dionysos's companions. One plays the tambourine, a common figure of voluptuousness and the other the triangle. Some *putti* are dancing to their music while others are playing children's games.

Sources and models for the *putti*

From the Renaissance, children or little cupids playing games were very common in painting, especially in allegorical subjects the main sources of inspiration of which were Antique bas-reliefs. The "models" for this type of subject are Titian's *Adoration of Venus* (1518, Madrid, Prado Museum) and Rubens's copy of it, made around 1635-1638 (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum), as well as the *Bacchanal of Children with a Goat*, a bas-relief by the Flemish sculptor François Duquesnoy (1597-1643) (1630, Rome, Galleria Spada) which echoes the *Bacchanal of Children* (1626) that Poussin painted at the same time in Rome. Lairesse would have known these works through prints. In our painting, as with Poussin and Duquesnoy, his cupids do not have wings.

¹¹ Alain Roy, *Gérard de Lairesse (1640-1711)*, Paris, 1992, p. 51-52.

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Girl Putti

Lairesse seems to have been particularly inspired by Rubens who depicted cupids indifferently as boys or girls.¹² In a work directly connected to our painting, *Children Dancing to the Sound of a Triangle*,¹³ the six dancing cupids include a girl who stands out for her hair style and her necklace. In this painting, a single maenad is sitting on the left. She is almost the same figure as in our painting, where we notice her back and her head in a classical profile. She is playing the triangle instead of the tambourine and is more clearly identified as a bacchante by the bunch of grapes on her knees and an overturned vase in the foreground, a Dionysian symbol.



Gérard de Lairesse, *Children Dancing to the Sound of a Triangle*, about 1668, oil on canvas, H. 0,57 m; W. 0,76 m, signed *G. Lairesse in. et f.* and initialled *GL* on the vase, Mâcon, Musée Municipal des Ursulines (inv. 1421).



Johannes Glauber (1646/50-1726), etching after a drawing by Gérard de Lairesse, *Children Dancing to the Music of a Triangle*, etching, H. 170 mm; W. 140 mm, *G. de L. in. / J. G. f.*, Alain Roy 1992, D. 184a.

¹² Girl cupids appear in Rubens's *Adoration of Venus* (after Titian), about 1635-1638, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum; also in his *Festivities of Venus*, 1636-1637, oil on canvas, H. 2,17 m; W. 3,50 m, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (inv. 684).

¹³ Gérard de Lairesse, *Children Dancing to the Sound of a Triangle*, about 1668, oil on canvas, H. 0,57 m; W. 0,76 m, signed *G. Lairesse in. et f.* and initialled *GL* on the vase, Mâcon, Musée Municipal des Ursulines (inv. 1421).

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Pierre Paul Rubens, *The Adoration of Venus* [after Titian (Prado)], 1635-1638, oil on canvas, H. 1,95 m; W. 2,10 m, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum (NM 599).



Francesco Albani, *The Toilet of Venus*, about 1617, oil on canvas, diameter 154 cm, Rome, Galleria Borghese.

The Ladies of the Bolognese School

With their studied gestures, the elegant female figures of our paintings are close to the Bolognese school, especially Albani and Domenichino. Albani's *Toilet of Venus* (Rome, Galleria Borghese)¹⁴ shows for example the same female type with similar muscular arms, most likely due to the use of male models. Like Albani, Lairesse has organized his composition in a frieze arrangement, like a bas relief in a forest with trees that frame a lovely view towards the horizon.

A Typical Work from the early Amsterdam Years

It is possible to find in our painting some characteristics of Lairesse's known works from his early years in Amsterdam (1665-1670).¹⁵ The same lateral light irregularly illuminates the scene while emphasizing the narrative. Everything is restrained, the poses, gestures and gazes that express the relationships between the figures match the refined rendering of the silky cloth and the chiselled metal.

¹⁴ Francesco Albani, *The Toilet of Venus*, about 1617, oil on canvas, diameter 154 cm, Rome, Galleria Borghese.

¹⁵ Gérard de Lairesse, *Allegory of Spring*, 1668, oil on canvas, H. 1,37 m; W. 1,83 m, Havana, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (inv. no. 90-3383); *Allegory of the Five Senses*, 1668, oil on canvas, H. 1,40 m; W. 1,83 m, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow Museums (inv. no. 3635).

