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de Bourbon as Amphitrite:  
From a Marine Thiasos to a Happy Threesome**

**(Ersterscheinung)**

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## **Rosalba Carriera's miniature of Françoise Marie de Bourbon as Amphitrite: From a Marine Thiasos to a Happy Threesome**

On the occasion of the wedding on February 18, 1692, of Françoise Marie de Bourbon (1677-1749), aged 14, to Philippe II d'Orléans, duke of Chartres (1674-1723), the court portraitist Pierre Gobert (1662-1715) made a painting called "Galatea Triumphant" (fig. 1). It was the first of a series of renderings of the Duchess as the centerpiece of mythological artworks that culminate in unusually explicit depiction of sapphic eroticism in a miniature by Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757). It is housed in the Royal collection in England and according to the museum catalogue it depicts Françoise-Marie de Bourbon as Amphitrite (fig. 4). This essay illustrates the exceptional place Carriera's miniature holds not only within eighteenth-century art but within the history of erotic paintings. It further analyzes the multiple layers of meaning that go beyond the erotic content in this depiction of Madame de Blois, unveiling a multifaceted piece executed by a highly erudite female artist.

By marrying the duke of Chartres, who was the future Regent of France until Louis XV (1710-1774) reached maturity at the age of 13, Françoise Marie married her first cousin. She was one of the seven children Louis XIV (1638-1715) had with his mistress Françoise-Athénaïs de Rochechouart, better known as Madame or Marquise de Montespan (1640-1707). And Philippe II d'Orléans's father, Philippe I of France, duke of Orléans (1640-1701) was the younger brother of King Louis XIV. Madame de Calyus (1673-1729) reports that once the young lady heard about the identity of her future husband, she apparently remarked that she did not care about him loving her but him marrying her.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the title "Madame de Blois" that she received when the sun King legitimized her at the age of four in 1681, Françoise Marie assumed through her marriage the titles "Duchess of Chartres" and "Duchess of Orléans". She also assumed the rank of *petite-fille de France* as her husband was a legitimate grandson of a king. She was thus addressed as Royal Highness.

Her wedding ceremony was celebrated in the castle of Versailles without the bride's mother. Madame de Montespan was not invited to participate, having lost her position at court shortly after the death in 1683 of Queen Maria Theresa of Spain (1660-1683), and by 1691 she had officially retired from Versailles.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Caylus, 1770, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> She spent her retirement in the convent of Saint-Joseph with a generous pension. The King showed his gratitude for her graceful withdrawal after the death of his wife by making her father the governor of Paris and her brother,

Gobert's painting (fig. 1) shows the bride as "Galatea Triumphant" in a bright blue dress, sitting on a shell that is being pulled by two dolphins.



Fig. 1. Pierre Gobert, Portrait of Mademoiselle de Blois as Galatea triumphant, 18<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 166 x 140 cm. Private collection.

In her left hand, she is holding the end of a blue veil blowing in the wind as if it were a sail, and in her right hand she is clutching the reins of her marine chariot to steer the dolphins in the right direction. Two sea nymphs and two tritons are part of Galatea's entourage. The triton in the bottom left corner is blowing into his conch shell to announce the arrival of the triumphant group. On the right side of the painting, another nymph can be seen looking up at the index finger of a nearby putto that is pointing towards the cyclops Polyphemus who is hovering behind a rock. With a lustful glance the cyclops is grinning down on Galatea, his object of desire

The textual source for this painting is a story, *The Cyclops*, told by Theocritus (b. around 300 BC-d. after 260 BC) in his 11<sup>th</sup> Idyll, with the author offering some consolation to his friend

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Louis Victor de Rochechouart de Montmart, Duc de Vivonne (1636-1688) marshal of France. Regarding her support of the convent for orphan girls that Madame de Montespan supported since 1671 see Devaureix, 2017, pp. 95-96.

Nicias of Miletus (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) by giving him advice to follow Polyphemus' example. He describes the cyclops' longing for the sea-nymph Galatea and how he attempts to heal his wounds of unrequited love through a song, though later he will kill his rival in love, who is the mortal Acis. Acis' blood turns into a river, and Acis himself turns into a river-god. Ovid (43 BC-17/18 AD) retells the myth in Book XIII of his *Metamorphoses*.<sup>3</sup>

Since the sixteenth century, many artists have used this story as the textual source for their works, and again we find the Duchess of Orléans in mythological disguise in a similar painting that is still in the Versailles collection. The castle's catalogue had identified it as a "Presumed portrait of Françoise Marie de Bourbon Madame de Blois as Amphitrite" (fig. 2) by an anonymous French painter.



Fig. 2. French painter, Presumed portrait of Françoise Marie de Bourbon as Amphitrite, 1692-1700, oil on canvas, Versailles, inv. 9894, LP 6867. © Chateau de Versailles Collection.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph13.htm>.

Despite the different titles and thus different characters – Madame de Blois is represented as Amphitrite in fig. 2 instead of Galatea in fig. 1 - the similarities of the two versions are striking. And yet, in this rendering of the Duchess of Orléans, some of the figures and the background change. On the right of the Versailles painting we see Poseidon, Amphitrite's husband, riding his chariot in the distance while on the left side some rocks appear. Also, the sea goddess is surrounded by three nymphs and two putti, but without the presence of a triton or other mythological sea creatures. Apart from Poseidon, the artist made the highly unusual choice of expelling all adult male figures from the scene. Indeed, it is rare to see the depiction of Amphitrite in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries with almost exclusively female figures.

The classical marine thiasos, the Greek term for an ecstatic retinue of Poseidon or some other sea deity, had since the Renaissance been a popular theme at European courts. In ancient examples, Triton, a mermaid son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, usually presided over the retinue and announced his parents' arrival by blowing in his conch shell. Eventually, the group was elevated to a host of tritons, ichthyocentaurs and nereids, sea horses, mythical sea creatures and a swarm of cupids.<sup>4</sup> With the rediscovery during the Renaissance of ancient sculpture, especially sarcophagi, the initial interest in these depictions was the presence of the nude female that was used as a model that could be copied or re-elaborated. Eventually, artists and commissioners recognized the relevance of the content of the stories and the inherent notions of eroticisms as well as their idea of the triumph.<sup>5</sup>

Not only did a growing number of paintings and sculptures depict sea images, the marine thiasos and the arrival of the sea gods in their chariot, but also court festivals across Europe exploited the theme, especially on occasions such as weddings.<sup>6</sup>

The first important example of the use of this specific subject matter within official state iconography can be found at the Medici court in Florence.<sup>7</sup> As García and Colomer have aptly shown, the union of the Medici with the Valois through the marriage of Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici (1549-1609) and Christine of Lorraine (1565-1637) surely catalyzed the more widespread use of this iconography at least in the form of court festivals also at the royal court in France.<sup>8</sup> Versailles is a telling example of how popular the marine iconography became under the reign of Louis XIV. Numerous paintings and sculptures represent Neptune, Galatea,

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<sup>4</sup> García/Colomer, 2012, p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> García/Colomer, 2012, p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> See the study of García/Colomer, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the wedding celebrations of Cosimo I (1519-1574) and Eleonora da Toledo (1522-1562), see García/Colomer, 2012, pp. 122-125.

<sup>8</sup> García/Colomer, 2012, p. 128.

Amphitrite, the tritons or the nymphs as part of the sun king's self-fashioning and his propagandistic iconography.<sup>9</sup>

Next to Louis XIV it was also his erudite mistress Madame de Montespan who knew how to apply the theme in order to ennoble herself and promote her privileged position. This woman was well-known for her intelligence, her overt arrogance and her "esprit" that translated, according to Voltaire (1694-1778), into a mixture of jokes, naivety, and finesse.<sup>10</sup> And she had a reputation for her interest in the arts and in music. She supported the composer Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687) and the garden architect André Le Nôtre (1613-1700). Authors such as Jean-Baptistes Racine (1639-1699) and Molière (1622-1673) were also among her proteges. She used her popularity and position to become a trend-setter within the circles of Louis XIV's court and generally helped artists to get themselves established there.<sup>11</sup> And she was very ambitious herself. In his book on strategies of visual legitimization of Louis XIV's and Louis XV's mistresses, Devaureix describes Madame de Montespan as someone who deemed herself predestined to play the role of a queen even if the royal title was not accessible to her. Soon after having arrived at court, she aimed at enhancing her power, principally operating through her children. Once they were legitimized, they further served her as the mother of royal offspring.<sup>12</sup>

This pronounced ambition was tangible even years later. Possibly already around 1680, Louis XIV was transferring his affections to Françoise d'Aubigny, marquise de Maintenon (1635 – 1719), whom he was to marry in 1685.<sup>13</sup> One of Madame de Montespan's reactions to this displacement was to continue exerting her influence by commissioning weavers attached to the court to produce a self-referential set of tapestries (around 1683) depicting "The Four

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<sup>9</sup> In 2012, Maral published a description of the sculptures in the garden of Versailles dated 1686 that mentions various hippocamps, sea nymphs, tritons, Galatea and Acis, Amphitrite and Neptune apart from the most famous group of Apollo's bath. See Maral, 2012, pp. 79, 98-101. Regarding the famous fresco in the Apollo Gallery in the Louvre by Charles Le Brun (1619-1690) entitled the "Triumph of Neptune", see Philip Mansel, *King of the World, The Life of Louis XIV*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2020, chapter 8. A particularly interesting example in this context is a painting in the castle of Compiègne. It was executed in 1684 by Pierre Mignard for Louis XIV and it shows "Neptune offering his wealth for France". Two seahorses pull a shell with the God of the sea who is looking up at a flag with the symbol of the sun that is brought in by a flying victory. Neptune has both of his arms raised towards this image of France offering his trident and his crown, symbols of his power. The shell is surrounded by the typical entourage that accompanies Neptune: triton is blowing in his conch shell to announce the parade that includes other tritons, nymphs, nereids and putti. Dolphins and other sea monsters are present as well. Among the goods Neptune is presenting to France one discovers fish, shells and corals. See the website of Compiègne, <https://compiègne-peintures.fr/notice/notice.php?id=191>. As to art and representation under Louis XIV and the artist Le Brun, see Pablo Schneider, *Die erste Ursache. Kunst, Repräsentation und Wissenschaft zu Zeiten Ludwigs XIV. und Charles le Bruns*. Berlin: Mann 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Devaureix, 2017, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Devaureix, 2017, pp. 90-91.

<sup>12</sup> Devaureix, 2017, p. 74.

<sup>13</sup> Devaureix, 2017, p. 102.

Elements” which are allegorical images of Louis XIV, his mistress, and six of their children.<sup>14</sup> After she officially retired from the court in 1691, Madame de Montespan’s desire to showcase herself, her power, and that of her children became even more pronounced and she commissioned a second set of tapestries representing “The Marine Triumphs” (around 1697) in which she conceptually and visually placed herself on par with the Queen. This series consists of four wall hangings that represent the triumph of Venus, Venus and Anchises, Venus giving arms to Aeneas, and Venus guiding Aeneas while Eurus destroys the Trojan fleet.<sup>15</sup> Bremer-David has convincingly interpreted the general theme of these four tapestries featuring scenes of the life of the goddess of love and the Aeneis as a powerful allegory of Madame de Montespan.<sup>16</sup> Worth noting is that all four scenes are placed in a marine landscape. As outlined above, the marine iconography was a typically royal theme and Madame de Montespan’s adoption of this artistic language is indicative of her ambition and claim to be the Queen’s equal in importance.

The tapestry featuring Vertumnus and Pomona (fig. 3) was part of the first series that depicted a cycle of the four elements.



Fig. 3. Design attributed to Charles le Brun, Vertumnus and Pomona, about 1683, canvas, silk, wool, and metal-thread embroidery in tent stitch. © Banque de France.

<sup>14</sup> The series consisted of eight tapestries that were probably worked in the workshop of Saint-Joseph, the convent Madame de Montespan supported since 1671. The literature mentions six tapestries, four of which are conserved in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, one in the Banque de France in Paris, and one reappeared on the art market in 2002. See Bremer-David, 2010, p. 338 and <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/1997>.

<sup>15</sup> They were woven in Béhagle's Parisian workshop around 1697.

<sup>16</sup> Bremer-David, 2010, p. 325-326.

In this scene, her daughter Francois-Marie, Mademoiselle de Blois is sitting as the wood nymph Pomona in her cherished orchard next to her brother Louis-Alexandre, Count of Toulouse (1678-1737), who appears as Vertumnus, god of seasons and plant growth.<sup>17</sup> For unknown reasons, this part of the tapestry as well as the upper roundel are replacements of two scenes that were cut out at some point.<sup>18</sup>

Looking again at Gobert's painting of Galatea (fig. 1), we realize that the figure of Madame de Blois in the tapestry, which was commissioned a year after her marriage, looks surprisingly similar. As we don't have any records that allow for building a precise chronology of the events, it is difficult to pinpoint who followed whom, but the similarities of the figures suggest a link between the two works.

The same can be said about the aspirations behind the various commissions. As Madame de Montespan included her children in the various tapestries together with their prominent father, the King, as a fundamental strategy of her self-fashioning, she may have been intent on consolidating her and their position.

In a similar way way, she sees that her second-to-last child as the new Duchess of Orléans is inserted into Gobert's painting of an important iconographical tradition at the Louis XIV court. At the same time, Gobert's work emphasizes the bride's origin, i.e. the Bourbon lineage, though the medium of art that served to celebrate Madame de Montespan and her family. Considering the fact that the painting was produced for Madame de Blois' wedding, it is noteworthy and indicative that no references allude to Philippe II d'Orléans. Instead, the daughter embraces her mother's ideas and claims through the marine iconography that was traditionally linked to the King and the Queen.

In the Versailles painting (fig. 2), the use of marine iconography in reference to royal status is even more explicit. Poseidon is not only associated with the figure of the king, but the god of the sea is also Amphitrite's husband. Madame de Blois, now the Duchess of Orléans elevates herself to the status of a Queen. Moreover, looking at the typical iconography of the

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<sup>17</sup> Air is devoted to the King in the guise of Jupiter, Fire to the Duke du Maine, Water to the Count of Toulouse as Neptune and Earth to Madame de Montespan as Cybele. Air and Fire belong to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Water has disappeared.

<sup>18</sup> The same scene of Vertumnus and Pomona is an adaptation of a painting that disappeared painting from the Château de Fontenay in Normandy during the Second World War. This painting of unknown author depicted Mademoiselle de Blois as Pomona, a young nymph of great beauty and goddess of fruit, and the Count of Toulouse as the god Vertumnus disguised as a woman. It was twin to a canvas ascribed to François de Troy (1691) who had painted the Duke du Maine and Mademoiselle de Nantes in the guise of Paris and Venus. The painting was sold in 2017 at an auction at Briscadieu Bordeaux, see <http://www.briscadieu-bordeaux.com/html/fiche.jsp?id=7748031>.



scene which usually includes tritons or other sea creatures, it is interesting that in this painting there are no other adult male figures apart from Poseidon.

This aspect needs to be highlighted, especially when we compare it to the miniature in fig. 4, for the artist Rosalba Carriera used this Versailles painting as her pictorial source.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 4. Rosalba Carriera, Françoise-Marie, Duchesse d'Orléans, as Amphitrite, 18<sup>th</sup> century, watercolour on ivory, 8.5 x 6.5 cm, Royal Collection Trust, inv. RCIN 420360. © Royal Collection Trust.

In 1720-21, following an invitation of the banker, art connoisseur and collector Pierre Crozat (1661–1740), Rosalba Carriera stayed in Paris executing portraits for the local aristocracy, including the Regent Philippe II d'Orléans and the future King Louis XV.<sup>20</sup> During her visit in France, Carriera could have easily seen the painting in question and then reinterpreted it in a particularly fascinating way for the commission of a miniature that again depicts Françoise-Marie de Bourbon again as Amphitrite.<sup>21</sup>

Other examples of Carriera's oeuvre, such as her miniature representing Rinaldo and Armida, her reception piece for the French art academy, which was a pastel of a nymph in

<sup>19</sup> Walker, 1992, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> Regarding Carriera's stay in France and her acceptance in the Académie Royale de Peinture e Sculpture, see Oberer, 2020, pp. 135-164.

<sup>21</sup> A nineteenth-century pencil inscription on the back identifies the protagonist as Louise Henrietta /d. of Philippe D. of Orléans/Father of Egalité. It is thanks to Walter that the protagonist has been identified as Françoise Marie. Walker, 1992, p. 65.

Apollo's retinue, and her pastel of Apollo that is nowadays in the Hermitage, prove that the artist was an intelligent and erudite painter who aptly knew to include, allude to or cleverly reinterpret works of other artists from antiquity, from the "Golden Age" of Venetian art or painters from her own days.<sup>22</sup> It therefore doesn't seem too far-fetched to believe that when she took inspiration for her miniature of Duchess of Orléans from the painting for Madame de Blois' wedding in 1691, Carriera was aware of the red thread that linked her work with Madame de Montespan's commissions of artworks and tapestries, and the significance of the marine iconography within the French court. But the various layers of meaning don't finish here.

By comparing Carriera's miniature with the painting in Versailles, we realize that she not only eliminated the last male adult but concentrated on the three figures of the right-hand side of the canvas. The remaining group of Amphitrite and two nymphs is depicted in a titillating close-up of three half-figures intertwined in an erotic embrace.

While the eighteenth century is known to have produced a vast array of erotic images and erotic literature that was consumed by men and women, the depiction of Sapphic love remained a somewhat vague theme.<sup>23</sup> Patricia Simons has analyzed the cultural negotiations regarding lesbian relationships in the Renaissance in Italy. One of the observations was that since the Middle Ages, the debate about homosexuality regarded primarily male relationships. In Florence, for example, where thousands of men were killed for acts of sodomy during the fifteenth century, no evidence of prosecution of sexual encounters between women has survived. Female homosexuality was "less threatening to the patrimony since reproduction, paternity and legitimacy were not at issue. The acts were also less visible because they often went unnamed in the statues and condemnations."<sup>24</sup> Sexual practices among women were considered an inadequate, preliminary sex without penetration and reproduction and thus not of much concern, whereas the most incited fear was the use of "instruments" during an erotic encounter between females. The appropriation and counterfeiting of the phallus made those women particularly masculine and threatening.<sup>25</sup> Overall, silence and ignorance predominated the legal, moral and ecclesiastic writings regarding sexual acts between women, a form of invisibility that slowly changed during the Renaissance when "images of women bathing and touching each other appeared."<sup>26</sup> The most typical way of alluding to or showing directly

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<sup>22</sup> See Oberer, 2020, pp. 78-85, 148-163, 200-205.

<sup>23</sup> Simons, 1994. See also Roulston, 2006, p. 653. Regarding women as a public for erotic literature, see Kłosowska, 2008, pp. 197-198. Regarding the risk of explicitly writing about sexuality between women, see the example of Félicité de Choiseul-Meuse (1767-1838). *Julie ou j'ai sauvé ma rose* was censored and ordered to be destroyed mainly because of the scenes that describe women's mutual erotic love, see Glessner, 1997, p. 136.

<sup>24</sup> Simons, 1994, p. 86.

<sup>25</sup> Simons, 1994, pp. 86-90.

<sup>26</sup> Simons, 1994, p. 94.

physical attraction and eroticism between women in art was through mythological figures like Diana and her nymphs.<sup>27</sup> The setting in which the goddess of chastity bathes and cavorts with her companions in an enclosed and paradisaical space offered the perfect excuse to depict naked women in a close bodily contact.<sup>28</sup> In a kind of a twist that mingles power dynamic and cross-identification, these depictions included the exploitation of the Callisto-myth. Even though Ovid tells the story within his “Metamorphoses” (Book II, 417- 440) of a sexual encounter between male (Jupiter) and female (Callisto), it was part of the same process of cultural negotiation of same-gender female love as the nymph was seduced and raped by Jupiter in the shape and disguise of Diana.<sup>29</sup> And it became a popular theme. “The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1900s, New York and Oxford 1993, vol. 1, lists over one 100 artists who have made use of the Callisto myth in words, music, or visual image; in addition to many paintings, there have been several operas and a ballet. The majority of these treatments occurred from the early seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century.”<sup>30</sup> Especially paintings that focus on the moment of her seduction highlight at the same time the pastoral sensuality and overt erotic attraction between two females as the scene is often devoid of any iconographic encoding of Jupiter.<sup>31</sup>

In Carriera’s miniature, the onlooker does not find the traditional mythological justification. Neither does the artist determine boundaries of class that allow for a visual intimacy or overt eroticism between females the way Roulston has highlighted in paintings by François Boucher (1703-1770).<sup>32</sup> Carriera’s work does not offer any further hints that would clearly identify or define the broader context of this all-female gathering. Only the clothes create some kind of timely distance. The figures do not wear eighteenth-century dresses but pseudo-ancient garments that Carriera typically used in mythological or allegorical scenes. The distancing from the eighteenth century is also achieved by the fact that the artist depicted two females facing the onlooker while the one in the middle is turning her back to the viewer which references the ancient theme of the three Graces. These deities were particularly popular during the Renaissance where authors like Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) or Pico della Mirandola (1463-

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<sup>27</sup> See Simons, 1994, pp. 94-110.

<sup>28</sup> Simons, 1994, p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> See Traub, 1996, pp. 25-28.

<sup>30</sup> Traub, 1996, p. 45, note 10.

<sup>31</sup> Traub, 1996, p. 28. See for example Peter Paul Rubens’s (1577-1640) painting in Kassel, Jacopo Amigoni’s (1682-1752) version in the Hermitage, Pietro Liberi’s (1605-1687) piece that was sold by Christie’s in 2008, Jean-Baptiste Pierre’s (1714-1789) canvas in the Prado, or Jean Simon Berthélemy’s (1743-1811) interpretation in a private collection. François Boucher (1703-1770) has depicted the myth various times, see for example his work in the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, the one in the Metropolitan Museum in New York or the version in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.

<sup>32</sup> Roulston, 2006, pp. 649-651.

1494) assigned them a central position among the allegorical figures in their versions of Neoplatonism.<sup>33</sup> Apart from the reinterpretation or elaborations regarding the three graces by ancient authors such as Seneca (d. 65 AD) during the fifteenth century, “the allegory of the three Graces offered Renaissance artists and humanists a perfect occasion to celebrate creatively the marriage of spirituality and sensuality.”<sup>34</sup> In the eighteenth century, instead, the triad mainly symbolized “the charms of love”.<sup>35</sup>

As tempting as it may be to consider that Carriera knew about Seneca’s or the humanistic reading of the deities, we can only state that the quotation of the Graces in her miniature as a quotation of a well-known ancient piece and theme is another proof of the artist’s erudition and artistic as well as intellectual finesse.

Finally, it is hardly a coincidence that the scene of Madame de Blois and her companions appears in the form of a miniature. These small-scale paintings that had been fashionable in Europe since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, were predestined for private consumption as the onlooker is required to hold them close to his/her eyes and focus intensely to truly appreciate their artistic as well as personal value.<sup>36</sup> As only one or very few people could look at a single miniature at the same time, they offered more easily the possibility to commission and to own an otherwise socially unacceptable or at least controversial piece.<sup>37</sup> Thanks to their reduced size, miniatures could also be worn or easily hidden, if necessary.<sup>38</sup> And they often were gifts, which creates an interesting but maybe coincidental link to Seneca’s interpretation of the three figures as representations of giving, receiving and returning a gift or a benefit.<sup>39</sup>

In Carriera’s miniature, Madame de Blois is looking straight into the eyes of the beholder engaging him/her in a “gazing-game”<sup>40</sup> where glances oscillate between the protagonist, the viewer and the other two women. At the same time, Madame de Blois seems to invite the onlooker to participate, a suggestion that is indirectly repeated by the composition of the piece, I argue. While the Duchess is flirting with the beholder, the woman on the right is embracing her with her right arm while the left arm is bent. We cannot clearly see where her left hand is placed – it is left to the onlooker’s fantasy to decide. The same woman is looking

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<sup>33</sup> Vidal, p. 357. See also Edgar Wind’s chapter on the three Graces in his pioneering study published in 1958.

<sup>34</sup> Vidal, 2014, p. 360.

<sup>35</sup> Vidal, 2014, p. 360.

<sup>36</sup> Pointon, 2001, p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> See also Lucy Davis who has highlighted that there is a striking number of erotic depictions within the 345 miniatures that are part of the Wallace Collection, Davis, 2018, p. 108.

<sup>38</sup> Regarding an overview of the various functions, forms, artists and clients of miniatures, see *European Portrait Miniatures: Artists, Functions and Collections*, ed. by Pappe, Bernd, Juliane Schieglitz-Otten, and Gerrit Walczak. [publ. by the Tansey Miniatures Foundation, Bomann-Museum, Celle]. Petersberg: Michael Imhof 2014.

<sup>39</sup> See Vidal, 2014, p. 340.

<sup>40</sup> Pointon, 2001, p. 68.

down to the third figure who is depicted on a lower level and differentiated through her black hair. She has turned her back to the viewer and her face is so close to Madame de Blois's breast that not a lot of fantasy is needed to understand what she is engaged in. It will be hard to find another example in European art until the 18<sup>th</sup> century in which three women without mythological disguise are depicted in such a startling and overt visualization of all-female eroticism.<sup>41</sup> And it will be even more difficult to find another woman artist before the twentieth century who pushed the boundaries in a similar way.<sup>42</sup>

But what is more important in our context, is to analyze how Carriera managed to blend the subject-object realities. The position of the black-haired woman in the center of the miniature corresponds to the position of the person who is holding the piece close to his/her eyes. If we imagine him/her not only visually enjoying the small-scale painting by looking but also kissing it, a practice that has been recorded more than once in the history of miniatures<sup>43</sup>, Carriera's composition proves to be much more than the result of refined aesthetic and artistic choices. We find an interesting example of the intimate body-object relationship between the owner of a miniature and the piece of art in Jean-Frédéric Schall's (1752-1825) painting "The Beloved Portrait" (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Jean-Frédéric Schall, *The Beloved Portrait*, 1783, oil on canvas, 29.5 x 22.8 cm. Private collection.

<sup>41</sup> In the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston is a small canvas by Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) that depicts *Actaeon Watching Diana and Her Nymphs Bathing* in which three figures on the left side of the painting are shown in an erotic encounter that is equally explicit. One of the nymphs seems to be sucking at the breast of her companion while she, together with a third nymph, touches the genitals of the figure in the middle. See Simons, 1994, p. 101.

<sup>42</sup> I have already underlined the startling fact that the existing documents do not reveal any kind of criticism or scandal regarding Carriera depicting erotic scenes. Oberer, 2020, pp. 64-65 and pp. 207-208.

<sup>43</sup> Regarding the importance of tactility, of body-object proximity and physical engagement see Pointon 2001, pp. 63-66.

It depicts a woman reclining on a sofa with her legs spread open. In her right hand she is holding a letter and in her right a miniature that she is longingly looking at and about to kiss (again?). Almost every detail of the painting alludes to the erotic content: her body position, the love-letter, the dog between her legs, the roses on the table next to her, the boudoir in itself and the painting on the wall that shows a satyr grabbing an almost naked woman or a nymph.<sup>44</sup> Together, these allusions form a joyful scene of auto-eroticism, and the kissing of “The Beloved Portrait” is a fundamental part of it.

In the case of Carriera’s piece, the holding and potentially kissing of the miniature are not visualized but implied in the composition of the figures. The artist deftly mingles the internal and external realities of the piece of art. Subject and object are intrinsically intertwined. This overlap of realities works in an even more intense way thanks to the aspect of touch which is an inevitable fact in the maneuvering, the *handling* of miniatures.<sup>45</sup>

The three women in Carriera’s piece touch each other, at least one hand is on somebody else’s body. They are entangled in such a tight embrace, that at the same time, all three bodies are touching. The emphasis of skin-to-skin contact is pronounced in a way that the depiction could be read as an allegorical rendering of touch as one of the five senses.<sup>46</sup> Taking into consideration the haptic and sensual aspects of touching, holding or even kissing the miniature, a similar fusion of realities takes place as described above in the discussion regarding the composition of the scene: The haptic experience creates closeness, inclusion. By taking the small painting in his/her hands, holding and turning it, striking the surface, the onlooker places him-/herself in the position of the three women in the painting and repeats to a certain extent their actions.

To conclude, it can be said, that Carriera left the observer of this extraordinary miniature with various layers of meaning. To decipher every single one of them would have been as much an intellectual as a joyful, sensual game. The artist deftly managed to trace a line to precedent examples of well-known official court iconography, to include an erudite quotation of antiquity and to blend visual as well as sensual pleasure in an unusually overt depiction of all-female eroticism. Through her miniature, she was able to provoke an intimate interaction between piece of art and onlooker not only on one, but on three different levels: applying the mutual exchange

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<sup>44</sup> As for a more detailed interpretation of the work, see Lajer-Burcharth, 2001, pp. 62-64 and Milam, 2015, pp. 199-200,

<sup>45</sup> Lajer-Burcharth’s essay “Pompadour’s Touch; Difference in Representation”, published in 2001, offers an excellent example of how to include this aspect in art historical research.

<sup>46</sup> Regarding the philosophical approach towards tactility in eighteenth-century France, see Lajer-Burcharth, 2001, pp. 56-58.

of glances, choosing a particularly clever composition and exploiting the sense of touch, inside and outside the depicted scene.

And for anybody who arrived at this conclusion, it was equally clear that this multifaceted piece was the result of an outstanding artist and yet another proof of Rosalba Carriera's excellent wittiness and her indubitable intellectual capacities.

## Illustrations

Fig. 1. Pierre Gobert, Portrait of Mademoiselle de Blois as Galatea triumphant, 18<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 166 x 140 cm. Private collection.

Fig. 2. 18<sup>th</sup>-century French painter, Presumed portrait of Françoise Marie de Bourbon as Amphitrite, 1692-1700, oil on canvas, Versailles, inv. 9894, LP 6867. © Chateau de Versailles Collection.

Fig. 3. Design attributed to Charles le Brun, Vertumnus and Pomona, about 1683, canvas, silk, wool, and metal-thread embroidery in tent stitch. Banque de France. © Banque de France.

Fig. 4. Rosalba Carriera, Françoise-Marie, Duchesse d'Orléans, as Amphitrite, 18<sup>th</sup> century, watercolour on ivory, 8.5 x 6.5 cm. Royal Collection Trust, inv. RCIN 420360. © Royal Collection Trust.

Fig. 5. Jean-Frédéric Schall, The Beloved Portrait, 1783, oil on canvas, 29.5 x 22.8 cm. Private collection.

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