

L U L L O · P A M P O U L I D E S

Victor van Dyck
Mechlen (Malines), 1862 – 1949

Jason charming the Colchian Dragon
Before 1887

Oil on canvas
296 x 226 cm.

Exhibited:

Exposition Générale Beaux-Arts, Bruxelles, 1887, no.415: 'Jason, avec le secours de Médée, s'empare de la Toison d'or, en livrant au sommeil le dragon vigilant'

Comparative literature:

Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon, deel 31, München-Leipzig, 2002

P. Piron, *Dictionnaire des artistes et plasticiens de Belgique des XIX^e et XX^e siècles*, Lasnes, Éditions Arts in Belgium, vol. 2, p. 624

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* – Latin Epic 1st C B.C. – 1st C A.D. 7. 149 ff :

This striking, monumental canvas was included in the Brussels *Exposition Générale Beaux-Arts* of 1887 (Fig.1). The catalogue entry describes the scene before us precisely: 'Jason, avec le secours de Médée, s'empare de la Toison d'or, en livrant au sommeil le dragon vigilant' (Jason, with the help of Medea, seizes the Golden Fleece, delivering the vigilant dragon to sleep) and it is possible that this work was that which van Dyck submitted to the Le Prix de Rome, Belge – for which he received an honourable mention. Van Dyck was a Belgian painter, born in Mechelen in 1862, the son of the painter Henri van Dyck. After training at the academies of Brussels (1877-1884) and Antwerp, he became known primarily as a painter of historical and religious subjects and portraits. In 1890 he won third place in the coveted Le Prix de Rome Belge - a scholarship for Belgian art students created in 1832 on the model of the French Prix de Rome. Van Dyck worked in Brussels before becoming a teacher at the Academy of his hometown of Mechelen in 1913. His son, Max van Dyck (1902-1992), also became a well-known painter in the region and also trained at L'Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles receiving the Belgian Prix de Rome painting prize in 1920. Victor exhibited frequently in Brussels and notably at the '35th Exhibition' in 1892 for the 100th anniversary of the Royal Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Ghent.

In European culture, the 'Golden Fleece' has come to represent an important symbol of authority and royal power. The tale of the Golden Fleece, obtained by the Greek hero Jason and his Argonauts, is one of the most enduring legends to have survived from the ancient world. The epic tale perhaps began when Ino, wife of King Orchomenus, decided that two of her step-children Phrixus and Helle were to be sacrificed to the Greek God Zeus. Hermes comes to the sibling's rescue by sending a winged ram with a golden fleece to carry them off to the Kingdom of Colchis. En route, Helle fell into the Dardanelles, but Phrixus arrived safely and, overjoyed, sacrificed the ram to Zeus and presented the fleece to King Aetes in gratitude. Aetes fastened the Fleece to an oak tree in a grove of Ares and was guarded by a dragon that never sleeps – known henceforth as the *Colchian Dragon*.

Years later, the usurper King Pelias fearing Jason would depose him sent him on what he hoped was a futile and deadly mission, to obtain the legendary Golden Fleece. Jason dutifully sailed away on his ship (the Argo) with fifty companions (the Argonauts) which included the heroes Herakles, Castor and Pollux, Orpheus, Admetus and Theseus. They had many adventures, but the moment of Jason's successful acquisition of the Golden Fleece was the story's most dramatic episode. Jason and the Argonauts set sail

L U L L O · P A M P O U L I D E S

for the Black Sea where legend said the Golden Fleece was hidden. After many adventures, the Argonauts reached the kingdom ruled by Aetes. The King, whose help the Argonauts needed, imposed seemingly impossible tasks upon Jason. One was to harness the fire breathing bulls with brazen feet and plow a field. He was then to sow the plowed field with dragons' teeth, from which would spring an army of warriors. Fortunately for Jason, Medea, daughter of Aetes, had fallen in love with him and Medea used her powers as a sorceress to help. Jason mastered the bulls, and when the armed men sprang from the dragons' teeth, Jason did what Kadmus had done before him: he threw a stone into the midst of the warriors, who accused each other of throwing it. They fought amongst themselves until they were all dead. Medea then led Jason to the place where the Golden Fleece hung, guarded by the terrible dragon.

There are a number of variations of this part of the legend, however, the version depicted here by Van Dyck appears to follow what was recounted by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*:

The task remained [for Jason] to charm the Dragon to sleep, that ever-wakeful beast with threatening crest and three-forked tongue and curving poison-fangs, the ghastly guardian of the golden tree. Then Jason sprinkled the creature with the opiate herb's Lethean juice and pronounced three times the words that bring deep peaceful sleep, that stay the troubled seas, the swollen streams, and on those sleepless eyes sleep fell at last. And Jason won the famous Golden Fleece and proudly with his prize, and with her too, his second prize, who gave him mastery, sailed home victorious to his fatherland. - Ovid, (loc. cit.)

In this version we see the hero, Jason, towering over us and uttering the words to charm the beast, while squeezing the Lethean juice of an opium plant into the jaws of the dragon. Van Dyck's selection of Ovid's version of events, particularly the with use of the opiate herb's Lethean juice, which "bring deep peaceful sleep, that stay the troubled seas, the swollen streams" is interesting considering the popularity, or epidemic, of Opium use in Europe during the 19th century. The great French poet of the time, Charles Baudelaire, in his *Artificial Paradises*, of 1860, hinted at the immensely addictive power and allure of the drug when he wrote: *Who is the man who can take his leave of the realms of opium?* This power must have been known to Ovid in ancient times, to choose it specifically to be the only substance that could make the sleepless dragon fall asleep. Indeed, even earlier, the ancient Greek poet Homer almost certainly refers to it as *a drug to quiet all pain and strife* in his epic poem *The Odyssey*.

The scene is lit in a 'Baroque' chiaroscuro, which heightens the drama of the scene, set in this hollow of an ancient grove. Jason stands beside the dragon in a state of classical, 'heroic' nudity, but for the opium plant which deftly covers his genitals. The main art historical precedents which appear to have inspired different elements of Van Dyck's configuration of Jason's body, include the archetypal ancient statue known as the *Apollo Belvedere* in the Vatican (Fig. 2) and perhaps two Mannerist-period masterpieces: Cellini's *Perseus with the head of Medusa*, in Florence (Fig. 3) and Giambologna's *Neptune fountain* in Bologna (Fig. 4). It is also interesting to note the similarities between Van Dyck's figure and the Belgian sculptor Charles van der Stappen's *L'homme à l'épée* (Fig. 5) who stands nude, flexing his fencing sword, to form a mirror-image of Van Dyck's hero. This may be merely coincidence, as van der Stappen was himself likely drawing upon the aforementioned works from the canon of European sculpture, which most Academy sculpture students would have been familiar with. However, it is interesting that the sculpture was commissioned for the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* in 1877 and was completed in 1879, entering the museum collection the same year. Van Dyck began training at the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels in 1877.

Although Victor Van Dyck's work is incredibly rare, this huge, arresting image is perhaps the finest of his canvasses known today. This image perfectly encapsulates the zeitgeist and visual culture of the age. The fact that the painting centres around the male nude and the model for Jason takes the *Apollo Belvedere* as its primary inspiration (which at this time existed as one of the most famous and archetypal ancient sculptures in the western canon) securely locates this painting within the classical tradition. This means that

LULLO · PAMPOULIDES

this painting would have been born out of the 'life-drawing' room of the Academy, which represented the foundation stone of all artistic education in Europe at this time. In addition, the hair-style and moustache that the figure wears, is highly typical of the late 19th century fashion in men's grooming and represents the contemporary masculine ideal: slender, muscular, moustachioed, powerful, combative and virile. The iconographic reference to Opium, although masked by classical allusion to Ovid's version of events, would have likely been interpreted at the time as a comment on the potency of a drug which was being used widely and recreationally throughout European society, especially in artistic centres of Brussels and Paris. Therefore, this picture is both a vitally important reflection of the methods of Academic artistic practice in the late nineteenth century and a comment on the preeminent vice of the age. It essentially depicts a battle between good and evil, but fascinatingly uses an opiate drug, which was so disparaged at the time as the cause of societal breakdown and destitution, as the very thing which saves the hero from certain death and the achievement of glory, in the procurement of the golden fleece.

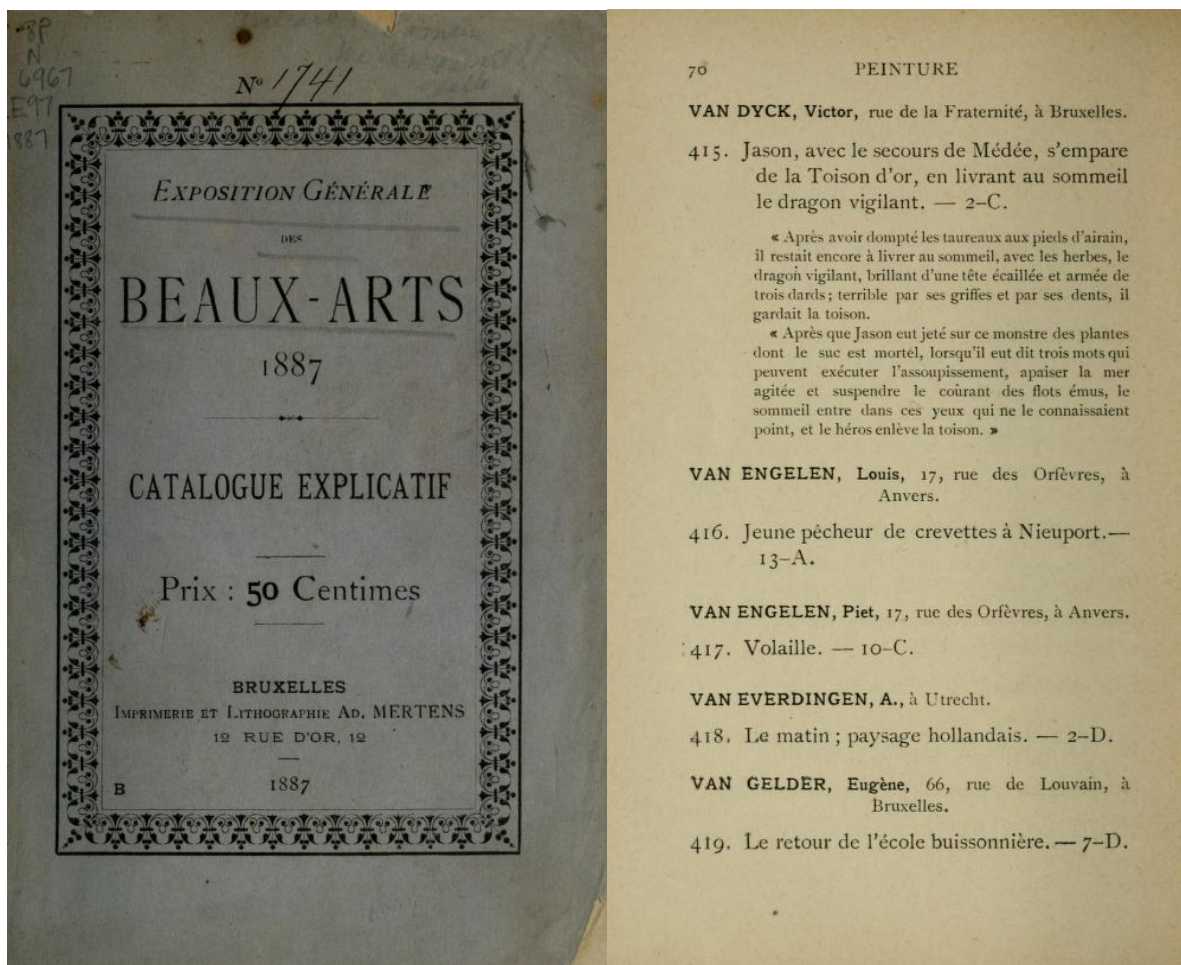


Fig.1 Catalogue for the *Exposition Générale Beaux-Arts*, Bruxelles, 1887



Fig. 2 *Apollo Belvedere*, Roman Hadrianic period, c.120 – 140 A.D, after a Greek Bronze original
Marble, 224 cm. high, Belvedere Courtyard, Vatican Museums, Rome



Fig. 3 Benvenuto Cellini (1500 – 1571), *Perseus with the head of Medusa*, c.1545 – 1554
Bronze, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence



Fig.4 Giambologna (1529 – 1608), *The Neptune Fountain*, c.1567
Bronze, Piazza del Nettuno, Bologna



Fig. 5 Charles van der Stappen (1876-1879) *L'homme à l'épée*, 1877 – 1879
Marble and bronze. 186.5 cm x 101.5 cm x 89.5 cm. Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique (Inv.
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