

ABRAHAM GOVAERTS

(Antwerp 1589 - Antwerp 1626)

Venus and Adonis in a Wooded Landscape

oil on copper laid on panel
39 x 54.5 cm (15³/₈ x 21¹/₂ in)

THE SUBJECT OF THIS WORK DERIVES FROM Ovid's vast compendium of Roman myth, his *Metamorphoses*. The story of Adonis' birth and his later love affair with Venus is evocatively retold in Book X. Venus fell in love with the handsome young man and often warned the keen hunter against the dangers of hunting wild animals. She advises him with touching concern, 'take no risks, dear lover, at my expense, or allow yourself to provoke what is well provided with weapons by nature.'¹ Despite her entreaties, however, Adonis was fatally wounded when he went chasing after a wild boar. A heartbroken Venus promised that he would be remembered eternally in the anemone or 'wind flower', which sprung up from the blood he had shed. Like Adonis, the life of these flowers is short as they are destroyed in their prime by the first breath of wind to flutter across their delicate petals.

The way in which Abraham Govaerts has depicted the two lovers was a popular grouping. Venus is shown here imploring Adonis not to hunt as she grasps his arm to prevent him from going. Adonis stands resplendent in a scarlet cloak holding a prominent and deadly looking spear. His hunting hounds look on inquisitively at their master and in a delightful vignette, one of Venus' cherubs sits astride a bemused dog. Venus' golden swan-drawn chariot can be seen abandoned nearby and in the top left hand corner of the sky, two white doves, birds sacred to the goddess, can be seen circling either side of a puffy cloud. A further pair of swans can also be seen, perhaps placed there in imitation of the human lovers, behind a broken tree trunk slightly short of the centre of the composition.

It has been noted that the positioning of the couple in this work is remarkably similar to Govaert's *The Rape of Europa* (Koninklijk Museum, Amsterdam). In both works, the figures are placed in front of a sunlit path along which the eye is drawn to a vanishing point deep within the wood. The left hand section of the Antwerp painting also features a river landscape, again framed by a tree on the extreme left. It would appear too that the present work is a collaborative one, the staffage almost certainly being by a different hand. Stylistically, the figures closely resemble the work of Adriaen van Stalbeem (1580-1662), a landscape artist who specialised in figure painting and who worked in conjunction with other artists including Pieter Brueghel II (c.1564-1638).

Govaerts' landscape is filled with exquisite miniature details that show off his artistic skills to perfection. Nestling incongruously in the oak tree overlooking the two lovers, a red squirrel perches precariously. In the extreme bottom left of the composition, a tiny heron stands whilst a dragonfly zooms past. Both creatures are surrounded by vividly realised flowers as violet irises and other woodland flora pepper the luxuriant grass. The artist's penchant for including exotic details in otherwise conventionally rendered landscapes can also be seen in his *Finding of Moses* in which a blue and yellow parrot is visible and above it a red plumed bird both of which would not look out of place in a jungle scene (fig. 1).

Govaerts was a Flemish painter who specialised in minutely accurate depictions of landscapes, real or imaginary. He was instrumental in training a number of painters, including Hans Groenrijs, Nicolaes Aertsen and Frans Synders (1579-1657). Govaerts predominantly painted wooded landscapes and his early works reveal clear stylistic affinities with the works of Gillis van Coninxloo (1544-1607) though he was also inspired by the works of Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625).

By about 1620, the time at which it has been suggested that *Venus and Adonis in a Wooded Landscape* was painted, Govaerts' work began increasingly to resemble that of Brueghel the Elder. Previously his painting style included an exaggeration of the brown foreground and blue tones in his foliage.



Abraham Govaerts (?), *Finding of Moses*, early 1620s, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; before 1797 (Figure 1)

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book X.542-546.

