

Pandora at Petworth House: new light on the work and patronage of Louis Laguerre

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AN OIL SKETCH by Louis Laguerre in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Fig. 15), has long been assumed to depict *The marriage of Cupid and Psyche* for the decoration of the staircase ceiling commissioned by Thomas Osborne, 1st Duke of Leeds, for Kiveton House, Yorkshire, which was destroyed in 1812.¹ Nonetheless it can now be clearly associated with the extant staircase ceiling mural at Petworth House, West Sussex, executed by Laguerre in 1719, the subject of which is *Pandora receiving gifts from the gods* (Fig. 16).² Moreover, the identification of the subject of this sketch prompts us to look again at the iconography of the staircase at Petworth, a house that includes other murals by Laguerre, and on the circumstances surrounding the commission, carried out during the lifetimes of Charles Seymour, 6th Duke of Somerset (1662–1748), and his exceptionally wealthy wife, the heiress of Petworth and other Percy family estates, Lady Elizabeth (1667–1722).

The only known documents relating to the murals are a note of their dimensions calculated ‘by Mr Lagars Man’ in 1719 and a covering letter sent with them to the Duke in the following year.³ These confirm Laguerre as the artist, and that the paintings were made in or around 1719. The letters are addressed to the Duke himself at his own behest, presumably for the purpose of releasing the payment. The transformation of Petworth began in earnest once the Duke’s wife had come into her Percy inheritance in 1688, though much of the planning took place before this time.⁴ The interiors of the seventeenth-century house – probably designed by the French Huguenot architect Daniel Marot – had been embellished under the Duke’s direction at great expense and reflecting the latest styles.⁵ But the grand staircase was built later, only in 1714, after a fire damaged part of the building, and should thus be seen as a discrete project. Given the new insights into the painted scheme made possible by the identification of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s sketch, which, as argued here, revolves around themes of female virtue, this article proposes that it was probably the Duchess who was more active in the development of its commission, rather than her husband as traditionally assumed.

A comparison of the sketch and the ceiling as executed by Laguerre reveals relatively few changes in content and composition, although these are vital to the interpretation of the meaning of the murals. Both sketch and ceiling show Pandora (the first

woman, according to ancient sources) in the centre of the heavens, surrounded by gods who offer her their attributes as gifts. On the ceiling, the positions of some of the figures have been changed from those used in the sketch – most obviously, the personification of Truth holding the lighted torch, found below and to the left of Pandora in the sketch, in the mural hovers directly above her head. The figures in the vault are distributed all around the boundaries of the ceiling instead of gravitating to the lower half of the composition as in the sketch, presumably modified in order to be viewed more easily while ascending and descending the three flights of stairs and traversing the balcony.⁶ The most telling differences, though, are found in the treatment of Pandora, who in the sketch is naked and holding her jar, while in the ceiling she is clothed and in the act of receiving the jar from the hands of Jupiter. It should be assumed that these iconographical diversions from the sketch, which must have functioned as a presentation piece to be discussed by the artist and patron, were thus related to some kind of intervention of the patron and implemented after a consensus had been reached.

The ceiling contains a representation of Pandora that is rare in the art of this period, for she is more often portrayed naked, as a temptress, a parallel to Eve.⁷ Here, shown almost fully dressed (by Minerva), she is depicted as the innocent recipient of Jupiter’s jar – the notorious wedding gift intended as a punishment for humankind after the Titan Prometheus gave them fire – rather than a wily protagonist. This is confirmed by the mural on the north wall of the staircase (Fig. 17), which shows Pandora reclining under a canopy to the left while Epimetheus, her new husband and the brother of Prometheus, stands to the right, holding the lid of the jar in his right hand. From the jar emanates an enormous cloud of black smoke with figures, including the three *parcae* in the centre, Fortune at the top and a wild-eyed character staring out from between the two columns to the lower right.⁸ This ensemble appears to be an allegory of Fate, referring to the ‘Evils both of Body and Mind’, representative of physical and mental decline.⁹ This is the moment of horror before Epimetheus slams down the lid again, retaining only Hope at the bottom of the jar. The narrative of Epimetheus has not previously been identified at Petworth, where the murals are usually described as depicting Pandora on the ceiling and the all-encompassing ‘Stories of Prometheus’ on the walls.¹⁰ While the most

¹ Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv. no. P.9-1956. For earlier identifications of the sketch, see E. Croft-Murray: *Decorative Painting in England, 1537–1837*, London 1962, I, p. 252; J. Simon: *English Baroque Sketches: The Painted Interior in the Age of Thornhill*, London 1974, under ‘Laguerre’. On Kiveton, see N. Lynton: ‘Laguerre at Kiveton’, *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 98 (1956), pp. 204–07.

² The sketch was displayed with its new title in exh. cat. *Sketches for Spaces: History Painting and Architecture, 1630–1730*, London (Tate Britain) 2013–14. On the iconography of Pandora, see D. and E. Panofsky: *Pandora’s Box: The Changing Aspects of a Mythical Symbol*, London 1956.

³ Chichester, West Sussex Records Office, Petworth Archive, PHA6292 and PH382.

⁴ C. Hussey: *Petworth House*, London 1926; and C. Rowell: *Petworth: The People and the Place*, Swindon 2012, pp. 34–49.

⁵ Rowell, *op cit.* (note 4), p. 40.

⁶ It has been suggested to me in conversation with Wolf Burchard that the sketch may have been for a ceiling other than Petworth, owing to their differing orientations and because the sketch is relatively highly finished. While this is possible, there is no other executed or planned ceiling with which the sketch can be readily associated, and it could be that the orientation of the composition was changed from landscape



14. Elizabeth, Duchess of Somerset with her son Algernon, by John Closterman. c.1690. Canvas, 207.5 by 132 cm. (Petworth House, West Sussex).

usual interpretation of the myth of Pandora is that she opened the jar, the idea that Epimetheus was culpable appears to have been common in seventeenth-century literature, although not in art.¹¹

to portrait when it was presented to the patrons.

⁷ For example, see the engraving by Jacques Callot (c.1625), in various collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, no.40.52.74. Pandora receiving gifts from the gods also appears to be the subject of the extant south staircase ceiling at Wollaton Hall, painted c.1699 and associated with Laguerre and Thornhill: here, she is shown in the manner of Callot. On Wollaton, see Croft-Murray, *op. cit.* (note 1), I, pp.62–63, 254a and 274a. On the positive associations of Pandora, see Panofsky, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.68–78.

⁸ The *parcae* are described, for example, in Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, II, 654, V, 532,

There is one visual source, however, that is comparable to the Petworth mural: an engraving by Sébastien Le Clerc contained in an edition of French verses from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1676;

VIII, 452 and XV 781.

⁹ The figures escaping Pandora's box were described as such by George Burghope in *Autarchy, or The Art of Self-Government in a Moral Essay*, London 1691, p.29.

¹⁰ A.E. Knox: *Catalogue of Pictures in Petworth House, Sussex*, London 1856, p.1; Croft-Murray, *op. cit.* (note 1), I, pp.64 and 253; National Trust guidebook, *Petworth House, West Sussex*, 1999, pp.21–22. I am grateful to have had access to the National Trust archives, where Alastair Laing's notes on the ceiling (no.PET.P.Z8) led me to these references and much other pertinent information.

¹¹ See, for example, Panofsky, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.79–84.



15. Pandora receiving gifts from the gods, by Louis Laguerre. c.1719. Canvas, 54.6 by 64.8 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

Fig.18).¹² This shows Pandora reclining, looking on as Epimetheus holds the jar and its lid, as figures emanate from it in a plume of smoke.

That Laguerre looked to a French prototype for his portrayal of Epimetheus is not in itself surprising: he would have been aware of Le Clerc's *œuvre* when enrolled at the Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris, where Le Clerc was a professor.¹³ Furthermore, it has recently been argued that Laguerre adapted works associated with Versailles for other English patrons, including in his murals for Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, at Marlborough House, St James's in c.1712.¹⁴ What is more remarkable is that he chose to represent the relatively obscure story of Epimetheus, and that both Pandora narratives, on the ceiling and the north wall, appear to elevate the female character and place the blame on the male. Moreover, these themes recur throughout the staircase murals. Opposite Pandora and Epimetheus, on the south wall, the Duchess of Somerset is shown riding in a triumphal carriage surrounded by her daugh-

ters as the Three Graces and led by her young son holding a torch (Fig.19).¹⁵ This parallels the ceiling where, as described above, the torch – the attribute of Truth – was deliberately moved to be directly above Pandora's head. On the Duchess's shield are the words '*virtus omnia vincit*' (Virtue conquers all) contrasting her with Epimetheus, the embodiment of imprudence, as seen opposite.¹⁶ The virtues of the Duchess and of Pandora are thus directly contrasted with the unvirtuous and unthinking Epimetheus.

The theme of the celebration of women is continued throughout the staircase murals, as well as in those on the ground floor showing episodes from the story of Prometheus.¹⁷ For example, to the right of the main door Pandora is shown clutching her jar, dressed in white with her head veiled. Moreover, it is the female figures who draw the spectator into these illusionistic scenes.¹⁸ They include, on the south wall, a woman dressed as a Vestal Virgin between the columns to the left and a younger woman who gazes boldly at the spectator from between the

¹² British Museum, London, no.1917,1208.70.119. The illustration is for Isaac de Benserade's *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide en rondeaux*, Paris 1676. An earlier, sixteenth-century engraving of Epimetheus by the Italian Giulio Bonasone (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, no.64.682.102) is very different in composition and in content, as he is shown crouching over an urn from which all goodness and virtue have escaped – yet another variation on the myth.

¹³ G. Vertue: 'Notebooks – I', *Walpole Society* 20 (1931–32), p.124. Pandora as a subject in art appears to have been more popular in France than in England. See Panofsky, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.72–75, no.18 and p.80, no.1.

¹⁴ L. Hamlett: 'Rupture through Realism: Sarah Churchill and Louis Laguerre's Murals at Marlborough House', in M. Hallett, N. Llewellyn and M. Myrone, eds.: *Court, Country, City: British Art and Architecture, 1660–1735*, New Haven and London 2016, pp.195–216.

¹⁵ A design for this wall is in the British Museum, London, inv. no.1971,0724.3.

¹⁶ A drawing of Epimetheus by Paolo Farinati in the collection of the Hamburger Kunsthalle (inv. no.21196) is inscribed '*sero nimirum sapere cepit*' ('too late he begins to be wise').

¹⁷ These include: *Prometheus deceives Jupiter over sacrificial offerings* (left, west wall,



16. *Pandora receiving gifts from the gods*, by Louis Laguerre. c.1719. Oil on plaster. (Petworth House, West Sussex; photograph Lisa Stein).

columns to the right. In the allegorical scenes celebrating the Arts, including architecture and music, over the balcony on the west wall, it is female figures who meet the spectator's gaze. Below the upper flight of stairs, a woman with a child sits on a fictive ledge, her hand resting upon it and her head turned to look at the torch race in the painted view beyond. Even the unusual, richly decorated painted architecture on the first floor contains female herms on its pilasters.

While we have evidence that the Duke was sent the bills for the murals and that he had taken an active role in the patronage of architecture and the arts at Petworth, it is worth reconsidering the extent of his assumed involvement in the commission for the staircase. The so-called 'Proud Duke' and his Duchess had a notoriously unhappy marriage, and anecdotes of his condescend-

ing attitude to women, including his wives and daughters, are well documented.¹⁹ On the other hand, he took full advantage of the wealth and status his marriage afforded him.²⁰ It seems highly unlikely that such a person would want to commission a scheme in which women were portrayed as active and virtuous protagonists. The Duchess, on the other hand, had a close connection with Petworth: it was her family seat, the place where she was born and where she chose to spend much time throughout her life, eschewing the court of Queen Anne.²¹ It could be that, having grown in confidence in the years between her marriage to the Duke and his early rebuilding of Petworth, she seized the opportunity that the 1714 fire presented to impart her own messages within the fabric of the building. The fire itself may of course be commemorated in the myth of Prometheus; but it is

ground floor); *Prometheus hiding fire in a fennel stalk* (under-balcony, west); *Prometheus and Pandora, veiled, with a sealed jar* (right, west wall, ground floor); *Prometheus creates the first man*, later overpainted as a woman (left, north wall, ground floor); *Zeus dispatching Mercury* (understairs, north); *Prometheia* (right, north wall, ground floor); *Punishment of Prometheus* (understairs, east); *Hercules rescuing Prometheus* (grisaille illusionistic roundel, south wall overdoor). National Trust archival records, on paper and online (for example, catalogue entry NT, cat. no.486598) show that there was over-painting of the ground-floor scenes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in parallel to architectural modifications. Subjects on the first floor of the west wall include:

(left) *An allegory of Architecture: Venus and attendants, with Petworth House and plans*, and (right) *An allegory of Music: Apollo and attendants* (NT cat. no.486596).

¹⁸ This contrasts with other examples of painted spectators, for example the *Escalier des Ambassadeurs* at Versailles and in Laguerre's own saloon at Blenheim Palace.

¹⁹ Rowell, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp.34–49.

²⁰ R.O. Bucholz: 'Seymour, Elizabeth, Duchess of Somerset (1667–1722)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004; online edition: September 2015, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21925>, accessed 16th April 2016.

²¹ P. Roberts, ed.: *The Diary of Sir David Hamilton, 1709–1714*, Oxford 1975, p.45.



17. *Pandora and Epimetheus*, by Louis Laguerre. c.1719. Oil on plaster. (Petworth House, West Sussex; photograph Lisa Stein).

the unusual repackaging of the Pandora myth that offers an opportunity to convey female virtue in its rebuilding. Besides drawing parallels between Pandora and the Duchess through their juxtaposition on the main walls and through shared visual devices such as the torch, there are also physical similarities between the two women: Pandora has the same strawberry blonde hair for which the Duchess was famous, and which can be seen in her full-length portrait by John Closterman (Fig. 14).²² A more tenuous, yet intriguing, connection between the two women is found in the covered jar that is Pandora's attribute. Christopher Rowell has remarked that the Duchess was an 'avid China collector', some of

whose collection of covered vases is currently displayed in the staircase hall next to the depictions of covered jars, or vases, in the murals.²³ The visual connection between the real and painted vases suggests that this was probably always their location: in any event, it is possible that the Duchess's passion for porcelain made Pandora an appropriate mythological counterpart.²⁴

If the involvement of the Duchess appears farfetched, given that the only documentation we have was sent to the Duke, it is worth referring again to another commission, also by Laguerre, recently undertaken by the Duchess's nemesis at court, the Duchess of Marlborough, at Marlborough House. It is accepted

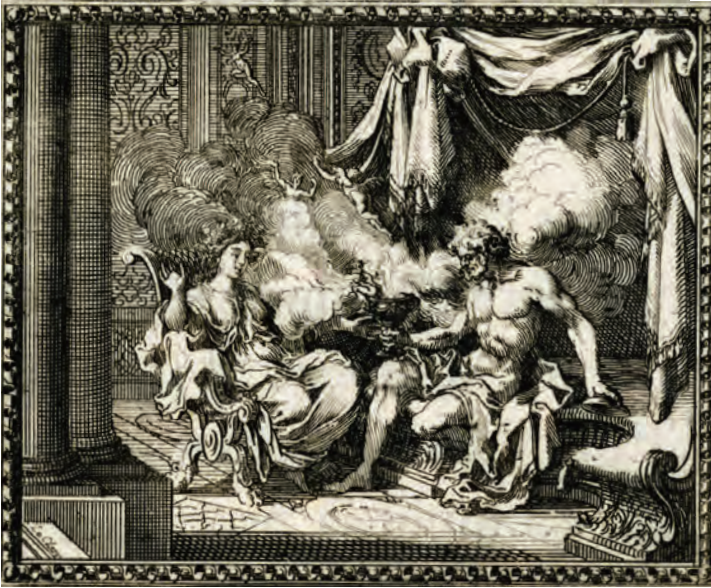
²² The Duchess was given the nickname 'Carrots' by Jonathan Swift in *The Windsor Prophecy* (1711) owing to the colour of her hair.

²³ Rowell, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.43.

²⁴ I am grateful to Andrew Loukes, House and Collections Manager at Petworth, for confirming (in email correspondence, September 2015) that there is no way of telling precisely where the Duchess's vast collection of china was displayed in the Baroque house, although it is likely that it was shown in groups throughout the state rooms and bedrooms.

²⁵ Hamlett, *op. cit.* (note 14).

²⁶ There are many links with seventeenth-century French noblewomen and the subject of Pandora, the implications of which are yet to be explored. For example, see Panofsky on Callot's engraving as being a glorification of the duchesse de Chevreuse; Panofsky, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.72–74. Pandora also lent her name to a late seventeenth-century French compilation of women's writing: C.C. Guyonnet Vertron, ed.: *La Nouvelle Pandore, ou les femmes illustres du siècle de Louis le Grand*, Paris 1698. I am grateful to Emma Gilby for drawing this to my attention.



18. *Pandora and Epimetheus*, by Sébastien Le Clerc. 1676. Engraving, 7.2 by 8.9 cm. (British Museum, London).

that the house was entirely the Duchess of Marlborough's idea, and that she oversaw its construction and directed the commission of Laguerre's murals, while the Duke merely paid for it.²⁵ It is highly probable that the Duchess of Somerset would have seen the murals at Marlborough House, which covered the main entrance hall and the two staircases to either side of it, and was inspired to communicate her own message through the same medium. That it was she who was responsible for supervising the Petworth commission, and consulting with Laguerre over its content and composition, is far more likely than its having been the work of the Duke. But such themes, though carefully veiled for many years within the guise of a traditionally misogynistic myth – Pandora – and stories of male virility – Prometheus – are, on inspection, very much in play.²⁶ With the identification of the Victoria and Albert Museum's sketch and the consequent revelation of the evolution of the commission, new light can be shed on the iconographic impetus behind the Petworth staircase, as well as prompting us to question traditional assumptions regarding the patronage of murals.



19. *Elizabeth, Duchess of Somerset, riding in a triumphal carriage*, by Louis Laguerre. c.1719. Oil on plaster. (Petworth House, West Sussex; photograph Lisa Stein).