



Ghismonda with the Heart of Guiscardo

Date

1520s

Primary Maker

Bacchiacca

Medium

Oil on wood

Description

Written in the mid-fourteenth century, at a time when the Black Death (bubonic plague) killed over a third of the population of Europe, the Decameron is a collection of one

hundred stories by the Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio. The tales are recounted by ten aristocratic young men and women who have fled the plague-ridden city of Florence to the safety of a secluded villa; to pass the time, they tell each other stories over the course of ten days. Although the majority of stories in the Decameron are light-hearted, humorous (and often ribald) tales of love, the collection also includes those that end tragically. One such story about ill-fated lovers, inspired the Lowe's painting of Ghismonda with the Heart of Guiscardo, by the Florentine artist, Francesco d'Ubertino Verdi, known as Bacchiacca. As told on the fourth day of the Decameron, Ghismonda was the daughter of Prince Tancredi of Salerno. A very possessive father, he discovers that Ghismonda is having an affair with Guiscardo, a mere valet. Outraged by his daughter's social impropriety, he orders that the man be strangled and his heart cut out. Tancredi places the heart in a gold cup and sends it to Ghismonda, with the cruel message: "Your father sends you this to comfort you in the loss of your dearest possession, just as you have comforted him in the loss of his. " When the gruesome gift arrives, Ghismonda lifts Guiscardo's heart to her lips, and says: "Nothing less splendid than a golden sepulcher would have suited so noble a heart; in this respect, my father has acted wisely." Unaware of what is in the cup, her ladies-in-waiting are bewildered by their mistress' actions and words. When Ghismonda finishes 'bathing Guiscardo's heart with her abundant tears,' she pours poison into the chalice; raising it to her lips, 'without any sign of fear', she drinks its liquid contents. Climbing onto her bed, Ghismonda places the heart of her dead lover close to her own, and silently awaits death. In Bacchiacca's painting, we are presented with the next-to-last chapter of Ghismonda's tragic story. The scene resembles that of an operatic stage setting, with the heroine Ghismonda, seated center stage in her bedroom, gazing upon the gold chalice that holds her lover's heart. The large Renaissance-style bed, on which she will die, features an elaborate canopy held by cupids, symbolizing the marital bed she has defiled by her lost virtue. The small jar between her feet, on the platform of the bed, holds the poison with which she will end her life. Last but not least, the dark shadow cast by the sinister-looking crone in the immediate foreground effectively conveys a sense of foreboding to the scene. Decorating the reverse of the round panel are conjoined coats-of-arms of the Carducci and Guidetti families of Florence.

The presence of the heraldic emblems suggests that Bacchiacca was commissioned to paint Ghismonda with the Heart of Guiscardo on the occasion of a marriage between members of these two patrician households. The subject of the painting reflects the importance accorded familial alliances by the elite society of sixteenth-century Italy.

Dimensions

Sight: 26 in. (66 cm) Framed: 3 3/4 x 34 1/2 in. (9.5 x 87.6 cm)