

= The Triumph of Cleopatra =

The Triumph of Cleopatra , also known as Cleopatra 's Arrival in Cilicia and The Arrival of Cleopatra in Cilicia , is an oil painting by English artist William Etty . It was first exhibited in 1821 , and is now in the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight across the River Mersey from Liverpool . During the 1810s Etty had become widely respected among staff and students at the Royal Academy of Arts , in particular for his use of colour and ability to paint realistic flesh tones . Despite having exhibited at every Summer Exhibition since 1811 he attracted little commercial or critical interest . In 1820 he exhibited The Coral Finder , which showed nude figures on a gilded boat . This painting attracted the attention of Sir Francis Freeling , who commissioned a similar painting on a more ambitious scale .

The Triumph of Cleopatra illustrates a scene from Plutarch 's Life of Antony and Shakespeare 's Antony and Cleopatra , in which Cleopatra , Queen of Egypt , travels to Tarsus in Cilicia aboard a magnificently decorated ship to cement an alliance with the Roman general Mark Antony . An intentionally cramped and crowded composition , it shows a huge group of people in various states of undress , gathering on the bank to watch the ship 's arrival . Although not universally admired in the press , the painting was an immediate success , making Etty famous almost overnight . Buoyed by its reception , Etty devoted much of the next decade to creating further history paintings containing nude figures , becoming renowned for his combination of nudity and moral messages .

= = Background = =

William Etty was born in York in 1787 , the son of a miller and baker . He showed artistic promise from an early age , but his family were financially insecure , and at the age of 12 he left school to become an apprentice printer in Hull . On completing his seven @-@ year indenture he moved to London " with a few pieces of chalk @-@ crayons in colours " , with the aim of emulating the Old Masters and becoming a history painter . Etty gained acceptance to the Royal Academy Schools in early 1807 . After a year spent studying under the renowned portrait painter Thomas Lawrence , Etty returned to the Royal Academy , drawing in the life class and copying other paintings . He was unsuccessful in all the Academy 's competitions , and every painting he submitted for the Summer Exhibition was rejected .

In 1811 , one of his paintings , Telemachus Rescues Antiope from the Fury of the Wild Boar , was finally accepted for the Summer Exhibition . Etty was becoming widely respected at the Royal Academy for his painting , particularly his use of colour and his ability to produce realistic flesh tones , and from 1811 onwards had at least one work accepted for the Summer Exhibition each year . However , he had little commercial success and generated little interest over the next few years .

At the 1820 Summer Exhibition Etty exhibited The Coral Finder : Venus and her Youthful Satellites Arriving at the Isle of Paphos . Strongly inspired by Titian , The Coral Finder depicts Venus Victrix lying nude in a golden boat , surrounded by scantily @-@ clad attendants . It was sold at exhibition to piano manufacturer Thomas Tomkinson for £ 30 (about £ 2 @ , @ 200 in 2016 terms) .

Sir Francis Freeling admired The Coral Finder at its exhibition , and learning that it had been sold he commissioned Etty to paint a similar picture on a more ambitious scale , for a fee of 200 guineas (about £ 15 @ , @ 100 in 2016 terms) . Etty had for some time been musing on the possibility of a painting of Cleopatra , and took the opportunity provided by Freeling to paint a picture of her based loosely on the composition of The Coral Finder .

= = Composition = =

The Triumph of Cleopatra is based loosely on Plutarch 's Life of Antony as repeated in Shakespeare 's Antony and Cleopatra , in which Cleopatra , Queen of Egypt , travels to Tarsus in Cilicia aboard a grand ship to cement an alliance with the Roman general Mark Antony .

Therefore when she was sent unto by divers letters , both from Antonius himself and also from his friends , she made so light of it and mocked Antonius so much that she disdained to set forward

otherwise but to take her barge in the river of Cydnus , the poop whereof was of gold , the sails of purple , and the oars of silver , which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes , howboys , cithernes , viols , and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge . And now for the person of herself : she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue , apparelled and attired like the goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture ; and hard by her , on either hand of her , pretty fair boys apparelled as painters do set forth god Cupid , with little fans in their hands , with the which they fanned wind upon her . Her ladies and gentlewomen also , the fairest of them were apparelled like the nymphs Nereides (which are the mermaids of the waters) and like the Graces , some steering the helm , others tending the tackle and ropes of the barge , out of which there came a wonderful passing sweet savour of perfumes , that perfumed the wharf 's side , pestered with innumerable multitudes of people .

While superficially similar to *The Coral Finder* , *Cleopatra* is more closely related to the style of Jean-Baptiste Regnault , with its deliberately cramped and crowded composition . The individual figures are intentionally out of proportion to each other and to the ship , while a large number of figures are tightly positioned within a relatively small section of the painting .

As well as from Regnault , the work borrows elements from Titian , Rubens and classical sculpture . The figures are painted as groups , and while each figure and group of figures is carefully arranged and painted , the combination of groups gives the appearance of a confused mass surrounding the ship when the painting is viewed as a whole . (Etty 's 1958 biographer Dennis Farr comments that " [*Cleopatra*] contains elements enough for three or four paintings no less ambitious but more maturely planned . ") The scene includes a number of images based on drawings Etty had sketched while out and about in London , such as the mother holding up her baby to see the view and the crowd on the roof of a temple in the background . It also includes elements of European painting that Etty had learned while copying Old Master artworks as a student , such as the putti in the sky . Etty greatly admired the Venetian school , and the painting includes obvious borrowings from Titian and other Venetian artists . It also contains a number of elements from the paintings of Rubens , such as the Nereids and Triton in the sea in front of the ship .

Unusually for an English painting of the period in its representation of a queen of an African country the group of *Cleopatra* 's attendants includes both dark- and light-skinned figures shown on equal terms and with equal prominence . From the earliest days of his career Etty had been interested in depicting variations in skin colour , and *The Missionary Boy* , believed to be his oldest significant surviving painting , shows a dark-skinned child .

= = Reception = =

Cleopatra caused an immediate sensation ; Etty later claimed that the day after the Summer Exhibition opened he " awoke famous " . The May 1821 issue of *The Gentleman 's Magazine* hailed *Cleopatra* as " belonging to the highest class " , and Charles Robert Leslie described it as " a splendid triumph of colour " . The painting did not meet with universal approval . *Blackwood 's Edinburgh Magazine* conceded that the painting had been " seen and admired at the Royal Academy " but condemned Etty 's taking a mythological approach to a historical subject :

The effect of this picture would have been much more intense had the painter treated it as a mere fact , and had not brought upon the scene those flying Cupids who turn the thing into a mythological fable . Real boys dressed like Cupids would have been proper , but aerial beings are impertinences , and put one out when one is thinking of the sex . If this amorous pageant had been a mere fiction , instead of having actually taken place , still the power of its delineation would have consisted in its probability .

Etty attempted to replicate the success of *Cleopatra* , and his next significant exhibited work was *A Sketch from One of Gray 's Odes (Youth on the Prow)* , exhibited at the British Institution in January 1822 . As with *The Coral Finder* and *Cleopatra* , this painting showed a gilded boat filled with nude figures , and its exhibition provoked condemnation from *The Times* :

We take this opportunity of advising Mr. Etty , who got some reputation for painting " *Cleopatra 's Galley* " , not to be seduced into a style which can gratify only the most vicious taste . Naked figures

, when painted with the purity of Raphael , may be endured : but nakedness without purity is offensive and indecent , and on Mr. Etty 's canvass is mere dirty flesh . Mr. Howard , whose poetical subjects sometimes require naked figures , never disgusts the eye or mind . Let Mr. Etty strive to acquire a taste equally pure : he should know , that just delicate taste and pure moral sense are synonymous terms .

Despite the tone , Etty was pleased to be noticed by a newspaper as influential as The Times , and much later confessed how delighted he was that the " Times noticed me . I felt my chariot wheels were on the right road to fame and honour , and I now drove on like another Jehu ! " Possibly as a result of the criticism in The Times , Freeling asked Etty to overpaint the figures in the foreground of Cleopatra . In 1829 , after Etty had become a respected artist , Freeling allowed the restoration of the figures to their original condition .

= = Legacy = =

The criticism did little to dissuade Etty from attempting to reproduce the success of Cleopatra , and he concentrated on painting further history paintings containing nude figures . He exhibited 15 paintings at the Summer Exhibition in the 1820s (including Cleopatra) , and all but one contained at least one nude figure . In so doing Etty became the first English artist to treat nude studies as a serious art form in their own right , capable of being aesthetically attractive and of delivering moral messages .

In 1823 ? 24 Etty made an extended trip to study in France and Italy , and returned a highly accomplished artist . His monumental 304 by 399 cm (10 ft by 13 ft 1 in) 1825 painting The Combat : Woman Pleading for the Vanquished was extremely well @-@ received , and Etty began to be spoken of as one of England 's finest painters . In February 1828 Etty soundly defeated John Constable by eighteen votes to five to become a full Royal Academician , at the time the highest honour available to an artist . On occasion he would re @-@ use elements from Cleopatra in his later paintings , such as the black soldier who squats on the side of the ship in Cleopatra and who also sits watching dancers in his 1828 The World Before the Flood .

Etty continued to produce paintings ranging from still lifes to formal portraits , and to attract both admiration for his technique and criticism for supposed obscenity , until his death in 1849 . In the years following his death Etty 's work became highly collectable , and his works fetched huge sums on resale . Changing tastes from the 1870s onwards meant history paintings in Etty 's style fell rapidly out of fashion , and by the end of the 19th century , the value of all of his works had fallen below their original prices .

Despite its technical flaws , Cleopatra remained a favourite among many of Etty 's admirers during his lifetime ; in 1846 Elizabeth Rigby described it as a " glorious confusion of figures " and " that wonderful ' Cleopatra ' of Etty 's " .

Following Freeling 's death in 1836 , Cleopatra was sold for 210 guineas , around the same price Freeling had paid for it , and entered the collection of Lord Taunton . While in Taunton 's ownership it was shown at a number of important exhibitions , including a major 1849 Etty retrospective , the Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857 and the 1862 International Exhibition . Following Taunton 's death in 1869 it was sold to a succession of owners for a variety of prices , peaking at 500 guineas (about £ 47 @,@ 000 in 2016 terms) in 1880 and dropping in price on each subsequent resale . In 1911 it was bought for 240 guineas (about £ 23 @,@ 000 in 2016 terms) by William Lever , 1st Viscount Leverhulme , who was a great admirer of Etty and had a number of his paintings hanging in the entrance hall of his home . It has remained in the collection Leverhulme assembled , housed from 1922 in the Lady Lever Art Gallery , ever since .