Louis Masreliez’ *Allegory of War* – Between History Painting and Interior Art in a Sequence of Interrelated Propaganda

Daniel Prytz
Curator, 18th-Century Painting, Drawings and Prints

Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm
Volume 28:1
Louis Masreliez’ Allegory of War – Between History Painting and Interior Art in a Sequence of Interrelated Propaganda

Daniel Prytz
Curator, 18th-Century Painting, Drawings and Prints

Fig. 1 Louis Masreliez (1748–1810), Allegory of War, c. 1790. Oil on canvas, 92.5 × 132 cm. Purchase: The Friends of the Nationalmuseum 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7613.
false pretexts for the declaration of war, the aim of maintaining political power at home through the show of military force abroad, and the importance placed on propaganda to achieve, justify and document this – these were as topical in the time of Gustav III (1746–1792) and the Russo-Swedish War 1788–90 as they are today. The present painting, recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum through the generous support of the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, is a prime example of this, specifically of the type of propagandistic allegory that Louis Masreliez’ (1748–1810) perfected in different, but often closely interconnected, artistic media and which served to reinforce the position and policies of the king (fig. 1).

Louis Masreliez showed a penchant for history painting early in his career and devoted thirteen years, 1770–1783, of study in Italy primarily to this field. After his return to Sweden he rarely had the chance to realise this in practice, but he applied compositional skills and his knowledge of didactic allegory and iconography, in part learned through his studies of history painting, in a variety of different ways. In 1785, Masreliez assumed artistic responsibility for the interior design of the Royal palaces; seldom have these types of decorations been filled with so much allegorical allusion as under his supervision.

The first commission of this kind Masreliez received was for the mezzanine apartment of Gustav III at the Royal Palace in Stockholm. Here, he created interiors that closely reflected what he and the king had been inspired by while in Italy. Gustav III had completed his Grand Tour just the year before and was obviously greatly motivated to modernise his apartments upon his return. The resulting décor represents the pinnacle of the latest neo-classical fashion, based as much on Renaissance and Greek influences as on Roman ones. A gesamtkunstwerk was created through the close affinity between Masreliez’ decorations and the furniture designed for the rooms, made by the foremost Swedish cabinetmaker of the time, Georg Haupt (1741–1784).

The painting was specifically made as an overdoor for Gustav III’s bedchamber. The closely thought-out interdisciplinary connectivity of the artist’s 1785 designs for the palace are perhaps why Masreliez scholar Carl David Moselius (1890–1968) dated it to the same year. The Nationalmuseum collections already have three works relating to the present painting: a preparatory drawing, and a preparatory drawing and an oil study for its overdoor counterpart, works of which Moselius was also aware. The preparatory drawing has an inscription by Masreliez, explaining that it represents Charles XII’s (1682–1718) victory at Narva, Russia, in 1700 (fig. 2). The full inscription,

![Fig. 2 Louis Masreliez (1748–1810), Allegory of the Battle of Narva 1700, c. 1790. Pen and grey ink, brown wash, on paper, 31.9 x 24.8 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 267/1891.](image)
written in two notes, in French and Swedish respectively, reads: “Dessin du porte pour le chambre à coucher du Roy Gustav III; Narva slag 1700; Bellona med en åskvigge i handen ledsagad av Boreas som blåser snöglopp. Allusion uppå snödrifvan som be-täckte svenska angrepet”.7 This depiction would be in line with some of Masreliez’ wall decoration designs for the divan room in the king’s apartment, which also alludes to Charles XII and is revealingly dated to 1788, according to the palace inventory.8 It is therefore possible that the present painting was also commissioned a few years later than Moselius’ assumption, in an attempt to update and amplify the allegorical content of the apartments’ décor, giving them a stronger political content as a direct result of the Russo-Swedish War. The war began on the initiative of Gustav III, and on false claims of a Russian attack in 1788, mainly in an effort to strengthen his position at home. The allusion to Narva could thus have been chosen specifically to put the king’s own battles against the Russians in the same light as this perhaps greatest historical Swedish triumph against its eastern neighbour and traditional foe.

The compositions of drawing and painting are very close; the warrior goddess Bellona is dynamically entering the fray in her chariot from the right, bolt of lightning held high, while Boreas and the zephyrs pour down snow from above. Her horses, seen from behind and moving inwards into the picture plane, lends depth to the composition. Their vigorous rendering is obviously inspired by Masreliez’ study of Italian Renaissance painting, which he fused with inspiration drawn directly from Antiquity in a somewhat novel way.9 Interestingly, on the same sheet underneath the drawing for the full composition, he seems to be trying out the positions of the zephyrs in a separate drawing, to achieve a higher degree of plasticity and movement. In a closely related preparatory pencil drawing which accompanied the acquisition of the painting, Bellona’s helmet is pulled down while her head and back is completely turned from the viewer, her stance even more accentuating motion and depth (fig. 3).

The design of the corresponding overdoor has naturally been interpreted as an allegory of peace, but a description of the allegorical content by Masreliez’ himself is lacking and the reading can therefore not be as completely confident and straightforward (figs. 4–5). Moselius interpreted the figures as Bellona and the Genius of Peace holding a pendant lodestone, representing equilibrium, in front of an altar in

Fig. 3 Louis Masreliez (1748–1810), Allegory of War. Study, c. 1790. Pencil on paper, 50.4 × 36.8 cm. Purchased with funds from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum 2021. Nationalmuseum, NMH 5/2022.
a courtyard, flanked by the curved arcades of a rotunda-shaped temple. In the background of the courtyard there seems to be an olive tree. If the two standing figures are war and peace, the kneeling figure is Sweden.10

However, if this interpretation is also to be viewed as a representation of the peace reached by Sweden and Russia in Värälä in 1790, it is quite different from other depictions of this subject. As a direct representation of this specific peace, the two standing figures could also be interpreted as Bellona and Sweden, while the then eastern half of the Swedish nation, Finland, could be represented by the kneeling woman. A few other attributes, which are clearer in the preparatory drawing than in the oil study, also suggest this interpretation, such as the shield adorned with the three crowns of the Swedish coat-of-arms at the feet of the standing woman to the right, as well as the royal mantle which drapes, and almost bilows over, both her and the kneeling woman. For the most part, the war was fought in Finland, including the most important battles, such as the naval battles at Hogland in 1788 and Svensksund in 1789 and 1790, the last of which Sweden won decisively. This interpretation would not only put the peace in a more specific context, but also in a more favourable, active, light for Sweden, and consequently for the king, showing him as the protector rather than the protected. Often, in other artistic representations of the Värälä peace, Sweden, and in particular the king, is even more overtly to be understood as a strong, even victorious, protector, while an equilibrium between the warring nations – which comes closes to the actual outcome of the war – is also acknowledged. Here, in straightforward depictions of the peace, Gustav III could be portrayed as Mars, in the same guise as he might be represented in allegories of the war and its battles. This was true of one of Masreliez’ designs for the king’s medals to commemorate the peace (fig. 6).11

From 1788, Masreliez also took overall responsibility for the artistic content of

---

**Fig. 4** Louis Masreliez (1748–1810), *Allegory of Peace. Study*, c. 1790. Oil on canvas, 30.5 × 39 cm. Purchase 1917. Nationalmuseum, NM 2073.

**Fig. 5** Louis Masreliez (1748–1810), *Allegory of Peace*, c. 1790. Pencil, pen, grey and black ink, grey and brown wash, on paper, 18.7 × 28.2 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 29/1874-9.
exemplified by Masreliez’ study for an unrealised monument dedicated to Karl XII, which is particularly close to the Allegory of War overdoor (fig. 7). Regardless of whether they were supposed to directly relate to Gustav III’s own war against Russia, or more generally to the Swedish might symbolised by his forebear Karl XII’s greatest triumph, the two painted allegories of war and peace could have been central to and – as overdoors and integral parts of interior decorations – literally have fit perfectly into this sequence, bridging Masreliez’ work using different media.

While it served to reinforce the intended interrelation between the media involved,
this sequential synergy could be both to an aesthetic advantage as well as disadvantage. In select paintings from the period, it is as if Masreliez directly repurposes the sculptur-esque, heavy figures typical of the motifs of neo-classical medallic art, which, even if this was intentional, can make them seem perhaps unnecessarily static. However, in other cases, as exemplified by the Allegory of War, Masreliez is also able to show his often-unrealised sense of movement and colour and infuse the work with the dynamism of 15th-century Italian Renaissance painting, exemplified by the murals of Polidoro Caldara de Caravaggio (1492/95–1543) and Luca Signorelli (1445–1523), amongst others, both of whom he was particularly fond. Likewise, in his medals, the typical stateliness of the allegorical figures can sometimes be replaced by a striking vitality he learned from the study of those same Renaissance artists.17

Perhaps the king’s death in 1792 led to Masreliez’ two designs for overdoors never being used, instead remaining in the possession of the artist.18 The recent acquisition of the Allegory of War repatriates the only finished overdoor from this commission to the same collection as the directly relating drawings and the oil study for its counterpart. Altogether, they can perhaps allow us to obtain an even clearer view of what Masreliez and the king intended to accomplish with the decorations, further suggesting an interrelation between the different media used in the artistic propaganda. The painting also allows us a further taste of the type of works Masreliez, when he was afforded time and opportunity, could execute within the, for him thoroughly explored, but largely unrealised, field of history painting.

Notes:
5. Moselius 1923, pp. 70–72. However, it is not wholly clear whether the work was intended for the state or private bedchamber.
7. Nationalmuseum inventory no. NMH 267/1891.
11. Daniel Prytz, Louis Masreliez och Gustav III:s medaljhistoria – Nyklassicemens ideal i miniatur, master thesis, Gotland University/Uppsala University 2009, pp. 42–43, fig. 36. This is also emphasised by the Latin inscription found on Masreliez’ design, which reads “Salus Populorum”.
12. Prytz 2009. It was actually in this field that Masreliez got to apply his knowledge of history painting to its greatest extent. The creation of Gustav III’s “History in Medals” was the responsibility of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities and its secretary Gudmund Jöran Adlerbeth (1751–1818). Tellingly, Adlerbeth referred to the obverse designs of the medals as “historie-tafflor” (history paintings). See: Prytz 2009, p. 31, note 128.