Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensuality

Primary Maker
Jean-Baptiste Regnault

Date
1785

Medium
Oil on canvas

Dimensions
23 1/4 × 28 3/4 in. (59.1 × 73 cm) Framed: 31 1/8 × 36 3/8 in. (79.1 × 92.4 cm)

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Type
Paintings

Baron Jean-Baptiste Regnault’s depiction of Alcibiades, the notoriously licentious student of Socrates, epitomizes Neoclassical subject matter and style. Regnault developed this style during his residency in Rome; once he arrived in the hub of neoclassical theory in 1768, the young artist found himself surrounded by antique and Renaissance monuments. Regnault was also greatly influenced by his contemporary rival, and the most prominent Neoclassical painter of the age, Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). In this painting, the great philosopher Socrates forcibly tries to tear the young man out of the embrace of a personified Sensuality (sometimes identified as the legendary courtesan Aspasia). This didactic image highlights Socrates as a model of rational thought, denouncing his student’s flight to earthly charms. The painting captures the moral dilemma of virtue versus pleasure for a celebrated Athenian youth, although this particular scene cannot be traced to any literary source. In a more general sense, according to Plato’s Symposium paraphrased by J. H. Lesher, Alcibiades “rejected Socrates’ attempt to recruit him into the philosophical life and fell back, with a palpable sense of shame and failure, into the pursuit of political power and popularity.”