

The Sacrifice of Polyxena, Giovanni Battista Pittoni

The Sacrifice of Polyxena

Giovanni Battista Pittoni
Italian, about 1733–34
Oil on canvas
50 1/2 x 37 1/2 in.
72.PA.18

Background Information

According to legend, the Greek warrior **Achilles** fell in love with Polyxena, the daughter of Priam, king of Troy. Achilles was offered her hand in marriage if he agreed to end the **Trojan War**. At Polyxena's request, Achilles went to make a sacrifice at the temple of Apollo, but he was ambushed by Paris, Polyxena's brother, as he knelt at the altar. Paris shot a fatal arrow into Achilles' heel, his one vulnerable spot. Before he died, Achilles vengefully proclaimed that the treacherous Polyxena be sacrificed at his tomb.

Here, Giovanni Battista Pittoni depicted the ghost of Achilles (in the red robe) demanding that his bride be killed. Polyxena, wearing a white wedding gown, extends her arm toward the priest

brandishing a knife and, with great dignity, steps forward toward the tomb. Around her, a throng of Greeks and Trojans watches with mixed emotions. Although a violent subject, Pittoni's scene of elegant, richly garbed figures and elaborate antique architecture makes an appealing picture of mythological martyrdom.



Paintings depicting historic events and legends from ancient times, such as the Trojan War, were popular in European art in the eighteenth century. Many artists captured events recounted in the most famous retelling of the Trojan War, **Homer's *The Iliad***, which covered fourteen days of the ten-year war. This story of Polyxena's sacrifice, however, was not included in the Homeric version.

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About the Artist

Giovanni Battista Pittoni (Italian, born Venice, 1687–1767)

Pittoni painted religious, mythological, and historical works for German, Polish, and Russian **patrons**. He created several canvases that depict young heroines facing challenging circumstances, which was a popular subject in history painting during his day.

In the 1720s and 1730s, Pittoni produced vibrant paintings with nervous brushwork. Later, his **color palette** lightened and his compositions became more sedate, probably due to the prevailing trend toward **Neoclassicism**. Highly regarded by his contemporaries, especially for his attractive and elegant draperies, Pittoni was a founding member of the Venetian Academy and was president of the institution in 1758.

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Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at this painting and share your initial observations.

What do you notice in the **foreground**? What do the figures' poses reveal about what is happening? (*The woman dressed in white has her left arm outstretched as if she is being guided by the man who holds her left hand in his. Although the man has a knife in his right hand, the woman's expression is calm. The man is whispering to another man, in armor and a red robe, who points at the woman as if ordering the man with the knife to do something.*)

What do you notice in the **middle ground**? What do the details reveal about what is happening? (*A throng of people gathers with flags and spears as if waiting for an event.*)

What do you notice in the **background**? What do the details reveal about the setting? (*The arch and columns look like architecture from antiquity.*)

The title of the painting is *The Sacrifice of Polyxena*. Does the title surprise you? Why or why not?