

Et in Arcadia ego

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"**Et in Arcadia ego**" is a Latin phrase that most famously appears as the title of two paintings by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665). They are pastoral paintings depicting idealized shepherds from classical antiquity, clustering around an austere tomb. The more famous second version of the subject, measuring 122 by 85 cm, is in the Louvre, Paris, and also goes under the name "Les bergers d'Arcadie" ("The Arcadian Shepherds"). It has been highly influential in the history of art and more recently has been associated with the pseudohistory of the Priory of Sion popularised in the books *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code*.

The phrase is a *memento mori*, which is usually interpreted to mean "I am also in Arcadia" or "I am even in Arcadia", as if spoken by personified Death. However, Poussin's biographer, Andre Felibien, interpreted it to mean that "the person buried in this tomb has lived in Arcadia"; in other words, that they too once enjoyed the pleasures of life on earth. The former interpretation is generally considered to be more likely. Either way, the sentiment was meant to set up an ironic contrast by casting the shadow of death over the usual idle merriment that the nymphs and swains of ancient Arcadia were thought to embody.



Et in Arcadia ego

Nicolas Poussin, 1637–1638

oil on canvas, 185 × 121 cm

Musée du Louvre



Guercino's 1622 version of the subject

The first appearance of a tomb with a memorial inscription (to Daphnis), amid the idyllic settings of Arcadia, appears in Virgil, *Eclogues* V, 42ff. Virgil took the idealized Sicilian rustics that had first appeared in the *Idylls* of Theocritus and set them in the primitive Greek district of Arcadia. The idea was taken up anew in the circle of Lorenzo de' Medici in the 1460s and 70s, during the Florentine Renaissance. In 1502, Jacopo Sannazaro published his long poem *Arcadia* that fixed the Early Modern perception of Arcadia as a lost world of idyllic bliss, remembered in regretful dirges. In the 1590s, Sir Philip Sidney circulated copies of his romance *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* which soon got into print. The first pictorial representation of the familiar *memento mori* theme that was popularized in 16th century Venice, now made more concrete and vivid by the inscription ET IN ARCADIA EGO, is Guercino's version, painted between 1618 and 1622 (in the Galleria Barberini, Rome), in which the inscription gains force from the prominent presence of a skull in the foreground, beneath which the words are carved.

Poussin's own first version of the painting, now in Chatsworth house, was probably commissioned as a reworking of Guercino's version. It is in a far more Baroque style than the later version, characteristic of Poussin's early work. In the Chatsworth painting the shepherds are actively discovering the half-hidden and overgrown tomb, and are reading the inscription with curious expressions. The shepherdess, standing at the left, is posed in sexually suggestive fashion, very different from her austere counterpart in the later version. The later version has a far more geometric composition and the figures are much more contemplative. The mask-like face of the shepherdess conforms to the conventions of the Classical "Greek profile".

While the phrase "et in Arcadia ego" might appear to be an incomplete sentence, since it contains no overt verb, the verb 'be' is frequently missing and presumed in Latin, therefore the complete phrase has an implied "sum" at the end. This presumed defect has led some pseudohistorians to speculate that it represents some esoteric message concealed in a (possibly anagrammatic) code, even though it is unsubstantiated. In *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln proposed that the phrase is an anagram for *! Tego arcana Dei*, which translates to 'Begone! I keep God's secrets', suggesting that the tomb contains the remains of Jesus or of another important Biblical figure. They claim that Poussin was privy to this secret and that he depicts an actual location. The authors do not explain why the tomb depicted in the second version of the painting contains this secret but the distinctly different one in the first version presumably does not. Ultimately, this view is dismissed by most art historians.



Poussin's 1627 version of the "Arcadian Shepherds", depicting a different tomb with the same inscription



The Shugborough relief, adapted from Poussin's second version of the subject

Further conspiracy theories concerning the image have been fuelled by a reversed copy of Poussin's second version sculpted, around 1760, in relief at Shugborough House in Staffordshire, England, beneath which is a mysterious inscription in a series of separate letters which imply an encoded message, as yet undeciphered. The reversed composition may mean that it was copied from an engraving, the compositions of which are commonly reversed because direct copies to the plate produced mirror images when printed.

The phrase is used as the title of the first act in Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*. It is also the title of the second major story arc of Grant Morrison's esoteric comic book series *The Invisibles*, which incorporates Poussin's painting, and appears as an inscription on a gun in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*.

The TV series "Millennium" (1996-1999) was infamous for its arcane and mysterious titles and a second season episode is titled "In Arcadia Ego".

See also

- Arcadia (paradise)
- Shugborough House inscription

External links

- Paul Smith, "Et in Arcadia ego" (<http://priory-of-sion.com/psp/id17.html>)
- Marc Wiesmann, "Classical Arcadia" (<http://arcadia.ceid.upatras.gr/arkadia/engversion/culture/clasarcadia/etinarc.html>)
- Guercino's painting illustrated at the official Galleria Barberini website (<http://www.galleriaborghese.it/barberini/it/arcadia.htm>) (text in Italian)

References

- Panofsky, Erwin (1993). *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0226645517.
- McCarthy, Cormac (December 1993). *Blood Meridian : Or, the Evening Redness in the West*, Pan MacMillan. ISBN 0330312561.

Retrieved from "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Et_in_Arcadia_ego"

Category: Paintings

- This page was last modified 01:20, 31 March 2006.
- All text is available under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License (see **Copyrights** for details).
Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.
- Privacy policy
- About Wikipedia
- Disclaimers