

# Basic Detail Report

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## Orpheus instructing a Savage People in Theology & the Arts of Social Life [2 of 17 Prints]

**Date**

1791

**Primary Maker**

James Barry

**Medium**

Engraving on paper

### Dimensions

Image Size: 41.8 x 50 cm

### Description

Second print of seventeen in 'A series of etchings by James Barry Esq. From his Original and Justly Celebrated Paintings in the Great Room of the Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.' Although the prints have been bound with the title 'A Series of Etchings ...' They are in fact engravings (intaglio prints). This print shows a classical Greek scene. The central figure, Orpheus, the mythical Greek musician and poet, the strains of whose lyre were said to be able to move rocks and trees, is sitting on a rock pointing towards the sky with his right hand. His left hand holds a lyre, which is resting on his left knee. Orpheus is surrounded by a group of primitive men with their women and children, all listening intently to the words of Orpheus. The landscape in the background has all the typical features of an Arcadian scene, to create the sense of an ideal region of rural contentment: wild white horses running, swans in a lake, wispy clouds floating among jagged mountains and a lion on a hill looking down at humans feeding and milking a goat. A more detailed and in-depth description is transcribed below. This description is taken from the bound version of Barry's etchings and printed on the page opposite the actual print. 'Orpheus. The scenery of this Picture exhibits a view of the mountainous and desert country of Thrace. Near the centre of the piece is Orpheus, in an action of great energy, enthusiastically singing his divine poems, his right hand rapturously stretched towards Heaven; and for the harmonious accompaniment of his instructive song, the several fingers of his left hand are employed upon the various strings of the lyre suspended from his shoulder, representing him, according to his own assumption, as inspired messenger and founder of the Grecian theology. The story of Orpheus has exercised the pencils of many painters, who, by realizing the poetical metaphor, have overlooked every thing valuable in it; but Mr. Barry, instead of surrounding him with such auditors as trees, birds and wild beasts, has united in his character the legislator, the divine, and the philosopher, as well as the musician, and has placed him in a wild and savage country, surrounded by people as uncultivated as the land they inhabit, depending upon the chase for their subsistence; whilst he,

as messenger from the Gods, to whose mansions he seems pointing, is pouring forth songs of instruction, which he accompanies with the music of his lyre. By the action of Orpheus, the song appears the principal, and the music an accessory part; as it should always be, where utility and instruction are intended. His hearers, who are represented in, what is called, a state of nature, are most of them armed with clubs, and clad in the spoils of wild beasts; in allusion to their being possessed of courage and strength to subdue lions and tigers, but wanting wisdom and skill to prevent retaliation on themselves or their feeble offspring. This latter circumstance is finely illustrated, by a woman at some distance, on the other side of a river, milking a goat, her two children sitting near her; at the entrance of their habitation, a cave, where they are ill secured against a lion, who discovers them as he is prowling about for prey: still further in the distance are seen two horses, one of which is run down by a tiger; by this incident it is clearly pointed out, that want of human culture is an evil which extends beyond our own species, to all animals intended for domestication, and which have no other defence than the wisdom and industry of man. It is a circumstance often observed by travellers, that the value and estimation of women increases according to the growth and cultivation of society, and that among savage nations their merits are disregarded, and they are in a condition little better than beasts of burden; all offices of fatigue and labour, war and hunting excepted, being reserved for them. It is to prove the truth of this observation, that a woman is leaning on her male companion, and carrying a dead fawn upon her shoulder. As Orpheus is said to have taught the use of letters, the theogony or generation of the Gods, and the worship due to them, there is placed near him, on his right hand, a scroll of mythological matters respecting the cosmogony and the mundane egg, &c. which is respectfully inspected by two admiring savages behind; and in the advanced part of the foreground are a lamb bound, a fire kindled, and other preparations for sacrifice. The countenances and actions of the several hearers are happily contrasted, and well exhibit the effect of those lessons on the various impressions of contemplation and reflection in the other sex; one of whom, contemplating his hands, and the various uses to which they are convertible, appears as if, for the first time, struck with the grand idea, that knowledge is power. About the fore-ground are scattered fragments of the Chaonian mast, or acorns, the miserable subsistence derived from spontaneous uncultivated nature. The whole of this picture shews the effect of those benefits which accrue to mankind from religion and philosophy, and the absolute necessity of substituting the love and pursuit of truth, justice, order, and social virtue, in lieu of fraud, violence, and disorder of the savage state.' Below the image is an inscription. For the full inscription, see the Inscription field.