

Arthur RACKHAM (Lewisham 1867 - Limpsfield 1939)

'Up to the Mountain's Top': Hippolyta and Theseus, from A Midsummer Night's Dream

Pen and brown ink and brown and grey wash, with touches of watercolour, on paper laid down on card.

Signed and dated Arthur Rackham 08 at the lower right.

286 x 183 mm. (11 1/4 x 7 1/4 in.)

This fine drawing is a final study for one of Rackham's illustrations for William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, published by Heinemann in London in 1908. Regarded as one of Rackham's finest works as an illustrator, the book achieved great success, with the entire run of 1,000 copies of the deluxe edition sold out within three months of publication. As has been noted of Rackham's illustrations for A Midsummer Night's Dream, which was also published in French, Italian and German editions, 'almost all of the plates echo perfectly the mysterious interweaving of lightness and depth in this great work', as a scholar has written. Rackham's illustrations have long remained the definitive rendering of the visual imagery of the story, and have inspired later stage and screen productions of the play. As one biographer has noted, 'Rackham cast his spell over the play; his drawings superseded the work of all his predecessors…his conception of Puck and Bottom, Titania and Oberon, Helena and Hermia, his gnarled trees and droves of fairies, have represented the visual reality of the Dream for thousands of readers. Here he excelled especially in landscape, and in reconciling dream and reality, giving himself to the luxury of rich detail with a rare generosity…William de Morgan, in a letter to Rackham, described his Midsummer-Night's Dream as 'the most splendid illustrated work of the century, so far.''

The present sheet illustrates the following passage from Act IV, Scene 1 of the play. As dawn breaks, Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons and fiancée of Theseus, have been celebrating the May morning and, accompanied by hounds, are about to embark on a hunt:

THESEUS:

Go, one of you, find out the forester;

For now our observation is perform'd;

And, since we have the vaward of the day,

My love shall hear the music of my hounds.

Uncouple in the western valley; let them go:

Dispatch, I say, and find the forester.

We will, fair queen, up to the mountain's top

And mark the musical confusion

Of hounds and echo in conjunction.

HIPPOLYTA:

I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,

When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear

With hounds of Sparta: never did I hear

Such gallant chiding; for, besides the groves,

The skies, the fountains, every region near

Seem'd all one mutual cry: I never heard

So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.

THESEUS

My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,

So flew'd, so sanded, and their heads are hung

With ears that sweep away the morning dew;

Crook-knee'd, and dewlapp'd like Thessalian bulls;

Slow in pursuit, but match'd in mouth like bells,

Each under each. A cry more tunable

Was never holla'd to, nor cheer'd with horn,

In Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly.

Judge when you hear.

Rackham worked tirelessly on the illustrations for A Midsummer Night's Dream, and took almost two years to complete the forty colour plates and thirty-four black and white illustrations for the book. A sketchbook of 1908, today in the collection of Columbia University in New York, contains over eighty preparatory studies for A Midsummer Night's Dream. (In the artist's own annotated copy of the published book, he noted that the settings for many of the illustrations were based on the countryside around Walberswick in Suffolk, where he had holidayed in 1907.) Rackham had always been especially fond of Shakespeare's play; as he wrote to the American publisher George Macy in 1936, 'I have done the Midsummer Night's Dream for instance & should like to do it any number of times.'

Seventy of Rackham's original drawings for A Midsummer Night's Dream, including the present sheet, were exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in London in 1908. As the critic Paul Konody noted of that exhibition, 'Rackham's name has become a household word and his position firmly established among the greatest illustrators of modern times...He reads the play, and when he comes across a passage or line that stirs his imagination he allows his mind to roam over the whole field of vision suggested by the poet…He is an artist to his fingertips, equipped with all the gifts that make for lasting fame.'

'Up to the Mountain's Top': Hippolyta and Theseus was purchased at the 1908 Leicester Galleries exhibition by the collector Edward John Power (1858-1918), and remained with his descendants until 2019. Other original drawings by Rackham for A Midsummer Night's Dream are today in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum, the New York Public Library, and a number of private collections.

Exhibitions

London, The Leicester Galleries, Exhibition of water-colour drawings illustrating Shakespeare's comedy "A midsummer-night's dream" by Arthur Rackham, R.W.S., 1908, no.50.

Artist description:

One of the famous and best-loved illustrators of his day, with a successful career which lasted for over forty years, Arthur Rackham provided illustrations for around 150 books and produced some 3,000 watercolours and drawings. He drew from a very early age, and soon after enrolling in evening classes at the Lambeth School of Art in 1884 began contributing illustrations to various newspapers and illustrated magazines such as The Westminster Budget and the Pall Mall Budget. His first real success, however, came with his illustrations for an edition of Grimm's Fairy Tales, published in 1900, which led to many further projects, including editions of Peter Pan, Gulliver's Travels, Rip Van Winkle, A

Midsummer Night's Dream and Andersen's Fairy Tales. Rackham's superb technique and imaginative compositions were greatly admired, and his reputation as an illustrator, particularly of children's books and fairy tales, was second to none. He exhibited his watercolours at both the Royal Academy and the Royal Society of Painters in Water-Colours, and won medals at exhibitions in Milan in 1906 and Barcelona in 1911. He also showed his drawings yearly at the Leicester Galleries in London, between 1906 and 1913.

In 1912 Rackham was honoured with a retrospective exhibition at the Societé Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and in 1919 was named a Master of the Art Workers Guild. By the 1920s Rackham's work had become extremely popular in America, and he began to sell his original drawings through the Scott & Fowles gallery in New York, as well as receiving commission for advertising images. He only paid one visit to America, however, in 1927. In the 1930s his new publisher, George Harrap, began producing books made with less expensive paper and with the illustrations printed and bound with the text rather than tipped-in separately. Rackham's last commission, from an American publisher, was for sixteen illustrations for an edition of Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows, published in 1940, after the artist's death.

Rackham's draughtsmanship was praised by his contemporaries, who elected him to the Royal Society of Painters in Water-Colours on his first application, as well as by art critics, one of whom wrote in 1906 that 'His admirable originality and exquisite technical skill have, within the last few years, gained him an assured place in the front rank of our water-colourists and draughtsmen; and to this place he has come not by fortunate accident, nor by the influence of powerful patrons, but solely by his own exertions...As a craftsman he has an extraordinary command over refinements of expression, a perfection of touch and a delicacy of hand which give rare distinction to everything he produces, and which, nevertheless, do not prevent him from attaining, when his subject requires it, the most satisfying vigour and decision. But in addition to this executive skill he has a faculty for seizing immediately upon the imaginative possibilities of the material he is considering.'