

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Theodor VON HOLST (London 1810 - London 1844)

The Witches' Sabbath (Walpurgisnacht)

Watercolour and gouache on paper, laid down on card.

Inscribed Elfin Ground in pencil on the reverse.

185 x 227 mm. (7 1/4 x 8 7/8 in.)

The attribution of this drawing to Theodor von Holst has been confirmed by Max Browne, who dates the sheet to c.1830-1835. The complex composition is a typical feature of the artist's draughtsmanship, and, as Browne notes, 'show Holst letting off artistic steam in a world that few other souls would or could venture into.' As Gert Schiff has noted, 'literary painter though he was, Von Holst hardly ever created illustrations but rather improvisations upon a given text. In his drawings, he starts by outlining the principal action with two, three, or more figures and then adds other motifs, rarely in the same size and quite often without relevance to the subject, sketching them around, in between, or even across the main incident. He thus creates confused, yet evocative, and, in the most literal sense, open-ended depictions which engage the viewer's fancy by an unresolved tension between the identifiable core and those added, incommensurate, and unexplained materials. One can find in these drawings a typical reflection of the romantic mind in all its impatience...'

A similar approach is also seen in Von Holst's paintings as, for example, in two large canvases inspired by Faust. One of these, A Scene from Goethe's 'Faust', was painted in 1833 and is now on loan to the Landesmuseum Oldenburg in Oldenburg, Germany. The other, a painting of Mephistopheles Holding a Goblet Leaps Above a Cauldron Before a Young Witch and Demonic Figures of 1834, is in the collection of Tate Britain in London. In both of these narrative paintings, as in the drawing here exhibited, Von Holst seems to have combined elements and characters from different parts of Goethe's tale.

Exhibitions

New York and London, Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd., Master Drawings, 2003, no.36.

Literature:

Max Browne, Theodor von Holst: His Art and The Pre-Raphaelites 1810-2010, exhibition catalogue, Cheltenham, 2010, pp.17-18, fig.8 (as Daemonic Revel, and dated c.1830).