

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Henry FUSELI (Zurich 1741 - Putney Hill 1825)

King Priam Begging Achilles to Return the Body of Hector

Pen and brown ink, with brown and grey washes, over a black chalk underdrawing.

A sketch of the head, arm and chest of Achilles drawn in pencil on the verso.

Inscribed (by the artist?) *Villa Borghese* in brown ink in the right margin.

Numbered 5370 in black ink on the verso.

264 x 364 mm. (10 3/8 x 14 3/8 in.) [sheet]

Watermark: An anchor in a circle surmounted by a star.

Drawn in Rome in c.1770-1771, not long after his arrival in the Eternal City, this large and highly finished sheet may be counted among the very finest works of Henry Fuseli's Italian period. It displays the artist's adoption of Neoclassical principles and his particular interest in the art of the ancient world and, in particular, Homeric subjects. As noted by the inscription 'Villa Borghese' in the margin of the present sheet, Fuseli has based his composition on part of an ancient Roman marble sarcophagus of c.240 BC that he would have seen in the Borghese collection in Rome, and which is now in the Louvre. While in Rome, Fuseli is known to have made numerous drawn copies of classical reliefs and other works of sculpture, as well as ancient vase paintings, and many of these copies seem to have been produced with a view towards translating them into specific original compositional ideas.

The subject of the present sheet is taken from the *Iliad*, and depicts the aged Priam, King of Troy, on his knees begging for Achilles to return to him the body of his son Hector, whom the Greek hero had killed. Hector had earlier slain Achilles's great friend Patroclus, and in revenge Achilles kills him and, treating the corpse with disrespect, refuses to return it. Escorted by the god Hermes, Priam enters the Greek camp with a chariot full of treasure. In supplication he pleads with Achilles to take pity on a father who has lost his son, and to return the body of Hector, invoking Achilles's father Peleus: '*Godlike Achilles, think of your own father, who is of my generation, and so is likewise on the sad threshold of old age. Perhaps his neighbours are troubling him, and there is no one to protect him from harm, or ward off ruin. But he at least can rejoice in the knowledge that you live, and each day brings the hope*

of seeing you return from Troy. While I, I am a victim of sad fate. Of the best of my sons, the best in all of Troy, not one is left...Most of them have fallen in furious battle, and the defender of the city and its people, my prime recourse, Hector, you have killed, as he fought for his country. I come now to the ships to beg his corpse from you, bringing a princely ransom. Respect the gods, Achilles, and show mercy towards me, remembering your own father, for I am more to be pitied than he, since I have brought myself to do what no other man on earth would do, I have lifted to my lips the hand of the man who killed my sons.' Moved by Priam's words, Achilles agrees to return Hector's body to the Trojans, and to allow for a temporary truce while the funeral rites are held.

In this powerful drawing, characterized by dramatic lighting and a bold composition that fills the entire sheet, Fuseli has contrasted the proud but physically frail figure of Priam with the muscular and yet melancholic warrior Achilles. The vivid expressions of both the protagonists may reflect Fuseli's knowledge of the scientific studies in physiognomy developed by the Swiss writer Johann Kaspar Lavater, a close friend of the artist since their schooldays in Zurich, whose treatise on the subject was published while Fuseli was in Rome.

It was during his eight-year stay in Italy that Fuseli began to develop a reputation as a virtuoso draughtsman. As Paul Ganz has written, *'The large number of designs from the Roman period, which are still extant, fully reveal the mature perfection of Fuseli's style of drawing and that versatility of expression which enabled him to solve any problem. His compositions no longer show any signs of effort, but are the vigorous and complete expression of his imagination...This style of the Roman period was no mere cartoon art, although he learned from classical models; his aim was not classical beauty but life and movement, often violent movement in which passion finds its most complete expression...It is astonishing with what assurance Fuseli handled pen and pencil and what beautiful effects he could produce by applying brush and wash to his designs. Each design has its own individual character and expresses the artist's intention with a vehemence of which only Fuseli's passionate spirit and genius were at that time capable.'* More recently, Martin Myrone has noted that *'The drawings that survive from Fuseli's Roman period certainly demonstrate a restless graphic experimentation, as the linearity already apparent in his English drawings is refined into the most economical notational system. Although there are sketches that appear to be based on specific paintings and sculptures he could have seen in Rome, these are generally free interpretations, emphasizing a sense of dynamic virility.'*

The Fuseli scholar Gert Schiff has noted parallels between the present sheet and a number of drawings from the artist's so-called 'Roman Album' of c.1770 now in the British Museum, in particular a composition of *Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus*, which Fuseli based on a contemporary drawing by his friend in Rome, the Swedish sculptor Johan Tobias Sergel. Another close stylistic comparison may be made with two other drawings from Fuseli's 'Roman Album' in the British Museum; a study of *Zethos, Antiope and Anthion*, which is a free copy of a Greek sculpted marble relief of *Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes* that the artist also studied in the Villa Borghese, and a *Relief with Bacchus* copied from a sculpture then in the Villa Albani and now in the Museo Torlonia in Rome.

Over three decades later, Fuseli treated the same subject of *Priam Pleading with Achilles for the Body of Hector* in an oil sketch of an upright format, painted in 1803 as part of a series of seventeen sketches intended to illustrate Alexander Pope's English translation of Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, published in 1805; the original painting is lost and is only known through a reproductive engraving⁹. The kneeling figure of Priam in this vertical composition, like that in the present sheet, may also be based on the Borghese sarcophagus.

As has recently been noted, '*Fuseli would remain an indefatigable draughtsman till the end of his life; and for him drawing would always retain its capacity to operate as a clandestine area of creative freedom – a space where he could be at liberty to break the rules, and give untrammelled expression to his genius.*'

An early owner of the present sheet was Susan North (née Coutts), Countess of Guilford (1771-1837), who was the daughter of Fuseli's patron Thomas Coutts and had known the artist since her childhood.

Fuseli was a close friend of the Countess and a frequent guest at her home in Putney Hill in London, and in fact died there in April 1825. As Fuseli's early biographer John Knowles noted, in the dedication of his book to the Countess of Guilford, '*I feel a degree of diffidence in dedicating to your Ladyship the Life and Posthumous Works of Henry Fuseli; because, with regard to the former, no one is better acquainted with the extent of his talents, or can form a more accurate opinion of the powers of his conversation, and the excellent qualities of his head and heart, than yourself.*' This exceptional sheet was one of over eight hundred drawings by Fuseli inherited by the Countess's daughter Susan, Baroness North (1797-1884), which were eventually sold and dispersed at auction in London in 1885.

Exhibitions

Newcastle upon Tyne, Hatton Gallery, *Italian and Other Drawings 1500-1800*, 1974, no.117; London, Courtauld Institute Galleries, *Italian and other Drawings 1500-1800, from the Ralph Holland Collection*, 1975, no.74.

Literature:

Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli 1741-1825*, Zürich, 1973, Vol.I, p.86 and 311, p.441, no.384, Vol.II, p.85, pl.384 (where dated 1770-1771); Ralph Holland, *Italian and Other Drawings 1500-1800*, exhibition catalogue, Newcastle, 1974, no.117, pl.XXXVI; Nancy L. Pressly, *The Fuseli Circle in Rome: Early Romantic Art of the 1770s*, exhibition catalogue, New Haven, 1979, p.30, under no.30; Hamburg, Le Claire Kunst, *Cavalier d'Arpino to Nolde: Watercolours, Drawings and Oil Sketches by European Masters*, 2013, unpaginated, no.6.

Artist description:

Although born and brought up in Switzerland, the artist and writer Henry Fuseli spent most of his career in England, apart from a period of about a year in Germany and some eight years in Italy. The son of a minor Swiss painter of portraits and landscapes from an old Zurich family, Fuseli was educated at the Collegium Carolinum in the city which was the intellectual and literary capital of Switzerland in the 18th century. Fuseli became part of a highly educated circle that included his fellow student, the poet and physiognomist Johan Kaspar Lavater, and the historian Johan Jakob Bodmer, who was his teacher and first instilled in the young student an abiding love of the works of Shakespeare and John Milton, as well as Dante, Homer and the Nibelungenlied. Fuseli was extremely well read and became proficient in several languages apart from his native German, including English, French, Italian, Latin and Greek. Destined by his father for the church, he was ordained into the Zwinglian Swiss Reformed Church at the age of twenty, at the same time as Lavater. In 1762 Fuseli and Lavater published an attack on a corrupt local magistrate and the following year had to leave Switzerland to avoid the repercussions caused the official's powerful family. After several months in Berlin, where Fuseli came into contact with several German writers, he settled in London in 1764. The following year he published a translation of the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann's writings on Greek art into English and visited France as tutor to the young Lord Chewton, the teenage son of Lord Waldegrave, meeting Jean-Jacques Rousseau and David Hume in Paris.

While Fuseli had drawn since his childhood, during his early years in London he expressed himself mainly in his writings. In 1768, however, he met Sir Joshua Reynolds, the President of the Royal

Academy, who encouraged him to become a painter and to travel to Rome. With the support of several friends and patrons, including the wealthy banker Thomas Coutts, he was able to spend the years between 1770 and 1778 studying in Italy, mainly in Rome but with visits to Naples, Florence and Venice.

A passionate admirer of Michelangelo and the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel in particular, which he copied extensively, Fuseli became part of a circle of foreign-born artists working in Rome that included Nicolai Abildgaard, Thomas Banks, John Brown and Johan Tobias Sergel. From Italy he occasionally sent back works to be shown at the Royal Academy and the Society of Artists. After his return to London he began to exhibit regularly at the Royal Academy, enjoying some success in the 1780s with such imaginative, grandiose and inventive compositions as *The Nightmare*, shown to considerable acclaim at the Royal Academy in 1782 and arguably his most famous painting, *Macbeth and the Three Witches and Lady Macbeth Walking in her Sleep*. He was inspired by performances of Shakespeare and other works on the London stage, and a theatrical influence is manifest in many of his early paintings. Fuseli continued to enjoy the patronage of Coutts and also received commissions from the Liverpool banker, lawyer and abolitionist William Roscoe, while among his pupils was the amateur painter William Lock of Norbury. Another early supporter was the influential publisher Joseph Johnson, through whom Fuseli met William Blake, who was to become a good friend, and Mary Wollstonecraft, who fell in love with him. Fuseli was elected an Associate of the Academy in 1788 and a Royal Academician in 1790.

Throughout his career, Fuseli's work remained deeply rooted in literature. From 1786 he produced nine paintings to illustrate John Boydell's 'Shakespeare Gallery', and a few years later began his single greatest task; a series of more than fifty paintings of subjects taken from the writings of John Milton. The project took a decade to come to fruition, and the paintings – many of them on a monumental scale – were exhibited, as the 'Milton Gallery', on Pall Mall in London in 1799 and 1800 but with little commercial success, and the artist came close to financial ruin. Fuseli served as Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy Schools from 1799 to 1805 and again from 1810 onwards, and as Keeper from 1784. Among his students at the Royal Academy were William Etty, Benjamin Robert Haydon, Edwin Landseer, John Linnell, William Mulready and David Wilkie. Although Fuseli was much respected in artistic circles in London as a member of the Royal Academy and a noted Professor, his paintings and drawings were little known outside of a small group of aristocratic private collectors, and he was largely forgotten by the middle of the 19th century. It was not until the centenary of Fuseli's death that his work became known to a wider audience, when an exhibition of 361 drawings and paintings, mainly from Swiss and English collections, was held at the Kunsthau in Zurich in 1926. In 1941 an even larger exhibition was held at the same museum, which today houses the most comprehensive collection of Fuseli's oeuvre.

Fuseli occupies an important place in the history of drawing in Britain. His intellectual background, which set him apart from almost any other artist working in England at the same time, is reflected in his conception of his own art, and this is especially true in his drawings. Around 1,400 drawings by the artist are known today, of which the largest single group, amounting to over six hundred sheets, is in the Kunsthau in Zurich. Relatively few of his drawings may be related to finished paintings, and most seem to have been done as independent exercises. As Paul Ganz has noted, in one of the earliest modern surveys of the artist's output as a draughtsman, 'Fuseli's drawings are less the product of his age than his paintings; they are the direct expression of his creative power and reveal his personal outlook and his fiery artistic temperament...In the drawings the artist's genius has unfolded itself in a free and unrestricted manner without regard to contemporary taste; they therefore open the way to a proper understanding of his art and reveal what was unusual in it and far ahead of his time.' Similarly, a more recent writer has commented that 'Fuseli concentrated especially on original subjects and inventive interpretations of those subjects, especially in drawings. Indeed, the drawings are the most immediate evidence of the sparkling genius, the tenderness, the intense and highly eccentric individuality that was Fuseli's.' The majority of Fuseli's extant drawings date from the 1770s onwards, as much of his earliest output was lost in a fire at the home of his friend and patron Joseph Johnson in 1770.

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