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For and Against Winckelmann

I. An academy painting

Assembled in a dimly lit, windowless room is a group of men clad in late eighteenth-century garb, looking on more or less attentively as the raised wrist of the unclothed model seated at right is inserted into a sling hanging from the ceiling; a second nude in the foreground appears to be preparing himself for similar treatment. Johann Zoffany's *Portraits of the Academicians of the Royal Academy of 1771/72* (Fig. 1) might at first glance be mistaken for the celebration of some mysterious ritual. Far from being members of an obscure sect, however, the men are actually members of the Royal Academy, captured at a key moment in what was then the standard course of training for artists: the moment when the model is positioned ready for a nude study.¹ Zoffany thus chose as his motif the most important skill required for the genre of history painting, which in those days was ranked higher than still life, landscape, portrait, and genre painting. This was the hierarchy upheld by the

academy's founders (assembled here at left) and by all those who taught there, including Zoffany himself, here shown seated at left, palette in hand. What elevates his group portrait to a history painting is not least the fact that its composition was modeled on Raphael's fresco *The School of Athens* (1510–11).

The thirty-three academicians are grouped close together but are singled out at the same time. Is this merely a consequence of Zoffany's obsession with minutiae, evident in several other works of his? Or is he trying to stress that these are all individuals, engaged in a discussion of some weighty matter? The second nude model is portrayed staring out of the canvas in a way that suggests that we, too, are expected to take a stand.

II. Bildung—the ideal of cultivation

The painting marks an important point in the development of London's Royal Academy of Arts, which had been founded just a few years earlier in 1768. Having moved into its new premises in the recently completed Somerset House in late 1771, it now boasted a prestigious address on the banks of the Thames. This, to Zoffany's mind, presented an ideal opportunity not only to highlight the principles of the training provided by the Academy and the long tradition underpinning them, but also,



Fig. 1
Johann Zoffany
Portraits of the Academicians of the Royal Academy in London, 1771/72
The Royal Collection, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Left:
Anton von Maron
Johann Joachim Winckelmann, 1768 (detail)
Klassik Stiftung Weimar/Museen

by bringing together so many illustrious experts in a single work, to raise art's standing as an honorable profession. The purpose and relevance of the male nude are here being debated at the highest level.

Having lost ground to the female nude preferred by Late Baroque and Rococo artists, the male nude did indeed enjoy something of a comeback starting in the seventeenth-sixties. Most of the male figures depicted without clothes were characters from Christian or pagan mythology. The purpose, however, was not to embody the ideal virtues of the rich and powerful; society had become too mobile and too middle-class for that. These nude men were rather figures of projection for each individual viewer and as such were supposed to educate and to edify.² The nudes of Greek and Roman Antiquity, brought back to life by the artists of the Renaissance and the Baroque era, were once again elevated to the ideal that all artists should aspire to.

This renewed interest in Classical statuary can be traced back to Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), who in 1755 published his groundbreaking *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerei*.³ His recommendation that contemporary artists model their works on the sculptures of Ancient Greece was based on a perception of those works as embodying the ideal whole man. He emphasized the way the parts of the body were balanced in both size and position, and rejected

categorically both individual proportions and the visualization of strong emotions. The “noble simplicity and serene grandeur” that he identified as the “defining characteristics of the Greek masterpieces” were to be found in both “posture and expression.”⁴ Winckelmann's friend, the painter Anton Raphael Mengs (1728–1779), took this to heart in works such as *Perseus and Andromeda* (1773–78), in which the nude figure of Perseus is modeled on the *Apollo Belvedere* (ca. 350–325 BC, Rome, Musei Vaticani), a statue much revered by the German scholar.⁵

Winckelmann's next book, a much larger and more ambitious history of ancient art called *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764), soon became a European bestseller, and excerpts from the same in translation were printed for example in several English newspapers.⁶ In this work, as in his first treatise, Winckelmann treated the artful representation of the male body in Classical and Hellenistic Greece as a reflection of what was then reality, and repeatedly identified freedom as the most important precondition of such bodies and of such art. This, of course, was also an oblique way of criticizing his own, unreformed times.⁷ The Age of Pericles was singled out for special praise, which is why his encomium to beautiful male bodies with their passions stoically reined in was also popular in revolutionary France. The resolute composure of the figures in the canvases of Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) is proof of this. The poses of the heroes in his monumental *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799; Fig. 2), despite the high



Fig. 2
Jacques-Louis David
The Intervention of the Sabine Women, 1799
Musée du Louvre, Paris

drama of the action, even look light-hearted, more like boys fighting in fun.

The ideal of composure (“Just as the depths of the ocean are eternally peaceful no matter how fierce the tempest on the surface, so it is that the statues of the Greeks express nobility and restraint even in suffering”⁸) was also the ideal underpinning Weimar Classicism and hence the Weimar prize for draftsmanship awarded under the aegis of Johann Wolfgang Goethe from 1799 to 1805. The artists to enjoy Goethe’s esteem was the Neoclassicist Asmus Jacob Carstens (1754–98), whose *Embarkation of Megapenthes* (1794; Fig. 3), reworked innumerable times, features a plethora of male nudes combining Michelangelesque physicality with Winckelmann-style emotional restraint.⁹ Even Friedrich Schinkel’s painting *View of the Flower of Greece* of 1825 (Fig. 4), which is known to us only through Wilhelm Ahlborn’s copy and shows men in “heroic nudity” building a temple of virtue, can still be regarded as a work that is both edifying and educating in the sense intended by Winckelmann.¹⁰ Schinkel (1781–1841) wanted the harmony of man and nature that he believed to have prevailed in the Age of Pericles to serve as a model for the Prussia of his own age. His landscape, he said, showed a “highly developed people’ living in peace and using their environment in order to create a ‘heightened enjoyment of life for the individual and the people as a whole.’”¹¹ Drudgery here looks no worse than a work-out in pursuit of a perfectly toned body.

Nowhere did the Greek model have a more important role to play than at the great art academies. As in the seventeenth century, academy students were allowed to draw from life only after they had sharpened their powers of perception by devoting a considerable amount of time to the in-depth study of ancient models; hence the large collections of plaster-cast copies held by most institutions. That the budding artists themselves were not entirely convinced by this method is borne out by a 1779 drawing by Edward Francis Burney (1860–1848) called *The Antique School at Old Somerset House*, in which the students poring over their drawing boards and their instructors clad in faded blue or yellow frock coats are all but dwarfed by the larger-than-life statues in a range of heroic poses filling the high, dust-laden hall. That the teaching here has lost all touch with reality needs no further comment.

Another work with an ironic take on the academy was produced some forty years later by the art student Christen Købke (1810–48), who by this time had already won admission to the nude class. His young man shown in the Copenhagen academy’s plaster-cast collection (page 173)¹² appears to have been temporarily overtaken by the Stendhal Syndrome, psychic problems brought on by an excess of high art. The maimed body of Poseidon, whose cast he is staring at, belonged, like the original frieze above it, to the Elgin Marbles, which the British Museum in London had purchased just a few years previously; these masterpieces by Phidias, taken mainly from

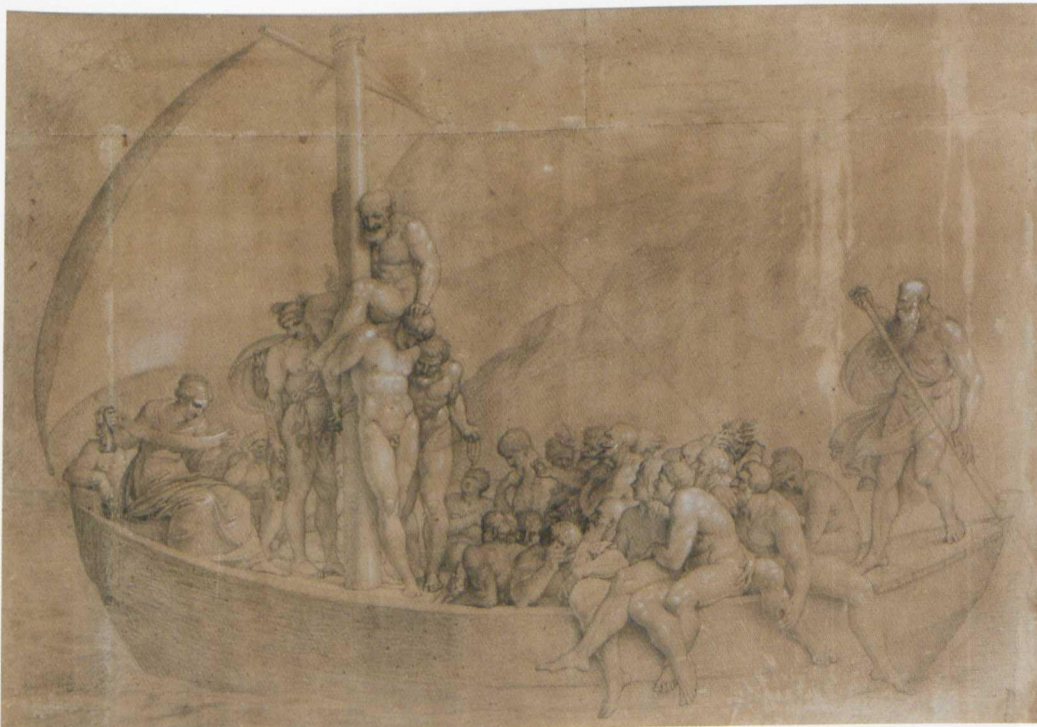


Fig. 3
Asmus Jacob Carstens
The Embarkation of Megapenthes, 1794
Klassik Stiftung Weimar/Museen

the Parthenon Temple in Athens, had sparked off yet another new wave of enthusiasm for Antiquity in Europe. The black-clad young man is apparently so dazzled by the hyperreality of so many ideal male bodies that he has to steady himself against the console, even while his eyes remain fixed on the midriff stretched out in front of him. The handkerchief in his hand, the strongest color accent in the work, emphasizes the distance kept to the objects he is marveling at.

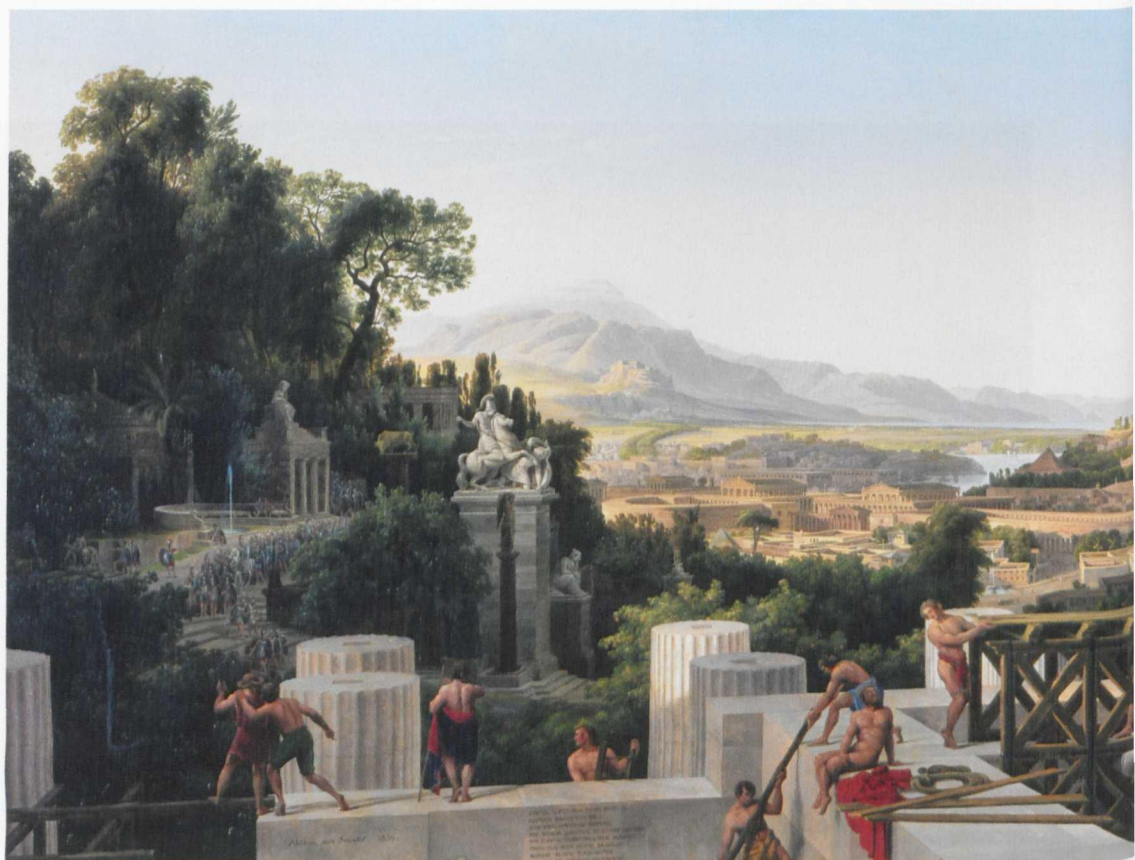
Preserved only in tantalizing fragments, the art of Ancient Greece and Rome was as greatly admired as its loss was lamented around 1800. But it was also a millstone round the neck of many an aspiring young artist. These are all points that viewers of Zoffany's painting would have expected the academicians busy positioning their model to take account of. They could scarcely have anticipated the much more vehement and more radical reactions that the turbulent period then just dawning had in store.

III. Against Winckelmann

Not long after the unveiling of Zoffany's painting of the academicians, a group of young artists, now regarded as part of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, rose up in protest against Winckelmann's calls for emotional restraint. Overstepping the traditional canon of emotions developed during the Renaissance and codified during the Baroque era,¹³ these

artists, all of whom had bourgeois origins, embarked on an exploration of what newly emancipated art could do, and hence on an exploration of their own psyches.

The chief protagonist of the countermovement that Werner Busch once described as "Classicism with pathos"¹⁴ was Johann Heinrich Füssli, better known as Henry Fuseli (1741–1825), who deliberately developed his own idea of how the male body should look. As Winckelmann had been a friend of his father, Johann Caspar Füssli, he had been more influenced than most by the great archaeologist's ideals.¹⁵ In 1765 he published his own English translation of Winckelmann's seminal *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke* and even in 1770, his first year in Rome, he was still going into raptures over the "truly great Winckelmann."¹⁶ Not for much longer, however. In a letter to Johann Caspar Lavater of 1777, he used a critique of Winckelmann's friend Mengs to explain where he now differed. After at first coolly commending Mengs for "not having written something not bad about Raphael's expression," he goes on to ask, "but who would have thought that Mengs himself had expression?"¹⁷ In a series of lectures given in 1801, Fuseli explicitly took a stand against Winckelmann by averring that the *Laocoön* group, far from exemplifying Classical self-control and emotional restraint, in fact embodied far more anguish than the latter had been prepared to admit.¹⁸



In his own art, however, Fuseli aimed not just for expression but for *extremes* of expression. What fascinated him, according to one of the aphorisms he took to penning from 1788 onwards, was this: “The being seized by an enormous passion, be it joy or grief, hope or despair, loses the character of its own individual expression, and is absorbed by the power of the feature that attracts it: Niobe and her family are assimilated by extreme anguish; Ugolino is petrified by the fate that sweeps his sons.”¹⁹

Fuseli himself therefore selected subjects that would allow him to depict figures, and above all men, “seized by an enormous passion”;²⁰ his works are populated by the heroes of Shakespeare’s dramas, by figures from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, or from the *Edda* saga or the *Song of the Nibelung*, all of which he knew well thanks to Johann Jakob Bodmer (1698-1783), his tutor and mentor in Zurich.²¹ The Nordic sagas, in particular, chimed well with this larger aim, if only because they were so much older: having been transcribed by the courtly poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they were sufficiently far removed from Fuseli’s own age to be viewed as showing human behavior “unspoiled” by civilization.²² Like many of his contemporaries, Fuseli, too, felt a deep yearning for all things “primitive.”²³

Thor Battering the Midgard Serpent, which Fuseli gave to the Royal Academy in 1790 as a token of thanks for having

been admitted to that hallowed institution two years earlier, is also a scene from a Nordic saga: Thor has caught the beast of the title using an ox head as bait. Fuseli shows him pulling the chained monster out of the sea while raising his arm ready to deal the deadly hammer blow. The giant Hymir, who moments later will be driven by sheer terror to sever the line and so to save the snake, is shown cowering in the stern of the little boat.

The pale and finely modeled figure of Thor is thrown sharply into relief by the misty, dark gray background. His sinewy body, which seems to consist entirely of clearly delineated muscles, looks as solid as if it were armored. This makes him the very antithesis of the shiny black snake, whose vaguely defined skin markings merge imperceptibly with the swirling dark waters.²⁴ And whereas Thor is tensed to the limit, one arm held aloft, the other at his side, his legs braced against the bow, Hymir cowers over the rudder in an attempt to make himself as small as possible—an act which likewise calls for a tensing of the muscles. The heads of the two men are either covered up or deep in shade, as if they had no mental control over the energies about to burst out of them.

The heroic body has antecedents, the most important of which was one of two horse tamers on the Quirinal Hill, a work that in those days was attributed to Phidias and was a constant source of inspiration for Fuseli. The dramatically low angle of vision and overdrawn anatomy that seems to show

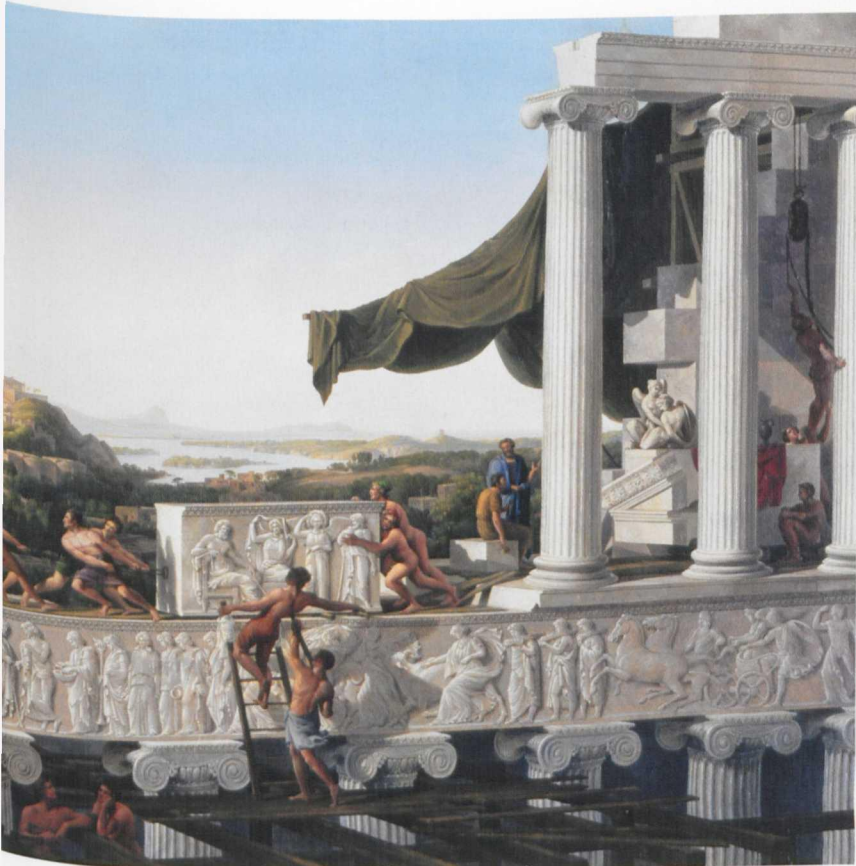


Fig. 4
August Wilhelm Julius Ahlborn, after Karl Friedrich Schinkel
View of the Flower of Greece, 1836
Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

every single muscle is reminiscent of Mannerist works such as those of Hendrik Goltzius (page 162). Indeed, some of Fuseli's contemporaries saw "manner" and even "caricature" in his works.²⁵ But nor would it be right to see them as one last flowering of "the anatomical and illusionistic accomplishments of Classicism and Mannerism" at the level of "high art—for which read artist's art."²⁶ On the contrary, what Fuseli did was to invest his Antique models with new meaning. Instead of emphasizing power, beauty, and individuality, which is what the Mannerists and older artists had sought to do, his chief concern was the subjective experience of bodies, expressively conveyed. Fuseli, in other words, wanted viewers to have a hand in shaping his works by "using their own powers of imaginative empathy to reconcile form and content."²⁷ The fact that his figures are easy to read is of course conducive to such involvement, as Busch noted; but so is the unnatural tensing of all his heroes' muscles and their conspicuous "overdrawing."

As has already been asserted repeatedly, what makes Fuseli's protagonists so striking is the way they relate to their pictorial space and so become ciphers for something else.²⁸ How we read them depends very much on their position in the composition. Fuseli seems to experiment with this particular aspect in *Prometheus Rescued by Hercules* (1781–1785) (page 190), in which the silhouette of Prometheus' torso is very similar to

that of Hercules. Both have one leg extended and one leg bent. But while Hercules is mustering all his strength ready to shoot with an invisible bow, Prometheus' writhing is expressive only of despair, anticipated pain, and the urge to flee.

Strikingly, Fuseli insists on tensing *all* the muscles of his protagonists' bodies even when this is not called for by the situation, as in *Satan Summoning His Legions* (1795–1800), which was one of the illustrations for Du Roveray's edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* of 1802.²⁹ A raised arm would have been perfectly sufficient here, and even in contrapposto there was never any danger of his falling over. Fuseli, however, gives us the impression that there is no place on Satan's body that is not informed by the act of summoning. It is the same whichever way we look, so much so that we cannot help but feel it ourselves.

Yet even Fuseli's "overdrawing," anatomical imprecision, and distortions³⁰ are likely to make the viewer engage even more intensively with his figures in the grip of overwhelming emotion. It is as if their passions had physically remolded their bodies. This form of proto-Expressionism makes the subject of the artist merge with the subject of his picture. Impressed by the aesthetic of the genius then circulating, Fuseli really did believe that what he was depicting was first and foremost himself; his works can thus be interpreted as explorations of his own expressive compass. This position

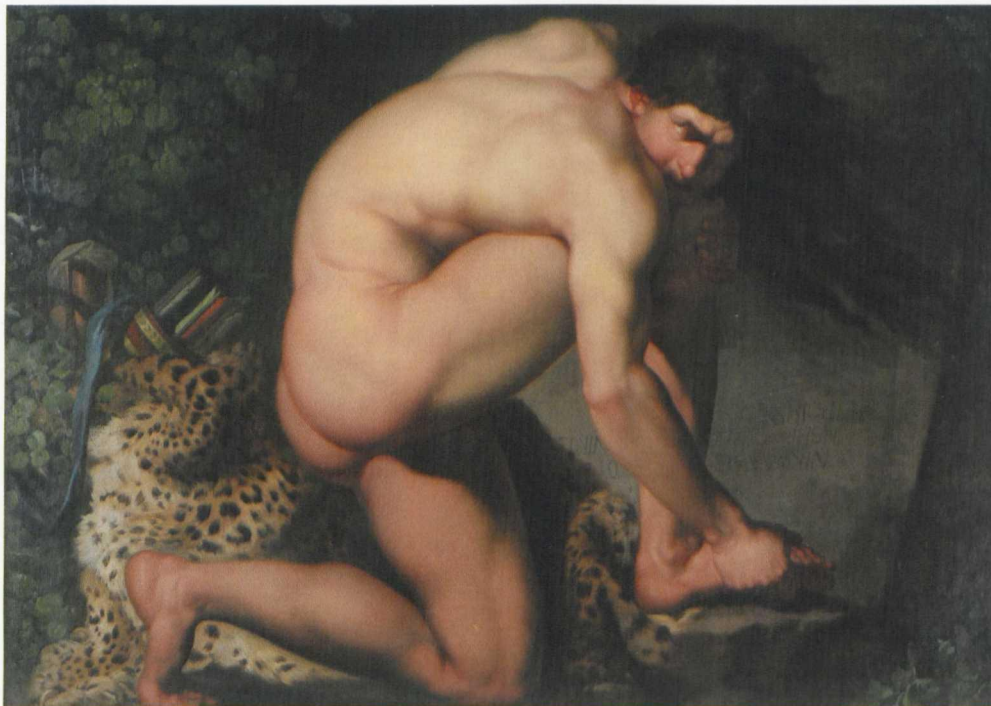


Fig. 5
Nicolai Abildgaard
Wounded Philoctetes, 1775
Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

informs another of his aphorisms: “In following too closely a model, there is danger in mistaking the individual for Nature herself; in relying only on the schools, the deviation into manner seems inevitable: what then remains, but to transpose *yourself* into your subject?”³¹

As Martin Myrone has recently noted, Fuseli’s bodies also helped him to sort out his own passions and self-projections, and to communicate these to his viewers. Yet his pictures were more than merely “hedonistic” and “devoid of any particular political intent,” even if their content—the society presented in the *Edda* illustrations, for example—was not only far removed from the realities of late eighteenth-century London but also “unrealizable, and in effect undesirable.”³² There can be no doubt that Fuseli’s fantastical and unrealistic art helped both him and his first viewers to deal with their own and others’ irrational and above all destructive impulses—at least on an intellectual level. It provided them not just with a counterfoil but also with the necessary supplement to Winckelmann’s ideal of cultivation and its political implications.

IV. Fellow disputants and one mediator

Fuseli gathered round him a whole host of artists from several different countries—and most of them quite young—during his stay in Rome from 1770 to 1778.³³ Among them were the

Englishman Thomas Banks, the Scots John Brown and Alexander Runciman, and the Swede Johan Tobias Sergel. They each added facets of their own to Fuseli’s exploration of eruptions of strong feeling in art. The “Master of the Giants” whose identity is still controversial,³⁴ for example, took the Mannerist distortion of proportions to an extreme.

The Danish artist Nicolai Abildgaard (1743–1809) combined Fuseli’s expressiveness with a new brand of painterly sensitivity. His small painting *Adrastos Slays Himself on Atys’ Tomb* (ca. 1774/75; page 187) and the magnum opus of his Roman period, *Wounded Philoctetes* (1774–1775; Fig. 5) show two opposite poles in terms of posture. While Ajax is depicted outstretched in diagonal freefall, Philoctetes is coiled up in a ball. The one is giving free rein to the pain his body is feeling, while the other is trying to squeeze it out of existence. The scene of the action in both cases is a flat stage; the naked bodies contrast sharply with the dark background, which has the effect of turning them into expressive ciphers. Abildgaard, too, makes deliberate use of anatomical distortions to enhance the expressiveness of his figures. As tensed as they are, however, his nudes, unlike Fuseli’s, do not have bodies made of steel, but on the contrary look pliant, fleshy, almost passive. Abildgaard thus adds an element of vulnerability to the pain his figures are enduring—a vulnerability that appeals directly to our sympathies.

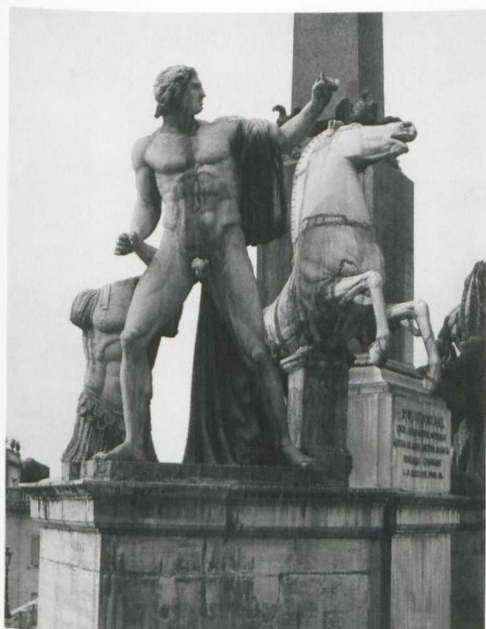


Fig. 7
The Horse Tamer
Roman Copy of a Greek Original
Piazza del Quirinale, Rome



Fig. 8
Johann August Nahl the Younger
Zeus and Ganymede, ca. 1780
Private ownership

Fuseli's male nudes were also an important source of inspiration for the visionary loner William Blake (1757–1827), whose illuminated books propagated a holistic view of man which might almost be said to anticipate the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93), for example, marks a clear break with Emanuel Swedenborg's clear-cut division of humanity into good and evil, symbolized by mind and body: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell."³⁵ Blake counters with the assertion that "Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy. Energy is Eternal Delight."³⁶

One of the plates in this book,³⁷ which Blake would later repeat in one of his great prints, *The Good and Evil Angels* (1795/1805) (Fig. 6),³⁸ presents the problematic division of physical energy held in check by morality and the truly free spirit, here rendered as two sinewy male nudes floating

alongside each other in space, albeit without touching. While physical energy bursts forth from the flames of Hell with a violence worthy of Fuseli himself, the free spirit stares anxiously into space, slightly tensed as if worrying that something might happen to his child. Despite the blown back hair, his body still accords with Winckelmann's ideal. It is as if Blake were here presenting two opposing views of the male nude side by side, possibly with the aim of reconciling the two.

In two of his "prophecies," *Europe* (1793) and *America* (1794), Blake identified the two opposite poles of energy and spirit with a personification of revolutionary energy called Orc and a personification of the established order called Urizen. This allowed him to comment on the revolutionary developments of his age on a mythical level, which is why there are good reasons for linking his *Good and Evil Angels* with the most pressing political problems of the day: progress towards a more humane social order cannot be achieved by suppressing political forces in the name of some preconceived ideal. Although widely derided by his peers, Blake succeeded in creating a memorable image of a problem which has lost none of its topicality even today.

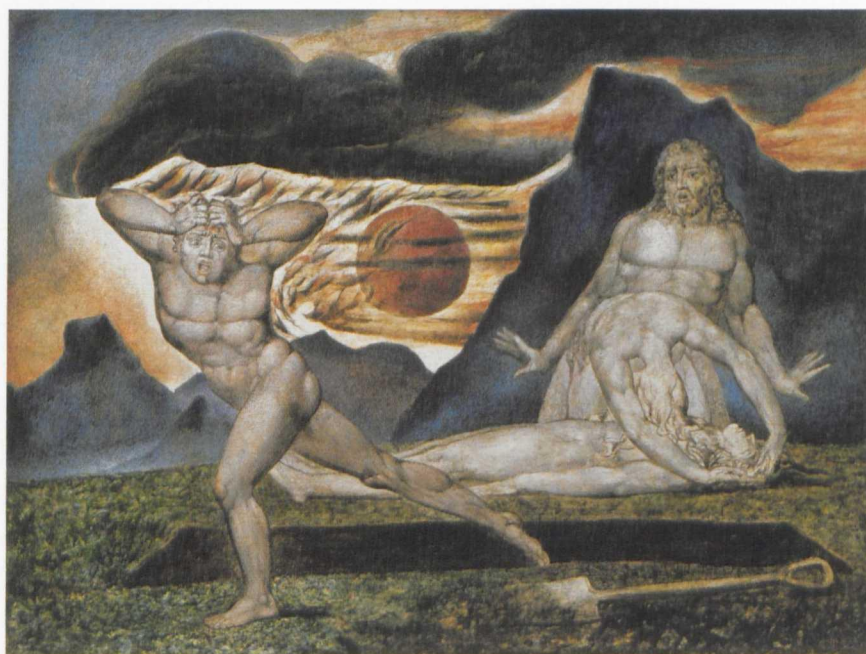


Fig. 6
William Blake
Adam and Eve find the Corpse of Abel, ca. 1826
Tate Britain, London

- 1 See Mary Anne Stevens's description of this work in exh. cat. New Haven/London 2011, pp. 218–21 (no. 44).
- 2 See Liebsch 2006.
- 3 Later published in English as *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*.
- 4 Winckelmann 1948, here p. 20.
- 5 See Steffi Roettgen's description of this work in exh. cat. Dresden 2001, pp. 244–7 (no. 78).
- 6 Craske 1997, p. 25.
- 7 Winckelmann 1948, pp. 3–9; Winckelmann 1913, p. 207.
- 8 Winckelmann 1948, p. 20.
- 9 Fernow 1806. For a critique of this position, see Hennig 2005, pp. 9–57.
- 10 See Lucius Grisebach's entry on this work in *Gemälde der deutschen Romantik* 1985, p. 98.
- 11 Quoted from Steven Moyano, "Quality vs. History: Schinkel's Altes Museum and Prussian Arts Policy," in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 72, no. 4, Dec. 1990, p. 606
- 12 See Kasper Monrad's description of this work in exh. cat. Los Angeles 1993, pp. 144–7 (no. 57).
- 13 See Kirchner 1991.
- 14 Busch 2009, here p. 47.
- 15 Walter Muschg, "Foreword," Fuseli 1942, pp. 13–43, here pp. 15/16.
- 16 Füssli to Lavater, Rome, 30.7.1770, in *ibid.*, pp. 157–60, here p. 159.
- 17 Füssli to Lavater, Rome, 14.7.1777, in *ibid.*, pp. 175–8, here p. 177.
- 18 Busch 2009, p. 45.
- 19 Fuseli 1944, p. 90 (Aphorism 89). See also Aphorism 178 (p. 132): "The passions that sway features and limbs equally reside, fluctuate, flash and lower in color."
- 20 Craske 1997, p. 239.
- 21 Busch 2009, p. 43.
- 22 See Klemm 2005.
- 23 See Martin Myrone's description of this work in *Gothic Nightmares*, 2006. p. 88 (no. 44).
- 24 Myrone 2005, p. 268.
- 25 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote of Fuseli in 1797 as follows: "Manner in all things, especially anatomy, hence the postures," Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Über Heinrich Füebli's Arbeiten" (1797), in: *ibid.*, *Werke, section 1, vol. 47*, Weimar 1896, p. 347; see also Füssli 1942, p. 168: Lavater, writing in Zurich on 4.11.1772, told Herder, "What he draws is not a portrait—yet all his features are true, albeit caricature."
- 26 Hofmann 1973, here p. 50.
- 27 Busch 2009, pp. 49/50.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 29 See Hattendorf 1997, here p. 86.
- 30 Myrone writes of his "manifest shortcomings as a draughtsman and technical painter," cf. Myrone 2005, p. 268, and explains what he means by this in his discussion of the painting of Thor in *Gothic Nightmares* 2006, p. 88 (No. 44).
- 31 Fuseli 1944, p. 115 (Aphorism 144, italics as in the original). See also Aphorism 118 (p. 105): "As far as the medium of an art can be taught, so far is the artist confined to the class of mere mechanics; he only then elevates himself to talent, when he imports to his method, or his tool, some unattainable or exclusive excellence of his own."
- 32 Myrone 2005, pp. 268 and 264.
- 33 Pressly 1979.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 90–5.
- 35 lake 1790–1793, p. 3.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 See Robin Hamlyn's comments on this sheet in exh. cat. London/New York 2000, p. 218.