

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

JOHANN HEINRICH FÜSSLI, R.A.

Zurich 1741 - London 1825
British school

**THE MEETING OF SIR HUON OF BORDEAUX AND SCHERASMIN IN THE
LIBANON CAVE (FROM WIELAND'S OBERON)**

Oil on canvas
H. 0,61 m; W. 0,45 m

DATE: 1804-1805

PROVENANCE:

Benjamin Sharpe, Hanwell Park, Middlesex
Peter Reinhart, Winterthur

LITERATURE:

- A. Federmann, *Johann Heinrich Füssli: Dichter und Maler 1741 - 1825*, Zürich and Leipzig, 1927, pl. 15.
E. R. Beutler, *Johann Heinrich Füssli: Ansprache bei Eröffnung der Füssli-Ausstellung des Frankfurter Goethemuseums am 27. August 1938*, Halle an der Saale, 1939, p. 20.
E. Jaloux, *Johann-Heinrich Füssli*, Montreux, 1942, p. 148 (ill.).
G. Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli*, Zurich, 1973, vol. 1, p. 325 and p. 565, no. 1219 ; vol. 2 p. 378 (ill.).
G. Schiff and P. Viotto, *Tout l'oeuvre peint de Füssli*, Milan, 1977, p. 105, no. 249.
D.H. Weinglas, *Prints and Engraved Illustrations by and after Henry Fuseli*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 291.

EXHIBITED:

- Zurich, Kunsthhaus, *Johann-Heinrich Füssli - Henry Fuseli (1741 - 1825)*, July - September 1926, no. 26, Zurich, 1934, no. 49.
Zurich, Kunsthhaus, *Johann-Heinrich Füssli (1741 - 1825): Zur Zweihunderjahrfeier und Gedächtnisausstellung*, 1941, no. 22.
Zurich, Kunsthhaus, *Johann-Heinrich Füssli (1741 - 1825), Gemälde und Zeichnungen*, May - July 1969, no. 77.
London, Tate Gallery, *Fuseli*, February - March 1975, cat. no. 136.

ENGRAVED:

J. Heath, in *Oberon, A Poem from the German of Wieland* by William Sotheby Esq., 2nd ed., London, 1805

On the first of January 1805 Füssli wrote to William Roscoe that he had, but for minimal final touches, finished the designs for his illustrations for *Oberon* by Wieland, which were to illustrate William Sotheby's *Oberon, a Poem from the German of Wieland*, London, 1805.

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Wieland's fanciful verse epic drew from such diverse sources as the old French courtly romance *Histoire de Huon de Bordeaux*, Chaucer's *the Merchant's Tale*, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *A Thousand-and-One Nights*. It earned Wieland (1733-1813) the title of 'The German Ariosto'. Sotheby's translation first appeared in 1798 but was not provided with illustrations until the second edition of 1805. The poem recounts the adventures of Huon of Bordeaux who, to expiate for killing one of Charlemagne's sons in a joust, must go to Baghdad, kill the knight seated to the left of the Caliph, rob the Caliph of four of his molars and a handful of his whiskers, and claim his daughter, Rezia, as his bride. All this Huon is able to achieve with the help of Oberon, king of the elves, only to bring misfortune upon himself and Rezia when he breaks his vow of chastity.

Füssli received 120 guineas from the publishers Cadell and Davies and felt he had made 'a bargain not very advantageous to myself', in contrast to the 18 guineas the engravers were paid per plate.

The episode depicted in the present painting is from part I verses 18-19, in which Huon, seeking shelter from a storm, meets a wild man dressed in tatters and cat-skins in a cave. This proves to be Scherasmin, servant to Huon's father who had died in the Holy Land. Roused by the opportunity to serve his old master's son, Scherasmin pledges his undying loyalty to Huon on his journey.

Sudden the way that led deep rocks
among
Sunk in a cavern, from whose pit
profound
Sparkled a crackling flame: the tones
around,
That o'er the night a wondrous radiance
flung,
Were fring'd with bushes, whose rude
tangles green
Dangled the mazes of the defts
between:
And as they glitter'd with reflected
rays,
Shone like a verdant fire. In mute
amaze
Motionless stood the knight amid
th'enchanted scene.

At once a voice, that thro' the cavern
rung,
'Halt!' thunders forth; straight stands
the knight before
One of wild mien, whose mantle
cover'd o'er
With cat-skins coarsely patch'd, loose
flapping hung.
Down to his hairy shanks; in tangled
flow
His coal-black beard thick waved his
breast below.
A ponderous branch from giant cedar
torn,
Swung, like a mace, upon his shoulder
born
Of pow'r the stoutest beast to level at a
blow

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Roscoe, to whom the artist wrote in 1805, was a great Liverpool collector, poet and historian who in 1792 bought his first picture from Füssli, *The Death of Oedipus* (now in the Walker Gallery, Liverpool). Roscoe became a close friend of the artist as well as one of his best patrons, eventually owning fifteen paintings by Füssli. He also chose to sell Füssli's works in Liverpool and persuaded his friends, including the collectors Daniel Daulby and Matthew Gregson, to buy pictures by the artist. As a result of this, Liverpool in the early years of the nineteenth century was a remarkable nest of Füssli connoisseurship.

As a young man Füssli concentrated on theological and classical studies and began a career as a writer but shortly after coming to England in his mid-twenties he was persuaded by Joshua Reynolds to become a painter. Füssli's character as an artist was strongly inspired by his highly educated and literary upbringing. He was keenly sensitive to the latest cultural trends and theories and he valued originality and individual genius over the accepted orthodoxies and rules of painting. The two most powerful forces upon Füssli's development as an artist were the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and the Sculpture of the Greeks*, which he translated into English as a young man, and the eight years he spent in Rome between 1770 and 1778 studying, as did many British artists of the period, from classical and renaissance sources. This may explain the references made through the horse in the present painting to Salviati's *Furio Camillo* frescoes, noted by Antal (L. Antal, *Fuseli Studies*, London, 1956).

In Rome Füssli was at the centre of a circle of progressive young artists who attempted to engage with antiquity in new ways. He developed a very personal style, based on drawings in line or line and wash, and with an exaggerated, even Mannerist approach to the depiction of the human figure and human emotions. This style was combined with his search for dramatic subjects to draw and paint, which he liked to find in great, and sometimes obscure, literature of the past, such as the source for the present work.

In 1780 Füssli returned to London after two years in Switzerland. He had occasionally sent works from Rome to the exhibitions of the Royal Academy in London, but from then on became a regular exhibitor and was elected for membership at the Academy by the end of the decade. In 1782 he made a huge public impression with his painting *The Nightmare*. With its dark setting, and its macabre and supernatural atmosphere, it explored unfamiliar areas of the human psyche, foretelling the directions art would take in the Romantic era.