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Füssli, Johann Heinrich, *Die Vision der Sintflut*, um 1796-1800, Öl auf Leinwand, 158 x 119 cm (Objektmass), Kunst Museum Winterthur. Beim Stadthaus

Documentation level



Name

Füssli, Johann Heinrich

Other version/s of name

Füessli, Johann Heinrich
Füssli, Hans (Johann) Heinrich
Fuessli, Heinrich
Fuseli, Henry
Fusely, Henry
Fusseli, Henry

Dates of birth and death

* 6.2.1741 Zürich, † 16.4.1825 Putney Hill (London)

Municipality of origin (CH)

Zürich

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Maler, Zeichner, Grafiker, Schriftsteller und Kunsttheoretiker. Professor an der Royal Academy in London. Historien- und phantastische Malerei. Mitglied der Künstlerfamilie Füssli. Sohn von Johann Kaspar Füssli dem Älteren

Fields of activity

Malerei, Zeichnung, Aquarell, Grafik, Illustration

Lexicon article

Johann Heinrich Füssli was born into an artistic [family](#). His father, [Johann Caspar](#), was a painter, art scholar and collector, as well as the founder of the discipline of Swiss art

history. His elder brother, [Johann Rudolf](#), ended his days as custodian of the collection of prints and drawings and the library of the Imperial Academy of Arts in Vienna; his younger brother [Hans Caspar](#) was a bookseller and publisher in Winterthur as well as an entomologist and painter of insects. It is said that Füssli's sisters [Elisabeth](#) and [Anna](#) were also skilful painters of insects and flowers. Years after the early death of his mother (Anna Elisabeth, née Waser) in 1759, the artist still remembered her loss with sorrow. Füssli's father intended him for the priesthood, and having attended the Collegium Carolinum in Zurich, where the scholars Johann Jacob Bodmer and Johann Jacob Breitingen left a lasting impression on him, he was ordained in 1761. Füssli shared Bodmer's conviction that painting and poetry were related and, according to Horace's motto «ut pictura poesis», mutually stimulating. Bodmer introduced Füssli to the writings of John Milton, William Shakespeare, Homer, Dante and others. These classic works later served as literary models for the artist's pictorial ideas. Decades later, Bodmer's early engagement with the Saga of the Nibelungs would still be discernible in Füssli's work.

[Johann Caspar Lavater](#) had been a friend of Füssli's since their days as theology students. Following in Bodmer's footsteps and in the spirit of the Enlightenment, together with Jacob and Felix Hess, the pair strove to improve the moral condition of state institutions. In order to enforce these values in their native city, they distributed a pamphlet in which they publicly attacked the Zurich magistrate Felix Grebel for serious misdemeanours as the Landvogt Grüningen. Their accusations proved to be correct, and Grebel was punished for his offences. However, in 1763, the scandal the young men's insubordinate behaviour had caused made it advisable for them to undertake an extended journey through Germany, with Johann Georg Sulzer as their paternal companion. Füssli and Lavater were received by the theological reformer Johann Joachim Spalding in Barth on the Baltic coast. At this time, Füssli wrote poetry and prose, some in the style of Klopstock, some in the spirit of the Sturm und Drang movement.

In 1764, Füssli travelled from Berlin to London. Sulzer and Bodmer saw in him an intermediary between English and German-Swiss intellectual life. Initially, Füssli intended to disseminate the ideas of Johann Joachim Winkelmann, with whom his father maintained friendly relations, in England. Füssli's translation of *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (*Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, London 1765) was published in 1765. From 1765–66, Füssli was employed as resident tutor by Lord Waldegrave with whose son he travelled through France. In 1767, in a polemical essay entitled *Remarks on Writings and Conduct of J. J. Rousseau*, he campaigned for the ideas of the

Genevan revolutionary, the idol of his youth.

Besides his literary activities, Füssli had drawn with great enthusiasm and without instruction since his youth. Initially, he took works from his father's collection as his models – mostly prints and drawings by Swiss artists of the late Renaissance and Baroque periods. A series of portraits of Swiss artists and illustrations for *Till Eulenspiegel* (1758–1760, Kunsthau Zürich, Graphics Collection), are the most outstanding of his early works. In London, daily contact with the theatre – it was the heyday of David Garrick – inspired a dramatic figurative style. In 1769, a fire in Füssli's London flat destroyed his manuscripts and the majority of his artistic work of the 1760s. Encouraged by Sir Joshua Reynolds' high opinion of him, he had taken the decision to become a painter only about a year earlier.

Soon afterwards, Füssli was given the opportunity to travel to Rome for further studies. He stayed in Italy from May 1770 until the autumn of 1778. During this period, he was on friendly terms with the Nordic artists Johann Tobias Sergel (1740–1814) and Nicolai Abraham Abildgaard (before 1743–1809), but was also at the centre of a circle of British artists that included Thomas Banks (1735–1805), Alexander Runciman (1736–1785) and James Northcote (1746–1831). They all shared one goal: to overcome the rigid classicism propagated by Winckelmann and supported by Mengs. Füssli found his own, forceful style with his drawings after Dante's *Inferno* in particular. On his return from Italy, he initially attempted, with Lavater's help, to gain a foothold as an artist in Zurich. However, Füssli's unrequited love for Anna Landolt, Lavater's niece, caused to him to make a hasty departure for London in April 1779. With the exception of an extended sojourn in Paris in 1802, he remained in England for the rest of his life, and distanced himself increasingly from his homeland. In 1788 he married Sophia Rawlins of Bath Eaton; the couple had no children.

Besides his artistic career (admitted to the Royal Academy in 1790, appointed Professor of Painting in 1799, and Keeper of the institution in 1804), Füssli continued his work as a journalist – as a reviewer for the *Analytical Review*, a magazine published by his radical friend Joseph Johnson, and as the editor and publisher of a lexicon of artists, Matthew Pilkington's *Dictionary of Painting* in 1805 and 1810. From 1789–1798, together with Thomas Holloway, he was responsible for the splendid English edition of Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente*. At Lavater's insistence, Füssli had already provided the illustrations for the French edition, which he now revised. His Academy lectures on art history and theory were published as of 1801 (collected in volumes 2 and 3 of John Knowles's biography of Füssli, 1831). Füssli's principal theoretical work, *Aphorisms, Chiefly Relative to the Fine Arts*, was also published in Knowles's biography. In his lectures, Füssli was more dogmatic and closer to conventional classicism than in his own artistic work. Following on from Winckelmann, he believed that there was a close link between artistic production and the process of civilisation, and considered both to be in decline.

Füssli's name is closely associated with the development of a national school of English art towards the end of the 18th century. He was decisively involved in John Boydell's *Shakespeare Gallery*, the most significant undertaking of its kind (for example, *Titania's Awakening*, 1785–89,

Kunstmuseum Winterthur). On his own initiative, Füssli later created a cycle of 47 paintings inspired by John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a tremendous achievement (for example, *Satan Starts from the Touch of Ithuriel's Spear*, 1796, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart). The *Milton Gallery* was shown in public in 1799 and 1800, but was not a success.

As a lecturer at the Academy, Füssli's students venerated him, but his immediate artistic influence can be evinced only with difficulty. In later years, his master student Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1845) turned his back on him; Theodor Matthias von Holst (1810–1844), whose works are occasionally attributed to Füssli, died young; and the work of William Mulready (1786–1863), Charles Robert Leslie (1794–1859) and William Etty (1787–1849) tended towards the mawkishly anecdotal. Füssli never entirely integrated into English society. Until his death he was described as the «wild Swiss» in his own circles; nonetheless, he was interred by an act of state in London's St. Paul's Cathedral in 1825.

As an artist, Füssli was receptive to a variety of influences. In Rome, he was probably influenced most strongly by Michelangelo's figures in the Sistine Chapel as well as by antique sculptures and vase motifs, but both before and after this experience he was also fascinated by Hogarth, Raphael and Rembrandt. The Greeks in particular remained his ideal, the paragon that he never achieved. It cannot be proven that Füssli was directly dependent on the Mannerists, for example; he merely adopted certain motifs of movement from this school. All the same, the style of his figures was already considered unnatural in his lifetime.

For the creation of his paintings, Füssli initially concentrated on literary subject matter and adequately translating the originals into the artistic medium. His compositions are structured with impressive assurance and clarity. In terms of painting technique, the quality of his work deteriorated over the decades, but this can only partially be attributed to his lack of a solid basic training in oil painting. While Füssli loved to create softly nuanced gradations using glaze for elegiac themes, when handling heroic subject matter he would also occasionally place vibrant colours side by side or seek to create a hard, chiaroscuro contrast. For him, no artistic device was an end in itself; everything served a more profound meaning. His drawings were his preferred mode of expression, and they have preserved the freshness of the artist's first flash of inspiration. Once Füssli had consolidated his style in Rome, his work showed scarcely any further stylistic development. He was a convinced eclecticist: depending on the subject he had chosen, he would employ a clearly defined, classical type of representation, on other occasions, a vague, romantic form of expression.

By choosing certain themes, Füssli remained true to the political ideals of his youth – justice and liberty. He repeatedly portrayed the tyrannicides Tell and Baumgarten, and for the Zurich Parliament he created, as a demonstratively political act, the monumental painting *The Three Oath-takers on the Rütli* (1779–1781, Kunsthau Zürich). He only rarely worked from nature. To Füssli, creating from his own imagination was a necessity, and is also evidence of his genius. In his choice of subject matter, he remained committed to the Sturm und Drang movement; he created innumerable male and female figures that reciprocally cause and feel pain. The leading protagonists in

his œuvre are the cruel woman and the heroic villain («beau criminel»). They are embodiments of untamed passions, the sight of which is intended to provoke a sensation of the sublime.

Pathos was Füssli's declared intention. His preferred method of achieving this was to portray the human figure in a state of violent emotion. Once he had found his gestural idiom, he deployed it in frequently changing contexts as formulae for pathos with shifting meanings. Nevertheless, this does not exclude a differentiated psychological characterisation of the figures by means of body language and facial expressions. Füssli had established his fame and reputation as a painter of horror and dreams with such an expressive figure (*The Nightmare*, first version 1782, Detroit, MI, The Detroit Institute of Arts). Thanks to graphic reproductions, this and other important creations became known throughout Europe within a relatively short time – English engravers led the market during this period. William Blake (1757–1827), a close friend of Füssli's in the years around 1790, was the ideal engraver of such images. The artists inspired each other.

One of Füssli's specialities is erotica and the motif of fashionably dressed and coiffed ladies – some of them courtesans – for which his wife usually served as a model. Füssli only rarely painted portraits, since he aimed to establish himself in England exclusively as a history painter. However, he frequently depicted his own face in self-portraits, mostly as a melancholy genius (*Self-portrait*, circa 1785, London, Victoria and Albert Museum).

Even in old age, Füssli's creative powers did not wane. After 1800, he produced extensive series of illustrations for the works of Milton, Shakespeare and Homer, as well as Wieland. In his representations of the Song of the Nibelung, the elderly artist emphasised sado-masochistic and fetishist elements; when illustrating *Undine*, on the other hand, he empathised with the profound love of a pure heart.

Works: Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum and Kupferstichkabinett; London, The British Museum; London, Victoria and Albert Museum; New Haven, Yale Center for British Art; Kunsthaus Zürich, Museum and Collection of Prints and Drawings

Matthias Vogel 1998, updated 2011
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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