CARL GUSTAV CARUS
1789 Leipzig - Dresden 1869

A Swan among the Reeds, by Moonlight

Charcoal with white heightening on brownish paper laid down on thin board.
Signed and dated on a small piece of paper attached on verso: Zum 11. Septbr. 1852. Carus (fig.1)
228 x 191 mm

PROVENANCE: Johanna Eugenia Carus – Margarethe Schwerdtner, Dresden [foster daughter of Caroline Cäcilie Carus, daughter of Carl Gustav Carus] – Thence by descent


Carl Gustav Carus was a man of many talents. A physician and natural scientist, he was active as a man of letters and a painter of outstanding ability. As an artist, he owed an important debt to Caspar David Friedrich, a close friend since 1817 and a lasting influence on his work. Following Friedrich’s lead, Carus kept faith with the natural world and filled his landscapes with powerful intensity of feeling. He enjoyed a longstanding friendship with Goethe with whom he shared a dual interest in art and science.

Carus took up the theme of the swan some time around 1819. He was probably inspired by a collection of poems titled “Der Schwan” by Otto Heinrich von Loeben (pseud. Isidorus Orientalis). He exhibited the painting “A lake with tree Swans” at the Dresdner Kunstausstellung in 1819. In 1820, Caspar David Friedrich executed his famous painting “Swans among the Reeds” (fig. 2). It is not unlikely that the two artists engaged in an exchange of ideas on the subject. Friedrich’s painting was a major focus of attention and its emotional and poetic character attracted widespread critical comment.

As the father of eleven children, six of whom died at an early age, death was a constant presence in Carus’s life. The present drawing, a birthday gift from Carus to his daughter Johanna Eugenia who was ill with typhus, is dated 11 September 1852, the day of her birthday. The poignant of its subject

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1 Similarly, a dedication to his son Albert and Carus’s own signature are identifiable in the drawing Gotische Kirchenruine im verschneiten Walde, 1869. Private collection (see Rogner & Bernhard, Deutsche Romantik Handzeichnungen, I, Munich 1973, p. 84).
3 The Swan, published in 1816.
4 Marianne Prause, Carl Gustav Carus – Leben und Werk, Berlin 1968, no. 222 [as lost].
movingly expresses Carus’s grief at the gravity of his daughter’s illness. At the same time it is something of a tribute to his daughter’s musicality – she was a gifted singer. He chose the swan as a symbol of death – in popular tradition the mournful cry of the swan was said to echo a poet’s last song. Some three months later, on 27 December 1852, Johanna Eugenia was to die from typhus. In his Lebenserinnerungen und Denkwürdigkeiten Carus mentions his beloved daughter, citing a letter she wrote to a friend about his birthday gift: “My dear father has given to me as a present a poetic charcoal drawing which is moving and full of melancholy […] it is plucking my heartstrings.”

After Goethe’s death in 1832, Carus executed a painting depicting two swans with a lyre and a laurel wreath under a dramatic sky. It was clearly intended to be an allegory of Goethe’s death [fig. 3]. His renewed use of the motif of the swan again demonstrates the closeness of his relationship to Caspar David Friedrich. The present drawing falls neatly into this artistic context: Carus’s anxiety about his daughter’s illness and fear of her imminent death meld with his memories of the past and his recollections of the friendships with Friedrich and Goethe. As Helmut Börsch-Supan has pointed out, this fine sheet is of seminal importance in contributing to analysis of the relationships between three outstanding figures of the German Romantic movement. It is also a superb example of Carus’s draughtsmanship and poetic sensibility.

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6 Helmut Börsch-Supan (written communication).
8 Carl Gustav Carus, Lebenserinnerungen und Denkwürdigkeiten, op. cit., p. 245 f.
9 Goethehaus Frankfurt/Main, inv. no. IV-01158. See Freies Deutsches Hochstift – Frankfurter Goethe-Museum, Bestandskatalog – Die Gemälde, Frankfurt am Main 2011, p. 36-8, no. 21.
10 Helmut Börsch-Supan (written communication).
Fig. 2: Caspar David Friedrich (1774 Greifswald - Dresden 1840), *Swans among the Reeds*, oil on canvas, 34.5 x 44.0 cm.
Goethe-Haus, Frankfurt

Fig. 3: *Allegory of Goethe’s Death*, oil on canvas, 40.8 x 56.0 cm.
Goethe-Haus, Frankfurt