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JOHANN HEINRICH FÜSSLI / JOHN HENRY FUSELI R.A.

1741 Zurich - London 1825

Portrait of the Artist's Wife

Pencil, watercolour with scratching out, heightened with white, on laid paper; executed in the early 1790s.
172 x 174 mm

PROVENANCE: Robert Henri Randall Davies, London (Lugt 2903a) – T. H. Cobb – Sale: Sotheby's, London, 2 August 1944, lot 26 – To Colnaghi on behalf of Sir Richard Brinsley Ford, and by descent in the family.

LITERATURE: Mary Balmanno, *Henry Fuseli, Esq., R.A.*, in *Pen and Pencil*, New York 1858, pp.193-209 – Nicolas Powell, *The Drawings of Henry Fuseli*, London 1951, pl. LX – Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli*, Zurich 1973, I, pp. 227, 230, 549, no. 1085, repr. II, p. 320 – Gert Schiff and Paola Viotto, *L'Opera completa di Füssli*, Milan 1977, no. D. 61 – Luke Hermann, *Catalogue of [British Drawings] The Ford Collection*, Walpole Society, LX, London 1998, II, p. 207, no. RBF 247, fig. 114

EXHIBITED: *British Art*, Royal Academy, London 1934 (label on verso) – R. E. A. Wilson, *Paintings and Drawings by Henry Fuseli R.A.*, London 1935, no. 17 – *The Ford Collection*, Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter 1946, no. 120 – *Three Centuries of British Water-Colours and Drawings*, Arts Council, London 1951, no. 68 – *Bicentenary Exhibition 1768-1968*, Royal Academy, London 1968, no. 653, as *Bust of a Lady*

Henry Fuseli, Swiss-born, was a versatile painter whose remarkable artistic proficiency took him far afield. After a lengthy stay in Rome he settled in England in 1780, where he emerged as one of the leading exponents of 'Sturm und Drang' painting. The 'Sturm und Drang' movement – chiefly a literary phenomenon – originated in the 1770s and centred on the figure of Goethe. Fuseli's graphic *oeuvre* is remarkably rich and varied. The present striking drawing is one of a large group of portrait drawings, many of them depicting his wife Sophia Rawlins, one of his favourite models, portrayed in a wide variety of poses and costumes. Identification of this sensitive drawing as a portrait of Sophia was first made by Gert Schiff in a letter to Sir Richard Brinsley Ford (1908-99), dated 10 October 1960 (L. Herrmann, 1998, op. cit.): *Quite recently the first authentic portrait of Mrs. Fuseli has been discovered. It is a pencil drawing, with two notes at the foot 'Mrs. Fuseli' and 'H. Fuseli fecit' and a further note in ink '1 July 98', and it is mounted and bound in a copy of James Boaden's 'Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble', two volumes, 1825, which is in the Hornby Library, Liverpool (G. Schiff, 1973, op. cit., no. 1110). Schiff continues: By way of comparison with the drawing, it becomes obvious that most of the 'fashionable' portraits of women are in fact portraits of Mrs. Fuseli, and I think this is the case of your 'Bust of a Women' as well. Sophia also appears in a similar pose and with the same coiffure in a drawing dated Dec. 90. This is now in the collection of the Kunsthau Zürich [Fig. 1]. A similar half-length portrait sketch in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg is dated Jan^o 30. 91. From this it can be surmised that the present drawing was also executed in the early 1790s.*

This drawing was at one time in the collection of Sir Richard Brinsley Ford, a British art historian, scholar and collector. The Ford family had a long history as collectors reaching back at least to the late eighteenth century. Sir Richard continued the family tradition, adding to the collection paintings, sculptures and ceramics dating from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. He was

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director of the *Burlington Magazine*, president of the Walpole Society and chairman of the National Art Collections Fund. The Walpole Society published a catalogue of his collection in 1998 (see above). In 2000, his estate sold a Michelangelo drawing he had bought in 1936 for over 12 million dollars.

Dr. David H. Weinglass, Emeritus Professor, University of Missouri-Kansas City, and expert on Fuseli, has prepared the following catalogue entry:

‘The present portrait of Sophia Fuseli, née Rawlins (d.1832; aged 69; whom Fuseli married in 1788, when she was about twenty-five, and he forty-seven), is a highly finished and sensitive portrait that was clearly created in a formal sitting, unlike so many of his ad-hoc sketches, many of which did not require Sophia’s participation. This drawing allows Sophia to show a persona that goes beyond a homebody, comfortable only with light chat. She is obviously enjoying the experience, as the smile at the corner of her lips suggests. After all, it is probably true that she had been a paid artist’s model before Fuseli met her at an exhibition of the Free Society of Artists in 1783, to which she had contributed two landscape drawings. This portrait catches our attention not because it screams “Look at me” but because of its serenity and the way Sophia is attempting to control her mischievous little smile that adds a little touch of intimacy to what we should recognise as one of Fuseli’s rare homages to his wife.

Sophia is shown in three-quarter profile, her face and upper body filling up over half of the available picture space. Her symmetric features reinforce the impression of intelligence and poise. As is characteristic of Fuseli’s practice in both drawings and oils, she is shown in front of an indeterminate backdrop which in this case is a dark brown wash that serves to heighten the contrast with her clear complexion and makes clear that she makes no excessive use of cosmetics. Her hairstyle seems to suggest a tiara and although rather novel is neither fantastical nor outrageous. Her glance is candid and suggests empathy with others. The hatchings shadowing the left side of her face show that she may have had her dark side (the Council of the Royal Academy considered she bullied the housekeeping staff). Fuseli seems to have chosen to outfit his wife in the Parisian style of “modest simplicity” that, as Aileen Ribeiro points out in her *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750-1820* (p. 89), “was *de rigueur* especially during the years of the Terror (1793-94)” in France. Indeed, his whole emphasis is on her modest and becoming demeanour, seen in her erect posture and her dress, a shawl over a “simple fichu voilant la poitrine” (ibid., p. 89), and perhaps a gown. If this sounds like a political endorsement we might consult Mrs. Balmanno’s “Reminiscences of Henry Fuseli, Esq., R.A.”, in her *Pen and Pencil* with her affectionate and somewhat contradictory memories of how Sophia “had won Mr. Fuseli’s heart by her exquisite symmetry of form, which in its contour had all the fulness and perfection of the antique ... It was a happy choice for himself, for she possessed no accomplishments, save domestic ones, no love for literature save such as claimed her spouse for its author, and not a wish beyond that of making him happy; whilst he repaid her with his whole heart, and, in addition, all his wayward ways.” (ibid., p. 89).

Sophia’s face is a memorable one. It is a face we encounter in Fuseli’s oeuvre about 300 times throughout the 1790s, both in his magnificent gallery of about 175 portraits of her where he is trying to capture Sophia’s mercurial character, about which he seems to be strongly conflicted: over the years at his hand her likeness assumes ever more coarsened and fantastic attributes of the virago-Medusa in proportion to her increasingly extravagant hair styles, e.g. *Mrs. Fuseli on a Balcony with High*

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Dressed Hair and Hat (c.1791-2, Schiff, 1973, no. 1777), although these portraits are interspersed with more upbeat depictions of her as the coltish young wife, the housebody, the exhibitionistic partner, and the temptress, that merge into the artist's erotic oeuvre, many of which are highly fetishised imaginary representations and somewhat stagey. Fuseli also uses her as a model for his book designs, in all of which she sports the physical attributes Fuseli favoured in his wife (she is pleasingly embonpoint); she is the model he uses for the engraving of *Salome Receiving the Head of St. John on a Charger* (1792, Schiff no. 961), in the English translation of Lavater's *Physiognomy*, replacing the French engraver's rather starved vision and endowing her with "amorous curves" and the Mae West-like thrust of her hips, in Chalmers' edition of Shakespeare (1805) (Schiff, nos. 1265-1267), in Sotheby's translation of Wieland's *Oberon* (1805) (Schiff, no. 1327), in Cowper's *Poems* (1806) as motherly and nurturing figure (Schiff, nos. 1231-1232, 1235), and in one illustration to the *Nibelungenlied* (Schiff, no. 1000, *Siegfried and Kriemhild*, 1798).'



Fig. 1. *Sophia Fuseli with her Hair in large Rolls*, dated Dec 90.
Pencil, grey and brown wash heightened with pink, 216 x 197 mm.
Kunsthaus Zürich [inv. 1914/32]. (Schiff, 1973, no. 1084)