

LE CLAIRE

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GEORGE ROMNEY

1734 Dalton-in-Furness, Lancashire - Kendal, Cumbria 1802

Fight between two Classical Warriors on Horseback, watched by three standing Figures in a Cave
Traditionally identified as: *The Fight between Hector and Ajax* (William Shakespeare: *Troilus and Cressida*, Act IV, Scene V)

Pencil, pen and black ink, grey wash on wove paper.
410 x 549 mm.

PROVENANCE: Sir Hugh Seymour Walpole (1884-1941) – Christie's, London, 10 January 1947, lot 106 (part) (38 gns to Wingate) – from the estate of Anthony John Wingate, London (1930-2017)

Until 2018, the present drawing was kept together with a second sheet of similar size, technique, and with a comparable subject [Fig.1]. Alex Kidson – the expert, research fellow of the *Romney Society*, and author of a new catalogue raisonné of Romney's paintings – described our sheet together with its former counterpart as follows:

This pair of drawings counts as one of the most remarkable Romney rediscoveries of recent years. On the one hand they are spectacular examples of the artist's graphic mastery, classic in their deployment of line and wash to create atmospheric tableaux; on the other they are the proverbial riddle wrapped within a mystery, puzzling in almost every aspect of their existence.

What we see is two distinct treatments of – apparently – a single theme: a dramatic (somewhat Rubensian) fight between two classical warriors on horseback, but in the presence of variant supporting casts and set against strikingly different backgrounds. Can they really be alternative ideas for the combat between Ajax and Hector, an episode in the fourth act of Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida*? This play, increasingly prized in the 20th Century by connoisseurs of the Bard, was obscure in the 18th Century, and not otherwise mined by Romney. That he knew anything of the play is uncertain: in 1792 he wrote to Lady Hamilton that his portrait of her as *Cassandra* had been accepted for display in Boydell's *Shakespeare Gallery* because it had turned out to suit a moment in the play, but it is as easy to interpret this as proof of his previous ignorance of it as of his awareness of it. Moreover, neither drawing closely follows the action in Shakespeare's play, in which the fight takes place in the camp of the Greeks and ends almost before it has begun, with the warriors discovering that they are cousins and embracing in friendship. Romney was never a slave to the literary episodes that he depicted, and yet his historical compositions usually did display more sensitivity to the source than this. It is tempting to speculate that the traditional title is the clever invention of a twentieth-century owner, perhaps Hugh Walpole, a famous literary figure and also a great connoisseur. As a resident of the Lake District, Romney's own homeland, Walpole would have been familiar with the artist's love of Shakespeare and his many compositions from Shakespeare's plays.

Taking a broader view of these drawings, it remains perfectly conceivable that they do depict a scene from a Shakespeare play (*Macbeth fighting Macduff*, say). This type of panoramic scene, executed in black wash, in which Romney reduces the scale of his figures and dwarfs them against a sublime landscape,

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is characteristic of the late 1780s and early 1790s, and many of them embody exploration of Shakespearean subjects in connection with the Boydell *Shakespeare Gallery*, of which he was one of the founders. The best known of their kind are the series of virtuosic studies for the *Cavern Scene* in Act 4 of *Macbeth* in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; the same compositional principle recurs in the sequence of remarkable late paintings depicting *Titania and her fairies* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The most puzzling feature of these drawings, however, is not that their literary source is elusive but that their subject appears to be unique within the whole corpus of Romney's vast output of drawings. The subjects of many Romney drawings remain unidentified and yet one finds that they are studied over and over, with little variation, in different scales and formats, in sketchbooks and on loose sheets, sometimes over long periods. This is one of the fundamental aspects of Romney's creativity, but it is not the case here. These are fully-formed pendants treating the same scene quite differently, without the familiar shoal of recognisable related studies in sketchbooks. It is as if they are set pieces, tours de force carried out almost as a public exercise, or for a special, demanding client who needed them at once and kept them together always.

Sir Hugh Seymour Walpole, celebrated novelist, was described by Sir Kenneth Clark as 'one of the three or four real patrons of art in this country, and of that small body he was perhaps the most generous and the most discriminating.' He left paintings to the Tate Gallery, London and the Fitzwilliam Museum, including works by Renoir, Manet and Augustus John.

Alex Kidson



Fig.1: *Fighting Scene under a Group of Trees; a Warrior has thrown a Person to the Ground, a Man, followed by a Child, attacks the Aggressor to rescue the Fallen Figure*. Traditionally also identified as: *The Fight between Hector and Ajax* (W. Shakespeare: *Troilus and Cressida*, Act IV, Scene V)

Pencil, pen and black ink, grey wash on wove paper. 410 x 546 cm.
Estate of Anthony Wingate.