

Fuseli

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FUSELI.

By GEOFFREY GRIGSON.

(Exhibition of works from Fuseli, at the New Burlington Galleries, Old Burlington Street, until February 25th, 1950.)

We reproduce herewith an article which appeared on the 4th inst. in the "Picture Post," by courtesy of the Editor.

Henri Fuseli was a demon; or so he was regarded in his own day, and so, in a sense, he is looked on now, 125 years after his death and burial in St. Paul's. He was a demon who painted wild and forcible pictures. He was 'Painter in ordinary to the Devil.' He was the 'wild hectoring little Swissman.' Credited with eating raw pork on the night before he began to paint his celebrated picture of 'The Nightmare.'

Born in Switzerland, a German Swiss, this little monster was too large for a little country of narrow ideas. So in 1764, when he was 23, Fuseli came to London. He was not sure whether to be poet, painter, or thinker; or all three. He both admired and despised the English. The traditional idea 200 years ago was that the English could no more paint than fly to the moon. Foreign painters had long been imported, native painters neglected. Rich men preferred to buy pictures by foreign masters or the foreign settlers. The English painter was given no respect like the poet, and had no social standing. All these were among the reasons why the Royal Academy was founded in 1768, four years after the demon-painter had arrived.

Young Fuseli was one of the last of the settlers, but there was thinking to be done for the new English school. Fuseli had learning and intelligence. He used to boast later that he was fluent in Greek, Latin, French, English, German, Danish, Dutch, Icelandic and Spanish, and so had nine ways of swearing. The president of the new Royal Academy, Joshua Reynolds, encouraged him, and foretold that he would be great. Young painters now go off to Paris. In those days they went to Rome. So this pocket demon, with eyes like electric sparks in his long face, moved to Rome in 1770 for an eight-years' apprenticeship to art.

Everyone felt he was on fire. 'His glance was lightning, his word a storm,' he was 'extreme in everything, always original.' He spoke himself of his brains being on the boil; he would stand outside in a storm and look at the ruins and statuary of Rome by lightning flashes. His seething mind made him think of the din of hell, howling and dying along the echoing stars.

Back he came, proud, fearless, razor-tongued, and a little scornful of English stuffiness and phlegm. The English were to be shown the meaning of terror and grandeur upon canvas; and one of his early paintings was that 'Nightmare,' that dream horse with coals for eyeballs. It may not seem terrible to us. But terrible it was in 1781, and famous it became through Europe.

Fuseli drew better than he painted, but ten years after he came back from Rome they made him an A.R.A., then an R.A. two years later, then Professor of Painting, and last of all Keeper of the Royal Academy. The figures he drew were tight with energy, always suggesting the more passionate, or weirder, experiences of men. *Romeo and Juliet*, not as boy and

girl, but as violent lovers; the three witches from *Macbeth*; Milton's night hag drawn through the air by the smell of infant blood to dance with Lapland witches during an eclipse of the moon — these were a few of his subjects. He loved to collect insects. In a picture he would paint a Death's Head hawk moth, or an insect turned into a goblin, as images of death or evil.

Bit by bit he became a legend. He became the legendary goblin artist, knowing everything, quick witted, quickly made angry at a dinner table by fame painting or a dull opinion, coloring the anger with his German accent or his expletives in strange tongues.

Someone twitted him about a fellow-painter who had strange looks and "chooses as strange subjects as yourself, Mr. Fuseli."

"Sir, he paints nothing but thieves and murderers, and when he wants a model he looks in the glass."

You have to imagine these replies spoken arrogantly, emphatically, and with the German accent, and coming from the large mouth of a small man who might that moment have popped out of a cave or a hollow tree. Of course, Fuseli did not paint mere thieves and murderers. He painted passion perhaps leading to murder in the great ambitions of a *Macbeth*. If it came to Hell, Fuseli would not be interested in the devil's tail, but in the devil himself, who was a fallen angel.

The English felt Fuseli to be a fallen angel. One day he and Sir Thomas Lawrence were sketching on the Pembrokeshire coast, on top of the cliff. Lawrence caught Fuseli just at the moment when he was looking down to the sea and over the bay and saying, "Jesu Christ, how grand!" and sketched him — as the Satan of *Paradise Lost* gazing into the abyss.

In many ways Fuseli knew that man and the devil had much in common. He realised that man is not always domestic and dependable. He knew we live on top of a volcano of our own blind energies. Sometimes the volcano is hidden, sometimes it breaks out, like the new Mexican volcano which has emerged out of a cornfield. Perhaps it was that knowledge of evil as well as good, of devils and heroes, which made Fuseli a friend of William Blake. Englishmen make a valuable point very often of not 'going too far.' Blake and Fuseli, in their different ways, both did go too far. That is the point about them. But since Fuseli had one of the best brains in Europe he always knew what he was doing. Blake showed him a drawing.

Fuseli: "Someone has told you this is very fine."

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Blake: "Yes, the Virgin Mary appeared to me and told me it was very fine. What can you say to that?"

Fuseli: "Why, nothing — only her ladyship has not an immaculate taste."

Nowadays, Fuseli is often called a forerunner of surrealism, which is perhaps why interest in his paintings, and especially his drawings, has suddenly revived. But it is wrong to call him either surrealist or romantic.

A surrealist, in contempt of society and reason, makes a science of picturing real things in unreal combinations, a piano in a desert listening to the tick of a watch which is melting like a bar of milk chocolate. A romantic painted his own feelings, often by seeing them in a wild or mild landscape. Fuseli was a wild man, but he looked for the wildest, most extreme moments of human behaviour in the greatest poetry, and then turned them — or tried to turn them — into line or paint.

He said he did not want to make a cottage but a pyramid. A pyramid is human. It is not Scawfell or the Matterhorn. It is subject to rules, and Fuseli believed both in rules and in breaking rules, whether he was painting witches who eat children or great murderers, or the tempest of a great love affair. He wanted to convey elemental energy inside order, though often he was not painter enough to succeed; he wanted to glorify human power, and he did not like the way men were going in England or across the Channel. They were too romantic or else too sentimental. So he lived on in London as a peculiar, rather frustrated old man till he died in 1825. In the Academy he taught a few boys of genius or talent, and many more who matured into stuffy Victorian R.A.s, acting a lie and keeping their butlers. In a way he was one of those tragic men whose imaginings are too big for their powers of expression, and in that he was no unlike his friend Blake, or Blake at least as a painter.

Fuseli helped to energise English painting. In spite of himself he was one of the volcanic symptoms of the early years of our modern catastrophe, like Goya, or Napoleon, or Byron, or Beethoven, much smaller as he was in his own stature. Before he died as an old man of 84, and before they gave him that honour of burial in St. Paul's, he said rather surprisingly, "I have been a happy man, for I have always been well, and always employed in doing what I like."

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