

Holst, Wainewright and Bertalda



The first Theodor von Holst exhibition took place in England in 1994 and the first exhibition devoted to his friend and fellow disciple of Henry Fuseli, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, is about to take place 27 years later in Tasmania.

In a review of the Holst exhibition for the Burlington Magazine, Martin Butlin attempted to re-attribute a major painting, *Bertalda Frightened by Apparitions*, to Wainewright based on a Royal Academy descriptive title of a work by this extraordinary figure in their exhibition of 1823. For Martin the 'reproachful blue eyes' of Undine (see above illustration) clinched it, notwithstanding that no subject oil paintings by Wainewright had yet come to light for comparison. This is a pertinent and challenging speculation of course but with no evidence to support it, it remains just that. The degree of rigorous analysis applied may be gauged, perhaps, by another observation in Martin's review that Edgar Allan Poe had written his first poem after a painting by Holst – it was actually Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

No matter, with the brave Wainewright debut exhibition looming it seems the right time to explain why I, and many others, have always believed that both these characteristic pictures are by Holst. With a side-by-side detail comparison (above) of the principal figures of Bertalda, we can see that they are by the same artist – or a highly accomplished forger!

The shape and execution of the faces, chins, cheeks and lips are almost identical as are other aspects such as the arms and fingers of their right hands. Also characteristic of Holst is the delicate floral decoration, here surrounding their crowns, and the sparkling and pearl like jewellery embellishing their costumes as well as some of the subordinate figures, along with the artist's fetishistic adornment of wristbands.

These two significant figures of early 19th Century Romantic Art were friends and part of the intense and eccentric cultural circle surrounding Henry Fuseli and William Blake in the twilight of the Regency Period. Holst, very young but precociously brilliant at the time, would no doubt have seen Wainwright's paintings at the RA exhibitions and may well have liked Undine's blue eyes sufficiently to emulate them in his own version of the scene years later. His art is full of the borrowed motifs from others, as taught by his masters.

With the death of these masters and the change of public values towards commercial trade and religious moralising, Holst and Wainwright both felt adrift and fought hard to survive and thrive in the new Age of Reform. Times were hard for artists and as Rossetti, Bell Scott and others later commented, they were not conducive to the exhibition of supernatural, daemonic or erotic subjects. Nevertheless Holst was not deterred from his natural domain but Wainwright, a lesser artist though with wider talents, forged ahead with outrageous criminal speculations that, self-admittedly, ultimately failed although inspiring universal wonderment ever since. Of course his CV would not be out of place in the Ducal Palace of the Borgias or other Italian Renaissance patrons and luminaries that his interests were so steeped in. In England, De Quincey had published his satirical essay *On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts* in 1827, perhaps prompting Wainwright shortly after into taking it a little too seriously!

The last time that these two paintings were seen together was at Martin Myrone's *Gothic Nightmares* exhibition at Tate Britain in 2006. Martin placed Holst as a principal exponent of this dark and often diabolical genre along with Fuseli, Blake and Gillray. Rossetti originally proposed it, Schiff agreed, my exhibition demonstrated it and Martin took it to a much larger public arena.

Even in the smallest of ways Wainwright could not compete since all his subject pictures seem to have disappeared in his own lifetime. It was not until I identified a small oil presented to me as a possible Holst, by the London dealer Simon Dickinson in 2013, that any such work by Wainwright emerged. *Two Lovers in a Moonlit Landscape* provided the fuel for a short article the following year in the *British Art Journal*. The key to the identification was a cartoon like foot remembered from the only known subject drawing by Wainwright in a British collection, at the Prints and Drawings department of the British Museum. This small common detail led to a satisfactory attribution, as both works were available for comparative examination.

The 1994 speculated authorship of *Bertalda Frightened by Apparitions* cannot yet be seriously considered until further evidence emerges or a major picture by Wainwright comes to light for comparison. Perhaps Jane Stewart's pioneering exhibition in Tasmania will provide the catalyst for this to happen. We hope so.

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April 2021