



The Nightmare by Henry Fuseli.

Fuseli, Henry (1741-1825)

by Linda Rapp

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Swiss-born Henry Fuseli spent most of his life in England, where he established a reputation as an artist of great originality. Best-known for *The Nightmare* (1781), he also painted scenes from the works of Shakespeare and Milton, as well as pictures of both heterosexual and homosexual subjects.

Born Johann Heinrich Füssli on February 6, 1741 in Zurich, the artist adopted an anglicized version of his name when he settled permanently in England.

Fuseli's father, Johann Caspar Füssli, was a portrait painter and a collector of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Swiss art. Füssli imparted to his son an appreciation of the Neoclassical ideas of Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Anton Raphael Mengs.

Fuseli took an avid interest in his father's art collection and began making sketches of the drawings when he was eight. His father, however, had decided that his son should be a Zwinglian minister. Consequently, Fuseli studied theology and was ordained in 1761.

The next year he and his close friend and fellow theology student Johann Lavater published a pamphlet attacking a corrupt Zurich official. As a result of this action, the two found it expedient to leave the city. In 1763 they went to Berlin, and the following year Fuseli continued on to London.

By the time he settled in England, Fuseli had given up the ministry. His primary professional interest had been in writing, but in London he began to think of a career as an artist. In 1767 or 1768 he met Sir Joshua Reynolds, who encouraged him to become a painter.

Fuseli drew some illustrations for Tobias Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle* (1769) and Dr. Willoughby's *Practical Family Bible* (1766-1770), but he wanted to study high art. In 1770 he went to Rome, where he remained for most of the next eight years.

In Rome Fuseli became intrigued by classical sculpture and the art of Michelangelo, as well as Mannerist artists Parmigianino and Rosso Fiorentino. The style that Fuseli developed at this time and that would remain largely unchanged throughout his life owed much to these sources.

Many of the subjects that Fuseli chose to paint were highly dramatic, often violent and/or psychologically disturbing. He also executed paintings and drawings of nude men in stances based on classical statuary. His figures were strong, muscular men, often standing with feet planted apart and genitals exposed.

Ian Maidment states that Fuseli's "frank celebration of maleness has appealed to many gay men." When doing paintings for public display, however, Fuseli often added drapery or tights to make the composition acceptable to general audiences.

Fuseli also created drawings with erotic or obscene content. These were intended for private collectors.

They included scenes of lesbian encounters and many pictures of women taunting or dominating men. In part because of these images he gained a reputation as a misogynist.

In 1778 Fuseli returned to Zurich, where he again saw his lifelong friend Lavater. He also supposedly fell in love with Lavater's niece, Anna Landolt. Since she was already engaged at the time, it is unclear if Fuseli ever considered marriage to her a realistic possibility.

Upon returning to England Fuseli created his most famous painting, *The Nightmare*. Often interpreted as a "punishment" of Landolt for her rejection of him, it shows a young woman sprawled on her back on a bed, with a gargoyle-like creature sitting on her torso and an ominous-looking horse peering through the bed curtains.

This disturbing picture, which was shown at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1781, soon became well known throughout Europe. Other artists painted variations on its theme, and cartoonists created versions of it illustrating political "nightmares."

Fuseli married in 1788 at the age of forty-seven. His wife, Sophia Rawlins, who had been an artist's model, has been described as his social and intellectual inferior.

A year later Mary Wollstonecraft met and became infatuated with Fuseli. When she proposed a *ménage à trois*, Sophia Fuseli banned her from the house. Peter Tomory describes Henry Fuseli as "immensely relieved" by that development, and Ruthven Todd calls Fuseli's relationship with Wollstonecraft "a peculiar and sexless intrigue."

Fuseli completed numerous paintings for John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, a small museum devoted to depictions of scenes from Shakespeare's work, but, disappointed by the remuneration that he received, decided to start his own Milton Gallery, which was a critical success but a financial failure. He also collaborated with William Blake until the two had a falling out in 1810.

Fuseli became an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1788 and a full member in 1790. From 1799 he served as Professor of Painting at the Academy. In his later years he was influential because of his writings and lectures on art history and theory.

Fuseli died at Putney Hill near London on April 16, 1825, at the age of eighty-four. After his death, his work was somewhat neglected until Freudian art critics and psychoanalysts revived interest in it because of its images of sexuality in dreams.

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