

Gods, heroes and traitors

History painting around 1800

2 June to 22 August 2023

To mark its anniversary this year, the ALBERTINA is putting on this exhibition to celebrate the major artists who were active at the time of the man who started the collection: Albert Casimir, Duke of Saxe-Teschen. He was responsible for establishing the finest collection of prints and drawings in the world, and collected pieces that aligned with contemporary artistic tendencies. He applied his passion to purchasing the most exquisite pieces directly from the artists' studios or from renowned academy exhibitions. Albert was interested in drawings, illustrations and sketches, just as much as he was in large-scale history paintings on paper that were considered fully executed tableaux in ink, chalk and pastels.

At the heart of the exhibition are works by Austrian resident and grandmaster of classicism Heinrich Friedrich Füger, who played a role in introducing this art movement to Vienna. Jacques-Louis David, who won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1774 and was seen as the greatest French artist of his time, is also featured with his key work, *The Combat of Diomedes*. The breadth of subject matter includes spectacular Greek mythology by Robert von Langer, literary motifs by Johann Heinrich Füssli and tales of Rome by prominent founder member of the Royal Academy of Arts Angelica Kauffman. The exhibition reflects the elitist and human mentality of the period. All but forgotten ancient Greek and Roman myths appear alongside major tragic opera works and tales from the Old Testament.

This exhibition was to a certain extent curated by Albert Casimir, Duke of Saxe-Teschen himself: he selected, purchased and preserved all of the pieces personally, making this presentation a “contemporary” showcase of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The history painting reached its absolute peak during this period, shaped by idealism and exaggerated pathos – the opposite of realistic depictions and nature. Everything is magnificent, every tiny

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gesture, every composition, every felt emotion. There is a need, a moral requirement even, to have a pedagogical influence on the mind in the same vein as Schiller.

The works on display here take on a special status because history paintings were typically seen as the pinnacle of each artist's career. In classicism, the ideal, both moral and illustrative, took priority in artistic creativity. The mind, education, ingenuity were the most sought after assets and superseded depictions of the real world such as still lifes. It was only in the middle of the 19th century that this opinion of modern trends was replaced, seeking to portray quite the opposite: nature and immediate sensations.

For this exhibition, the ALBERTINA is drawing entirely on its own inventory of artworks, all of which were purchased by Albert Casimir, Duke of Saxe-Teschen during his lifetime.

Curator: Julia Zaunbauer