

GEORGE ROMNEY

1734–1802

THE WAVE

Oil on canvas

33 x 48 ½ inches; 840 x 1235 mm

Painted c. 1793



Collections:

George Romney;

By descent to Elizabeth Romney (1832-1893), the artist's granddaughter;

Romney sale, Christie's, 25 May 1894, lot. 202;

Bought Shepherd, (probably Shepherd Brothers, 27 King St, St James's);

J. L. E. Brandreth;

John George Butcher M.P., son-in-law of the above, by 1900;

R. S Verelst;

Christie's, 28 June 1963, lot.76;

Sabin Galleries Ltd, by 1984;

Peter Koblenzer (1922-2019), purchased from the above;

Koblenzer sale, Christie's, 8th June 2006, lot.63;

Private collection, UK to 2024;

Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd.

Literature:

Lionel Cust, 'The Romney Exhibition at the Grafton Gallery', *Magazine of Art*, August 1900, pp.449-50;

T.H. Ward and William Roberts, *Romney: A Biographical and Critical Essay with a Catalogue Raisonné of his Works*, London and New York, 1904, vol.2, p.202;

David Cross, *A Striking Likeness: The Life of George Romney*, Aldershot, 2000, pp.120, 185;

David Cross, 'The Admiral of the Blues': George Romney, Depression and Creativity', in ed.

Alex Kidson, *Those Delightful Regions of the Imagination: Essays on George Romney*, New Haven and London, 2002 p.29, repr. on dust-wrapper;

Alex Kidson, *George Romney 1734-1802*, exh. cat. Liverpool, London and San Marino (Walker Art Gallery, National Portrait Gallery and Huntington), 2002, pp.35, 193;

Yvonne Romney Dixon and Alex Kidson, 'Romney Sketchbooks in Public Collections', *Transactions of the Romney Society*, vol.8, 2003, pp.23, 33;

Alex Kidson, *George Romney: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, New Haven and London, 2015, vol. III, cat. no. 1755

Exhibited:

London, Grafton Galleries, *Exhibition of a special selection from the works by George Romney: including a few portraits of Emma, Lady Hamilton, by other artists.*, 1900, no. 114 (lent by J.G. Butcher M.P.)

‘There is a serious case to be made, at least from the perspective of the twenty-first century, that Romney’s true originality lay in the creation of extraordinary images such as this.’¹

This extraordinary painting is a rare manifestation of George Romney’s preoccupation with man’s fragility in the face of nature’s power. Painted towards the end of his career, the composition shows four young boys dancing on the seashore, apparently unaware that they are about to be enveloped by the dark wave on the left; rolling dark clouds and a lingering fiery red sunset contribute to a sense of portentous menace. As one of the most iconographically singular works from Romney’s career this painting has been much discussed, and its precise meaning debated. David Cross has suggested that ‘the motif of the shipwreck underpins Romney’s life and art’ offering a visual manifestation of the depression which afflicted him, particularly in the last decade of his life. The scale and ambition of the present canvas and the fact that a fully worked-up drawing for the composition survives in the collection of the Yale Center for British Art raises certain questions over its intended audience and ultimately its significance within Romney’s oeuvre.

George Romney was born in modest circumstances in Cumbria, after training with a local painter he moved to London and worked in the circle of the St Martin’s Lane Academy. Following several years acquiring Continental polish in Italy Romney took the expensive lease on a large house on the south side of Cavendish Square which had formerly been occupied by Francis Cotes. Supported by a series of influential patrons, Romney established a successful and profitable portrait practice. Romney combined his prodigious portrait practice with a relentless campaign of drawing, making hundreds of studies for historical compositions, many of which never came to fruition.

By the late 1780s Romney was routinely complaining of being fettered to portraiture and projecting his retirement with a view to concentrating on subject painting. In a letter to his friend, supporter and eventual biographer William Hayley, Romney protests: ‘This cursed portrait-painting! How I am shackled with it! I am determined to live frugally, that I may enable myself to cut it short, as soon as I am tolerably independent, and then give my mind up to those delightful regions of imagination.’² Romney’s sense of disenchantment fed into his mental state. Romney suffered spells of depression all his life, Hayley was particularly sensitive to Romney’s fragile mental health making many references to his ‘perilously acute

¹ Alex Kidson, *George Romney 1734-1802*, exh. cat. Liverpool, London and San Marino (Walker Art Gallery, National Portrait Gallery and Huntington), 2002, p.192.

² Yvonne Romney Dixon, *Designs from Fancy: George Romney’s Shakespearean Drawings*, exh. cat. Washington (The Folger Shakespeare Library), 1998, p.21.

feelings’ and specifically his dark moods, described him as being ‘as wild as the Wind of the Equinox.’

The present, remarkable painting belongs to an exceptional group of subject paintings Romney made in the last decade of his life. These include *The Tempest: Shipwreck Scene, Act I* painted for Boydell’s *Shakespeare Gallery* and subsequently destroyed, *Boys in a Boat Drifting out to Sea* in a private collection and *Shipwreck at the Cape of Good Hope* which was engraved by William Blake for Hayley’s *The Life of George Romney*. In each Romney explores the fragility of his human subjects in the face of the power of the sea. The last of these, based on an episode reported by the Swedish naturalist C.P. Thunberg, shows a contemporary wreck, foreshadowing the more famous paintings of maritime disasters in the early nineteenth century.

In the visionary conception of history painting that germinated in his mind throughout the decade, Romney contrasted the ‘artificial and cold macanical effect’ of academic historical compositions of the day, created in piecemeal fashion, with his own notion of a painting:

‘heated and fermented long in the mind and varied every possible way to make the whole perfect that the whole composition may come from the mind like one sudden impression or conception.’³

As Alex Kidson has observed the ‘other-worldly atmosphere’ in the present work does ‘indeed bear every sign of having been ‘heated and fermented long’ in a mind not unduly exercised by the expectations of his contemporaries.’ As with *Boys in a Boat Drifting out to Sea* there is no obvious literary source, and it may be that Romney took his idea from a human-interest story in a newspaper. Tsunamis were not unknown in the eighteenth century, in 1783 a series of large earthquakes in Calabria triggered a rockslide near Scilla causing a tsunami which killed 1,500 seeking refuge on a nearby beach. Sir William Hamilton provided an account of the earthquake – and fatal wave - from Count Francesco Ippolito to the Royal Society which was published in their *Philosophical Transactions* in 1783.

The painting itself is an unsettling meditation on mortality. The children – painted in the spirited, impish style of Titania’s attendants from Romney’s suite of paintings showing scenes from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – are apparently carefree and completely unaware of their impending doom. In the preparatory drawing at Yale, two of the children seem to have an awareness of the danger at hand, in the finished painting Romney reverts the figures to a state of innocence. Romney was clearly interested in eliciting a frisson from his viewer, showing us the dark wall of water a moment before impact. Romney creates an

³ Romney’s notes for a discourse on painting. See Yvonne Romney Dixon, *Designs from Fancy: George Romney’s Shakespearean Drawings*, exh. cat. Washington (The Folger Shakespeare Library), 1998, pp.232-33.

image that reaches beyond the terms of the sublime as articulated by Burke to something even more dreadful, the violent loss of innocents.

As Alex Kidson noted in 2002 'there is a serious case to be made, at least from the perspective of the twenty-first century, that Romney's true originality lay in the creation of extraordinary images such as this.' Romney saw an inherent fragility in human existence and in spare, abstracted images such as this he captured something of the temporary reality of the Anthropocene in the face of nature.



George Romney
The Wave
Black ink and grey wash over pencil
13 ¼ x 19 inches; 337 x 483 mm
Drawn late 1780s
Yale Center for British Art,
Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.5466



William Blake, after Romney
The Shipwreck, a preparatory drawing for the engraving for
William Hayley's 'Life of Romney'
Brush drawing in grey wash, pencil and squared for transfer
5 ¼ x 7 ½ inches; 135 x 179 mm
Drawn in 1804
© The Trustees of the British Museum



George Romney
Titania and her Attendants
Oil on canvas
47 x 59 inches; 1194 x 1499 mm
Painted c. 1790
Private collection
Ex. Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd.