GOTHIC NIGHTMARES: FUSELI, BLAKE AND THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION

Gothic Nightmares presents paintings, drawings and prints on supernatural, fantastic and visionary themes from the period 1770-1830. The work of Henry Fuseli dominates throughout; the show brings together around 60 of his finest paintings and drawings. William Blake and James Gillray will also be shown in depth, and the show will also feature works by George Romney, Richard and Maria Cosway, Joseph Wright of Derby, James Barry, Georgina North and Theodor von Holst.

The show has been organised around themes or subject-matter. An introductory section focuses on Fuseli’s The Nightmare and the artistic representation of horror. The two following sections explore the extravagant and weird conceptions of the body apparent in the art of Fuseli and his friends. A small room explores the major motifs of the Gothic as a literary and artistic phenomenon. Sections on ‘Witches and Apparitions’ and ‘Fairies and Fatal Women’ present major works by Fuseli with important watercolours and graphic works by his contemporaries and followers. The final section on the visionary art responding to the French Revolution brings the works of Gillray and Blake to the fore, while a final ‘coda’ to the exhibition suggests the enduring influence of Fuseli’s The Nightmare in the modern world.

1. THE NIGHTMARE: FUSELI AND THE ART OF HORROR

“. . . on his Night-Mare, through the evening fog,  
Flits the squab fiend o’er fen, and lake, and bog,  
Seeks some love-wilder’d Maid with sleep oppress’d,  
Alights, and grinning sits upon her breast.  
---Such as of late amid the murky sky  
Was mark’d by Fuseli’s poetic eye;  
Whose daring tints, with Shakespear’s happiest grace,  
Gave to the airy phantom form and place.”

Erasmus Darwin The Love of the Plants (1789)

The opening section of the exhibition will focus on Henry Fuseli’s famous canvas, The Nightmare (Detroit Institute of Arts). Ever since it was first exhibited to the public at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1782, this
painting has been an icon of horror. Reviewers of the time were impressed, and not a little shocked, by the power and strangeness of this image. Fuseli’s name as a painter of the supernatural and the weird was established and his reputation as one of the greatest eccentrics of the age forged.

Showing a woman supine in her boudoir or bedroom, oppressed by a foul imp while a ferocious-looking horse glares on, the painting seems to draw on folklore and popular culture, medicine, concepts of imagination, and classical art to create a new kind of sexually charged horror image. The painting has been interpreted as a literary illustration, an expression of the artist’s frustrated desires, and a scientific allegory, yet has never been fully explained. Plagiarised and satirised constantly in the two centuries since its creation, *The Nightmare* has become one of the most familiar images in western art. A selection of related works by Fuseli and satirical versions of *The Nightmare* will accompany the painting itself, demonstrating the versatility and power of this remarkable invention.

2. PERVERSE CLASSICISM

“Mr Fuseli would have made an excellent Poulterer, he has such a happy knack of twisting legs and arms, without any regard to fractures or dislocations.”

From a review of the Royal Academy exhibition, 1790

The works in this section will introduce the basic visual vocabulary which was used by artists treating ‘Gothic’ themes in the late eighteenth century. The selection focuses on the shocking, confrontational use of bodily horror and violence by Fuseli and the artists associated with him from the 1770s, and how the themes of confinement and heroic struggle came to embody an idea of artistic genius in the coming decades.

Fuseli emerged in the 1770s as the central figure in an international community of artists whose transformed the classical tradition into a more expressive and extravagant form, associated with novel concepts of the Sublime and ‘original genius’. They pursued an extravagant and risky style, adapted to outlandish and heroic themes. These characteristics were exemplified in the theme of Prometheus, and the exhibition will feature treatments of this subject by Fuseli, John Flaxman, Richard Cosway,
George Romney and related works by Thomas Banks and William Blake, showing chained, inverted or falling figures. For poets and writers - including Mary Shelley whose *Frankenstein* (1818) is subtitled ‘The Modern Prometheus’ – the fallen Titan served as a symbol of the imagination, crystallising the idea of the rebel artist at the opening of what we know as ‘Romanticism’.

3. SUPERHEROES

“The Englishman eats roastbeef and plumpudding, drinks port and claret; therefore, if you will read him, you must open the portals of Hell with the hand of Milton, convulse his ear or his sides with Shakespeare’s buskin or sock, raise him above the stars with Dryden’s Cecilia or sink him to the melancholy of the grave with Gray. Intermediate tones, though they were as sweet as honey, as lovely as the flush of dawn, send him to sleep.”

Fuseli to Dälliker, November 1765

The paintings and drawings in this selection show how the dynamic conception of the body developed by artists in Rome in the 1770s was introduced into narrative art produced in Britain. The selection makes evident the tendency to extravagant physicality and fantastic action which emerged in the later eighteenth century, and the appearance of distinctly ‘Gothic’ sorts of superheroes drawn from literature and history.

Henry Fuseli’s large canvases of *The Oath on the Ruttli* (1780; Kunsthau, Zurich), *The Dispute between Hotspur, Glendower, Mortimer and Worcester* (1784; Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery) and *Satan Starting from the Touch of Ithuriel’s Spear* (1779; Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart) will dominate the room. His exceptional drawings of a warrior rescuing a lady (1781; Cecil Higgins Art Gallery) and *Perseus and the Medusa’s Head* (1816; Chicago Art Institute) will also feature, along with designs of heroic figures by Blake and James Barry.

Bounding, leaping, flying, extravagantly proportioned, super-virile and ultra-violent, the heroes that appeared in these images were inherently absurd. Instead of providing role models of equitable behaviour and ethical nobility, they were supremely, sometimes vacuously, spectacular. The sexual dimension of these figures can hardly be overlooked, either, exemplifying the forms of ecstatic fulfilment associated with the Sublime,
providing flattering self-mages for male spectators, but also, perhaps uneasily, playing on the eroticisation of the male body.

4. GOTHIC GLOOMTH

“... when you have finished Udolpho, we will read the Italian together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you.’ “Have you indeed! How glad I am! – What are they all?” “I will read you their names directly; here they are, in my pocket book. Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries. Those will last us some time.” “Yes, pretty well; but are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?” Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818)

Castles and dungeons, blasted heaths and sepulchral cells, forests and storm-ravaged cliffs, maidens in distress, rugged heroes, alchemists, wizards, ghosts, rotting corpses, bleeding nuns, monks, mad priests and viragoes. . . these are the raw materials of the Gothic: sometimes genuinely shocking, more often extravagant, ridiculous, and laugh-out loud silly.

The taste for Gothic horror and fantasy was the cultural phenomenon of the late eighteenth century. Originating in the reappraisal of medieval architecture and romance literature, politically charged research into the ancient origins of the British state, and a new interest in Sublime themes of terror and the supernatural, the Gothic developed in the 1780s as the first form of trash literature, reaching a massive and socially diverse readership through cheap publication and circulating libraries.

Artists only tackled subjects from contemporary Gothic novels rarely; the more established literary sources of Shakespeare and Milton, and the fund of medieval and renaissance literature, provided, however, a rich resource for Gothic motifs of torture, imprisonment and terror. This space will display paintings and drawings drawing directly on Gothic literary themes – such as Thomas Robinson’s *The Hermit of Warkworth* (1790; private collection), Catherine Blake’s *Agnes* (1800; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) and Fuseli’s *Wolfram Observing his Wife in her Walled-in Cell* (c.1812-20; Georg Schafer Coll.).
5. WITCHES AND APPARITIONS

“If a Man were now to say that he is Inspired, he woud not be believed – Inspiration is therefore like Witchcraft, which ceased to be pretended as soon as it ceased to be believed.”

Horace Walpole (from his Miscellany, 1786-95)

By the late eighteenth century, the great majority of people had ceased sincerely believing in witches and ghosts, or at least, tended more than ever to refrain from expressing such beliefs in public. Only children or simple country folk, it seemed, now believed in spectres and the powers of magic.

Paradoxically, the supernatural had, a curious allure in this materialist, rationalist age. The aesthetics of the Sublime, the revaluation of medieval and romance literature, and a novel emphasis on the creative imagination conspired in the late eighteenth century to give artists a license to explore themes of witchcraft and magic. Witches, apparitions and fantasy creatures both enticing and monstrous, abound in painting and the graphic arts, and provided satirists with an incisive means of attacking the perceived deceptions and delusions of modern politics. Magic and illusion, meanwhile, were centrally important metaphors for the creative act; Fuseli, in particular, had a reputation as the ‘Wizard Painter’ from early in his public career.

There were rich resources of literary tradition and folklore to which artists could turn. Witches and ghosts feature prominently in Greek tragedy, and in Shakespeare, Milton and Jonson. Such associations lent dignity to the treatment of supernatural themes in art, even as the most shocking and sensational pictorial effects were being explored – and exploited. Henry Fuseli’s greatest witchcraft images will feature here – the Weird Sisters (or The Three Witches, 1783; Kunsthau, Zurich), Macbeth and the Armed Head (1793-4; Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington) and Night-hags Visiting Lapland Witches (1796; Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY), together with comparable subjects by George Romney, William Blake and John Downman. This section will also feature a recreation of a ‘Phantasmagoria’ show from around 1800.

6. FAIRIES AND FATAL WOMEN
“To dream of seeing strange apparitions,
As devils, hobgoblins, and such visions,
Does show thy love, or thy sweetheart,
Hath a fair face but devil’s heart.”

The Universal Fortune Teller: Or, Mrs Bridget’s (commonly called the Norwood Gypsy) Golden Treasury Explained, London c.1770

This section brings together images of fairies and fantasy women: the sexually adult and childlike worlds these figure represent were closely intertwined.

By the late eighteenth century almost no-one in educated society would admit to believing in fairies. Like ghosts and witches, they could be reconciled neither to empirical science, nor to the Protestant faith. Yet fairy-tales and fantasy persisted and with Fuseli and latterly Blake took on a dynamic new imaginative life.

Fuseli was universally acknowledged as the master-painter of the fairy, and his unique vision of the supernatural realm is saturated with sex. His conception of Shakespeare’s fairy world puts female characters in charge – beautiful, long-limbed creatures of perfection contrasted with squat, grotesque simple men; his private drawings of pornographic scenes feature sexually aggressive women torturing boys, suffocating men with their bodies, or teasing haughtily. The exhibition will bring together his two great paintings of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, from Tate and the Kunstmuseum, Winterthur, together with exceptional paintings and watercolours by William Blake, Georgina North and Theodor von Holst. A special section of this room will include the rarely-seen erotic works by von Holst and Fuseli, drawn from several international collections.

7. REVOLUTION, REVELATION AND APOCALYPSE

“There was not a man alive who had not experienced in the short span of four or five years more misfortunes than the most celebrated novelist could portray in a century. Thus, to compose works of interest, one had to call upon the aid of hell itself, and to find in the world of make-believe things wherewith one was fully familiar merely by delving into man’s daily life in this age of iron.”
The Marquis de Sade on the Gothic (1800)

Between the riots and political upheaval in Paris in 1789 that marked the opening shots of the French Revolution through to the battle of Waterloo in 1815 which saw the defeat of Napoleon, European culture was transformed in ways that were not just unprecedented, but virtually unimagined. The fall of the infamous Bastille prison in July 1789, the rigorous pursuit of democratic principles in France, the imprisonment and execution of Louis XVI and the ascent of Napoleon as emperor marked the overhaul of the old material and symbolic structures, the rise of new ways of thinking about and experiencing the world, of brutal violence and painful optimism, impossible dreams of freedom and the bleakest terrorization of humanity. The world it seemed was to be made anew: either as a monstrous caricature, or as a utopia.

The final section of the exhibition will represent the artistic response to the historical traumas of revolution and war. James Gillray and William Blake dominate this selection: despite their different intentions as artists and contrasting political tendencies, each developed a highly original apocalyptic style. Gillray’s *Presages of the Milenium* (1795) will be juxtaposed with the image it lampoons – Benjamin West’s *Death on a Pale Horse* (1783; Royal Academy of Arts), as well as Philip James de Loutherbourg’s *Vision of the White Horse* (1798; Tate) and Blake’s treatment of the same theme (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). Images of apocalyptic horror and devastation, plague and pestilence, will demonstrate the power of satire and visionary art at the eve of the new century.

8. THE NIGHTMARE IN MODERN CULTURE

“I’d known that Fuseli painting for some time. It was used as an album cover for a nineteenth century symphony by a composer so obscure I can’t remember his name now – a painting of a horrible little dwarf perched on a sleeping woman’s chest. He’s inhuman and he’s frightening. It was really fun to find a horrid little man two feet high and put him on this beautiful woman’s breast. The painting inspired one of the most scary scenes in the film.”

Ken Russell, from an interview with Christopher Frayling 2003
As a ‘coda’ to the exhibition, a room will be set aside for the presentation of film clips suggesting how Fuseli’s *The Nightmare* has become absorbed into modern culture. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), James Whales’s *Frankenstein* (1931) and Ken Russell’s *Gothic* (1986) each re-staged the painter’s famous image, giving it new life and new meanings for a modern audience.