

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder (Haina, Germany 1722 - Kassel, Germany 1789)

The Rape of Europa

oil on canvas

26 x 33 cm (10¼ x 13 in)

The present work is a newly discovered addition to the oeuvre of Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder, one of the leading figures in eighteenth-century German painting, and a member of the famous Tischbein dynasty of artists. The work depicts the famous Greek myth of Zeus' seduction of the beautiful Phoenician princess Europa. The god had become enamoured by Europa and so transformed himself into a bull and mixed with her father's herds. When Europa and her female attendants were gathering flowers she saw the bull, and although she was fearful at first, 'soon she approached with a garland of flowers for his gleaming head' and 'As little by little her fears were allayed, he would offer his front to be stroked by her maidenly hand or his horns to be decked with fresh garlands. The princess even ventured to sit with her legs astride on the back of the bull, unaware whose sides she was resting her thighs on.'¹ Once she was on his back Zeus galloped off and swam with her to Crete, where he revealed his true identity.

Tischbein has depicted Europa sitting atop the bull, her elegant, nude beauty the focus of the work. Both she and Zeus are garlanded with flowers, and they are surrounded by the princess' attendants and amoretti, who reflect the amorous theme of the work. The figures are arranged in a pyramidal composition, thus simply and effectively conveying the narrative. The bull's eye sparkles and he licks his lips in anticipation of his seduction, and Europa grips one of his horns suggestively. There is a mood of peace and relaxation in the work, as Zeus lulls Europa into a false sense of security, with the exception of the amoretto on the left-hand side, who appears to be agitating for the abduction to begin.

This painting had previously been unknown to Dr. Petra Tiegel-Hertfelder, author of the catalogue raisonné of Tischbein's history paintings. However, she points out a reference in the artist's order book to the subject of 'Europa' and is certain that the present painting is that work. Although the original client has

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yet to be identified *The Rape of Europa* is an exceptional example of Tischbein's small cabinet paintings.

Tiegel-Hertfelder has dated the work to 1758-1765 and, like the famous [Jupiter Disguised as Diana Seducing Callisto](#), from the same period, it demonstrates the influence of French Rococo painting upon Tischbein's art. In this period much of his work dealt with amorous themes, and this, together with the rich colouring, are reflective of the French influence. In both paintings the languorous female nudes are caressed with light, which highlights their delicate, almost porcelain skin. These bodies are made all the more prominent by the thick dark foliage of the settings, again a typical device used by Tischbein during this period. The thin and delicate fabrics, which are suggestively draped across the female bodies, add to the erotic overtone of both works.

The fifth son of an artisan, Tischbein was apprenticed to several artists, including his brother Johann Valentin Tischbein (1715-1768). An early and important patron, Count von Stadion, paid for him to travel to Paris in 1743, where he worked in the studio of [Carle van Loo \(1705-1765\)](#). He also spent time in Venice, working with Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (1683-1754), and visited Rome before returning to Germany in 1751.

He was soon appointed court painter to William VIII, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel (1682-1760), and so moved permanently to Kassel, the town which gave him the moniker 'der Kasseler'. Tischbein continued to hold his position as first court painter under his patron's successor, Landgrave Frederick II (1720-1785) and in 1776 he was appointed professor of painting and director of the Kassel Art Academy. Through his activities as a teacher and his long career, Tischbein established a painting style in Kassel that was to influence several generations of artists until well into the nineteenth century.

We are grateful to both Dr. Petra Tiegel-Hertfelder and Prof. Harald Marx for attributing the present work to Tischbein.

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Raeburn D. (Penguin Books, London, 2004), Book 2, 861 & 866-868.