PHILIPPE-JACQUES DE LOUTHERBOURG, R.A.

(Strasburg 1740 - Chiswick 1812)

Two Men, One Sleeping

with inscription ‘J. Loutherbourg’ (on the mount)
pen and black ink, grey wash
13.6 x 12.4 cm (5⅜ x 4⅞ in)

Provenance: An unidentified collector’s mark (L. 1718).

In this drawing Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg has shown a robbery in process. One man is fast asleep; the split flagon suggesting that he is either drunk or has possibly been drugged. The second man looms over the sleeping figure, his arm outstretched. It appears that he is about to steal whatever the sleeping figure cradles in his arms. The thief is dressed in torn, ragged clothing, has a straggling beard and long, unkempt hair. His appearance suggests that he is an impoverished street thief and his sly, gleeful grin confirms his wickedness. The prominently positioned flagon is decorated with an oriental text, thus the present work possibly shows the robbery of a naive foreigner.

In Two Men, One Sleeping the robber’s clothing strongly reflects his character. His costume quickly establishes his role in the image and the focus on costume is a feature in several of de Loutherbourg’s drawings, such as Man in Uniform (fig. 1). Although this drawing has no narrative, as it is a study of the figure of an officer in his uniform, like the figure of the thief in Two Men, One Sleeping, the viewer gains an immediate, concise and clear insight into the officer’s character. His tight-fitting jacket accentuates his rather portly figure, and as it clings to his large stomach, the buttons seem on the verge of popping off. It creates a slightly comical appearance although the man is clearly well-off. His chubbiness, confident upright bearing and his jolly, round face creates an image of a well fed, upper class man that is ever so slightly mocking. This is an example of the characteristic humour found in de Loutherbourg’s work.

De Loutherbourg’s work became characterised by its variety, from landscape to caricature and he often adapted his art to suit the market. De Loutherbourg was also a prolific illustrator, contributing twenty plates to John Bell’s second edition of Shakespeare (1786-1788), as well as publishing his collections of engravings, The Picturesque Scenery of Great Britain (1801) and The Picturesque and Romantic Scenery of England and Wales (1805).