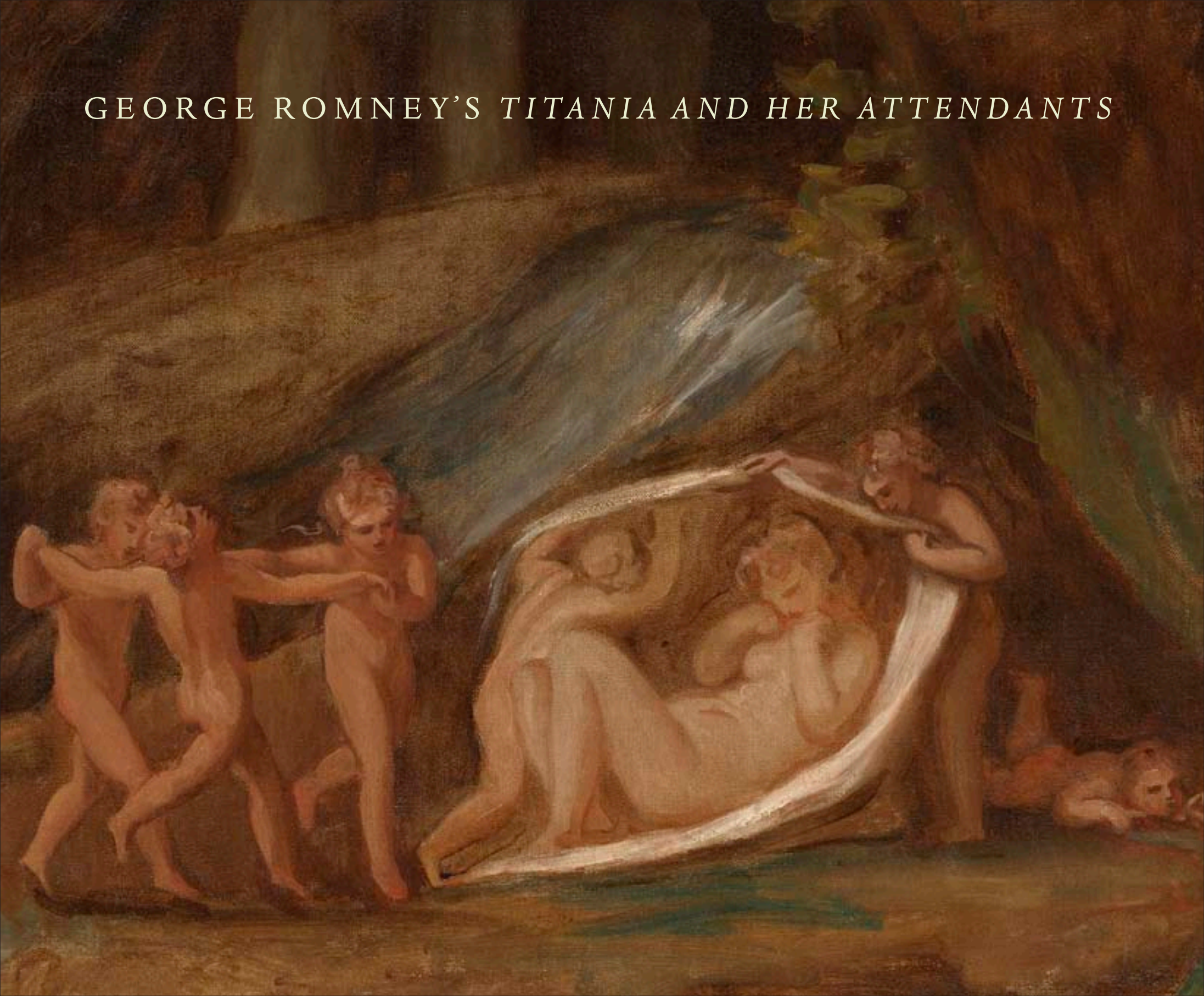


GEORGE ROMNEY'S *TITANIA AND HER ATTENDANTS*



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George Romney, *A study for Titania and her Attendants*

Pen with brown ink and wash · 6¼ × 7¾ inches · 156 × 196 mm · Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC (Art Vol. c59.45)

GEORGE ROMNEY'S
TITANIA AND HER ATTENDANTS

LOWELL LIBSON LIMITED

LONDON · 2011

INTRODUCTION

ROMNEY HAS LONG BEEN REGARDED as one of the major figures of late eighteenth century portraiture and, albeit, perhaps slightly less highly regarded than Reynolds, Gainsborough and Lawrence, his technical confidence, adventurous sense of design – especially strong in the period after his return from Italy – and his ability to record his sitters with elegance and sophistication has always maintained his reputation. In recent years there has generally been a greater critical appreciation for his drawings than his portraits and this is not entirely unfounded. Romney's solid skills as a draughtsman were transmuted by his time in Rome where he was exposed to the glories of seventeenth century Roman drawing, the influence of which is clearly seen in his later drawings, large and small, executed in ink with brush and pen. These vibrant drawings are now often regarded as an end in themselves but for Romney they were a means of distilling his ideas for subject paintings into harmonious and poetic form. Although Romney was dogged by the unrelenting pressure on his time as a fashionable portrait painter, as were Reynolds and Gainsborough, his slight disconnection from 'Society' did enable him to devote much time to expanding his thoughts relating to these compositions, as can be seen by the evidence of the plethora of surviving sketchbook studies, many very slight, which serve to underline the importance of subject painting to him.

The ethereal nature of this remarkable work is heightened by Romney's painterly transcription of the *Aurora Borealis*, 'The Northern Lights', with which he

would have been familiar from his early years in Westmorland as well as on his subsequent visits in later years to see his wife who remained there. John Dalton, the natural philosopher who developed atomic theory was teaching in Kendal between 1786 and 1793 and recorded some 250 sightings of the *Aurora Borealis* during that period, including spectacular displays in 1787.

The late series of paintings inspired by Shakespeare and especially by *Midsummer Night's Dream* are perhaps the apogee of his career and mark Romney out as one of the most innovative and inspired painters of the early Romantic movement. Remarkable for their poetry and the extraordinary breadth and confidence of their handling they are not only the antithesis of the 'Grand' manner as promulgated by Reynolds but even the works of his friend and competitor Fuseli. We are grateful to Alex Kidson for placing this picture and its related works in context in the illuminating essay that he has written for this catalogue. Our beautiful picture represents the culmination of Romney's long artistic journey combining, as it does, the high artistic ideals derived from his study of ancient, renaissance and baroque art in Italy with his ambitions inspired by his literary mentor, the poet Thomas Hayley. Romney, ever introspective, sought to make a direct and emotional impact on his viewer and in the present picture, perhaps the most ethereal of what Kidson has called this 'remarkable cluster of paintings', one glimpses not only Romney's true artistic sensibility but a vision of his perfect world.

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GEORGE ROMNEY 1734–1802

TITANIA AND HER ATTENDANTS

A rugged eminence where fairy children prepare Titania for sleep in the lee of a tree, whilst others chase a bat, play with a slug and stalk an owl. mysterious figures gather in a cave whilst the northern lights illuminate the plain below

Oil on canvas · 47 × 59 inches · 1194 × 1499 mm

Titania:

Come now, a roundel and a fairy song;
Then, for the third part of a minute, hence:
Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds;
Some war with rere-mice for their leathern wings,
To make my small elves coats; and some keep back
The clamorous owl that nightly hoots and wonders
At our quaint spirits. Sing me now asleep;
Then to your offices, and let me rest.

The fairies sing

First fairy:

You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong,
Come not near our fairy Queen.

Chorus :

Philomel with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby.
Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby.
Never harm
Nor spell nor charm
Come our lovely lady nigh.
So good night, with lullaby.

Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act II, Scene II

COLLECTIONS

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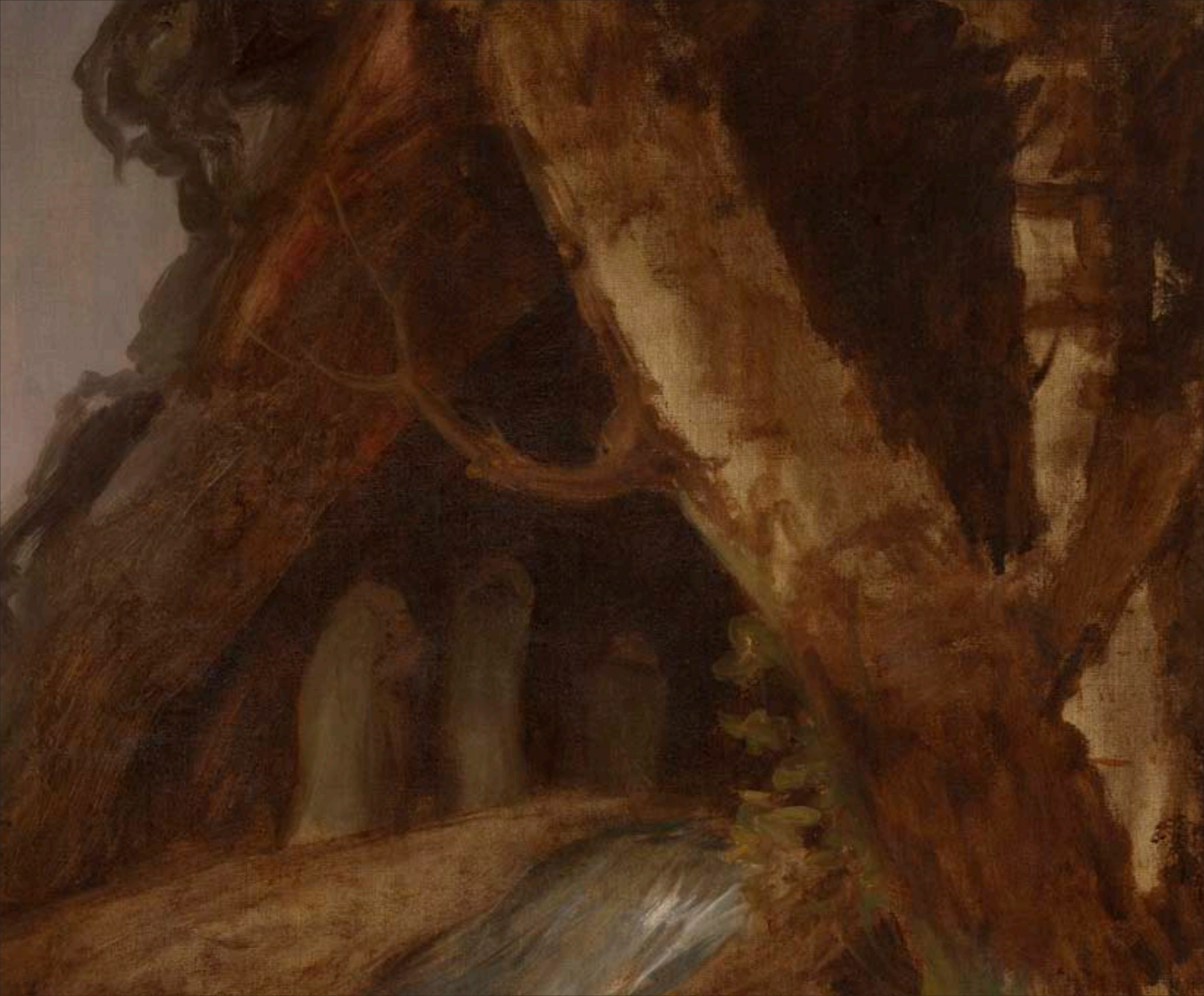
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David Cross, *A Striking Likeness: The Life of George Romney*, 2000, p.192;
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To be included in Alex Kidson's forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the works of Romney to be published by Yale University Press

EXHIBITED

London, Kenwood, *George Romney, 1734–1802: Paintings and Drawings*, June 1961, no.37;
Nottingham University Art Gallery, *Shakespeare in Art*, 1961, no.34;
New York, Finch College Museum of Art, *The Richard H. Rush Collection*, 25 February – 25 April, 1971, no.41;
Washington DC, Folger Shakespeare Library: 'Designs from Fancy', *George Romney's Shakespearean Drawings*, 1998, no.82





THIS PICTURE ILLUSTRATES A SCENE from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the beginning of Act II, scene 2, where Titania is falling asleep to the fairies' lullaby.

John Flaxman pointed out in his 'Sketch of Romney's Professional Character', that Romney was gifted with peculiar powers for historical and ideal painting, so his heart and soul were engaged in the pursuit of it, whenever he could extricate himself from the importunate business of portrait painting. It was his delight by day and study by night, and for this his food and rest were often neglected (John Flaxman in William Hayley, *The Life of George Romney Esq.*, 1809, p.310). Indeed, Shakespeare was to provide the central platform for what Romney described as *those delightful regions of the imagination* (Hayley, *op.cit.* p.123) and his first 'History' painting, executed prior to 1761, was of King Lear in the storm. However, it was Romney's two year period of study in Rome (1773–75) that resolved and released both his technical capability and imaginative capacity, which in the field of history painting was to find its most immediate and constant release in the stream of ink wash drawings which seem to mark the almost fevered frustration of his desire to devote himself to this more elevated and inspiring art.

Romney's interest in this area was further stimulated in 1786 when Alderman John Boydell initiated his ambitious scheme to found a Shakespeare Gallery, which was to comprise a gallery in Pall Mall containing one hundred large and one hundred small paintings illustrating scenes from the plays. The gallery was intended as an adjunct to Boydell's publishing activities and the success of the venture would depend on sales of engravings derived from the paintings (see tailpiece, p.24). From the outset, Romney was an enthusiastic supporter of the scheme (which ultimately led to Boydell's bankruptcy) contributing the largest canvas of his career (117 × 180 inches) illustrating the shipwreck from *The Tempest* (destroyed 1957, four fragments survive in Bolton Museum and Art Gallery). This composition, which is now known from an engraving of inferior quality and a small *modello*, met with little critical success.

From the latter 1780s, a time when he had secured his financial independence, Romney increasingly turned away from portraiture to history painting. As Alex Kidson has recently pointed out (*George Romney 1734–1802*, exhibition catalogue, 2002), Romney eschewed following an orthodox academic, or to use his own words an *artificial and cold macanical* [sic] effect of the standard historical composition of the period. Indeed, the present work precisely fits Romney's own idea of a picture: *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* (Folger Library, Washington DC, Art vol.c61.72 verso-74, Romney's notes for a discourse on painting, see p.20 for a transcript). Kidson (*op. cit.* pp.35–6) has pointed out that in the remarkable group of paintings that he

made in the early 1790s based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Academic precepts of the primacy of the figure or the importance of finish are swept away in favour of a magical ethereality of colour, and where the subject, from a position of familiarity with Shakespeare's text, is at first glance almost incomprehensible*. The play itself was very rarely performed in the eighteenth century and this may have been an added attraction to Romney who could forge his compositions without the preconceptions deriving from an audience familiar with the play.

It is interesting to note that Romney visited Paris in the summer of 1790 when he made a study of Titian's *Pardo Venus* in the Louvre. The reclining Venus seen in the right-hand of Titian's painting appears to have been the inspiration for the reclining Titania in Romney's *Midsummer Night's Dream* compositions. Alex Kidson (*op.cit.* p.207) suggests that the large drawing (Private collection, UK) directly derived from the Titian was inspired by Romney's Parisian mistress, Thélassie, a dancer. However, it would appear that tenderly executed nude figure of Titania seen in the present work may well have been inspired by the return to London in 1791 of Romney's muse, Emma Hart.

The small group of late history paintings, especially those based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can now be seen to represent the culmination of Romney's artistic journey, executed at a pivotal point in the history of both British and European painting. These paintings have often been characterized as being unfinished, even by John Romney, the painter's son, but given Romney's developing views of the nature of his art, allied with the high degree of finish given to his remarkable rendering of the 'Northern Lights' in the present work, it would appear that the artist may have considered this picture with its poetic simplicity to conform to his notion of being like a *momentary impulse or impression in the Mind*.

Romney's physical and mental frailty in the 1790s and his further, almost entire, withdrawal from the artistic establishment, (which he ultimately appeared to regret) and the consequent obscurity of his late works, resulting from his timidity and a fear of exposure, led to the true nature and importance of his late work being withheld from contemporary viewers.

Romney's late Shakespeare subjects represent an antithesis to the established academic classicism represented by Reynolds and promulgated in his *Discourses*. In *Titania's Attendants*, Romney can be seen to be following his own words found in his *Discourse*, in executing a work that is intensely Romantic in conception, having gone through the process of being *heated or fermented long in the Mind*. In this extraordinary painting of the early 1790s we find in Romney's art an extreme sensibility which can only be paralleled in the late landscapes of Gainsborough. It is to be regretted that this and the small related group of works by Romney did not have greater, if any, currency in the 1790s as they would surely have made a huge impression of a younger generation of artists and connoisseurs in the early years of the Romantic movement. LL

THE MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM PAINTINGS OF GEORGE ROMNEY



Fig. 1
Benjamin Smith
after George
Romney,
The Tempest
Stipple engraving
19½ × 24¾ inches
495 × 630 mm
Published in 1797



Fig. 2
Caroline Watson
after George
Romney, *Miranda*
Stipple engraving
10¾ × 7¾ inches
273 × 195 mm
Published in 1808
for Hayley's *Life*
of *George Romney*
© The Trustees of the
British Museum



Fig. 3 | George Romney, *Studies relating to Titania*
Pencil · 5¼ × 7½ inches · 130 × 190 mm
Sketchbook D. 1952 RW 2503, fol. 20v
The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London



Fig. 4 | George Romney, *Studies relating to Titania*
Pencil · 5¼ × 7½ inches · 130 × 190 mm
Sketchbook D. 1952 RW 2503, fol. 21r
The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

ALTHOUGH GEORGE ROMNEY'S WIDER FAME in the last three decades of the 18th century rested on his society portraiture, his aspirations as a history painter were well-known to contemporaries. As early as the 1760s, when new in London, he had shown in public, and been awarded prizes for, such works as *The Death of General Wolfe* and *The Death of King Edmund*. Later, when he was fashionably set up in Cavendish Square, visitors to his painting room were able to inspect not only his recent portraits of the great and the good, but also a number of his black chalk cartoons on literary themes, as well as, for a time, his sublime oil sketch *Providence Brooding over Chaos*. His enthusiasm for Shakespeare was nurtured by friendships with writers and people from the world of the theatre, and he was widely known to have been a pivotal figure in the formation of the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery in 1786. For that, after initially signing up to paint the banquet scene from *Macbeth*, he struggled for over three years to complete his colossal machine depicting the action of Act 1 of *The Tempest* (fig. 1). His abandonment of the first and difficulties with the second appeared to confirm the easy assumption made by his fellow-artists that for all his absorption in the pathos of Shakespearian drama, his aesthetic was too much rooted in the lucrative world of portraiture for him ever to succeed as a history painter. So it was against all expectation that, having since his arrival in London completed only one canvas from his favourite Shakespeare tragedies *Macbeth* and *King Lear* – and that essentially the portrait of an actor – Romney in his last ten years as an active artist made seven paintings from a Shakespeare play of very different character: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Little known in his lifetime (and scarcely any more familiar to posterity) these late canvases are effectively his one coherent body of history paintings. Made against the background of his declining interest in portraiture and his ever-proliferating schemes for ambitious cycles of canvases that were invariably abandoned at the stage of preliminary sketches, they constitute the evidence of Romney's true proclivities as a painter of the imagination, and are one of the most remarkable contributions to the tradition of literary painting in British art.

The origins of this group of works are largely shrouded in mystery. However, it is clear that having spent over twenty-five years in creative engagement with *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, Romney began widening his familiarity with Shakespeare's works in the mid-1780s. The main catalyst for this was his introduction to Emma Hart, the mistress of his longstanding patron Charles Greville. In employing Emma as a model for fancy portraits, Romney discovered, in the words of their mutual friend the poet William Hayley, that 'her features, like the language of

Shakespeare, could exhibit all the feelings of nature and all the gradation of every passion with a most fascinating truth and felicity of expression'. Shortly before Greville shipped Emma off to Naples to live with his uncle Sir William Hamilton in the spring of 1786, Romney depicted her personifying the character of Miranda in *The Tempest*, a picture which it may be no exaggeration to claim was the germ of the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery (fig. 2). Once the Boydell scheme was under way at the end of that year, and even while he was beginning work on his grand *Tempest* painting, it behoved Romney to study other Shakespearian heroines. Titania, the queen of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (along with Margery Jourdain and Joan of Arc from *Henry VI, Parts 1 and 2*, and later Ophelia from *Hamlet* and Constance from *King John*) was soon attracting his attention.

The birth of Romney's interest in the figure of Titania may be traced in four slight pencil studies in a sketchbook that on internal evidence can be shown to have been used at the end of 1786 and the early months of 1787 (Courtauld Institute Gallery D. 1952 RW 2503). One of these sketches (fol. 13r) appears to depict a scene of Oberon and Titania quarrelling over the Changeling that Romney never developed; but the other three (fols. 20r, 20v, 21r. figs. 3 & 4) can be related quite closely to elements of the oil *The Indian Woman* (Private Collection, UK).

This is the one painting in the series for which there is close documentary evidence for dating: in a letter of 8 April 1793 to his brother James in India, Romney mentioned having 'just finished a Picture from Midsummer night's dream it is only a discription [sic] of Titania by the seaside talking to her Indian woman with child'. There is nothing exceptional in the notion of Romney taking six years to mature the composition of one of his works of the imagination (although the sketch on page 20v of the sketchbook is surprisingly close to the finished work). Nevertheless Hayley, in describing *The Indian Woman* in his later biography of Romney, noted that 'many years before' Romney finished the picture, he made an oil sketch of it at Hayley's villa in Sussex, in a different format to the later painting, and gave this to Hayley's son. It seems likely that this oil, which has disappeared from the day it was painted, was made in 1787 in conjunction with the Courtauld sketches.

If this scenario is the right one, it is likely that the trigger for Romney's studying a Titania subject was the news – printed in *The Times* in January 1787 – that Henry Fuseli had decided upon a subject from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for his first work for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery. Romney's and Fuseli's longstanding reciprocal interest in each other's subject matter is one that requires in-depth research, but as far back as 1774, when the two men had both been part

of the community of British artists in Rome, Romney had become keenly aware of Fuseli's drawings, and his Roman deathbed scenes and his later cartoon *The Death of Odin*, for example, are strongly indebted to similar works by the Swiss artist. It is unclear whether Fuseli chose to take on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Boydell because he had already made paintings on subjects from the play: two small roundels depicting two of Titania's fairies, *Cobweb* and *Peaseblossom*, first known of in the ownership of the Liverpool collector Edward Rogers, are traditionally dated 1785–6, but they may have emerged in conjunction with the huge, multi-figured *Titania and Bottom with the Asses' Head* (Tate Britain, fig.5) that Fuseli worked on in 1787 and 1788 and which was one of the 34 paintings ready in time for the opening of the Boydells' gallery in the spring of 1789. It would have been entirely in keeping with Romney that he kept a watching brief on Fuseli's progress with *Titania and Bottom* and indeed the two further *Midsummer Night's Dream* pictures that Fuseli worked on in 1789 and had added to the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery by 1790: *Titania Awakening* (Winterthur, fig.6) – the pendant to *Titania and Bottom* – and *Robin Goodfellow* (untraced). That Romney was aware of the latter, and probably also its rival in the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, the *Puck* by Sir Joshua Reynolds (fig.7), is strongly suggested by the fact that in April 1789 he started work on a portrait of Tom Hayley personifying Puck, even though it was early 1792 before that picture (Tate Britain, fig.8) was finished.

It could be argued that Romney's and Fuseli's approaches to making a grand Shakespearean machine, as witnessed in their *Tempest* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* pictures respectively, were not wholly dissimilar; both took large liberties with the text, recreating the action according to a personal vision, and both filled their canvases with a crowd of figures that demanded close reading. There is no



Fig 5 | Henry Fuseli, *Titania and Bottom*
Oil on canvas · 85½ × 108½ inches · 2172 × 2756 mm
© Tate, London 2011



Fig 6 | Henry Fuseli, *Titania Awakening*
(*Titania's Erwachen*)
Oil on canvas · 87½ × 110¼ inches · 2220 × 2800 mm
Kunstmuseum, Winterthur. Presented by George Reinhart, 1946

evidence that Romney's interest in Titania subject matter was taken any further during the period that he was working on his *Tempest* painting, which was eventually delivered to the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery in April 1790, but when over the two following years he began two contrasted paintings of Titania subjects, they displayed very little stylistic and conceptual continuity with *The Tempest* and consequently offered a sharp contrast to Fuseli's pictures. The lack of respect afforded to *The Tempest* by Romney's fellow artists (even though the painting was well reviewed by disinterested critics) had affected his confidence and he instinctively withdrew into a more intimate and poetic vein characterized by an avoidance of high finish and a preference for compositions of few figures which did not require elaborate exegesis. In one of these two pictures, *Titania, Puck and the Changeling* (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, fig. 9), Titania was modelled, obviously from the life and without the need for any composition sketches, by Emma Hart, on her return to London in the summer of 1791: the opportunism of the sittings yielding a lyrical, quickly painted work that by eighteenth century standards would have been considered unfinished (indeed it may have been for this reason, rather than sentimental ones, that Romney kept the work in his own possession for the rest of his life). With its seashore setting and depiction of a grouping of characters who never figure together in the play, it inhabits the same poetic world as the *Indian Woman* sketch in the Courtauld sketchbook, indicating that Romney's ideas about the play had remained relatively constant since 1787.

The second picture, *Titania Reposing with her Indian Votaries* (Royal Shakespeare Company Collection, Stratford on Avon, fig.10) depicts Titania with her fairy attendants in an imagined recreation of the opening of Act 2 scene 2 of the play. Although it is unclear whether Romney began it before or after *Titania, Puck*



Fig.7 | Luigi Schiavonetti after Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Puck*
Stipple engraving
9 × 7¼ inches · 230 × 183 mm
Published in 1769 by Boydell
© Trustees of the British Museum



Fig.8 | George Romney, *Tom Hayley as Robin Goodfellow*
Oil on canvas · 29¼ × 25 inches
756 × 635 mm frame
© Tate, London 2011

and the *Changeling*, it functions in a creative dialectic with the latter work. The model this time was not Emma, but she may well be Thélassie, the French dancer who lived with Romney for a period at the end of the 1780s and early 1790s and of whom the artist's son John Romney observed sourly that her features appeared in all his father's later works. For all John Romney's disapproval of his father's choice of companion, there seems little doubt that the presence of Thélassie in Romney's life grounded him emotionally and enabled him to bring to fruition the kind of picture that would previously have defeated him. In *Titania Reposing* Romney engaged more directly with Fuseli's conception of the fairy queen: although he experimented with a horizontal format in a beautiful unfinished oil version of the picture (Private Collection, UK, fig.11) he eventually reverted to an upright canvas that followed Fuseli but contrasted with all his own other *Midsummer Night's Dream* paintings. He also took the central figure to a higher degree of finish. Without sacrificing the poetic conception and magical atmosphere of *Titania, Puck and the Changeling* he centred the work on what was in effect an academic nude.

Titania Reposing is not easy to date. From its carefully worked character, it is tempting to argue that Romney's many thumbnail drawings of Titania and her fairies, both on loose sheets and in a number of dismembered and surviving sketchbooks, belong essentially to its gestation, rather than with the other paintings in the group. Given the way that Romney used his sketchbooks in overlapping clusters rather than in strict chronological order, and the way he used drawings to explore variation, the contention is not self-evident; certainly sketches exist that relate directly to *The Indian Woman* and *Titania and her Attendants* (Lowell Libson Ltd, fig 12). Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that when Romney began making at first fairly undirected *Midsummer Night's Dream* studies, in sketchbooks purchased in and inscribed with the date 1790 (if perhaps not used till later) it was this painting that was primarily in view; and it is also the case that the one sketchbook whose contents relate most closely to the establishment of Titania's distinctive front-on pose in the present work (Folger Shakespeare Library Art vol. c61) is one of those most densely filled with *Midsummer Night's Dream* studies. Art vol.c61 is the sketchbook in which Romney jotted down his most coherent series of thoughts towards a discourse on painting, and his remarks on 'that immense Fabrick a historical picture', which 'should appear like one momentary impulse in the mind', its composition 'formed in the mind perfect and whole before it is delivered on paper or canvas' rather than mechanically or piecemeal, closely reflect the distinction he was establishing between *Titania Reposing* and his other *Midsummer Night's Dream* paintings on the one hand and most of the other contributions to the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, with their 'mechanical' reproduction of the action of the play in appropriate historical costume on the other. Art vol.c61, which is inscribed on the front cover *Queen Mab*, an alternative



Shakespearean name for the queen of the fairies (deriving from a speech in *Romeo and Juliet*, and revealing how prone Romney was to eliding subject matter in his own mind) contains notes in the endpapers referring to Romney's trip to France in the summer of 1790, and a journey that he made to Greenwich in July 1791; while more crucially, one of its composition studies for *Titania Reposing* is paired on the same sheet (c61 fol. 38) with a study for his portrait of Mrs Anne St. George and her son Richard (Heckscher Art Museum, Huntington, NY) a work for which sittings were given in July and August 1791. Unusual in Romney's portrait *oeuvre* as a mother and child composition in which the child is shown completely naked, *Mrs St George and Son* might well be viewed as a Titania manqué with one of her fairies.

If that suggests that the Stratford *Titania Reposing* was begun in the summer of 1791, and thus capitalised upon the excitement of Romney's muse Emma modelling his other Titania at the same time, sketches for it are also present in a sketchbook (Princeton Art Museum, 1948.1660) whose endpaper jottings show that it was in use in the summer of 1792: evidence that suggests that the painting was still unfinished at the later date. The Princeton sketchbook also contains studies relating to two new *Midsummer Night's Dream* paintings, *Titania and her Attendants* (Lowell Libson Ltd) and a second *Titania Reposing* (Private collection, UK, fig.13), both of which depict the same scene 2 of Act 2 of the play in contrasted ways.

If the first *Titania Reposing* was essentially Romney's attempt to distil the scene in all its poetry and magic, these next pictures read as his admission that the task was an impossible one, that there were just too many alternative ways of rendering it. The same size as each other and perhaps always regarded as a pair (they remained together until the present century) they are slightly smaller than the first *Titania Reposing* and are more rapidly brushed, returning to the visual language of *Titania, Puck and the Changeling* while giving even more creative weight to achieving an atmosphere of poetry and mystery. Gone from them, however, is any sense of Titania as the artist's muse: she has served her purpose.

Fig.9 | George Romney, *Titania, Puck and the Changeling from Shakespeare's, A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1793

Oil on canvas · 41 × 53½ inches · 1040 × 1350 mm
Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

Fig.10 | George Romney, *Titania Reposing with her Indian Votaries*

Oil on canvas · 53 × 45¼ inches · 1345 × 1165 mm
Royal Shakespeare Company Collection, Stratford on Avon © Royal Shakespeare Company

Fig.11 | George Romney, *Titania Reposing*

Oil on canvas · 41¼ × 47 inches · 1015 × 1195 mm
Private collection, UK



Fig.12 | George Romney, *Titania and her attendants*
Oil on canvas · 47 × 59 inches · 1194 × 1499 mm
Lowell Libson Ltd



Fig.13 | George Romney, *Titania Reposing*
Oil on canvas · 46 × 58½ inches · 1168 × 1486 mm
Private collection, UK



Fig.14 | George Romney, *A study for Titania and her attendants*
Pen with brown ink and wash · 6¼ × 7¼ inches · 156 × 196 mm
Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC (Art Vol.c59.30)



Fig.15 | George Romney, *A study for Titania and her attendants*
Pen with brown ink and wash · 6¼ × 7¼ inches · 156 × 196 mm
Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC (Art Vol.c59.45)

In *Titania's Attendants* Romney focuses instead on Titania's fairies, carrying out their orders from their queen:

*Come now, a roundel and a fairy song,
Then, for the third of a minute, hence;
Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds,
Some war with vire-mice for their leathern wings,
To make my small elves coats, and some keep back
The clamorous owl, that nightly hoots, and wonders
At our quaint spirits. Sing me now asleep;
Then to your offices, and let me rest.*

In later life Romney was increasingly drawn to paint young children; and yet the true subject of the picture is not the fairies: it is the sublime, rough-hewn setting and the extraordinary skyscape with its rendition of the Northern Lights, an effect which Romney studied in a further sketchbook (Folger Shakespeare Library Art vol.c59; fols. 30 and 45, figs. 14 & 15) whose *Midsummer Night's Dream* drawings as a whole seem to have been made with the present painting in mind.

The sense of withdrawal from the real world into the dream world inhabited by the play is taken even further in the companion work, the second *Titania Reposing*. Here Titania and her fairies are reduced to a tiny and ghostly patch on the landscape, while in the other half of the painting three shadowy figures emerge out of the darkness; perhaps Lysander, Hermia and Oberon, who figure in Act 2 shortly after Titania has fallen asleep, but whose presence in the painting fractures the temporal unity of the scene as surely as their scale fractures its spatial one. This is the most ethereal of all the *Midsummer Night's Dream* pictures: the figures are less realised even than the fairies in *Titania's Attendants* and the landscape dissolves into an undifferentiated twilight world. John Romney, the artist's son, recalling his father's anti-social tendencies and preference for long walks in the country, sketchbook in his pocket, noted that 'he had great pleasure in observing evening and twilight effects, and began four pictures, suggested by such observations, representing the visitations of ghosts and fairies at that solemn and fancy moving hour'. This must have been one of the paintings of which he was chiefly thinking.

The second *Titania Reposing* appears in retrospect as the *ne plus ultra* of Romney's modernist tendencies, and it would be tempting to assume it was the last picture of the series. Yet two further paintings depend more closely on it and on *Titania's Attendants* than they do the earlier works in the group. The first of these is a large and mysterious work whose original title, if it ever had one, has disappeared from view (Private Collection, Japan, fig.16). Only tradition states that it is a *Midsummer Night's Dream* subject. It does not represent Titania and her fairies, nor is it any part of the action of the play (although that would not be expected of Romney); and yet its procession of cowed figures resembles those in one of

the drawings for *Titania's Attendants* (Folger Shakespeare Library Art vol.c59, fol. 30) and in its general mood it is clearly more closely related to the second *Titania Reposing* than to any other Romney painting. Just conceivably it is an evocation of Puck's speech at the beginning of the last scene of the play:

*... Now it is that time of night
That the graves, all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite
In the church-way paths to glide:
And we fairies that do run
By the triple Hecate's team,
From the presence of the sun,
Following darkness like a dream,
Now are frolic ...*

The dream that is the play then dissolves before the dawning of a new day.

The second painting is *The Indian Woman* (Private collection, UK, fig.17). Again its relation to *Titania's Attendants* and the second *Titania Reposing* is less thematic (it is still about one of Titania's attendants, but its source lies in a different scene of the play altogether) than formal. It is on the same size of canvas, and its palette,



Fig.16 | George Romney, *Figures in a landscape*
Oil on canvas · 43½ × 60¼ inches · 1110 × 1530 mm
Private collection, Japan

with its soft pinks and pale blues, is especially close to the second *Titania Resting*. It is tempting to wonder whether this picture was always the goal of Romney's *Midsummer Night's Dream* campaign: the work that brought him full circle, back to his first engagement with the play in the mid-1780s and back within range of the emotional charge experienced in painting Emma as Titania on the seashore. The painting withdraws from the most radical and daring effects of its companions, both visually and in terms of the positioning of image against text; but it could be said to apply more surely the lessons learnt in painting them, especially the key role played by colour and atmosphere. It is striking that this is the one painting of the group that Romney talks about in his correspondence. As we have seen, he mentions its completion in the spring of 1793 in a letter to his brother in India as if it is a work he is proud of (the phrase 'only a description' is a beacon of false modesty); but more significantly it is one of 'four Pictures that does [sic] me greater Credit than any I have painted before' (the others being *Milton and his Daughters*, an unfinished *Ophelia* that was being cast as a companion to *The Indian Woman* and an also unfinished *Susan, when the Seas were Roaring*) that he lists in a letter of March 1794 to his son John.



Fig.17 | George Romney, *The Indian Woman*, 1793
Oil on canvas · 46½ × 58½ inches · 1185 × 1485 mm
Private collection, UK

Not least, *The Indian Woman* was the only *Midsummer Night's Dream* painting that was sold in Romney's lifetime, arguing that the artist gave it priority it when prospective patrons showed an interest in his work. Its buyer, at the splendid price of 300 guineas, was none other than William Beckford of Fonthill: a former client of Romney the portraitist but belatedly in touch with the artist's larger aspirations, and a man likely enough to be strongly attracted to the painting's unorthodox poetry. Beckford kept the work only ten years, but the reflected glory of his collection was such in that time as to seal the picture's reputation. John Britton, in his *Beauties of Wiltshire* of 1801, wrote that 'the design, colouring and execution of this piece, are all admirable. The effect it produces, as reflected in the large glass opposite, is quite magical. We seem to behold the glowing atmosphere of an exotic climate, and to enjoy in imagination, "the spiced Indian air"'. Richard Cumberland, in his obituary of Romney in the *European Magazine*, June 1803, noted that 'the character, scenery and execution are beautiful'; and when the contents of Fonthill were sold in 1807 the auctioneer, Phillips, described the work – catalogued under the curious title *The Gypsy* – as 'the chef d'oeuvre of that distinguished artist'.

After 1807 *The Indian Woman* disappeared from view and its lustre passed, unexpectedly, to *Titania, Puck and the Changeling*. Although it was understood to be unfinished, the painting was the star of Romney's posthumous sale in the April of that year. It was described in the catalogue as 'a surprising picture of poetic sportive invention, treated with Correggiasque taste and magic effect – one of the happiest efforts of the artist'; and its purchase by Sir John Leicester and subsequent prominent position in the publications of Britton, Carey and Young on Leicester's much admired collection – even though this was scattered in 1827 – were enough to ensure its and the artist's continued reputation in the dark days of the mid-nineteenth century.

Several more of the remaining *Midsummer Night's Dream* pictures besides *Titania, Puck and the Changeling* were included in Romney's posthumous sale. Their identities are unclear. John Romney later wrote that he regretted not reserving one of them: 'a beautiful naked figure ... in truth, a very fairy. It represented her reclining in her bower, and in a state of somnolency; and if I remember rightly, Bottom sleeping by her side ...' This looks as if it was lot 105, which was bought by the artist Henry Tresham and is probably to be identified as the Stratford *Titania Resting* (although if John Romney was correct about the presence of Bottom, that figure has subsequently been completely painted over). Two other canvases John Romney did buy in: *A Subject from a Midsummer Night's Dream, faint sketch, large* and *Titania Concealing Herself, a Sketch*. It is tempting to think that the first of these was the picture – which is larger than the others – now in Japan (fig.16), and the second the unfinished work (fig.13).

Not one of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* pictures appeared in a public exhibition in Romney's lifetime or during the nineteenth century, and they have always struggled to impinge on the popular image of Romney's work. It might be suggested that part of their obscurity partakes of the play's own relatively reticent place in the Shakespearean canon during the eighteenth century; it is noticeable that in the Boydells' prospectus for their Shakespeare Gallery, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was one of the plays threatened with representation by only one illustration, in order to free up better-known plays to have three. This reticence suited Romney's creative *persona* perfectly. An artist who at the most fundamental level hated direct competition and regarded the expectations of his contemporaries as a threat and a nuisance, Romney remained suspicious of the aesthetic prescriptions of others and once a mature artist, he signally struggled to formulate compositions based on the great Shakespearean tragedies for which there already existed a strong tradition of intellectual and pictorial debate. He preferred to operate by stealth. In colonizing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he had an unexceptional tradition of eighteenth-century illustration of the play to contend with: Gravelot's design for Lewis Theobald's Shakespeare edition of 1740; Hayman's for Sir Thomas Hanmer's edition of 1743–4 (fig.18); and more recent designs by Edward Edwards whose emphasis lay on the acting and the costumes that might have been expected by theatre-goers, not on the poetry or the psychology of the play. In this respect only Fuseli was ahead of him, and Romney seems always to have been able to view Fuseli as a fellow traveller, not a rival.

A further attraction of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*



Fig.18 | Gerard van der Gucht after Francis Hayman, *Puck and the sleeping Helena*
Etching · 5¾ × 3¾ inches · 142 × 85 mm
© Trustees of the British Museum

for him was the character of Titania herself: one of those enchantresses and dominatrixes, but also women victimized by their male partners, who bestrode Romney's subject matter throughout his life and lit his creative fuse more surely than any other literary type. Feeding into his fascination with the supernatural, the world of fairies and magic, Titania arguably became the last incarnation of the Eternal Feminine that drove him on. But in retrospect, however, the most crucial feature of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* paintings were that they operated in counterpoint to, rather than at the cutting edge, of Romney's aspirations as a history painter. None of them was intended for the Boydells, and none was on a scale of *the Tempest* or even the *Milton and his Daughters* with whose production theirs co-incided. They were painted as an expression of his true instincts, not as what was expected of him. Their cast of characters had more in common with his quotidian clientele of mothers and children than the heroes beloved of his literary friends and advisers (none of whom were required to shape these works); and it could be argued that the poetry that suffused them represented a culminating transformation of the countless landscape backgrounds, not quite abstracted,

not quite real, that had graced his portraits for decades past. There could be no surprise, then, that in one of his last major portrait commissions, given in 1795 to paint Lord Egremont's partner Elizabeth Iliff and their children (Private Collection, UK) Romney personified his sitters as Titania and her attendants shooting at bats. In this grand and crepuscular painting the various strands of Romney's artistry came seamlessly together to form one of his most deeply personal and truly characteristic masterpieces.

GEORGE ROMNEY

NOTES FOR A DISCOURSE ON PAINTING

Divide the Art of Painting/ under the following heads:

Composition

Character

Expression

Grandure

Simplicity

Grace in a form exists/ in great Art –

Drawing and Coloring/ [crossed out] are mechanical I begin under the above heads to speak on that Divine Art – and A Composition is a term under which head the

Difficulties of the art are mostly comprehended, and the most extensive knowledge required, Invention, Philosophy, and a great knowledge of Human Nature are also necessary before a Painter can sit down to form that immense Fabrick a Historical Picture – It should appear like one momentary impulse or impression in the Mind or like an incident in Nature – where every thing falls together by accident or Chance – Composition is conceiving the Subject Poetically and justly to the Subject to throw every thing into the Picture that the subject will admit of that is grand and will illustrate without destroying the simplicity of the Picture that is, nothing heterogeneous or trifling – When the soul of Man receives impressions from its own impulse or from fine Poetry or History it or ought forms that arrangement or combination in the Mind perfect and whole before it is delivered on paper or canvas – it should be heated or 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 – on the other hand if a composition be formed mechanical and piecemeal varied one figure after another upon paper it will always have an artificial and cold mechanical effect

Folger Library, Art Vol. c61.72 verso – 74

GEORGE ROMNEY

THE TITANIA SKETCHBOOK



Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC (Inv. no. Art vol. c59), [Dixon & Kidson 2003, no. 25]

Pen with brown ink and wash · 6¼ × 7¾ inches · 156 × 196 mm · illustrated above c59.30R



C59 - 23R



C59 - 20R



C59 - 21R



C59 - 22R



C59 - 27R



C59 - 28R



C59 - 31R



C59 - 32R



C59 - 33R



C59 - 36R



C59 - 42R



C59 - 45R



C59 - 48R

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James Gillray, *Shakespeare Sacrificed – or – the offering to avarice*

Etching · 19¹/₁₆ × 15 inches · 500 × 383 mm

Published in 1789

© Trustees of the British Museum

Alderman Boydell stands within a magic circle, directing a sacrifice of Shakespeare's plays

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