

Lot 1035



Auction	Fine Art
Date	17.05.2024, ca. 14:27
Preview	10.05.2024 - 10:00:00 bis 13.05.2024 - 18:00:00

GRAFF, ANTON
1736 Winterthur - 1813 Dresden

Title: Portrait of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803).
Date: 1790s.
Technique: Oil on canvas.
Measurement: 71.5 x 57.5cm.
Frame: Framed.

Literature:
E. Berckenhagen: Anton Graff. Leben und Werk, Berlin 1967, p. 392, nr. 1565.

Provenance:
Private ownership, Germany.

We are grateful to Helmut Börsch-Supan, Berlin, for confirming the attribution of this portrait to Anton Graff on the basis of a high-resolution photograph. Börsch-Supan refers to the portrait of Johann Gottfried Herder from the Gleimhaus in Halberstadt depicted by Berckenhagen and sees the present painting as a new discovery.

It is in the nature of things that a portrait depicts the sitter as closely as possible. However, the great skill of the outstanding portraitist lies in visualising not only the outward appearance, but also the nature and character of the model. When this succeeds, a portrait conveys a comprehensive personality that transcends the boundaries of time and lends the person portrayed the immediacy of a contemporary.

Swiss-born Anton Graff was the outstanding portraitist in the German-speaking world of the 18th century. During his three-year training at Schellenberg's drawing school in Winterthur, he had already specialised in portraiture. At the age of 20, he moved to southern Germany. He travelled to Augsburg, Ansbach and Regensburg, where he already worked independently but also completed his training. His meeting with the Bavarian court painter Désmarées in Schleißheim was of decisive importance for Graff. As was his access to large collections of paintings, where he was able to study works by leading portraitists such as Pesne, Rigaud and Kupetzky.

The young Graff attracted attention and, in 1766, he was offered a permanent position as court painter. This

appointment signalled Anton Graff's final breakthrough. Dignitaries and politicians, aristocrats and military officers, great intellectuals and actors wanted to be painted by Anton Graff. And demand was not only high in Dresden. Graff negotiated a limited attendance requirement in his employment contract, which allowed him to travel and paint personalities in other cities as well.

In Carlsbad in 1785, he also portrayed Johann Gottfried Herder, the great polymath who had been working in Weimar as a theologian, philosopher, writer, cultural historian, anthropologist and translator since 1776. Together with Goethe, Schiller and Wieland, he formed the intellectual centre of the Weimar court of the muses. The portrait painted by Anton Graff in 1785 (Gleimhaus, Halberstadt) shows the 41-year-old scholar as a bust portrait without a wig. It is known from a letter by Friedrich Schiller that Herder was not entirely happy with this painting. Schiller also criticised the lack of seriousness in this earlier portrait.

In the painting presented here, the famous thinker appears several years older. On the basis of various Herder portraits made by Angelika Kaufmann (1789), Johann Heinrich Tischbein (1796/1800), Gerhard von Kügelgen (1799) and Friedrich Rehberg (1800), it can be assumed that it was painted around 10 years after the first portrait, i.e. around 1795.

An oval-format chalk drawing attributed to Graff, which may be a preparatory drawing for our portrait, was sold at auction in Bern in 1950 and 1955. "Bust portrait in dark skirt with white jabot, eyes turned to viewer."

The treatment of the light in this painting is striking: Herder's body in the black skirt merges almost without contrast into the background, which is kept very dark at the edges. The oval face with its high forehead under the powdered wig is turned towards the viewer in three-quarter profile. The ivory-coloured collar with jabot increases the concentration of light in the centre of the picture. The lighting from the front on these crucial parts of the picture is absorbed by the partial lighting of the background, which Graff has realised in a very painterly manner. The philosopher casts no visible shadow; he appears in front of this bright part of the background with an immense presence. This stylistic detail appears in Graff's oeuvre in other paintings from the early 1790s, which supports the proposed dating of our picture.

In his left hand, Herder holds a document that attributively identifies him as a man of the (written) word. It is an interesting detail that only one of the philosopher's hands can be seen. The agreed (high) price for ordering a portrait from Anton Graff was increased if hands were to be shown - with each hand being charged individually.

This portrait of Johann Gottfried Herder was hitherto unknown. It shows the scholar, whose insights continue to have an impact even today, as an approachable and friendly character, with a clear, intense gaze from deep, dark eyes. The resulting image is somewhat more austere than Graff's 1785 painting, which presumably pleased the interlocutor.

Estimate: 15.000 € - 20.000 €

