THE LIFE AND NETWORK OF HEINRICH FRIEDERICH FÜGER

MAY 07, 2024



Recent research into a portrait miniature by Heinrich Friederich Füger (1751-1818) revealed a network of connections that the artist had, from across Austria, Germany, and Italy. The portrait miniature in question is of Count Joseph Johannn von Fries (fig. 1), a high flying and extremely wealthy Austrian patron. On a search for a date for the portrait, I came across the mentions of Fries in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's Italian journey, and this led to an investigation into a web of connections between these artists, their patrons, and other culturally significant figures of the time.



Fig. 1: H. F. Füger, Portrait miniature of Count Joseph Johann von Fries (1765-1788), c.1774-1785, Watercolour and Bodycolour on Ivory, Oval, 77mm high. - The Limner Company (to be offered in the online selling exhibition, Miniatures in May, 13 - 18 May 2024)

What seemed particularly striking was the apparent similarity between the work of Füger and his (slightly older) contemporary, Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807). Kauffman is recognised as one of the most accomplished female artists of her time. The current exhibition at the Royal Academy of the Arts, London, tracks her career through different countries and the different genres of painting that she explored[1].

Füger would go on to have a similar life, yet he has not enjoyed the same popularity and major exhibitions in Britain. Heinrich Friederich Füger was born in Heilbronn on December 8th, 1751. He enjoyed a successful career in painting full-scale as well as miniature portraits and historical scenes. There is yet to be an English-language monograph published on the artist. One of the most recent publications on the artist, in German, was written by Robert Keil in 2009. Keil provides an in-depth look into the life, education, and oeuvre of the artist. Fügeralso features in a large entry in Schidlof's The Miniature in Europe (vol.1, 1964), and from these sources we are able to reconstruct a general narrative of the life of the artist, from which the offshoots of high-flying connections slowly appear.

Füger's early life and education

It is generally accepted that Füger painted his first portrait miniature at the age of 11. It may have been the artistic talent that he demonstrated through this miniature that convinced his father to send him to an art academy when he was 15. Here, Füger was under the leadership of artist Nicolas Guibal (1725-1784). It is through Guibal that Füger's artistic network began to expand. Guibal's father had been a sculptor and before becoming a teacher, he had travelled to Italy, and worked closely with Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779). We will come across this name later, as someone who would become a great influence to Füger once he ventured out of the German-speaking world. Later on in Füger's career he would go back to paint Guibal and his wife in miniature form[2]. One of these miniatures is now held in the Landesmuseum, Stuttgart.

The young Heinrich clearly hadn't felt that art was for him, and was too intimidated by his peers and his predecessors[3]. As a result, he was sent to study law in Halle in 1768. Here, he was accompanied by his brother Gottlieb Christian Füger (1749-c.1793), who was studying theology. It is evident that, throughout their lives, the two brothers had a good relationship. We see this in the portrait miniature of him and his brother, sat in front of a piano[4]. An oval miniature in this form is not uncommon for Füger, who had painted the daughters of the engraver Johann Friederich Bause in a similar style[5]. It appears to be more in the style of a genre painting than a typical portrait miniature. This is something that Keil (2009) mentions; when Füger paints portraits like these he is aiming to represent each sitter by their activity. In the case of him and his brother, Heinrich stands, holding what appears to be a paintbrush, while his brother does what he knows best, which is playing music. A similar thing can be said about his miniature of Guibal, which depicts him holding a paintbrush and palette, in front of

statues and other mediums of art in the background.



Fig. 2 H. F. Füger, Self Portrait with his brother, Gottlieb Christian Füger, watercolour on ivory, 10.5 x 13.6 cm, c. 1768, Berlin, Staatliche Museen Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie, inventory no. A I 932.

Not before long, Füger had tuned back into his artistic abilities, and was beginning to paint again. He started learning again under Adam Friederich Oeser (1717-1799). Here we find another branch out into the world of arts and culture of the period. Oeser was an artist himself, and had opened an academy in Leipzig in 1764, just before Füger arrived in the city. His other students included Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and he inspired the work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768). Though an actual meeting between Goethe and Füger cannot be proven, Goethe would go on to lurk on the outskirts of our artist's life.

After Leipzig, he would move on to Dresden. It was here that Füger was able to exhibit some of his early works. In 1771, the Dresden exhibition featured a work that would become extremely important in his career- if not for how it looked but for who it depicted. That was the portrait miniature of Sir Robert Murray Keith (1730-1795)[6]. Keith was a diplomat based in Dresden, who would later be sent to Copenhagen, and then Vienna. What was important for Füger was Keith's diplomatic connections and the chance he provided to become a patron to the artist. The miniature certainly captures the fact that Keith was a diplomat, as he is pictured wearing his official dress. He has a capturing gaze, which makes the viewer feel that he is important. This miniature may be more 'traditional' than the double portrait of Füger and his brother, in the fact that this portrait is not showing the sitter doing anything in particular. However, Füger has still managed to demonstrate the status of Keith, if not only in society, but also to the artist personally.

Moving further South

Keith would be important to Füger when he went on to travel to Vienna, alongside other artists and persons of political influence that he had met along the way. This trip to the Austrian capital had taken place after Füger returned to his hometown, Heilbronn, between 1772 and 1774. His movement back towards the larger cities of the German-speaking world signified a move up the artist's scale further than just a British diplomat. It was in Vienna that Füger would be introduced to other, more important political figures, including the State Chancellor, Prince Kaunitz (1711-1894), and more importantly, the imperial family. It was through painting the Imperial family that Füger was able to create a good enough impression to be sent on his way to Rome. This was under the guidance of Prince Kaunitz in 1776, with four other Austrian artists. This was not a holiday, or a grand tour, but a scholarship, in which Kaunitz had set out aims for what the students were meant to follow and to achieve. This was very much based on ancient and Italian tradition. The many extant works from this period reflect this learning, and depict a lot of historical scenes[7]. However, it can also be seen that Füger was enjoying influence from other artists both alive and dead. One such example, mentioned earlier, was Mengs, but the artist was not only to be influenced by others who had come from the same part of the world as him. Kiel (2009) also mentions French influences, of the likes of Poussin and Le Seur, as well as older Italian masters such as Domenichino and Raphael.

During this period, Füger continued to paint miniatures as he had always done. One example of these is one of his self-portraits in miniature, painted on ivory[8]. This particular example demonstrates a few of the changes in the artist's technique that were emerging at this point in time. Importantly, we can see a large amount of expression in the artist's face, which is something that Keil states was a direct influence of Domenichino and Raphael[9]. Painting in miniature was not something that Kaunitz had prescribed to Füger in his curriculum, so here we can see the artist beginning to learn for himself, and slowly break away from just being the student.

Patrons and connections in Italy

Despite these new developments in his artistic techniques, a lot of the ways in which Füger was socialising and making connections in this new location remained the same. Goethe has already been mentioned as a tangential connection to Füger's life, and it was in this period that the two were actually residing in the same place, and socialising with the same people. Goethe's Italian Journey, aside from the insights it gives into the life of a young man who was learning more about the arts himself, is also an incredible source as a who's who of Italy in the period that he was there. Füger is not mentioned by name, but Fries, the sitter in this blog's keynote portrait miniature, certainly is. Goethe mentions the art that Fries was buying, as well as the camaraderie that he provided.

The same sort of story can be told by another frequent mention in Goethe's travel work, Angelica Kauffman. Often intimately referred to as 'Angelica', the successful artist of the period was slightly older than both Füger and Goethe. It is possible that Kauffman also acted as an influence to Füger, which can certainly be seen when comparing their works. Both artists painted the same sitters on multiple occasions, which demonstrates not only the influence that artists that were all going to the same places enjoyed, but also the mutuality of their connections

These people included Fries himself (fig.1)[10]. It is not known at which date he was painted by Füger, but what is known is that Kauffman painted a portrait of the wealthy patron in 1787[11]. By this point, Füger had left Italy, so it is possible that he painted Fries upon his return to Vienna, or even just copied Kauffman's portrait into miniature form. Many similarities can be found between the two depictions. Firstly, his magnificent hat, which is adorned with a large feather- something that Goethe notes as being important currency within some places in Italy at the time [12]. Furthermore, he wears the same red damask, that is also placed as a feature in the reverse of the miniature by Füger. Both portraits depict the patron, who was heavily invested in the arts, in a flamboyant light.

Both of these portraits also bear similar resemblance to that painted by Füger of Prince Nikolai Borisovich Yusupov (fig.3). This portrait is now held in the State Hermitage Museum and depicts an important Russian nobleman and art collector of the time. Though no known portrait by Kauffman exists for us to compare this to, we do know that Yusupov was also a patron of the Swiss Artist. This portrait, again, shows a well-dressed and flamboyant character. He also wears a red cape, and is pictured against a moody sky, giving a viewer a sense of his importance and power. Though this is a portrait in full, and not in miniature, it reflects the idea, mentioned earlier, that these portraits being done by Füger were not meant to just simply show a person at face value, but to show us their personality, too.



Fig. 3. Heinrich Friederich Füger, Portrait of Prince Nikolai Borisovich Yusupov, 1783, oil on canvas, 87cm x 112cm, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, inventory no. ГЭ-5770.

In 1781, Füger had moved to Naples, and it was here that he was put in contact with Queen Maria Carolina (Karolina) of Naples and Sicily (1752-1814). The daughter of Francis I, Holy Roman Emperor, and sister of Marie Antoinette, this particular patron lay in the centre of an important royal European circle. He would have painted her family before as part of his work for the imperial family in Austria. He was able to create a few portraits of the sitter, including a miniature (fig.4). She was a patron of many successful artists, including Kauffman and Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842). The former painted her in a portrait (fig.4), as well in a family portrait[13]. There are fewer similarities between the portraits completed by Kauffman and Füger of this particular patron, however the coincidence of them both painting her adds to the list of common patrons and connections that they shared.





Fig. 4 [left] Heinrich Friederich Füger, Portrait of Maria Karolina, Queen of Naples, signed and dated Füger p.1790, watercolour on ivory, 17.6 cm x 13cm, Vienna, Albertina, inventory no. 30194.

Fig. 5 [right] Angelica Kauffman, Portrait of Maria Carolina of Austria, c. 1782-1783, oil on canvas Bregenz, Vorarlberg Museum.

After Italy

Just after painting Prince Yusupov, Füger returned to Vienna. Here, he was able to continue his successful career and remained connected to well-off patrons. These included Admiral Horatio Nelson, whom he painted numerous times. Füger also painted Nelson's mistress, Emma Hamilton, when she returned home from Naples. Hamilton was well-painted, and her life alone would require its own post (watch this space…). However, she again was connected to Füger through different people, being mentioned in Goethe's works, and having been painted by Kauffman[14].

It was at this point in his life that Füger was able to truly move away from being the student, and into being the teacher. He was appointed at the Academy of Fine arts in the same year that he returned to the Austrian capital, 1783, and soon settled down to start a family with actress Josephine Hortensia Müller. The remaining years of Füger's life saw him move away from miniatures, especially following a diagnosis of an eye disease in 1798, a common fate for those who had spent so much time looking so closely at their miniatures. In 1806, after painting the large-scale portraits of Nelson and Hamilton he was appointed director of the Royal Academy of Pictures. He would remain in Vienna until his death, in the winter of 1818.

For Füger, travelling across Germany, Austria, and Italy had allowed him to create and maintain important connections with artists and patrons. It is through these very connections, and the paintings that resulted from them, that we are able to reconstruct a map of who he knew. What we find is that he was connected to people who are seen to many as being cultural icons today, and that the influence of these people can be traced within his art, such as his Portrait of Portrait of Count Joseph Johann von Fries (fig.1).

[1] London, Royal Academy of Arts, Angelica Kauffman, Wednesday 28 February 2024 – Sunday 30 June 2024.

[2] Inventory no. 1951/1527. R. Keil, Wien, 2009, Heinrich Friedrich Füger (1751 - 1818). Nur wenigen ist es vergönnt das Licht der Wahrheit zu sehen, reproduced WV36, p. 206.

[3] 'After seeing the historical pictures of Charles le Brun, he lost courage', L. Schidlof, Graz, 1964, The Miniature in Europe in the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries, vol.1, p.273.

[4] In the Staatlisches Museen, Berlin,

[5] R. Keil, Wien, 2009, Heinrich Friedrich Füger (1751 - 1818). Nur wenigen ist es vergönnt das Licht der Wahrheit zu sehen, reproduced in colour, pl. 1.

[6] Keil (2009) states that the version in the Albertina, Vienna is a second version (p.37). R. Keil, Wien, 2009, Heinrich Friedrich Füger (1751 - 1818). Nur wenigen ist es vergönnt das Licht der Wahrheit zu sehen, reproduced WV24, p. 202. For another version, see online, at the Marburg Photo Archive, https://www.bildindex.de/document/obj00002611.

[7] Many of which can be found in the Albertina, Vienna.

[8] Heinrich Friederich Füger, Self Portrait in Black Shirt, c.1777, Vienna, Albertina, inventory no. 29572.

[9] R. Keil, Wien, 2009, Heinrich Friedrich Füger (1751 - 1818). Nur wenigen ist es vergönnt das Licht der Wahrheit zu sehen, p.46.

[10] Heinrich Friederich Füger, Portrait of Portrait of Count Joseph Johannn von Fries (1765-1788), c.1774-1785, Watercolour and Bodycolour on Ivory, Oval, 77mm high. Exhibited with The Limner Company X Period Portraits, online, Miniatures in May, 2024.

[11] Angelica Kauffman, Joseph Johann Graf Fries, 1787, oil on canvas, 128.5 x 102.5 cm, Vienna, Wien Museum. See online at https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/joseph-Johannn-graf-fries-angelica-angelika-kauffmann/ywH5FQ5TuXFISQ?hl=en.

[12] Goethe mentions this- 'I frequently had the occasion to observe that the people here [around the Brenner Pass] have attached great value to peacock feathers and, indeed, to any brightly coloured feather.' W. J. Goethe, Penguin, London, 1970, Italian Journey, p.34.

[13] Angelica Kauffman, Portrait of Ferdinand IV of Naples, and his Family, oil on canvas, 310 x 426 cm, 1783, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte, inventory no. OA 6557.

[14] Kauffman painted Hamilton on numerous occasions. One example, Portrait of Emma, Lady Hamilton as Muse of Comedy (1791), has been exhibited at the 2024 Kauffman exhibition at the Royal Academy. See https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/angelica-kauffman.