

GEORGE ROMNEY

1734–1802

TITANIA AND HER ATTENDANTS

Oil on canvas

47 x 59 inches; 1194 x 1499 mm

c. 1790



Collections: Elizabeth Romney, by descent, to 1894;
Romney sale, Christie's, 25 May 1894, part lot 200;
with Agnew's;
Norman Clark Neill (1885-1935);
Mrs A. Buxton, to 1959;
Leger Galleries, acquired from the above;
Richard & Julia Rush, acquired from the above in 1961;
And by descent to the Richard H. Rush Charitable Trust;
Rush sale, Sotheby's, London, 23 November 2006, lot 68;
Lowell Libson Ltd, purchased at the above sale;
Private collection, UK, purchased from the above, to 2023;
Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd.

Literature: Rev. John Romney, *Memoirs of the Life and Works of George Romney*, 1830, pp.128, 234;
Humphrey Ward and William Roberts, *Romney, a Biographical and Critical Essay, with a Catalogue Raisonné of his Works*, 1904, vol. II, pp.195–196, under 'Titania Reposing with her Indian Votaries';
Arthur B. Chamberlain, *George Romney*, 1910, pp.189–191;
Elizabeth Johnston, *George Romney, 1734–1802, Paintings and Drawings*, exhibition catalogue, 1961, no.37;
A.M. Frankfurter, 'Rediscovering Romney as a Fantastick', *Art News*, September 1961, no.34;
Yvonne Romney Dixon, *The Drawings of George Romney in the Folger Shakespeare Library*, PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, 1977, pp. 80-81, 255, 265;
Yvonne Romney Dixon, 'Designs from Fancy': *George Romney's Shakespearean Drawings*, exhibition catalogue, 1998, pp.78, 143, 195–96, 198;
David Cross, *A Striking Likeness: The Life of George Romney*, 2000, p.192;
Alex Kidson, *George Romney 1734–1802*, exhibition catalogue, 2002, pp. 12, 227;
Yvonne Romney Dixon and Alex Kidson, 'Romney Sketchbooks in Public Collections' *Transactions of the Romney Society*, vol. 8, 2003, pp. 27, 30-312, 50;

Alex Kidson, 'The Midsummer Night's Dream Paintings of George Romney, in George Romney's *Titania and Her Attendants*' in ed. Lowell Libson, *George Romney's Titania and Her Attendants*, London, 2011, pp.11-19;
Suzanne E May, '*Sublime and Infernal Reveries*': *George Romney and the Creation of an eighteenth-century History Painter*, PhD dissertation, John Moores University, Liverpool, 2007, vol. I, p160;
Alex Kidson, 'Late Romney, A Reappraisal, in ed. Guillard Sutherland, *Windows on that World: Essays in British Art Presented to Brian Allen*, New Haven and London, 2012, p.204;
Alex Kidson, *George Romney: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, New Haven and London, 2015, vol. III, cat. no. 1741 and repr. on the dust-jacket;
Roberta J. M. Olson and Jay M. Pasachoff, *Cosmos: The Art and Science of the Universe*, London, 2019, p.254 and 280

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;
Bath, The Holburne Museum, long-term loan, 2019-23

This exceptional canvas is perhaps the boldest and most remarkable history painting made by George Romney in the final decades of his career. Recently used as the cover of the *Romney Catalogue Raisonné*, this ambitious work depicts Act II, scene II from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Romney shows Titania, Queen of the fairies, being sung to sleep by a group of her attendants. The crepuscular landscape is illuminated by other-worldly light, resembling the aurora borealis and populated by 'the clamorous owl', 'spotted snakes' and other creatures and insects mentioned in Shakespeare's text. The painting is notable as a large-scale realisation of one of Romney's boldest designs. A restless and relentless draughtsman, Romney frequently made hundreds of drawings refining a single composition, rarely did these drawings materialise on canvas. This makes the present picture not only an exceptional work in Romney's oeuvre, but in its breadth of handling and bold design one of the most remarkable history paintings produced in Europe in the late eighteenth century.

Romney's contemporaries recognised that whilst he was a successful portraitist, his genius lay elsewhere. John Flaxman reported to William Hayley 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 important business of portrait painting. It was his delight by day and study by night, for this his food and rest were often neglected.'¹

¹ William Hayley, *The Life of George Romney Esq.*, London, 1809, p.309.

Romney himself wrote of the ‘cursed portrait-painting!’ Declaring that he was ‘determined to live frugally, that I may enable myself to cut it short, as soon as I am tolerably independent, and then give my mind up to that delightful region of imagination.’²

Shakespeare occupied a central place in Romney’s imagination. 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 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 John Boydell initiated his ambitious scheme to establish his Shakespeare Gallery, a gallery in Pall Mall containing one hundred large and one hundred small paintings illustrating scenes from the plays of Shakespeare. 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. From the outset, Romney was an enthusiastic supporter of the scheme contributing a large canvas illustrating the shipwreck from *The Tempest* (destroyed in 1957). This composition, which is now known from an engraving and a small *modello*, met with little critical success.

In the 1790s Romney was able to devote himself to several ambitious projects. He became fascinated with a composition showing the penal reformer John Howard visiting prisoners, developing a sequence of remarkably expressive drawings of the subject. As Romney himself noted in the notes he made for *A Discourse on Painting*, ‘when the soul of Man receives impressions from its own impulse or from fine Poetry or History... it should be 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.’³ In practice, Romney’s fermentation took place on the page, producing great sequences of rapidly worked pen and ink studies exploring the dramatic potential of his chosen subject. The relentless refinement of his ideas meant few of Romney’s projects were ever worked up on canvas; *John Howard visiting prisoners*, for example, remained resolutely on the page. *Titania and her Attendants* is therefore an exceptional example of Romney realising one of his historical compositions in paint.

A sketchbook now housed in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington (inv. no. Art vol.c59), contains a remarkable sequence of compositional studies, showing Romney’s evolution of his idea for *Titania and her Attendants*. Romney took as his subject the opening of Act II, scene 2 from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Titania enters with the lines:

‘Come, now a roundel and a fairy song;
Then, for the third part of a minute, hence –
Some to kill crankers in the muskrose buds,
Some war with reremice for their leathern wings

² William Hayley, *The Life of George Romney Esq.*, London, 1809, p.123.

³ David A. Cross, *A Striking Likeness: The Life of George Romney*, Aldershot, 2000, p.166.

To make my small elves coats, and some keep back
The clamorous owl that nightly hoots and wonders
At our quaint spirits, Sing me to asleep.
Then to your offices and let me rest.'

The fluid ink and wash sketches show Romney developing elements of the composition: refining the pose of Titania, and her enveloping blanket, restlessly changing the dynamic actions of the attending fairies. The sketchbook contains intimations of the more remarkable elements of the finished painting: the Northern Lights, shown as ink lines radiating from the landscape and the over-sized bat (the rere-mice of Shakespeare's text) being chased by two of the fairies.

In the Folger sketchbook the 'roundel' of fairies evolves from a raucous dynamic mass, to the lyrical trio in the final painting. The rhythmic dancers recall the careful posing of the *Leveson-Gower* children, one of Romney's most complex portrait groups and a composition he returned to repeatedly in drawings. In the finished painting on the left of the landscape two further fairies chase a large bat, whilst a single fairy in the foreground frightens the abstracted form of a 'clamorous owl'. Behind the frieze-like arrangement of figures, Romney includes three ghostly forms moving in the undergrowth, presumably the figures of Lysander and Hermia 'faint with wandering in the wood', who will enter the scene after Titania falls asleep.

In general composition and format, the painting recalls depictions of Venus and cupids. It has been pointed out that the figure of Titania recalls the figure of Venus from Titian's so-called *Pardo Venus*, which Romney recorded seeing at the Louvre in 1790. The figure of the fairy in the foreground frightening the owl recalls the Roman statue of a *Young Satyr Wearing a Theatre Mask of Silenus* which was in the Ludovisi collection during the eighteenth century. But these figurative borrowings are superseded by the ethereal, dream-like mode Romney adopts, the eerie light reinforcing the phantasmagorical quality of the landscape. Shakespeare's play was rarely performed during the eighteenth century, allowing Romney to invent a fantastical visual language distinct from the norms of the contemporary theatre.

Painted with extraordinary verve and fluidity, Romney worked rapidly in liquid oil paint, retaining the immediate energy of his pen and ink drawings. As in the best of his drawings, Romney retains a degree of judicious ambiguity, leaving details, such as the owl, incomplete whilst bringing other elements to a far greater degree of finish. The painting contains powerful painterly passages throughout, for example the lick of liquid paint where the light catches the wing of the bat. There is evidence that the dematerialised quality of Romney's canvas does not necessarily represent a lack of resolution. As Alex Kidson has observed it is in Romney's late Shakespearean paintings that the '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.'⁴ 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

⁴ Alex Kidson, *George Romney 1734-1802*, exh. cat. London (National Portrait Gallery), 2002, pp.34-35.

rendering of the 'Northern Lights' in the present work, it would appear that the artist considered this picture with its poetic simplicity to conform to his notion of being like a 'momentary impulse or impression in the Mind.'



George Romney
Titania and her fairies
Pen with brown ink and wash
6 1/8 x 7 3/4 inches (156 x 196 mm)
Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC
(Art Vol. c59.30)



George Romney
Fairies dancing and chasing bats
Pen with brown ink and wash
6 1/8 x 7 3/4 inches (156 x 196 mm)
Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC
(Art Vol. c59.45)



George Romney
Titania and her fairies
Pen with brown ink and wash
6 1/8 x 7 3/4 inches (156 x 196 mm)
Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC
(Art Vol. c59.23)



George Romney
Titania reclining, one fairie curled up by her side
Pen with brown ink and wash
6 1/8 x 7 3/4 inches (156 x 196 mm)
Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC
(Art Vol. c59.33)