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Graphite drawing, perhaps by John Flaxman (1755-1826), of a Sarcophagus with a scene of Amazonomachy located at the Vatican Museum, Pius-Clementine Museum, Octagonal Court, North Portico, 27, 28.

In his book *John Flaxman, Sculptor, Illustrator, and Designer*, David Irwin describes Flaxman's formation as an artist at the Academy School amid a debate between a professor of Anatomy, Dr. William Hunter, and the Academy president, Joshua Reynolds. Hunter insisted on the "superiority of nature over art" while Reynolds stressed "an idealised

nature” born of the mind as much as the eye. Irwin goes on to describe Flaxman’s love of literature as a “mental labor” and “source of inspiration,” especially “Greek and Roman myths, history, and the Bible.” Such ideas served well his work at Wedgwood, the evolution of Neo-classical art, and the desire of the artist, at 37, to embark upon a grand tour through France and Italy, visiting the places where art was imbued with the ancient stories. There, he made sketchbooks and notes (The V&A and Yale Sketchbooks and Fitzwilliam Journal, etc.) carefully explored in Volume 72 of *The Volume of the Walpole Society*, 2010. Irwin explains that once arriving in Rome in 1787, Flaxman “devoted more pages of his sketchbooks to drawings after works of classical antiquity, both statues and reliefs.”

In his article *John Flaxman’s Drawings*, pages 25-45 of the aforementioned volume from the Walpole Society, Eckhart Marchand writes, “When it comes to the Roman section of the Yale Sketchbook, the broad outlook of the Grand Tourist manifests itself in the variety of objects, motifs and themes that Flaxman records, without the clear focus of the practicing sculptor that can be sensed in the later V&A sketchbooks. Thus he studies free-standing classical sculpture, sarcophagus reliefs, imperial monuments.” Marchand goes on to point out that once in Rome, Waxman’s drawing techniques change. “Flaxman now started to fix the design with broad and bolder graphite lines and indicated difference in volume and depth through slight changes in tone and width of the outlines.... Over time, Flaxman developed this technique to such perfection that some of his broader graphite marks may be mistaken for the much softer black chalk, while others, thinly applied with maximum pressure, appear like pen and ink marks.” Having seen a digital image of our drawing, Marchand wrote in an email, “Indeed, as you say, the main image is of the Amazonomachia in the Museo Pio Clementino. The scene is very much one that would have attracted Flaxman, with its tight symmetrical composition and a central group of two figures.”

Irwin writes, “His sketches, especially those after sarcophagi panels, usually accentuate the linearity inherent in the style of the original marble.” “He recorded many detail of a composition in order to be able to recall accurately how a story was told.” “He chose a variety of subjects, sometimes imbuing them in his drawings a slight sentiment not evident in the original model.” He quoted Flaxman as saying, “Horses and human figures are most perfect beautiful copies of nature.”

There is no doubt that Flaxman made graphite drawings at the Vatican in Rome. *The Calydonian Boar Hunt* after a fragment of ancient Roman sarcophagus comes to mind. We know that the sarcophagus with the frieze of Amazonomachia, with Achilles and Penthesilea would have been at the Vatican Museum during Flaxman’s years there. Perhaps Flaxman would have recalled the stories about the Amazons from his reading of Virgil, Plutarch, Herodotus, or myths about labors of Hercules. Surely he would have known the moment when Achilles clasped the lifeless body of Penthesilea. If our drawing is indeed by Flaxman, it would have been drawn during these Roman years when he was experimenting with creating work entirely by graphite.

Our drawing seems to be more than sketches that were copied for memories sake and might explain one of Marchand’s reservations expressed in his email, “What I do not know from Flaxman's drawings is the careful description of the framework and the even handed treatment of all figures.”

One might be inclined to revisit the idea of the Grand Tour during which educated men (and women) toured through France and Italy in search of art and culture, often bringing back with them treasures from the trip. Perhaps, and here we speculate, Flaxman was creating such a souvenir, which might account for the imposed framework and fuller treatment of the figures.

Whatever the purpose of our drawing, we know that it found its way to a museum in Nyon, Switzerland. Nyon had been the Roman town of Noviodunum. In 1860 citizens there founded a museum that had as a guide to their collections, as Caroline Demierre Burri from Chateau de Nyon wrote in an email, “an encyclopedic approach aimed to cover a wide range of subjects that at the time constituted the basic ingredients for a man of culture.”

When we purchased the drawing from a collector in NY, the 35.56 x 51.43 cm sheet was folded, revealing only the image above. The bottom half reveals the Nyon Museum stamp and studies of a horse and deer. The horse may be another rendering of one of the horses from the sarcophagus. The deer is a mystery, although it, too, falls into Flaxman’s love of nature.

