

The Staubbach in the Lauterbrunnen Valley, 1804

When looking at the painting *The Staubbach in the Lauterbrunnen Valley* the eye moves directly to the monumental quantity of water on the right side of the picture, which falls down almost the entire length of the canvas. An immeasurable intensity emanates from this waterfall called the Staubbach. Only after great effort the gaze can be released and concentrated on the whole picture. On the lower left side, a river runs through the bend of the valley and seems to lead the eye to the white, snow-covered massif in the background of the painting. Both sides of the valley are bright and friendly, but only the right side with the waterfalls is fully illuminated by the sun. The valley itself, the central wooden huts and the house not far from the river are also flooded with sunlight, while the foreground lies in the shade. Cows and goats graze on the green meadow and on the same level three figures enter the landscape scenery on a path from the right. In comparison to the imposing waterfall, the people seem inconspicuous - they look like staffage - and as a viewer there lies a risk of focusing one's attention entirely on the shimmering waterfall. However, they are no staffage, but contribute to the events depicted: they are tourists who travelled to the Bernese Oberland to admire the Staubbach Falls in the Lauterbrunnen Valley. The Staubbach, still a popular sight nowadays, was already a well visited destination among travellers back in the days when this object was made. The creator of the painting, the Bernese painter Franz Niklaus König (1765-1832), was well aware of the impact of the waterfall. In his publication *Reise in die Alpen* from 1814, he writes about the falls. His detailed description gives an idea of the reason why he chose this waterfall for his largest work ever created:

"The Staubbach is, of course, the one [waterfall] that has the greatest reputation, and indeed is strange, because of its nine hundred shoe high fall; at the outfall it is divided into two parts, which soon unite, and dissolve completely into dust. [...] The entire waterfall is illuminated the most favourably between 11 and 12 o'clock, when then the background is in the shade, and only the water is illuminated transparently."¹

This account of the waterfall bears witness to how well the painter knew the Bernese Oberland and how experienced he was in implementing what he had observed. Consequently, this oil painting made in 1804 is considered to be one of the main artworks in König's oeuvre.

¹ König, *Reise in die Alpen*, 20-21. Quote translated by author.

vre,² which is mainly due to the paintings size, as it is the largest ever made by the artist. The measurements of a typical landscape artwork by König are in the range of 20 x 25 cm as he primarily made etchings, watercolour drawings and lithographs. This can be explained by the fact that König belonged to the artistic group *Schweizer Kleinmeister* meaning Swiss small masters. The unfortunate naming derives from the main activity these artists exercised: the production of small format images, mainly landscapes of the Swiss midland, made especially for the arising tourism.³

What distinguishes Franz Niklaus König from the others is the fact that he lived in the Bernese Oberland for several years. He consciously chose to move from Bern to Interlaken and targeted the uprising tourist groups as buyers of his art. The majority of his works are small-format objects that he produced to sell to tourists. With this knowledge it seems all the more interesting that König created a landscape with tourists as part of the spectacle, which was not meant to be sold to tourists, but was made for an exhibition and a public audience.

A thesis as to why König painted this monumental oil painting can be found in connection to the Bernese art enthusiast Sigmund Wagner. In 1804, König was invited to exhibit at the first art and industrial exhibition in Bern organised by Wagner and exhibited this painting. The exhibition catalogue also contains eight other works by the artist, which are declared as coloured drawings or have no data.⁴ Since 1795, Wagner and König had been friends and maintained an intensive collaboration.⁵ Further, Wagner planned on opening the first art museum in Bern, which was, however, a short lived project.⁶ Wagner may have informed König about his plans and the artist decided to paint a large oil painting that was not intended to be sold to a tourist but instead would be permanently on display in a museum.

It is not possible to reconstruct exactly how the exhibition went for König, but an examination of the art exhibitions that took place between 1804 and his death in 1832 showed that this particular work was not exhibited anymore after 1804. There is no evidence for the sale of the painting, which is supported by the fact that there are no prices in the list and the introductory text does not mention that the works were for sale. Furthermore, the quality of the oil painting in comparison to König's exhibited watercolours was harshly criticized and

² Bähler, "Radiermalerkunst," 347.

³ "Schweizer Kleinmeister."

⁴ See *Verzeichniss 1804*, 10.

⁵ Among others they co-initiated the Unspunnenfestival and were founding members of the Bernese Art Society.

⁶ The documents for the museumproject (1805-1807) are in the Burgerbibliothek Bern, Archives Unit GA Oek.Ges.91 (8-10).

perceived as pale.⁷ This perception can be explained by the widespread presence of the small masters in Bern. Such a large landscape painting was rare at the time. The sobering reception by the public and the lack of evidence of a sale suggest that it has not left the property of König during his lifetime.

With its donation to the Bernese Art Society in 1878 and the transfer of the collection to the Kunstmuseum Bern in 1879, *The Staubbach in the Lauterbrunnen Valley* finally found its place in a museum – as Franz Niklaus König presumably wanted it to as early as 1804.

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⁷ See Pfeifer-Helke, *Die Koloristen*, 25.

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