

### ***Celebration of alpine herders in Unspunnen on August 17, 1808, 1808/09***

Mountains rise in the blue sky, lightly covered by white clouds, and take up the background of the painting *Celebration of alpine herders in Unspunnen on August 17, 1808*. The mountain landscape seems somewhat unusual and the observer might wonder whether or not it exists or it is a merely romanticised idealistic landscape. In front of the mountains lies a stone ruin – the castle ruin of Unspunnen. While the background of the picture is exclusively landscaped, there are numerous figures in the foreground. From the left a group of people enters the painting. On the meadow to the right of the picture, people gather to observe the event in the middle around which a circle of people has formed. There are several figures in the circle: while two couples of men are having a competition in Swiss wrestling, another man is throwing a stone. To the right of the circle, on a small hill, men are playing the alphorn. Today, all three activities are considered to be typically Swiss.

In the foreground, at the edge of the painting, there are other groups. While in the right corner people sit at a table, a group in the left corner plays music for the dancing couples. Most people are wearing the Swiss traditional costume. Almost in the middle a woman in a white dress and a red scarf over her shoulders sits on the meadow, while the man in front of her hands her a box. This woman is the artist Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, who has depicted herself in the painting. This was discovered, since she has written about this celebration in her memoirs.<sup>1</sup> One also learned that it is the Comte de Gramont who stands in front of her and holds her pastel colours while she makes drawings of the celebration. Ahead in the picture, Germaine de Staël and the Duc de Montmorency walk together across the meadow. It is further mentioned that the picture of the celebration was painted in oil and is in the possession of Mr. Talleyrand.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to Vigée Le Brun's Swiss travels, the celebration of the alpine herders is treated minimally in literature.<sup>3</sup> Two points are always thematised: her landscape pastel drawings, which are supposed to prove that she was an inadequate landscape painter making her authorship of the painting doubtful, which is regarded as clarified today.<sup>4</sup> What is striking about the clarification is that the lack of quality and the defectiveness of certain elements in

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<sup>1</sup> She has written nine letters from Switzerland and letter IX is about the festivity. For all letters see Vigée Le Brun, *Souvenirs*, 418-447.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 447.

<sup>3</sup> Pitt-Rivers, *Vigée Le Brun*, 211-220; Haroche-Bouzinac, *Vigée Le Brun*, 431-451; von Mengden, *Der Schönheit Malerin*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 213, 220; *Ibid.*, 448; Kuthy, "Vigée Le Brun und das Alpherntfest."

the painting serve as evidence that it was made by Vigée Le Brun. In a detailed article from 1976 the attempted attribution of the painting to various Swiss artists is explained.<sup>5</sup> For decades, a cooperation between her and the Bernese painter Franz Niklaus König was considered, because the figures in the foreground originate from his oeuvre.<sup>6</sup> The attribution to Vigée Le Brun happened as a last resort and mainly due to faulty elements in the painting. The main argument is provided by the mountains as they are imaginary and do not exist in the Bernese Oberland. The reasoning was, that Swiss painters would not make up mountains as they were well acquainted with the Swiss landscapes.<sup>7</sup>

In the reports of the Gottfried Keller Foundation – owner of the painting since 1910 – it is noticeable that the authorship was not questioned at the time of the purchase. In a letter from 1909, the seller Theodor Engelmann explicitly calls it a painting by Vigée Le Brun.<sup>8</sup> The reports discuss the purchase and refer to her memoirs as an authentic source. The figures in the foreground from König's work are explained by the fact that she made a „costume study“ with him.<sup>9</sup> In the loan documentation from 1910 to the Kunstmuseum Bern, König suddenly appears. While the certificate was filled in handwriting, his name was added and inserted by typewriter between the lines of Vigée Le Brun's name and the title.

Doubts about the authorship only seem to have arisen with the purchase of the work by a foundation managed by the Swiss Confederation. They might not have appreciated a French painter being responsible for the artwork instead of a Swiss painter.

When studying this painting in depth, the focus was placed on the artist as well as the presentation of evidence of authorship. Looking at the portraits by Vigée Le Brun's oeuvre, which mostly depict women, a scarf which is often in red can be noticed enveloping the shoulders of the women, as a recurring feature of her works. From the 1780s, she painted women repeatedly with turbans and scarfs.<sup>10</sup> The aforementioned red scarf can be found several times in the object analysed here. Some women are shown in a white dress and a red scarf over their shoulder – so Germaine de Staël and Vigée Le Brun. Of the latter a self-portrait exists, painted one year after this landscape painting and sent to König. In the memoirs it says, that Vigée Le Brun lived with König during the celebration, but as he did not want any money for the accommodation she painted him a self-portrait as a sign of her

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<sup>5</sup> Kuthy, „Vigée Le Brun und das Alpirtenfest.“

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 162-3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 161-9.

<sup>8</sup> See the documents of the Gottfried Keller Foundation, 1909-1910, in the archives of the Federal Office of Culture.

<sup>9</sup> Report of the Gottfried Keller Foundation, 20<sup>th</sup> december, 1909.

<sup>10</sup> Walczak, *Eine Künstlerin in der Emigration*, 24.

gratitude.<sup>11</sup> Relevant in this self-portrait is the clothing of Vigée Le Brun: at the neck the white collar of her dress is visible while her shoulders are covered by a red scarf – as in the painting *Celebration of alpine herders in Unspunnen on August 17, 1808*.

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<sup>11</sup> Vigée Le Brun, *Souvenirs*, 445. The self-portrait is in the Burgerbibliothek Bern, Porträtdok. 6471.

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