

# TRINITY FINE ART



**Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein**  
(Haina, 1751 – 1829, Eutin)

*Ajax and Ulysses in Orcus (Hades)*  
(scene from the 11th book of Homer's *Odyssey*)

1790s-1813

Oil on canvas, 222 x 165 cm

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## Provenance

Tischbein's studio in Eutin until 1813

Baron Eustache Joseph Marie de Blondel de Beauregard de Viane (1775-1848)

The Chamberlain of William I of the Netherlands

Property by descent of the Blondel de Beauregard de Viane family in the Château de Viane, Grammont, western Flanders (present-day Belgium) until 1919

The van Poelart family from 1919 upon their acquisition of the Château de Viane and its contents

Acquired from the van Poelart family in 2020.

We would like to thank Professor Hermann Mildenerberger for writing this notice on February 5, 2025.

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The Greek heroes Ajax (standing to the left) and Ulysses (crouched to the right) are depicted on a mythological and almost larger-than-life scale at the entrance to the Underworld. To the lower left is the shadowy figure of Ulysses' mother Antikleia who died during the hero's voyage. In the eleventh book of Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses comes ashore where the mighty Oceanus flows into the sea and the Cimmerians live in perpetual night. Here is to be found the entrance to Hades, a fissure in the earth at which Ulysses summons the spirits of the dead through animal sacrifice:

Thither we came and beached our ship, and took out the sheep, and ourselves went beside the stream of Oceanus until we came to the place of which Circe had told us. Here Perimedes and Eurylochus held the victims, while I drew my sharp sword from beside my thigh, and dug a pit of a cubit's length this way and that, and around it poured a libation to all the dead, first with milk and honey, thereafter with sweet wine, and in the third place with water, and I sprinkled thereon white barley meal. And I earnestly entreated the powerless heads of the dead, vowing that when I came to Ithaca I would sacrifice in my halls a barren heifer, the best I had, and pile the altar with goodly gifts, and to Teiresias alone would sacrifice separately a ram, wholly black, the goodliest of my flocks. But when with vows and prayers I had made supplication to the tribes of the dead, I took the sheep and cut their throats over the pit, and the dark blood ran forth. Then there gathered from out of Erebus the spirits of those that are dead... (*The Odyssey*, book 11, lines 20-37)<sup>1</sup>

Tischbein represents this scene. Ulysses is in a cavern, holding the sword employed to excavate the pit over which he made animal sacrifices: these included a ram whose head is seen to the right of Ulysses, and whose black blood has stained Ulysses' sword.

Ulysses' deceased mother Antikleia is among the spirits Ulysses summons; she casts a lugubrious gaze as she bids farewell, returning to Hades and the realm of death. Ajax, the son of Telamon, also appears. Shortly before his death Ajax had fought a bitter battle of words with

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<sup>1</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans A.T. Murray, London, 1919.

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Ulysses over the armour that the fallen Achilles had promised to Ulysses. Ulysses defeated Ajax in their verbal sparring match, causing Ajax to take his own life from shame, his own blood still staining his sword. As in Tischbein's painting, the crouching Ulysses awaits the spirits of the dead with his sword drawn: "And I myself drew my sharp sword from beside my thigh and sat there, and would not suffer the powerless heads of the dead to draw near to the blood until I had enquired of Tiresias." (*The Odyssey*, book 11, lines 48-50)

The procession of the dead includes Ulysses' recently departed companion Elpenor, who precedes his mother Antikleia, and the seer Tiresias. Many of the spirits drank from the black sacrificial blood. Only Ajax kept his distance as a result of the bitter fight with Ulysses during his lifetime:

Alone of them all the spirit of Ajax, son of Telamon, stood apart, still full of wrath for the victory that I had won over him in the contest by the ships for the arms of Achilles whose honored mother had set them for a prize; and the judges were the sons of the Trojans and Pallas Athena. I would that I had never won in the contest for such a prize, over so noble a head did the earth close because of those arms, even over Ajax, who in comeliness and in deeds of war was above all the other Achaeans, next to the peerless son of Peleus. To him I spoke with soothing words: 'Ajax, son of peerless Telamon, wast thou then not even in death to forget thy wrath against me because of those accursed arms? Surely the gods set them to be a bane to the Argives: such a tower of strength was lost to them in thee; and for thee in death we Achaeans sorrow unceasingly, even as for the life of Achilles, son of Peleus. Yet no other is to blame but Zeus, who bore terrible hatred against the host of Danaan spearmen, and brought on thee thy doom. Nay, come hither, prince, that thou mayest hear my word and my speech; and subdue thy wrath and thy proud spirit.' So I spoke, but he answered me not a word, but went his way to Erebus to join the other spirits of those dead and gone. (*The Odyssey*, book 11, lines 544-65)

The French occupation of Naples in 1799 caused Tischbein to flee to Germany, managing to evacuate by sea his art collection, including many of his own works. In 1801 Tischbein moved to Hamburg where he cultivated relations with Duke Peter Friedrich Ludwig von Oldenburg

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(1755- 1829), Regent of the Duchy of Oldenburg, gaining commissions for paintings and selling the duke works from the artist's own Old Master collection assembled during his long sojourn in Naples. In 1808 Tischbein was appointed court painter to the duke, as well as inspector of a paintings' collection that he had mostly once owned. The artist was in regular epistolary contact with his employer, and the painting of *Ajax and Ulysses in Orcus* is mentioned in their correspondence.

Tischbein resided not in the principal ducal home of Schloss Oldenburg but rather in the residence of Eutin, a ducal exclave that was part of the secularised princely bishopric of Lübeck, north-east of Hamburg. Napoleon's occupation of northern Germany at the end of 1810 forced the duke into exile in St Petersburg in February 1811 where the Tzar was a member of the same ruling dynasty. With the defeat of Napoleon, the duke returned to Oldenburg in November 1813. Although unpaid, Tischbein had remained formally employed and had kept in contact with the duke during the latter's exile. Despite his loyalty, Tischbein only received promises of back payments of his salary after the duke's return. On 12 September 1813 the painter related to the duke the work he had done for his patron, noting in passing that 'I have also made another large picture that is almost finished, a life-sized *Ajax and Ulysses in Orcus*.'<sup>2</sup>

Tischbein used the term 'large picture' to refer to large-scale history paintings with Homeric and Trojan War themes, including a number that the artist had brought from Naples to Germany where he worked them afresh; he painted further works from scratch.<sup>3</sup> On 15 November 1803 Tischbein sent a letter from Hamburg to the duke in which he said he was working on a history painting of *Ajax and Cassandra* (Stiftung Schloss, Eutin) (fig. 2). The painting was completed

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<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Dohe, *Der Briefwechsel von J.H.W. Tischbein und Herzog Peter Friedrich Ludwig nach den oldenburgischen Quellen 1801- 1824*, Oldenburg, 2018, p.54.

<sup>3</sup> Tischbein also brought his largest ever historical work from Italy, *Hektor accuses Paris of cowardice* (1786). Still present in Tischbein's studio upon the artist's death, the work was auctioned in 1838: see Hermann Mildener, 'J.H.W. Tischbein - zwei neuentdeckte Historiengemälde aus seiner römischen Zeit und weitere Neubestimmungen' in *Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte*, new series, vol.8, Petersberg, 2024, p.138. The large format paintings were likely transported rolled. See also Hermann Mildener, 'Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein. Hektor wirft Paris seine Weichlichkeit vor. Ein Konkurrenzbild zu Jacques-Louis David von 1786 und die Folgen', in *Klassik Stiftung Weimar. KulturStiftung der Länder, PATRIMONIA 253*, Weimar and Berlin, 2003, pp.19-52.

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**Fig. 1:** J.H.W. Tischbein, *Study for Ajax*, pen and brown ink over traces of graphite on paper, 334 x 214 mm, Oldenburg, Landesmuseum, Inv. LMO 15.341

in 1806 and acquired by the duke.<sup>4</sup> The duke also acquired *Hector Taking Leave of Andromache* (fig. 3) completed in 1812 (Landesmuseum, Oldenburg).<sup>5</sup> Tischbein worked on this large scale during his ducal employment, including the period of the duke's Russian exile. Tischbein described *Ajax and Ulysses* as 'another large painting', conceived as part of a series that he completed over time. Tischbein's work on Ajax and Ulysses is not just documented in letters of the period; Tischbein also drew a study for the figure of Ajax on the verso of a sheet that once belonged to the Grand-ducal Oldenburg Collection (fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> The recto of the sheet shows a study, a bird with her young in a nest, inscribed by Tischbein, 'd 15 July 1813'. The sheet was once conserved in a portfolio in the ducal library labelled, 'Fantasies and views in nature and art I'.<sup>7</sup> The dating

of the recto thus links the verso to the figure of Ajax in the present painting, *Ajax and Ulysses*. The Ajax study was erroneously identified by the chamberlain Friedrich von Alten, the curator of the ducal Oldenburg collections (collections that became Grand-ducal after the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 by which Oldenburg became a Grand-duchy). Von Alten inscribed in graphite on the sheet, 'Study for a picture of the Protector of Man (now Hermann und Thusnelda)'. This was the subject of a large-scale history painting dated 1822/23, known by Von Alten's titles but also, *Allegory of the Victory over Napoleon*, seen as analogous to the victory of the Germanic tribes over the Romans, and further developed in an arresting manner in the Homeric and Trojan Wars sagas.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Mildenerberger, 'Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein (1751-1829). Historienmalerei und niedere Bildgattungen vereint im Dienst monarchischer Restauration' in *IDEA Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle. VIII*, 1989, n.13, pp.92-3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pp.78-9.

<sup>6</sup> Landesmuseum Oldenburg, inv.no. LMO 15.341, pen and brown ink over traces of graphite on paper, 334 x 214 mm.

<sup>7</sup> 'Phantasien und Blicke in Natur und Kunst I'; Landesmuseum Oldenburg, inv.no. LMO 15.337.

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**Fig. 2:** J.H.W. Tischbein, *Ajax and Cassandra*, oil on canvas, Eutin, Stiftung Schloss

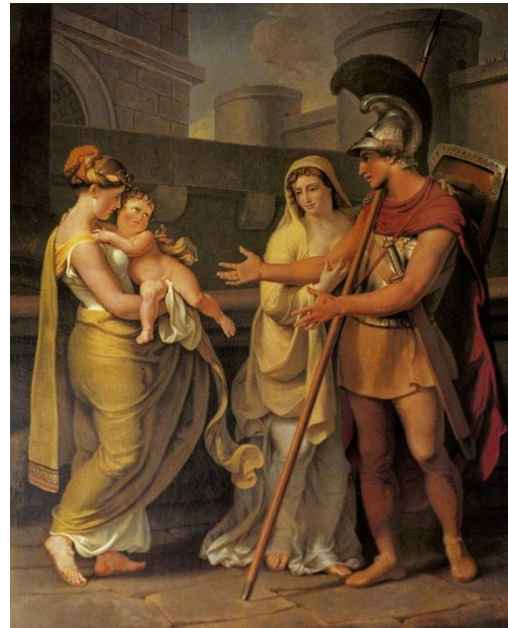


**Fig. 3:** J.H.W. Tischbein, *Hector Taking Leave of Andromache*, 1812, oil on canvas, 262 x 210 cm, Oldenburg, Landesmuseum

The composition of the crouching Ulysses, and in particular the position of the legs, may derive from an Antique motif seen in Tischbein's outline etching *Diomedes with the statue of Pallas Athene* (fig. 4). This print is known in the unique impression bound in the album of Tischbein's *Homer nach Antiken gezeichnet* ('Homer Drawn from the Antique') in the British Museum.<sup>8</sup> Two drawings by Tischbein once in the ducal Oldenburg collections are linked to the print.<sup>9</sup> The iconographic representation of Ajax and Ulysses in Hades is rare: an Attic vase in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston shows Elpenor appearing to Ulysses who sits with two sacrificed rams at his feet.<sup>10</sup>

Pausanias' second-century AD description of Polygnot's murals in the Lesche of the Knidians at Delphi included the motif of Ulysses crouching with a sword in hand at the entrance to Hades. Romantic artists such as Franz and Johannes Riepenhausen sought to reconstruct Polygnot's lost works. The Riepenhausen brothers were Tischbein's students in Göttingen in

<sup>8</sup> British Museum 1993,0509.1.26; whole album 1993,0509.1 to 81; Lesley Fulton, 'Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein's Album of Prints in the British Museum', *Print Quarterly*, Volume XL, Number 2, June 2023, pp. 150- 69.

<sup>9</sup> Landesmuseum Oldenburg, inv. nos LMO 15.310 und 15.322.

<sup>10</sup> Accession number 34.79; L.D. Caskey, *Attic vase paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, Part II, London, 1954, pl. lxiii, no. 111.

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around 1800 before Tischbein moved to Hamburg. And Tischbein was the inspiration behind the brothers' print project, *Gemälde des Polygnotos in der Lesche zu Delphi* ('Polygnot's Paintings in the Lesche in Delphi'), outline etchings published by Heinrich Dieterich in 1805.<sup>11</sup> A copy sent to Goethe in Weimar delighted the illustrious poet. The Riepenhausen's Polygnot prints were conceived in parallel to Tischbein's ongoing work of many years on his Homer project.<sup>12</sup>



**Fig. 4:** J.H.W. Tischbein, *Diomedes with the statue of Pallas Athene* Print, 498 x 360 mm London, British Museum, Inv. 1993,0509.1.26.

Indeed, Pausanias' description of Polygnot's works evokes the composition of Tischbein's painting of Ajax and Ulysses. Enthused by the Riepenhausen brothers' imagining of Polygnot's murals, Goethe engaged with the same subject and wrote extensively on it.<sup>13</sup> Upon his return to Germany in 1799, Tischbein sought to repair relations with Goethe through intermediaries, principally the Duchess Anna Amalia von Sachsen-Weimar (the friendship between the artist and poet had cooled after Tischbein declined to accompany Goethe to Sicily in 1787). Over time, Tischbein regained the regard of the esteemed poet.

Tischbein worked upon *Ajax and Ulysses* over a period of decades; it was among the many works that the artist succeeded in transporting by sea from Naples after the city was overrun by the French in 1799. The classical stylization notwithstanding, Tischbein conceived the figure of Ulysses from nature. Ulysses evokes a distinctly Mediterranean type that the artist described to the Duchess Anna Amalia von Sachsen-Weimar on 18 December 1792 from Naples. 'A few days ago I saw a group of new recruits who had come from Greece and whose

<sup>11</sup> British Museum, 1875,0814.677 to 692.

<sup>12</sup> Otto Deneke, *Die Brüder Riepenhausen*, Göttingen, 1936, pp. 5-7, 12-13; Max Kunze (ed.), *Antike zwischen Klassizismus und Romantik. Die Künstlerfamilie Riepenhausen*, exh.cat., Winckelmann-Museum Stendal, Mainz 2001, pp. 44-6, 52-4.

<sup>13</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 'Polygnots Gemälde in der Lesche zu Delphi' in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 13, Zürich 1954 (1977), pp. 364-90.

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simple dress, giving them the appearance of being almost naked, made a profound impression on me: I felt I were seeing Achilles, Ajax and Ulysses - such liveliness and freshness of spirit is not to be found in these parts, and it is said that that these men live off just a little bread and some onions, and work tirelessly day and night, and are of undaunted courage. It was a real pleasure to have seen these people.'<sup>14</sup> Tischbein's Ulysses reveals its origin in a model from the artist's Neapolitan period; the greater stylistic abstraction of Ajax, in contrast, derives from the artist's northern German period from the early 1800s to 1813.

Five history paintings from Tischbein's Homer and Trojan War cycle were iconographically linked after the duke's return from Russian exile. These included the already mentioned *Herman and Thusnelda*, an allegory of the victory over Napoleon, also known by other titles (*The Protector of Man*, *The Duty of Man* (1822/23), and *The Strength of Man* (1821)), a new monumental version of a work first conceived in Rome in 1786, also known as the *Image of Reason* in a version of 1821. In the first salon of Schloss Oldenburg hung *Ajax and Cassandra* (1806), *Hector Taking Leave of Andromache* (1812), *Menelaus and Helen* (1816) as well as *Achilles and Penthesilea* (1819). In the second salon were displayed *Herman and Thusnelda* (also known by the titles above) (1822/23), as well as *The Strength of Man* (1821), *Achilles and Penthesilea* or *Fortune* (1823/24). Six Antique-style paintings in grisaille placed above the doorways to the salons elaborated the programme of the history paintings through idealizing and moral allegories.

Although *Ajax and Cassandra*, completed in 1806, was an allegory against the French Revolution,<sup>15</sup> the pictorial programme as a whole extolled the rule of the duke after his restoration. When it was opportune, Tischbein was adept at combining and altering his compositions from different periods to create new thematic links. Tischbein discussed the iconographic programme of the history paintings with the duke who was clearly interested in art, as were the mostly sophisticated court officials. The present large painting *Ajax and Ulysses*

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<sup>14</sup> Friedrich von Alten, *Aus Tischbein's Leben und Briefwechsel*, Leipzig, 1872, p.58.

<sup>15</sup> Mildemberger 1989 (as n.4), n.13, pp.92-3. The Klassik Stiftung Weimar (inv.nos KK 12141 to 12150) conserves a manuscript in Tischbein's hand, inscribed 'Sehen weckt Gedanken' ('Seeing awakens thoughts'). It is not complete but describes the individual parts of the hang of the history paintings and their accompanying grisailles in Schloss Oldenburg. See Hermann Mildemberger, 'Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein. Gesamtverzeichnis der erworbenen Werke' in *Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein. Aquarelle und Zeichnungen. Klassik Stiftung Weimar. KulturStiftung der Länder – PATRIMONIA* 274, Weimar and Berlin, 2006, pp.91-3.

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that Tischbein worked on in Eutin in 1813, and described to the duke, was not included in the cycle of paintings in Schloss Oldenburg. It would seem that Tischbein sold the work in 1813, needing to provide for a young wife and six children. The painting was not completely forgotten: Franz Landsberger briefly described the work, dating it to 1801-29, in the succinct list of Tischbein's works that the author included in his monograph on Tischbein published in 1908: 'Ulysses sacrificing in Hades to whom Ajax appears. Complete figures in life-size. Canvas. Height 2.30 Width 1.725'.<sup>16</sup> The metric dimensions do not perfectly correspond to the present painting as Landsberger only gave approximate dimensions. The accurate measuring of works was likely hindered by the hang of the work and its frame. Landsberger does not record a location for the work in 1908.

We warmly thank Lesley Fulton for helpful archaeological suggestions.

Weimar, 4 February 2025  
Prof. Dr. Hermann Mildenerberger

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<sup>16</sup> 'Uliss im Hades opfernd, dem Ajax erscheint. Ganze Figuren in Lebensgröße. Lwd. H. 2,30 B. 1,725'; Franz Landsberger, *Wilhelm Tischbein. Ein Künstlerleben des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Leipzig, 1908, no.205, p.205.