

# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung

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This cool-looking guy with goatee and long wavy hair is a classic example of one of those Romantic artists who could be described as the rock stars of their age. They lived fast and died young—of tuberculosis (John Keats), through suicide (Johann Christoph Erhard), or, as this one here, by drowning in the Tiber River.



Carl Philipp Fohr was born in Heidelberg in 1795. He found the support of Princess Wilhelmine Luise of Baden and studied at the academy in Munich. From there, he walked on foot to Italy. In Rome, he shared a studio with Joseph Anton Koch and met the German Nazarene artists Peter von Cornelius, Philipp Veit, and Friedrich Overbeck. After having briefly returned to Heidelberg, he returned to Rome, where he died on June 29, 1818. His friend, the artist Carl Barth, had drawn a dashing portrait of him the year before. It was Barth, an excellent swimmer, who had encouraged Fohr to join him in the treacherous currents of the Tiber when the tragedy happened. Feeling guilty and distraught, Barth, who was also a superb engraver, felt incapable of creating this memorial print after his own drawing and left the task to another friend, the Swiss artist Samuel Amsler.

The print was sold to raise funds for a monument in Fohr's honor. It was exhibited in Rome at Palazzo Caffarelli in 1819, together with work by other German artists, and was immediately recognized as a masterpiece of portrait engraving. Goethe, always well-informed, owned an impression and praised it for its exacting technique. Yet he also sensed that there was something new and unusual about it that, as so often during his later years, prompted his reservations. Goethe found deficiencies and complained about “an underlying false mannerism in the drawing and handling.” What displeased the Weimar sage was the “new manner” of engraving deployed by Amsler. Wherever possible, Amsler avoided crosshatching and the swelling and tapering lines that typify engraving, giving the print instead the appearance of an etching. What he gained through this technique was the ability to grasp the specific character of Barth's drawing in a highly convincing way.

This print counts as one of the earliest examples of the revival of the “altdeutsche Manier” (the old German manner). Its technique rejects the elegance of the French taille and looks back to the more organic, far less systematic linework of Albrecht Dürer. Even Amsler's monogram alludes to the familiar AD “trademark” of the Nuremberg master.



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