



Inv. no. B 359

CHRISTEN KØBKE
'NIGHT' (AFTER BERTEL THORVALDSEN'S RELIEF), 1834–1835
OIL ON CANVAS

DIAMETER: 76.5 CM

In 1815, the painter C.W. Eckersberg (1783–1853) witnessed how two of the best-known reliefs by the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen's (1770–1844) came to be. He was well positioned to do so as both artists lived in the same house in Rome at the time.

According to Eckersberg, Thorvaldsen had long pondered how to treat a particular subject rooted in ancient mythology; a symbolic depiction of *Night* (Nyx) and her two children, the twins *Sleep* (Hypnos) and *Death* (Thanatos). However, he struggled to clarify his ideas. One night, however, the motif suddenly sprang into his head, and he immediately got out of bed and quickly modelled the relief. When Eckersberg came by his room in the morning the following day, the relief was almost finished, and a plasterer was sent for. Before he arrived, Thorvaldsen had also executed the relief's counterpart, *Day*.¹ Some twenty years after the creation of the two reliefs, Christen Købke copied them – not in plaster, however, but as grisaille

paintings.

Here is one of the two paintings, *Night*, showing the goddess Nyx flying across the sky with closed eyes, cradling her two sleeping children in her arms. Her hair wreath is braided with poppies, one of her attributes and a symbol of sleep and death. Another of Nyx's attributes is the owl seen from the front under her wings. The owl is a nocturnal bird, and here it is a symbol of silence.

When Thorvaldsen created his reliefs in 1815, they soon became popular as decorative embellishments in interiors as well as exteriors, for example inside gateways. Købke executed his two paintings for a similar purpose: alongside two landscapes (20/1969) (31/2014), they would decorate his parents' dining room in their home in Blegdammen in Copenhagen.²

Købke's painting *Day*, the counterpart to *Night*, can also be seen in The David Collection (B 358).

¹ For more information about the Købke family's home in Blegdammen, see Hans Edvard Nørgaard-Nielsen and Kasper Monrad (ed.): *Christen Købke 1810–1848, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen 1996*, pp. 200–206.

² Kasper Monrad: *Hverdagsbilleder. Dansk Guldalder – kunstnerne og deres vilkår*, Copenhagen 1989, p. 36.

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