Per Krafft the Younger and *Belisarius* – One of the Foremost Swedish Examples of Neoclassical Painting in the French Style

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In 1796, at the age of 19, Per Krafft the Younger (1777–1863) received a travel stipend from the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts. This was partly due to the unexpected death of Jonas Åkerström (1759–1795), aged just 36, whilst in Rome on a stipend the previous year. Krafft left for Paris, where he spent several years as the only Swede studying under Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). David had a great number of students and his teaching, which was conducted in the Louvre at this period, emphasised painting and drawing techniques, modelling and nature studies, always with Antiquity as the ideal.

Belisarius was a successful Byzantine general (c. 505–565), whose achievements included defeating the Ostrogoths in Italy. Falsely accused of conspiring against Emperor Justinian I (c. 482–565), Belisarius was punished by being blinded, after which he had to survive by begging at the gates of Constantinople. Depictions of the loyal soldier’s fall into undeserved disfavour with an ungrateful leader became popular during the second half of the 18th century, partly thanks to Jean-François Marmontel’s (1723–1799) novel, Bélisaire from 1767. Marmontel was one of Denis Diderot’s (1713–1784) encyclopaedists and one of the leaders among that era’s enlightened French intelligentsia. In 1772, he succeeded Charles Pinot Duclos (1704–1772) as the historiographe du Roi, “the king’s historiographer”, a position previously held by Voltaire. Marmontel often wrote moral
works, but Bélisaire also has a political dimension. The author manipulated the story in relation to the classical sources he based it upon, specifically to use it as criticism of a regime characterised by a weak monarch who was under the influence of a disingenuous aristocracy. The subject also provided the opportunity to allegorically target more general criticism at tyrannical princes, even if it was used by varying political factions – “liberals, moderate conservatives and conservatives masquerading as moderates” – and could thus have a range of content. It is not surprising that David, who at this time was close to liberals, such as Marmontel, but was soon to become a declared republican and revolutionary, chose this subject in his reception piece for the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, exhibited at the Salon in 1781 (Fig. 2). It depicts how one of the soldiers previously under Belisarius’ command discovers, to his distress, the destitute former general. Compositionally, the soldier, functions as the viewer’s “guide” to the painting’s theme. Other renowned examples of works using the same subject at this period include a painting by another of David’s students, François-Pascal-Simon Gérard (1770–1837) and paintings by Nicolas-René Jollain (1732–1804), Louis-Jean-Jacques Durameau (1733–1796), François-André Vincent (1746–1817) and Jean-François-Pierre Peyron (1744–1814), as well as busts by Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828) and Jean-Baptiste Stouf (1742–1826).

The influence of David is obvious in Krafft’s Belisarius (Fig. 1), which should be counted among the foremost Swedish works in the style of French Neoclassicism. It was painted in 1799 and sent to Stockholm, along with the compositions Phrygian Lyre Player in Meditation, Paris, Love and a few portraits, to be exhibited at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1801. Recently extensive overpaint has been removed from the work. In all certainty this was added when the painting was relined, possibly in the early 1920’s. The reason for the overpaint is unknown, but perhaps it reflects the taste for an even more pared down neoclassicism. The later additions of the “classical” buildings in the background have, for example, a somewhat 1920’s feel and their removal reveals a beautifully lit, almost arcadian, landscape which adds depth to the composition. Belisarius’ cape is also now revealed to be of a pinkish and lilac hue, rather than reddish brown. The focus falls firmly on the finely executed figures which almost appear to stand in relief against the background. All this put the present work in close affinity to works executed during the same period by Gérard. This becomes even more apparent when one takes into account other specific details such as the very close similarities between Krafft’s depiction of Belisarius’ companion and Psyche in Gérard’s famous painting Psyche Receiving Cupid’s First Kiss, exhibited at the Salon in Paris in 1798 and today in the Louvre (inv no. 4739).

Krafft emphasises the pathos of Belisarius through a tangible and all-pervasive atmosphere of gravitas. An especially important detail, also common in other depictions of the
subject, is the boy guide's use of the old
general's helmet to collect the alms he
receives which serves to remind the viewer
of his former glory and how far he had
fallen from grace. Here, the artist's inter-
pretation is close to that of Marmontel
who, in his vivid descriptions, emphasised
the pitiful but soberly imposing figure of
Belisarius using the perspectives of dif-
ferent observers, in particular how this
affected the soldiers who had been under
the general's command.12 However, Krafft
differs from several of his predecessors in
that he removes the soldier and entirely
focuses on the two central figures. He
locates them very close in the foreground,
in what is reminiscent of a half-length
portrait in three-quarter view; no longer is
there a specific figure that provides a com-
pass, pointing out the moral and political
implications of the subject. Instead, this
meeting is directly between the viewer and
the unfortunate general. In terms of form,
this depiction of the subject is close to that
of a work by Benjamin West (1738–1820)
from 1802 and a lesser known Belisarius
by David, painted in Rome just before the
artist left the city for Paris in 1780.13

However, the spirit of Krafft's painting
is most reminiscent of two other works:
Gérard's painting of the subject (Fig. 3) and
Stouf's bust (Fig. 4). Gerard's atmospheric
work also focuses solely on the general
and the guide, depicted full-length and
walking, against a precisely reproduced
sunset in the background. Here, the former
is carrying the latter who, by the artist's
invention, has been bitten by a snake. As in
Krafft's painting, the helmet also functions
as a symbol of the general's unjust fall into
disrepute. As Tony Halliday and Jennifer
Marie Langworthy have stated, Gerard's
interpretation of the subject can be said
to represent a step in a different direction
to that of David; it has a more generally
contemplative and emotional dimension,
a desire to arouse a deeper sense of com-
passion in the viewer, which was probably
also influential for Krafft. This universal
feeling could still be applied to specific

Fig. 3 François Gérard (1770–1837), Belisarius, 1797. Oil on canvas, 91.8 x 72.5 cm. The J. Paul Getty
Museum, Los Angeles, 2005.10.
phenomena in Gérard’s era, but in this case – perhaps paradoxically – the vulnerable émigrés who were forced to flee the country during the revolution. Gerard’s picture of Belisarius’ troubled wandering and the injured youth he is forced to carry not only emphasises suffering, but also rootlessness. This interpretation shows how versatile and useful this subject was in art and may also explain its prolonged popularity.

There are two versions of Gérard’s work, one that was exhibited at the Salon in 1795 and one from 1797, which was possibly created for use when transferring the painting to an engraving. The latter painting probably remained in Gérard’s studio until 1807 and it is possible that Krafft saw the work there. Incidentally, Gérard’s studio was located in the Louvre, just like David’s. In terms of colour and light, Krafft also appears to have taken his inspiration from Gérard’s work, while the sense of a realistic portrait that radiates from Belisarius’ face is strongly reminiscent of Stouf’s bust; it has the same sunken cheeks, profile and furrowed brow. In 1799, when Krafft painted his Belisarius, the subject had had a firmly cemented position in French art for three decades, both before and after the Revolution. At this time, few other choices of subject could have been more typical of French Neoclassicism. However, as in the case of Gérard, when considering the form and content of Krafft’s work it is important to remember the turbulent years that followed the Revolution. David was close to Robespierre and, after the latter’s execution in 1794, the artist was imprisoned for having de facto responsibility for what could be described as the visual propaganda of the reign of terror. Naturally, the experience of these varying political and artistic successes and setbacks left an impression on David’s art, which was gradually modified. Krafft enrolled as a student at David’s studio in 1796, not long after David had been released from prison and had restarted his teaching activities. Of course, the artistic role models and teachings that Krafft now absorbed were in some ways different to those that were fashionable just a few years before, even though they basically sprang from the same subjects and the same artist’s [or artists’] Neoclassicism. As a subject, Belisarius no longer necessarily entailed the same specific political allusions as those of Marmontel or, as in David’s painting from 1781, politically righteous and disconcerted, possibly dissident, indignation. Instead, what appears is a pared-down form and meditative content as in the works of Gérard and Krafft. To some extent, there was a recurrence of the subject’s more depoliticised use, including as an exemplum virtutis, an example of virtue for “courage, steadfastness, and magnanimity”.

The then curator of the Swedish Royal Museum and member of the

Fig. 4 Jean-Baptiste Stouf (1742–1826), Belisarius, c. 1785–1791. Marble, 60 x 55 x 30 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2005.19.
Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts, Carl Fredrik Fredenheim (1748–1803), lamented that there was neither “light nor shadow” in Krafft’s painting when he saw it in 1801, which could perhaps reveal some unfamiliarity with the direction taken by Neoclassical painting in Paris in the late 1790s.\textsuperscript{22} Despite this, according to Fredenheim’s notes, out of the works that Krafft exhibited, it was \textit{Belisarius} that the young king, Gustav IV Adolf (1778–1837) wished to “keep”.\textsuperscript{23} If we consider Krafft’s painting in the light of the subject’s adaptable and varied use, so well exemplified by the interpretations of Marmontel, David and Gérard, it is perhaps not surprising that the king fell for it. After all, he was the son of a king who had staged a coup d’état and then been assassinated. Gustav IV Adolf was surrounded by advisers whose loyalty was open to question for multiple reasons. He sympathised strongly with the \textit{émigrés} of the French Revolution; that he was later deposed in a coup d’état and forced to live his life as a suffering \textit{émigré} can both be seen as a coincidence and a case of premonition. However, it could just as well have been the more fundamentally virtuous aspects of the subject that appealed. It is an open question as to whether this variety of potential interpretations was why the king subsequently changed his mind and did not acquire the work.\textsuperscript{24}

With great inspiration, Krafft’s work captures qualities that are both transient and eternal, and undoubtedly has traces of the changeable and sometimes complex content that the subject of Belisarius offers and which, in various ways, was taken up in the visual arts in the years following the publication of Marmontel’s novel. However, his work is principally a shining example of the more universal weight that the subject [re]gains in the years around 1800 and which, in turn, allows more opportunities for personal interpretation by its beholder.

Fig. 5 Per Krafft the Younger (1777–1863), \textit{Belisarius}, 1799. Oil on canvas, 125 x 94 cm. Purchase: the Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7468. Before the removal of extensive overpaint.
Notes:
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. The 1801 catalogue of the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts describes Krafft’s painting in the following manner: “Finally; this brave, Oriental Emperor Justinian, General and defender of the Realm, was through jealous men’s and enemies’ plotters, by the same Emperor sentenced to lose both his eyes, and sent to the begging staff.”
12. Fried 1980, pp. 152–154. Boime 1980, pp. 85–87. Masterworks from the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille 1992, pp. 139–140, note 9. There are two versions of Gérard’s painting (1795 & 1797). The latter, like Stout’s bust (ca. 1785–1791), is now at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Jollain’s painting (1767) has long been lost, but we know of it through Diderot’s description. Durameau’s painting (1775) is now at the Musée Ingres, Montauban; Vincent’s painting (1776) in the Musée Fabre, Montpellier; Peyron’s painting (1779) and Houdon’s bust in Musée des Augustins, Toulouse. Other relevant works with the same subject in the collection of the Nationalmuseum are the drawings NMH 12/2006, Antoine-François Callet (1741–1823), The Blind Belisarius as Beggar & NMH 8/1981, Johan Tobias Sergel (1740–1814), Belisarius as Beggar. Writing on an old label glued to the upper corner of Krafft’s painting says “Per Krafft [the Younger] Copy 1800 of (probably) Gerard’s painting “The Blind Belisarius”. Later writing on the label states: “According to Nationalmuseum original by P.K. the Y.”
13. Evald E:son Uggla, Minnesutställning över Per Krafft d.y., 1777–1863, Nationalmusei exhibition catalogue no. 25 Stockholm 1927, pp. 5–8, 13–14, cat. no. 10 (entitled The Begging Belisarius). E:son Uggla preferred Krafft’s portraiture, writing: “The portraits from this time are considerably superior to the Antique compositions, of which Belisarius is one example”.
15. West’s painting is now at the Detroit Institute of Arts, accession number 12.11. Marmontel 1994 (1767).
16. E:son Uggla preferred Krafft’s portraiture, writing: “The portraits from this time are considerably superior to the Antique compositions, of which Belisarius is one example”.
18. West’s painting is now at the Detroit Institute of Arts, accession number 12.11. Marmontel 1994 (1767).
19. Ibid.
22. E:son Uggla 1928, p. 204, note 63: “Krafft’s little portrait of himself is more satisfying than his three large paintings with neither light nor shadow”, quote from Carl Fredrik Fredenheim’s journal, August 1800.
24. Ibid.