

Johann Jakob Wolfensberger



The Temple of Olympian Zeus, with the Acropolis beyond and the
Temple of Hephaistos, Athens

Reference: 10902

Dimensions:

Height: 52 cm / 20½ in

Width: 75.40 cm / 29¾ in

KT499

Johann Jakob Wolfensberger (Swiss 1797-1850)

The Temple of Olympian Zeus, with the Acropolis beyond and the Temple of Hephaistos, Athens

A pair, the Hephaisteion signed and dated I.I.: Wolfensberger 1845, watercolour over traces of pencil with touches of gum arabic and scratching out

KAREN TAYLOR

FINE ART

Each 52 x 75.4 cm

Outside mount size 65 x 86 cm

Provenance

Private collection, U.S.A. until 2022

This pair of impressive watercolours are fine examples of the largest format used by the Swiss artist who made a contemporary name for himself as a result of his travels in Greece and the Ottoman Empire in 1840s.

The temple of Zeus Olympios was begun in the Doric order in the sixth century BC under the Peisistradid tyranny but was discontinued after its fall. A new version in the Corinthian order was begun by Antiochos IV of Syria (175-164 BC). When it was completed around 300 years later, circa AD 131 – 2, in Hadrian's reign, it was by far the biggest building in Athens.

The brick structure upon the architrave of the two western columns of the middle range is supposed to have been built as an aerial retreat around 1209 by Nicholas de la Roche, the canon of Athens. It was removed circa 1870.

The temple of Hephaistos, God of smiths and other crafts, was built on the edge of the Athens marketplace to celebrate the city's powers in the arts and conceived as a sister temple to the Parthenon. Built in the Doric order it is attributed to an unknown architect working circa 450-430 BC.

Born near Zürich, Johann Jacob Wolfensberger studied there with Heinrich Fuseli between 1814 and 1817, when he travelled to Italy where he lived in Naples, for several years, and spent some time travelling in Sicily. In 1825 he was in Rome, where he befriended Horace Vernet, the director of the Académie de France. In Rome Wolfensberger was employed as a drawing teacher to the Marquess of Northampton, later President of the Royal Society. In 1829 he returned briefly to Zürich, where he lived with the painter Johann Conrad Zeller, before coming back to Rome in 1830.

Between 1832 and 1835 Wolfensberger lived and worked in Athens, where he was employed by the French envoy the Baron de Rouen and the Austrian Baron Prokesch von Osten. During this time, he visited Smyrna, Constantinople and Asia Minor in 1834. He also travelled with Joseph Count of Estourmel (1783-1853) in the early 1830s in Greece and Asia Minor. The illustrated book of the Count of Estourmel's journey was published in 1844 entitled 'Journal d'un Voyage en Orient'.

In 1838 an exhibition of two hundred of Wolfensberger's views of Italy and Greece was held in Zürich. With the financial support of the Swiss bibliophile, scholar and collector Martin Bodmer, further exhibitions of his work took place in Vienna, Paris and London. A trip to London in 1840 resulted in a commission from the publisher Henry Fisher for a series of seventeen prints of Italian and Greek views. The artist's marriage the following year to Hanna Dorothea Burdon, an Englishwoman, allowed him some financial security. Wolfensberger continued to make sketching trips around Europe, visiting Italy in 1843, Switzerland in 1844, and England and Scotland in 1846. Four years after he died from encephalitis in 1850, a biography of the artist was published by his widow.

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A large group of around five hundred drawings and watercolours by Wolfensberger can be found in the collection of the Kunstmuseum in St. Gallen. Further works by the artist are in the collections of the Kunsthaus, the ETH Graphische Sammlung, Zurich and the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich.