

Antoine-Ignace Melling (Karlsruhe)



Vue de l'embouchure de la Mer Noire

Reference: 11070

Dimensions:

Height: 42 cm / 16½ in
Width: 79 cm / 31⅛ in

Inscribed I.I.: No 1, watercolour over traces of pencil with touches of gum arabic and scratching out, inscribed with title and numbered on reverse of backing: Vue de l'embouchure de la Mer Noire, further inscribed in white bodycolour on a strip originally below the watercolour, now attached to the reverse of the frame: Vue d'une partie du Bosphore où l'on decouvre dans le lointain l'embouchure de la mer noire

42 x 79 cm

Provenance

Private collection U.S.A., until 2016

Engraved

'Le Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore d'après les dessins de M. Melling, architecte de l'Empereur Sélim III et dessinateur de la Sultane Hadidgé, sa soeur', no. 44, published 1819, Paris, by Treutel and Würtz

This recently rediscovered original watercolour by Melling for his Voyage is an exciting addition to his known oeuvre and presents the mouth of the Bosphorus as if seen from a ship on the water. The focus of Melling's great print epic of 1819,

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'Voyage picturesque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore' was water, a reflection of the geographical situation of the city of Constantinople with its wide panoramas, and the unifying thread of his book. This precisely detailed, large and highly finished watercolour is probably the watercolour he provided for the engravers to work from.

After training in his uncle's atelier in Karlsruhe, Melling travelled in Italy, Egypt and to Smyrna, before finally arriving in Constantinople circa 1784 in the retinue of the Russian ambassador, Count Yakov Ivanovich Bulgakov. He spent time in the Russian palaces at Pera and Büyükdere and also taught drawing to the son of the Dutch ambassador (Walter, op cit., chap. 4 note 4). It was his design of the garden for the Danish ambassador Baron Frederik von Hübsch, native of Pera and head of the Galata Bank Hübsch and Timoni, a friend of Selim III, which led to his introduction to his sister Hatice Sultane.

Melling worked for Hatice for most of his time in Constantinople, designing the garden for her Bosphorus palace and a pavilion for it with all its interior decoration. Elisabeth Fraser describes him as a 'kind of artistic director in residence' (op. cit. p. 131), overseeing everything from flowers to the design of luxury items. He lived in the wing of Hatice's palace occupied by her husband Sayyid Ahmed Pasha and was as close to her as a court servant could become. Their correspondence records that Melling taught her the Latin alphabet and they communicated in an invented script of Ottoman Turkish transcribed into Latin characters based on Italian phonetics with a few Italian words.

Sultan Selim then asked Melling to renovate his favourite palace on the Bosphorus at Besiktas where he built a kiosk, a gallery, an apartment for the Valide Sultana and a quay with a balustrade. There were plans for Melling to build a kiosk at Sarayburnu, and he expected to be named Selim's official architect and designer, but the project was abandoned when the French invaded Egypt in 1798 and Melling lost his position around 1800. His unique position as an imperial insider, patronised by Hatice Sultane and Selim III himself, gave him a profound and rare insight into Ottoman society, and this privileged position allowed him to draw the imperial residences as well as the opportunity to draw and paint many views of the city.

Melling moved to France with an introduction to Talleyrand, French minister of foreign affairs in Paris, and his lavish travel book, conceived in 1801, received significant official support in 12,000 francs worth of shares. This ambitious book, unusually large in size, (each print is 2 1/2 x 3 1/4 feet) comprises forty-eight prints (in etching and engraving) and special attention was taken over the quality of the engravings, text and paper. He contracted with the experienced engraver François Denis Née, who had worked with Choiseul-Gouffier, Cassas and d'Ohsson, in March 1803, to supervise the engraving process. On 7 December that year they signed a second contract with Treuttel and Würtz, the libraires-imprimeurs. In it Melling agreed to produce two versions of each image, an engraver's version in black and white and a watercolour. Melling was forbidden from producing any competing work on Constantinople until a bound copy of his original watercolours was sold (see Boschma and Perot, op cit. pp.38-9). The publishers then took over the control of the book production of which 700 copies were projected. 'Voyage pittoresque' was sold by subscription and in thirteen livraisons from 1807-1819, three prospectuses were also produced in 1804, 1816 and 1819 as was a subscribers list which included many sovereigns; the kings of France, Spain and Sweden, the emperors of Austria and Russia, aristocrats, diplomats, dragomans and booksellers (see E. Fraser, op cit. pp 132-4).

Melling and his publishers cultivated official connections at the highest level and in 1802 he met with the three consuls then ruling France and presented two watercolours to Consul Bonaparte (now in the Musée Bonaparte at château

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Arenenberg on the Bodensee, see Boppe, op. cit, p. 252-255, ill.). They kept Napoleon abreast of the project, even sending the first livraison to him at his military camp in Poland and asking for his sponsorship and permission to dedicate the work to him. The plan seems to have worked as Napoleon's personal interest in the project is recorded and evidence of its significance. Josephine was also presented with drawings from the first livraison at an audience at Saint Cloud in 1807 and she bought further watercolours by Melling the following year (of which four are now in the château Arenenberg). Drawings for the project were shown at Salon exhibitions in 1804, 1806, 1810 and 1812 and Melling won a gold medal in 1810.

The 'Voyage pittoresque' was a departure from the other Ottoman travel books of the period in its detailed focus on Constantinople and its environs, linked by the Bosphorus. Choiseul-Gouffier in his 'Voyage pittoresque de la Grèce' focussed on Greece and antiquity, the Swedish diplomat and author d'Ohsson in his 'Tableau General de l'Empire Othoman', 1790, was primarily interested in Ottoman institutions, mosques, tombs, religious practices and history. The text of the 'Voyage pittoresque' makes frequent references to Melling's long stay in Constantinople and his proximity to the court to add authority and authenticity to the work. The book made Melling's reputation if not his fortune.

Melling's work is neatly described by Elisabeth Fraser (op cit. p. 136) as a 'navigational narrative', with over half the prints illustrating views along Istanbul's major waterways, the Bosphorus Strait and the Golden Horn, reinforced by the descriptions of arrival in the accompanying text. The sequence of the images take the reader on a journey through the city and its environs approaching it via the water route from the Mediterranean. From Tenedos (Bozcaada) and the Aegean, continuing via the Dardanelles at the end of which Constantinople can be seen in the distance. The city is approached and then about six plates show places within it, Galata, Pera, Eyüp, Tophane, Besiktas, Scutari and Topkapi. Then the voyage continues along the water onto the Golden Horn, up the Bosphorus and to the Black Sea, which defines the northern end of the river and the end of suburban Istanbul. The size of the prints reflect the panoramas and their uniformity increases the drama of the voyage. It also reflects the secular eighteenth century city with the Imperial centre firmly based around the Bosphorus (see S. Hamade, op cit.)

Bibliography

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I am grateful to Professor Elisabeth Fraser, for her comments about this watercolour from an image. My account owes much to her recent scholarship on the subject.