Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Auguste RAVIER (1814 - 1895)

Landscape with Part of the Aurelian Walls of Rome

Pen and brown ink and watercolour, over a pencil underdrawing, on blue paper, laid down on a backing sheet.

Signed with the artist's initials FAtR at the lower left.

198 x 547 mm. (7 3/4 x 21 1/2 in.)

A splendid and luminous example of Ravier's watercolour style, the present sheet dates from one of the artist's visits to Italy in the 1840s. It is typical of his poetic landscapes, in which there is almost always no trace of a human presence. As Ravier noted in a letter written from Rome soon after his arrival there in 1840, his first visits to the countryside beyond the city walls made a deep impression on him: 'Around three quarters of a mile outside the walls there begins a desert where there is nothing but wild plants and ruins. I walked for an hour without meeting anyone other than a monk who said his breviary…But that which brings to the utmost degree the beauty and sadness of this place, are the ancient tombs in ruins which line the road on both sides at the left and right…It is the landscape which has made the greatest impression on me.' In the vicinity of Rome, Ravier is known to have visited Ariccia, Subiaco, Cervara, Ostia, Nemi, Anzio, Olevano and elsewhere.

As the Ravier scholar Christine Boyer-Thiollier has noted, 'The use of watercolours certainly became familiar to the artist during his stay in Rome, for it corresponded perfectly to his aspirations…This method allowed him to rapidly transcribe the golden hues of light or the atmospheric effects of the eternal city, using colours whose dilution rendered them even more transparent…In Rome, 'outdoor' artists swarmed over the same old classical sites, which seem to have been ignored by Ravier, for his surviving watercolours show only desolate and lonely places of elegiac beauty. Unfortunately he had left there in the care of an indelicate friend, an entire trunkful of studies and watercolours which have disappeared into thin air. The watercolours which have survived testify to the quality of Ravier's work.'

This fine watercolour landscape, which may be counted among Ravier's largest works as a draughtsman, depicts two gates in the southern part of the Aurelian Walls of Rome. The Porta Asinaria, with its two tower blocks, dominates the centre of the composition, while the Porta San Giovanni is at the left. The Porta Asinaria was built between 270 and 273 A.D., at the same time as the Wall itself, while the Porta San Giovanni dates from 1574, when it replaced the older Porta Asinaria, which had become overwhelmed by traffic. To the right of this view, although not depicted by Ravier in the present sheet, is the Basilica of San Giovanni Laterano.

A far more distant watercolour view of the Aurelian Walls is in a private collection in France, while a

stylistically comparable watercolour Roman Landscape with a View of St. Peter'sis in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Reims. Among other drawings by Ravier of sites and monuments in and around Rome is a view of the 16th century Porta Furba and the Acqua Felice aqueduct, drawn in charcoal on blue paper, in the collection of the Maison Ravier in Morestel.

Provenance:

An unidentified collection stamp (not in Lugt), stamped in blue ink on the backing sheet
Galerie Jonas, Paris, in 1975.

Exhibitions

Paris, Galerie Jonas, F. A. Ravier, November 1975, no.60.

Artist description:

A native of Lyon, Auguste Ravier abandoned his studies as a notary in Paris to train as an artist in the studios of Jules Coigniet and Théodore Caruelle d'Aligny. Early in his career he met Camille Corot, who was to be a lifelong influence on his work. Apart from several trips to Italy between 1840 and 1847, where he painted landscape oil sketches very similar to those of Corot, Ravier worked for his entire career around Lyon and the Dauphiné, taking his subjects from the countryside around the towns of Crémieu and Morestel. He seems to have been something of a recluse, avoiding visits to town and living a life of country solitude.

Ravier was particularly adept as a watercolourist, and in the 1850's and 1860's worked in a manner indebted to that of Corot and Charles-François Daubigny, both of whom were close friends. He was especially fond of scenes at dawn and dusk, often making studies in oil or watercolour on the spot that would later be worked up into finished watercolours in his studio. As he wrote in one letter, 'The sky contains everything…Clouds and atmosphere stir my senses. Always something new, something inexhaustible – infinity!' Indeed, his atmospheric landscapes in watercolour have earned comparisons with those of Turner, whose work he greatly admired. (As he noted in a letter of August 1874 to his friend and biographer Félix Thioller, 'I believe that I have made some progress in regard to the rendering of light. I want to get at Turner, with whose work I find I have more in common than with anyone else.')

Ravier only rarely exhibited his work, and when he did so it was almost always in Lyon. He hardly ever visited Paris, and it was not until 1884 that several of his watercolours were shown at the Salon. In the same year he lost the sight in one eye, forcing him to give up painting, and by 1889 he had become totally blind.

That Ravier was something of a perfectionist in his watercolour technique is seen in another letter to Thioller, written in 1876: 'For myself I have one pre-occupation: sincerity, the expression of the scene of the moment as felt by my senses as that moment...Without doubt I sometimes get my water-colours too heavy. These I give up; I have to wash them, sponge them, rub them out. It is an effort which has not succeeded; but it is an effort, and it would be more convenient and more easy not to have made it. I try everything, for I have a thirst for the unknown, the madness of research; but that is where my value lies. It is imperfect, but it is not commonplace.'