Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Johann Jacob Wolfensberger (Rumlikon 1797 - Zürich 1850)

View of Rome from the Janiculum Hill, with the Oak of Tasso

Circa: 1825

Watercolour, over a pencil underdrawing.
Signed and inscribed Wolfensberger / Rom on the steps at the lower left centre.
Inscribed (priced) 16 piaster on the verso.
Further inscribed, in a modern hand, Le chêne du Tasse et l'hemicycle / de St Philippe de Neri au Monastère / de Sant Onofrio à ROME / par Wolfensberger (1825) on the old backing board.
Also inscribed, in a modern hand, Le chêne du courent de Saint Onophre sur le Janicule / sous lequel Le Tasse se fit postes pour mousis(?) et / ou Chateaubriand retait de finis ses jours / (Mémoires d'Outre tombe) on the old backing board.
208 x 270 mm. (8 1/8 x 10 5/8 in.)

The so-called Oak of Tasso (or Quercia del Tasso) was a famous Roman landmark located on the northern tip of the Janiculum Hill in Trastevere, a ridge of high ground to the west of the Tiber river which afforded a panoramic view of the centre of Rome. The ancient oak tree was long associated with the 16th century poet Torquato Tasso, who according to legend spent much of the last year of his life sitting underneath the tree, gazing down on Rome and waiting for official recognition of his works from Pope Clement VIII. Tasso died in the nearby church and convent of Sant'Onofrio, where he is buried. The oak which bears his name survived until the early 20th century when it was struck by lightning; only a remnant of the tree survives today, supported by metal scaffolding and concrete1. A small open-air amphitheatre underneath the tree, built in the 17th century in natural hollow in the side of the hill, is named for the Oak of Tasso.

Artist description:

Born near Zürich, Johann Jacob Wolfensberger studied there with Heinrich Füessli between 1814 and 1817, when he travelled to Italy. Settling in Naples, he worked there for several years, and also 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 Wolfesnberger 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. He made trips to Smyrna,

Constantinople and Malta in 1834, and the following year settled for two years in Naples, making visits to Pompeii and Paestum.

In 1838 an exhibition of two hundred of Wolfensberger's views in 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 Fisher for a series of seventeen prints of Italian and Greek views. His marriage the following year to an Englishwoman allowed the artist a measure of 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 his death from encephalitis in 1850, a biography of the artist was published by his widow, Hanna Dorothea Burdon.

Wolfensberger's watercolour views of Italy, Greece and the Near East are characterized by a topographical accuracy combined with a charming or picturesque viewpoint. A large group of around five hundred drawings and watercolours by Wolfensberger is today in the collection of the Kunstmuseum in St. Gallen. Other works by the artist are in the collections of the Kunsthaus, the ETH and the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich.