

Aloys ZÖTL (Freistadt 1803 - Eferding 1887)

Two Amazonian Horned Frogs (Ceratophrys cornuta)
Watercolour.

Signed and dated Alois Zötl fecit am 14 Juni 1884 in the lower right margin.

Inscribed Amphibien Taf.37 at the lower left margin. Further inscribed Weibchen, Die Hornkröte. Rano cornuta. and Mänchen. in the bottom margin.

Numbered 86 in the lower right margin.

327 x 425 mm. (12 7/8 x 16 3/4 in.) [image]

410 x 508 mm. (16 1/8 x 20 in.) [sheet]

This large watercolour depicts two Amazonian horned frogs (Ceratophrys cornuta); a female frog in the left foreground and a male frog in the right background. Native to countries in the northern part of South America, the horned frog is distinguished by horn-like protrusions above its eyes and a very wide mouth. Measuring up to twenty centimetres in length, it is a voracious eater.

The present sheet may be related in particular to a similar depiction of two horned frogs by Zötl, dated August 1863, which is today in a private collection. Described by André Breton as 'one of the most beautiful Max Ernsts I know', that watercolour is numbered as plate 36, and thus – despite the difference in date – may have immediately preceded the present sheet in the arrangement of the Amphibien series of watercolours in the Bestiarium.

The artist may have based this particular watercolour on an coloured lithograph, by an unknown artist, of two Ceratophrys varia, illustrated in Friedrich Treitschke's Naturhistorischer Bildersaal des Thierreichs, published in 1842. Zötl produced watercolours of several different species of frogs between 1857 and 1886, some of which were included in the sale of 150 works from his studio held in Paris in 1955. A number of watercolours of frogs by Zötl were later in the collection of Alix de Rothschild.

As André Breton wrote of the artist, 'It would be...futile to speculate on the origin of the documents, very few of them probably scenes taken from life, which Zötl used to depict this perfect organic harmony between the animal and its environment, of which he is the living hieroglyph. What is so marvellous in

Zötl's paintings is that these two qualities are constantly expressed in terms of each other, and that the artist's extraordinary ardour conjures up before our eyes the vision of universal harmony which exists, repressed, in the very depths of our beings.' Perhaps best described as a combination of science and fantasy, the watercolours by Aloys Zötl for his Bestiarium may be regarded one of the most remarkable and original works of natural history of the 19th century.

Artist description:

From 1831 until his death in 1887, the obscure Austrian dyer and amateur artist Aloys Zötl produced an extensive series of very large and beautifully drawn watercolours of exotic animals, known as the Bestiarium. This massive project was to be his life's work, although its purpose remains unknown. The watercolours of the Bestiarium, characterized by a brilliant technique and rich colouring, allied to the unbridled imagination of the artist, do not seem to have ever been reproduced in Zötl's lifetime, either as prints or in the form of a book. While the animals are generally depicted with a high degree of accuracy, they are given a sort of added symbolism in the way in which the artist has depicted them on the page. Most of the watercolours show the animals in some form of natural habitat, although this at times seems to verge on the imaginary. It is not known if these spectacular watercolours were the result of a commission or - as is perhaps most likely, given the fact that they were part of a project that seems to have lasted over fifty years - simply an astonishing, and lifelong, labour of love. Certainly all of the watercolours remained together after the artist's death.

Hardly anything is known of the life of Zötl. The son of a master dyer, he was born in Freistadt in Upper Austria and took up his father's profession, as did one of his brothers, while another became a bookseller. Following his marriage Zötl moved to the village of Eferding, about forty kilometres from Freistadt, where he remained for the rest of his life. He died on October 21st, 1887, after a long illness. His last watercolour, a study of exotic seashells, was dated only eighteen days earlier, on October 3rd, 1887.

As an artist, Zötl remained almost completely unknown until after the Second World War, when a large group of his animal and natural history watercolours – numbering 320 sheets – was sold in two auctions in Paris in 1955 and 1956. Nothing is known of the earlier provenance of these works, which were consigned for sale by a descendant of an Austrian family. Writing shortly after the first sale of 150 watercolours from the Bestiarium in December 1955, at which he purchased eleven works, the writer André Breton likened Zötl's work to that of Henri Rousseau, and identified a distinct Surrealist sensibility in much of his oeuvre.

As Breton noted, 'Lacking any biographical details about the artist, one can only indulge one's fantasies in imagining the reasons which might have induced this workman from Upper Austria, a dyer by profession, to undertake so zealously between 1832 and 1887 the elaboration of the most sumptuous bestiary ever seen. It would almost seem as though Zötl's vision, trained professionally to detect the most subtle colours and tones, had endowed him with a mental prism functioning as an instrument of second-sight and revealing to him in succession, back to its most distant origins, the animal kingdom which remains such an enigmatic aspect in each of our lives and which plays such an essential role in the symbolism of the unconscious mind.'

Zötl does not seem to have travelled much beyond his home in the village of Eferding in Upper Austria, and it is thought that most of his watercolours must have been derived from his close study of the extensive library of published works of zoology, natural history, ethnography and travel which he owned, which remains in the possesion of his descendants.