Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Joseph-Frédéric DEBACQ (Paris 1800 - Paris 1892)

The Nave of the Cathedral at Monreale, Looking West, with a Traveller in the Foreground

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, over an underdrawing in pencil.

Inscribed *Cathedrale de Monreale près de Palerme* on the verso.

Further inscribed *Cathedrale de Monreale près Palerme.* at the bottom of the album page onto which this drawing was pasted.

Stamped with the mark FD in a double circle (not in Lugt), possibly the Debacq atelier stamp, at the lower left.

197 x 315 mm. (7 7/8 x 12 3/8 in.)

As the 19th century English traveller and illustrator William Henry Bartlett noted, the Duomo at Monreale, 'though different in style, might vie in extent and splendour with any of the cathedrals erected by the Norman Kings in England or in France. The most celebrated artists, Greek, Italian and Saracenic, were employed in its construction and adornment, and it remains the most splendid monument of that singular and often gorgeous, though some may think incongruous, combination of styles…When the immense bronze doors are suddenly thrown open, the effect of the interior covered with gold and mosaic, and sunk in a rich half-shadow, is indescribably gorgeous. The nave, ample and spacious, resembles a basilica, rather than the vaulted edifice of the north. The design is exceedingly simple; a range of massive pillars of different coloured marbles, taken from ancient Roman buildings, and surmounted by capitals, some of them antique, and others rich in device and execution, evidently carved by Greek workmen. The arches above are slightly pointed; a range of slender lights above them casts a subdued light into the edifice, which is surmounted by a rich flat roof, gorgeously carved and decorated…[The] mosaics, with which the greater part of the interior is covered, confer upon it a distinctive character. They are wrought upon a gold ground…and exhibit a series of scripture incidents. Predominating the whole is a colossal head of the Saviour in the centre apse, which produces, as it was intended to do, an awful and striking effect. But this is not all; the marble panelling of the side aisles, the ornamental devices, and the decorations of the roofing, are all strikingly Saracenic, while Norman peculiarities of detail are curiously intermingled with the rest. Combining as it does so many styles nowhere else seen in juxtaposition, and wrought into one grand whole by the master-mind of the architect, the cathedral of Monreale is undoubtedly the most curious, as well as magnificent monument of the period which gave it birth.'

The present sheet depicts the nave of the Duomo, looking east towards the entrance façade. In both this

and the pendant drawing Debacq has endeavoured to be as accurate as possible, to the extent of depicting a small temporary wooden scaffold or balustrade at the clerestory level, above one of the arches on the south aisle.

Drawings by Joseph-Frédéric Debacq are rare. A handful of architectural studies, dating from his student days, are in the collection of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, while a watercolour by the artist is in the Musée Calvet in Avignon.

Artist description:

An architect and painter, Joseph-Frédéric Debacq entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1818, studying with the architect Lucien-Tirté van Clemputte. Appointed architect to the city of Paris, Debacq found an important patron and supporter in Honoré Théodoric d'Albert de Luynes, the future 8th Duc de Luynes (1802-1867), a wealthy student of archaeology and an amateur artist. De Luynes was fascinated by antiquity, and in 1828 he and Debacq travelled together from southern France, across the Alps and through the Italian peninsula, to study the Greek ruins and cities of Southern Italy; the area known by the ancient Romans as Magna Graecia. In 1833 De Luynes would publish an important study, illustrated by Debacq, of the ancient Greek city of Metapontum in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Working with the architect Charles Garnier, Debacq later designed the funerary chapel of the Château de Dampierre for the Duc de Luynes, and also built his hôtel particulier on the rue de l'Université in Paris.