

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Thomas Shotter BOYS (London 1803 - London 1874)

The Café de L'Amitie and the Former Palace of Prince William Frederick of the Netherlands on the Place Royale in Brussels

Watercolour, heightened with gouache, over an underdrawing in pencil.

Signed and dated *T. Boys. / 1830.* in blue ink at the lower left.

Inscribed (by a later hand) *The café de l'amitié & ancient hotel of Prince Frederick* in pencil on the verso.

159 x 248 mm. (6 1/4 x 9 3/4 in.)

Thomas Shotter Boys's brief period in Brussels in 1830 was marked by the turmoil of the Belgian Revolution that took place during the summer of that year. Following the end of the Napoleonic wars, the Northern Netherlands (formerly the Dutch Republic) and the Southern Netherlands (modern-day Belgium) had been united as one country at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The United Netherlands was ruled by the Protestant king William Frederick, son of Wilhelm V, Prince of Orange, who styled himself William I, King of the Netherlands. The citizens of the southern provinces, who were mainly Catholic, resented the influence and interference of the Protestant King and in August 1830 riots erupted in Brussels and elsewhere in the southern provinces. William responded by sending in his army but on 27 September 1830, after four days of fierce fighting, they were driven out of Brussels. The southern provinces then seceded and on 4th October a provisional Belgian government declared independence, which was soon recognized by other major European powers.

The Café de L'Amitie, on the Place Royale in Brussels, was a meeting place popular with Belgian writers, artists, politicians and members of the social elite, as well as French visitors to the city. During the Belgian Revolution the building was targeted by the Dutch forces and its facade was severely damaged during the conflict. Boys also painted another watercolour of the same battle-scarred building seen from a different angle. Today in a private collection, *The Hôtel de Bellevue and the Café de L'Amitie seen from the Park* is slightly larger than the present sheet and depicts the Place Royale as viewed from the Parc Royale, with the Café de L'Amitie at the centre right and the Hôtel de Belle-Vue at the left, and with groups of soldiers and a cannon in the foreground. The present sheet shows the view from the opposite end of the street, looking towards the park, with the low wall extending along the Rue Royale and its gatepost, adjacent to the Café de l'Amitié, marked by two sculpted lions. This watercolour places more emphasis on the damage to the façade of the building, as well as the shattered remains of a carriage in the foreground.

Yet in both watercolours Boys has somewhat underplayed the effects of the battle and the damage to the structure, to judge from a colour lithograph showing the Café de L'Amitié and its surroundings immediately after the fighting of 23 to 26 September 1830 that gives a more accurate of how the area looked at the time, with much more severe damage to the façade readily evident. Another contemporary print shows almost the exact same view as the present watercolour, albeit with very different staffage, and may have been based on it.

Boys produced a handful of other watercolours of Brussels in 1830, each of similar dimensions to the present sheet. These include *The King's Palace, Brussels* in the collection of the Ulster Museum in Belfast and *Brussels after an Artillery Attack* sold at auction in 1971, as well as *The Place des Palais, Brussels*, showing some of the same buildings as in the present sheet, which appeared at auction in London in 2007.

Artist description:

One of the finest English watercolourists of the 19th century, the artist and printmaker Thomas Shotter Boys had almost no formal academic training and was apprenticed to the line engraver George Cooke in 1817. Sometime in the early 1820s he moved to France, where he learned the art of lithography. Boys lived and worked mainly in Paris between 1823 and 1837, working as an engraver, lithographer and watercolourist. He also befriended his contemporary Richard Parkes Bonington, whose style and technique as a watercolourist, particularly in his urban views, was to be a particular influence on Boys, to the extent that their work has sometimes been confused. In 1830 Boys left France for Brussels, but the outbreak of the short-lived Belgian Revolution meant that he had to return to Paris, where he shared a studio with William Callow, who sometimes accompanied him on sketching expeditions. Some of Boys's 1830 drawings of Belgian cities were later used for his book *Picturesque Architecture in Paris, Ghent, Antwerp, Rouen &c.*, published in London in 1839. This was followed in 1842 by *Original Views of London as it is*, a masterpiece of the new method of chromolithography, and both volumes may be counted among the finest large-format albums of picturesque views of the period.

Boys's splendid watercolours of urban views, full of incidental detail, were much admired by critics. The artist worked between Paris and London, exhibiting his work at the Paris Salon, where he made his debut in 1833, and the New Water-colour Society, of which he became a member in 1840, and where he showed five or six watercolours a year, on average, until his death. As Marcia Pointon has noted, 'The decade of the 'thirties was the highpoint of Boys's career... The vitality of Boys's work during this period and the depth and thoughtfulness of his approach to the motif, his colour sense and the fine precision of his detail must ensure for him a place of honour in [the] circle of artists in Paris.' By the later 1840s, however, Boys's career and reputation had begun to fade. He was hardly mentioned by the prominent art critic John Ruskin in his many writings, despite the fact that Boys was employed to produce etchings for Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, and this critical neglect meant that collectors began to lose interest in his work. In his later years Boys struggled to support himself financially, trying without much success to work as a drawing master and an architectural draughtsman. In 1850 he was obliged to sell at auction his collection of works by other artists, including Bonington and François-Marius Granet, as well as Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Jean-Baptiste Greuze and Jean-Antoine Watteau. In his last years Boys suffered from a form of paralysis, and died in poverty in 1874, at the age of seventy-two.