Lancelot - Théodore Turpin de Crissé

Landscape with Bacchanalia

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(Paris, 1782 - 1859)

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Oil on canvas, 130 x 98 cm

PROVENANCE: Georg Schaefer collection, Schweinfurt

Several nineteenth century works, recently dispersed but previously in the prestigious collection of Georg Schaefer (Schweinfurt, Germany), have been revealed as extraordinary paintings, once the ambiguity of mistaken attribution was removed. In this way, a late Neoclassical canvas that had been generically attributed to the school of David has turned out to be a magnificent Camuccini and, in our case, from an unlikely attribution to the great Jacob Philipp Hackert, there has emerged the beautiful second version of a masterpiece of the heroic landscape, dating from the years of the Restoration. In fact, this *Landscape with Bacchanalia* formed part of the celebrated series of great Mediterranean views by one of the leading exponents of that genre, the versatile Lancelot-Théodore Turpin conte de Crissé (Paris 1782 – 1859) **(Fig. 1)**.

We are still waiting for a monograph to give him, as he deserves, his true value not only as an artist, but as a fundamental figure in understanding the taste of those great amateurs who worked in Europe between the Empire and the reign of Louis Philippe. Meanwhile, there are no lack of sources from the period and a dense bibliography, including museum and exhibition catalogues, which can help us build up a fairly realistic and detailed profile of one of the protagonists of high society

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and politics, as well as a collector (he was the fortunate owner of – among other works – masterpieces like the *Paolo e Francesca* by Ingres, Museum of Angers, which are so original and captivating as to make the ideal subject for a writer of memoirs or the "social" novel of the first half of the nineteenth century).

His origins and family background appear to have destined him perfectly for this role. In fact, he was a descendent of the ancient lineage of Turpin d'Anjou, who had understood how to combine aristocratic pride (he would always reassert his privileged status by drawing the count's coronet over the date and signature on his paintings) with military endeavour. His grandfather, a lieutenant-general, had been a famous strategist. Meanwhile, his father, Roland-Henri-Lancelot, a colonel in the Berchiny regiment, was also a great collector of drawings and paintings, though just an amateur painter. We know that he exhibited at the Salon of 1787 and that he encouraged his son's talent, which had emerged precociously despite an infancy and youth spent running back and forth between England and Germany as an émigré during the years of the Revolution. In fact, the young man even had to sell his own drawings and watercolours in this period to meet the needs of his mother and sister, since his father had preferred to flee to America, where he died around 1795.

Whilst the basic rudiments taught him by his father had enabled him to afford life's simple necessities, his real artistic education was due to the protection of the count of Choiseul, author of the popular *Voyage pittoresque en Grece*. The count took him with him to Switzerland after 1801, where, immerging himself in the beauty of unspoilt nature, Turpin could make his first studies from life. Nevertheless, the first paintings he exhibited at the Salon of 1806, *The Farewells of René and his sister* (inspired by the novel by Chateaubriand) and the *View of the Temple of Minerva at Athens*, which were awarded a gold medal, saw his repertoire widening to include the various possibilities of the heroic landscape, or "illustrated", that is, with the inclusion of ancient

Fig. 1 Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Lancelot-Théodore, comte Turpin de Crissé*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

monuments or mythological subjects (though also historical and literary) which would make his fortune at later Salons, where he would regularly present until 1835; likewise, at the Royal Academy of London, where he exhibited in 1832.

The numerous beautiful drawings conserved at the Louvre document very well his first trip to Italy, between 1807 and 1808, when he worked in Rome and Naples, building up that repertory of Mediterranean images that would come to distinguish him, as he himself would observe, specifying that "it was an indispensable collection" that would "become the basis of my pictorial fortune", constituting in fact "a precious ensemble of materials to draw upon over time". Thus, his

Fig. 2 Lancelot-Théodore Turpin de Crissé, *View of a Villa, Pizzofalcone, Naples*, Washington DC, National Gallery of Art

View of Civita Castellana, exhibited on his return from Italy, was bought by the Empress Joséphine who, as a sympathiser of the circles of the restored old aristocracy and fascinated by both his talent and his sophisticated social inclinations, chose him as her chamberlain and confidante in 1810. It seems that he was also her lover, as he would later be of her daughter, Queen Hortense, for whom he illustrated the *Romances*. Nominated baron of the Empire in 1811, he accompanied the Empress on her travels, demonstrating great expertise in his representation of places chosen by the sovereign and becoming a perfect "man of the world". His rise would not be impeded even by the return of the Bourbons, In fact, he was welcomed into the Academie des Beaux-Arts during the reign of Louis XVIII, achieving the important office of Inspecteur Générale des Beaux-Arts in 1824 with the coronation of Charles X. Gentilhomme honoraire of the King's Chamber in 1829, he remained loyal to his sovereign, even following him into exile in 1830.

The quality of painting by Turpin, now justly reconsidered to be one of the leading landscape painters of the first half of the nineteenth century, though greatly appreciated in his own time, when he was "placed at the forefront of the most illustrious men of our school", is due to his continual experimentation following his numerous study travels, particularly to Italy where, after that first visit we have just mentioned, he could be found again in 1818, 1824, 1829, 1830 and 1838. His natural inclination was for the South, in particular Naples, where he had the chance to experience that fascinating Mediterranean light, rendered with such crystalline clarity and magical golden tones in his paintings. His Neapolitan trip **(Fig. 2)** of 1824 was particularly productive and would inspire an extraordinary collection of etchings, entitled *Souvenirs du Golfe de Naples*. He had a particularly influential friendship with the German architect, Jacob Ignaz Hittorf, who accompanied him on his travels and with whom he shared the dream of restoring the ancient monuments of Magna Grecia to their original polychromatic splendour. As testimony to this special relationship, we have the beautiful *View of the Island of Capri*, from 1824, conserved at the Wallraff-Richartz Museum of Cologne, which was a gift from Turpin, as we can read in the dedication, "à son collegue et ami Mr Hittorf". It was one of those images, small or medium-sized, that was conceived *en plein air* and then re-used in the studio to create larger views, such as the series of Mediterranean landscapes he created and exhibited – as in our case – at Venice. The lagoon city was the most frequented of his other Italian destinations, the one with which Turpin had the most intense and long-lasting relationship. He felt particularly at ease here on account of the presence of the Bourbons in exile, like the celebrated duchess de Berry resident at Palazzo Vendramin Calerghi with her entire court of artists, and thanks also to his good relations with the local connoisseurs. Above all, these included the count Leopoldo Cicognara **(Fig. 3)**, President of the Academy of Fine Arts. Both of them were collectors of objects d'art, exchanging materials and opinions. Turpin considered his Venetian friend's collection of antique niellos to be "la plus riche et la plus complète qu'existe ajourd'hui" (V. Malamani, *Memoirs of Count Leopoldo Cicognara, drawn from the original documents*, Venezia 1888, II, p. 338). Cicognara, who admired him greatly as a painter, included several beautiful drawings by Turpin in his famous *Album*, consisting of sheets by the leading artists of the time and which is now conserved in the Correr Museum in Venice.

Fig. 3 Antonio Canova, *Bust of Leopoldo Cicognara*, Ferrara, Palazzo Paradiso

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Fig. 4 Lancelot-Théodore Turpin de Crissé, *Landscape with hunt of the centaurs*, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia, on loan to the Prefecture of Belluno

Without doubt, he encouraged the artist to exhibit his own paintings at the exhibitions promoted by the Venetian Academy from 1833 onwards. Out of gratitude for being elected an honorary member of that prestigious institute, he presented him in 1836 with three large paintings *Landscape with hunt of the centaurs* **(Fig. 4)**, *Landscape with bacchanalia* and *Landscape with water and animals*, recorded by the guides of the time as being in the Hall of Modern Painting, together with paintings of the eighteenth century and perspective views by Vincenzo Chilone and Tranquillo Orsi. When they were presented at the special exhibition organised in 1838 for the visit of the Emperor of Austria, Ferdinand I, these pictures were particularly appreciated by the critics, who praised the true-to-life lighting effects, the "extreme freedom and readiness of touch" as well as their "taste", "intelligence" and "fluidity". These were all characteristics that represented a great novelty in Venetian circles, exerting a decisive influence on the new landscape painting, in particular, the works of the young Ippolito Caffi (see F. Mazzocca in *The Veneto and Austria. Life and artistic culture in the cities of the Veneto 1814–1866*, catalogue of the exhibition, edited by G. Mazzariol, S. Marinelli and F. Mazzocca, Milano, Electa, 1989, pp. 69, 102-104, 232-234).

On that same occasion, the French painter produced a masterly painting, conserved in the Museum of Nantes, where, with great perspective skill and acute documentary sensibility, he represented a special event like *The arrival of the Emperor Ferdinand I of Habsburg at Venice in 1838*. This is a beautiful view of the Grand Canal, at the point where it turns, with Palazzo Balbi in the background, to the left the gothic backdrop of Ca' Foscari and to the right Palazzo Moro Lin, featuring the slow procession of the grand Imperial boat, with gondolas following behind. There is a very different atmosphere, though, in the three large Mediterranean landscapes, where the studies from life during his previous sojourns in the south of Italy had been the inspiration for the broad compositions of his own invention, with nature as the magnificent backdrop for mythological themes connected with a vision of our country as a land of myth. They were highly original works, then, full of charm, where an extraordinary sensibility for truth was perfectly matched to an ideal dimension that could be traced back to the great tradition of classical landscape art, back to Lorrain, Dughet, Poussin and to their eighteenth-nineteenth century emulators, like Valenciennes, Michallon, Bidauld, and to the fascination for all things ancient. It was that same antiquarian taste that dominated the choices of the collector with broad interests. Turpin collected Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan and Roman antiquities, Italian statues from the Renaissance, antique jewellery,

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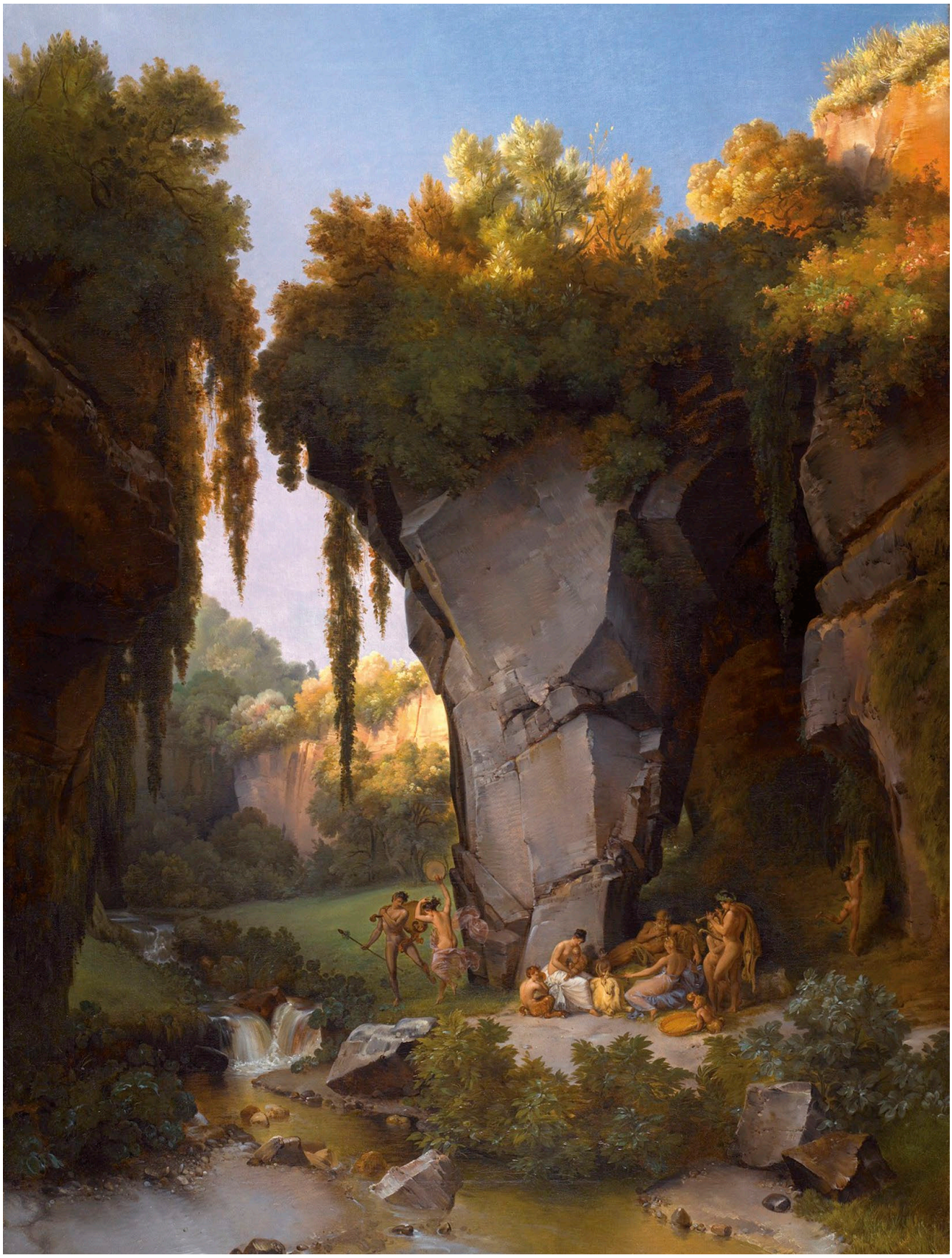

Fig. 5 Lancelot-Théodore Turpin de Crissé, *Landscape with bacchanalia*, present location unknown

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as well as Neoclassical drawings by Gérard, Girodet, Percier, all objects which are now conserved in the Museum of Angers, to which he himself bequeathed them.

Our beautiful *Landscape with bacchanalia* constitutes a second version of the one donated to the Academy of Venice, which was later lost but then reappeared at auction recently: Franco Semenzato & C., *Important antique paintings*, Venice 14 December 1986, lot n°39. Compared to this version **(Fig. 5)**, with the same dimensions, there are no significant changes. The only notable difference is that, in this case, the painter has left certain areas partly unfinished – perhaps as a deliberate expressive wish – especially the foreground with its torrent flowing between rocks. Apart from imbuing the work with a peculiar vigour and modernity, it bears testimony to the painter's creative process, where he achieved the definition of the image, with its extraordinary luminosity and particular transparency, via an elaborate series of layers and artful glazing, and not just by touch painting. *The landscape with hunt of the centaurs* and our *Landscape with Bacchanalia*, which are identical in form and dimension, represent ideal companions, characterised by two very similar perspectives and compositions, with the foreground occupied by mythological inventions and closed by the vertical elements of the rocks covered in that rich Mediterranean vegetation, which had enchanted all travellers to Italy from Goethe onwards. In this particular layout, which bestows a metaphysical charm upon the paintings, there remains a small space where the perspective opens towards a distant seascape in the canvas that is still conserved in the Academy Gallery at Venice and towards a mysterious wooded depth in our own picture. Whilst the sophisticated chiaroscuro landscapes, the counter lighting effects, the concordance between the different chromatic tones, warmer in the part where the vegetation is bathed in sunlight, colder in the parts immersed in shade, reveal the artist to be a refined connoisseur of the ancient masters he had studied in museums and art collections all over Europe, deriving inspiration from them.

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