Laon Cathedral

John Ruskin

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Description

John Ruskin (1819-1900)
The West Towers of Laon Cathedral, France

Signed with initials lower right
Watercolour over pencil heightened with white on buff paper
20 by 12.4 cm., 7 3/4 by 4 3/4 in.

Provenance:
With Andrew Wyld, 2011, where bought by the present owner

Literature:
Andrew Wyld (W.S. Fine Art), exhibition catalogue, Summer 2011, no. 42, pp.86-87, ill.

The present drawing is one of a small group of surviving pages from a small sketchbook that Ruskin used during his ten-month tour of France and Italy between September 1840 and end of June 1841. Undertaken on the advice of his doctor, to recover from a bout of ill health, Ruskin travelled with his parents and his cousin Mary Richardson. The party stopped in Laon on 21st June during the last few days of their tour.

Laon lies in the north-east of France, between Reims and Amiens and although Ruskin described the town as a 'pretty old-fashioned French place', they had not initially intended to stop there. Ruskin was particularly captivated by the cathedral and especially by the sculpture over the doors and the abundance of slender columns, which characterise both the interior and the exterior towers. Ruskin returned to Laon many years later, accompanied by William Collingwood in August 1882.

Laon Cathedral was built between 1160 and 1230. It was damaged during the French Revolution, but at the time of Ruskin's visit, the cathedral had recently been declared an Historic Monument and a programme of restoration planned. The restoration began in 1846 and was not completed until shortly before the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Luckily the cathedral remained undamaged by the War.

Before setting out on his journey, Ruskin approached various leading artists who he admired, including Peter de Wint, David Roberts, James Duffield Harding and J.M.W. Turner for advice as to what drawing materials he should take with him and most appropriate techniques to employ. Turner advised him to vary his technique depending on the subject, however, it was Robert's use of delicate pencil and wash that Ruskin had seen and admired in a recent exhibition of Holy Land drawings, that Ruskin decided to adopt. Although Ruskin did not adopt Turner's advice as to technique, his influence is apparent in Ruskin's diary entries which make detailed notes of atmospheric and colour effects. Furthermore, Ruskin made detours to look first-hand at the landscapes that had appealed to him in Turner's recent publication, Rivers of France, published three years earlier in 1837.

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