Assiut on the Nile

Edward Lear

Sold

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REF: 2404

Description

Edward Lear (1812-1888)
Assiut on the Nile

Inscribed with colour notes
pen and brown ink and watercolour over pencil
13.8 by 31.4 cm., 5 1/4 by 12 1/4 in.

Provenance:
Lord Northbrook;
Anonymous sale, London, Bonham's, 8 June 2004, lot 58

The city of Assiut or Asyut, is on the western shore of the Nile, approximately halfway between Cairo and Aswan and was an important trading city on the route with Sudan. Lear first visited Egypt in 1849 and was captivated by the sights, colours and the light that he found there. However, his visit was brief and he only visited Cairo and the pyramids. Keen to explore the country further, he undertook a second, longer visit during the winter of 1853-4. This was meant to be in the company of William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), who he had met the previous year, but the younger artist was delayed, so Lear travelled with a group of people he had met on arriving in Cairo. He travelled leisurely down the Nile as far as Philae, sketching constantly. Lear returned for a final visit between December 1866 and March 1867, again travelling along the Nile, but this time heading further south, as far as Nubia.

It is not possible to firmly date the present watercolour, although it would have been from either his second or final trip to the country; we know that Lear visited the city on both journeys. This watercolour captures many of the numerous mosques for which the city was celebrated, as well as indicating something of the expanse of the Nile valley, which at this point is some 12 miles wide.

Lear's letters to his sister Ann during his 1853-4 visit are full of delight about his travels up the Nile: 'it is a magnificent river, with endless villages - hundreds & hundreds on its banks, all fringed with palms, & reflected in the water; - the usual accompaniments of buffaloes, camels etc. abound, but the multitude of birds it is utterly impossible to describe... The most beautiful feature is the number of boats which look like giant moths.' (Lear to Ann, 4th January 1854, as quoted in Vivien Noakes, Edward Lear, the Life of a Wanderer, 1979, pp.120-1).

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