LOT 66

THE PROPERTY OF A GENTLEMAN

JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER, R.A.

LONDON 1775 - 1851

A MOUNTAIN SCENE, SAID TO BE A VIEW OF THE GRIVOLA, IN THE VAL D'AOSTA, ITALY

inscribed on the old paper backing of the stretcher, verso: The Gravola from Vieyes

Sunset in the Alps/ J. M W. Turner

oil on canvas

61.5 x 46 cm.; 24 1/4 x 18 1/8 in.

ESTIMATE 200,000-300,000 GBP

Lot Sold: 394,000 GBP

PROVENANCE

Anonymous sale, Worcester, J.G. Lear & Partners, 27 February 1974, lot 167 (as St Gotthard Pass by W. J. Müller),
where acquired by the father of the present owner; Thence by descent.

LITERATURE

CATALOGUE NOTE
This recently rediscovered work is an exceptionally rare and exciting new addition to the œuvre of Britain’s greatest landscape painter. Previously unrecorded, it is now unanimously accepted by Turner scholars as an early oil sketch by the artist, dating from about 1797/8–1802/3. The distinctive handling of the painting bears many of the artist’s hallmarks from this period; particularly in the middle distance, with the fall of light on the rocky face of the far mountain, and the treatment of the foreground foliage, especially the inclusion of a large branch jutting out into the void, lower right – a typical Turner motif. Loosely handled and rapidly painted, this important new discovery represents an early experiment in the Sublime – an aesthetic that would come to characterise many of Turner’s greatest works in both oil and watercolour – and the craggy, vertiginous composition presages a number of the artist’s most celebrated early mountain scenes, including The Devil’s Bridge, St Gothard (Private collection, on loan to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, fig. 1) and The Pass of St Gothard (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery), both of which were painted circa 1803–04.

Turner had first explored such scenery in the mid-1790s on sketching tours of Wales, between 1792 and 1799, and northern England, including the Lake District, which he visited in 1797. In 1801 he was commissioned by the Duke of Argyll for a view of Inveraray Castle, on the shores of Loch Fyne, which provided the impulse for a tour of the Scottish Highlands that year. During this period Turner was also heavily influenced by the work of the French born artist Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg (1740–1812), a leading exponent of the Sublime with whom Turner developed a close friendship. A member of the Royal Academy, much of whose work is noted for its craggy mountains and Alpine scenery, de Loutherbourg had travelled widely through Switzerland, Germany and Italy and Turner was a regular visitor to his studio in Hammersmith in the 1790s. In 1802 Turner made his first trip to the Continent, during the brief cessation of hostilities between France and Great Britain afforded by the Peace of Amiens, and experienced first-hand the dramatic scenery of the Alps for himself. Travelling though France, via Lyon and Grenoble, he reached Geneva before pressing into the heart of the mountains, via Chamonix, to the foot of Mont Blanc. Travelling around the southern side of the mountain and crossing into Italy he visited Courmayeur and travelled down the Val d’Aosta to Aosta, before turning north again, through the Grand St-Bernard Pass into Switzerland, visiting Martigny, as well as Chillon, Vevey and Lausanne on the shores of Lake Geneva. From here he cut north east along the river Broye to Avenches, Berne, and then down to Lake Thun and across to Unterseen to explore the famous glaciers at Grindelwald. Travelling on to Lucerne, where he made an excursion up the river Reuss to the St Gotthard Pass, he made his way down stream to Zug, where he caught his first glimpse of the famous Rigi, and on to Basel and the Rhineland.

Turner’s 1802 European expedition was one of the most important tours of his life and the culmination of his early career. Over a three-month period he made over five hundred sketches and no fewer than seventy-five finished pictures. Turner was an enthusiastic traveller from the first and throughout his career three main subjects of interest appear to have preoccupied him in his sketchbooks: the weather; the sea; and mountains. In the five years leading up to 1802 he had thoroughly explored all the major mountain ranges that Britain had to offer. The Alps, however, would present the greatest work of nature he was ever likely to see and his reaction to the first-hand experience of such sublimities was both intense and lasting. From 1816, following Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo the previous year, until his death in 1851, Turner would return to the
Continent almost every summer on a series of annual sketching tours. Chief among his destinations was always the Alps, whose spectacular scenery captivated his imagination as it had done with previous generations of English travellers in search of the sublime; such as Joseph Addison, who in 1702 perfectly encapsulated their romantic appeal when he described the mountains as ‘broken into so many steeps and precipices, that they fill the mind with an agreeable kind of horror’. From this moment on, a fascination with the sublime in nature, rather than just the picturesque or topographic, became a defining feature of Turner’s art and Alpine scenery in particular, be it the luminous Rigi seen from across the waters of Lake Zug, the great Falls of Shaffhausen on the Rhine, or the magnificent splendour of the Val d’Aosta, providing the subject matter for many of his greatest works, both in oil and in watercolour.

An old hand-written label on the back of the stretcher of this painting identifies the view as the Grivola, seen from Vieyes, in the Val d’Aosta, northern Italy. Part of the Graian Alps, the Grivola, whose summit is 3,969 meters above sea level, lies between Valsavarenche and the Cogne Valley. In addition to the label there is support for this identification from a number of authorities on the subject, including Prue Bishop, a recognised expert on Turner’s Alpine views, and officials from the Comune di Aymavilles in the Regione Autonoma Valle D’Aosta, including two experienced local mountain guides, who identified the view as the south face of the Grivola seen, not from Vieyes, but from the High Valley of Cogne. The composition of the present work, and the profile of the mountains depicted, also bears a strikingly close relationship to those found in a drawing in Turner’s 1802 sketchbook entitled Mountains, from the St Martin to Sevoz Road (Tate Gallery, London, D04486), which is also thought possibly to be a view of the Grivola. Whilst not written in the artist’s hand the misspelling of the mountains name, as ‘Gravola’, on the back of the stretcher also suggests in its favour, as Turner was notorious for misspelling such location names and it is possible that it may have been transcribed from an earlier inscription by the artist himself.

Whilst scholarly opinion is unanimous on the attribution of the painting to Turner, opinion is divided as to the exact date of the work. James Hamilton and Andrew Wilton both date the painting to circa 1803 and believe that it is based upon the artist's experiences during the Alpine tour of 1802. Hamilton is of the opinion that the work is a compositional study, made in his London studio in the two or three years after he came back from the Alps in 1802 and references a number of other paintings that emerged from on-the-spot sketches made on this tour, such as Bonneville, Savoy, with Mont Blanc (Dallas Museum of Art, Texas) and the two versions of the St Gothard’s Pass (previously mentioned). Wilton, too, compares the composition with the two St Gothard’s Pass paintings and considers that ‘the overall character of the work is entirely consistent with the oil studies that Turner produced after his return from the 1802 Continental tour’. Whilst Wilton does not support the identification of the view as being the Grivola, both his and Hamilton’s dating of the painting leave open the possibility that it could be an Alpine inspired scene.

Martin Butlin, David Hill and Ian Warrell, however, date the present painting to the late 1790s, possibly circa 1796–98, before Turner’s first Continental tour. All three scholars consider the work to be inspired by Turner’s experiences in Wales and the Lake District in the mid-1790s, as well as upon his relationship with Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg, with whose similarly vertiginous and sublime views of mountain scenery Turner was intimately acquainted (see fig. 2). Warrell, in particular, compares the composition to a number of drawings in Turner’s sketchbook from the Lake District tour of 1797, especially such topographic monuments as the Langdale Pikes and a drawing of Longthwaite Bridge with Castle Crag. There are also similarities with a number of topographical elements found in Turner’s North Wales sketchbook of 1798 and, indeed, his Wye Valley views from 1795.

We are grateful to Martin Butlin, James Hamilton, David Hill, Ian Warrell and Andrew Wilton for each independently endorsing the attribution to Turner following first-hand inspection.

3 A. Wilton, private correspondence with the current owner, August 2017.

Fig. 1
J.M.W. Turner, R.A., The Devil's Bridge, watercolour on paper,
Private Collection / Photo © Agnew's, London / Bridgeman Images

Fig. 2
Philip Jacques de Loutherbourg, An Avalanche in the Alps, Tate Britain