

# S P H I N X F I N E A R T



**Thomas Allom (London 1804 - London 1872)**

## **Constantinople from the Entrance of the Golden Horn**

watercolour heightened with bodycolour

30.5 x 42.5 cm (12 x 16¾ in)

The elegant, elongated forms of several *caiques* glide with great dexterity across the Golden Horn. Guided by the *caique-gees*, or boatmen, with their oars made of beech, they are deftly driven forward. In the background lies the glistening city of Constantinople, with the Süleymaniye Mosque rising graciously above it, and the distinctive Beyazit Tower and numerous minarets poking out of the horizon.

Deep into the watercolour, on the left-hand side, one can see a distinctive and longer *caique*. Propelled through the waters by eleven or more pairs of oars, it is possibly transporting the Sultan himself, perhaps from Topkapi Palace to a kiosk or another palace further along the Bosphorus. This long vessel is ornately decorated at one end with a magnificent carved and painted curl. At the stern one can see an erected canopy, which would have been made from silk, under which the most important passenger sits. Beside him would be the *Reis*, a man often chosen for his humour and ability to entertain the Sultan on his journey, who was responsible for guiding the vessel.

Alongside the *caiques*, large lumbering barges, crammed with people, ferry their passengers to villages along the shore of the Bosphorus. In the foreground, on the left hand side, a bulky and sizeable raft is being strenuously lugged along. Its cargo of timber framing indicates that it is probably destined for the Imperial Naval Arsenal.

Thomas Allom was one of the great artists to travel to the near east in the early 1800s. In 1828 Allom began a fifteen year collaboration with the publishers Fisher Son & Co., and together with William Henry Bartlett (1809-1854), became the two leading illustrators for travel books on Asia Minor.

In 1837 Fisher sent Allom abroad to make sketches of Turkey. He returned to England in April 1838, where he prepared the plates for Fisher's book *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor*, 1838, in which the present work was reproduced as the opening plate in Volume 1 before the frontispiece, with the same title.

Robert Walsh provided the descriptive commentary which accompanied Allom's scenic works in the publication. Walsh had been the chaplain to Lord Strangford's embassy in Constantinople, and had travelled throughout Turkey from 1821 to 1824. He returned to Constantinople again in 1831, where he remained for a further four years. Thus he had a considerable knowledge of the city.

Although no documents or diaries relating to Allom's ten month journey exist, one can assume that he spent a lot of time in Constantinople from the number of plates he devoted to the city. None of the preliminary sketches Allom made of Turkey seem to have survived, though we know that he subsequently worked them up into a variety of formats and mediums for many years. One such example is his *The Castles of Anadoluhisari and Rumelihisari on the Bosphorus*.

The present watercolour is from an existing group that Allom prepared for the engravers, shortly after his return from Turkey. Most tend to be of a similar size, 8 x 11 in, though the present work is much larger, 12 x 16¾ in. The dates of the group of watercolours are usually June or July 1838, and nearly all relate to the plates in the original 1838 edition. This group contains probably the finest Turkish watercolours he produced.

#### **Literature:**

R. Walsh, *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor*, Vol. 1, 1838, where reproduced as the first plate.

#### **Artist description:**

Thomas Allom was an English artist, topographical illustrator and architect, and one of the founder members of what eventually became the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).

He was born in Lambeth, south London, the son of a coachman from Suffolk. In 1819, he was apprenticed to architect Francis Goodwin for whom he worked until 1826. He then studied at the Royal Academy School. His designs for churches shown at exhibitions in 1824 and 1827 aroused considerable interest, and he later designed many buildings in London (including a workhouse in Marloes Road, Kensington (1847), the Church of Christ in Highbury in 1850, the Church of St Peter in Notting Hill in 1856, and the elegant Ladbroke Estate in west London). Further afield his works included workhouses at Calne, Wiltshire (1847) and in Liverpool, design of the William Brown Library, also in Liverpool, (1857-1860), and the tower of the church of Basford St. Leodegarius, near Nottingham (1860). He also worked with Sir Charles Barry on numerous projects, including the Houses of Parliament and the remodelling of Highclere Castle.

However, Allom is known chiefly for his numerous topographical works, which were used to illustrate books on travel. From the 1820s onwards, he travelled extensively throughout the UK and mainland Europe. In 1834 he arrived in Istanbul, Turkey, and produced hundreds of drawings during journeys through Anatolia, Syria and Palestine. The results of this expedition were published in 1838 in *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor* published in two volumes with text by Robert Walsh. Emily Reeve's *Character and Costume in Turkey and Italy*, published in London in 1840, was also illustrated with engravings by Allom. He is also remembered for numerous illustrations of China, published in *China Illustrated* in 1845.

Allom suffered from a heart condition in his later years, and although he only retired in 1870, his artistic and architectural output slowed during the 1860s. He designed Holy Trinity Church, Castelnau (in south west London) in 1868 – his local church to which he contributed £50 towards the cost of construction. In 1865 he was commissioned to design a mausoleum for former MP George Dodd in West Norwood Cemetery. Dodd, who died on 15 December 1854, was one of the Gentlemen of Her Majesty's privy chamber from 1844, and MP for Maidstone from 29 June 1841 to May 1853.

Allom died aged 68 in Barnes, and was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery.

#### **Collections**

Allom is represented in the following collections: Tate Gallery, London; Courtauld Institute of Art,

London; Royal Academy of Arts, London; National Library of Australia, Canberra; Indianapolis Museum of Arts, Indiana; Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Waiwhetu, New Zealand; Tyne and Wear Museum, UK, amongst others.