

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



French School, Eighteenth Century

Four Views of Ports

black ink and grey wash
18 x 34.5 cm (7 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ in)
a set of four (4)

Four Views of Ports shows four densely populated port scenes buzzing with maritime and harbour-side activity. Some figures are engaged in heavy labour as they unload wares from the docked ships, whilst others are clearly leisurely strolling along the classical promenades. The dress worn by the figures indicates their differing social status; some are shown in torn and tatty clothing, while others appear in the elegant finery of the eighteenth-century upper classes. The artist has paid much attention to the varying activities of the figures to interest and attract the viewers' attention, for example the construction workers extending a dock, the architect consulting his drawings, the couple relaxing and drinking together in the sunshine and the figures seen firing cannons out to sea. The ports are jam-packed with ships further highlighting their importance as hives of local mercantile and social activity.

The drawings are reminiscent of the port scenes produced by Claude Lorrain (?1604/5-1682), for example *Port with Villa Medici* (1637, The Uffizi, Florence). Claude, by framing the scene with buildings and boats, forces the viewer's eye to the horizon and a similar technique has been used in *Four Views of Ports*. Furthermore, the dockside architecture in *Four Views of Ports* is in the same imposing classical style as the buildings that recur in much of Claude's work. Claude also populates the foreground with scenes of the day-to-day activities found in port cities.

Scenes of port life were popular in France during the eighteenth century and artists, such as Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789) and Nicolas Ozanne (1728-1811), often produced similar marine landscapes. In the case of Vernet, whose work was also heavily influenced by Claude, his series of the *Ports of France* was one of the most important royal commissions of Louis XV's reign. Like *Four Views of Ports*, the *Ports of France* are also notable for the considerable detail used to imaginatively bring to life the multitude of activities taking place.