SPHINX FINE ART



Jacob Philipp Hackert (Prenzlau 1737 - San Pietro di Careggi 1807)

The Volturno with the Ponte Margherita, near Caserta, with a Herdsman Resting and Peasants on a Path

signed and dated 'Filippo Hackert, 1799' (lower right)
oil on canvas
64.8 x 88.9 cm (25½ x 35 in)

Embodying a scene of utter tranquillity and contentment, *The Volturno with the Ponte Margherita, near Caserta, with a Herdsman Resting and Peasants on a Path,* was painted in 1799, a year of turmoil for Jacob Philipp Hackert, who was forced to flee Naples after French Revolutionary forces occupied the city. The painting depicts the Volturno running through the Caserta region of southern Italy and the Ponte Margherita, a bridge near the town of Alife, not far from Naples. Hackert may have painted the scenery whilst on his way north to escape the trouble in Naples or he may have based his composition on earlier sketches of the area. The resulting image indicates none of the tensions that were presumably present in his life; instead it is, like Hackert's work in general, a picturesque and romanticised representation of a pastoral landscape, bathed in soft, golden light.

The eye is immediately drawn towards the figures and oxen in the foreground of the picture. A woman and her daughter, amble down a path, with their backs to the viewer. The mother carries a basket as if on her way to market and wears a red skirt with a white blouse, a white apron bunched around her hips and a brown bodice. Her daughter wears a blue skirt and red bodice. Both have bare feet, indicating their station in life, and also emphasizing the romantic simplicity of the scene. They have caught the attention of a sheepdog who sits on the side of the path near his master, a weary herdsman who is clothed to suit his semi-nomadic way of life, in a warm sheepskin vest and thick woollen stockings. Further down the path, a couple of women approach, one of whom balances a jar of water on her head. On the left of the composition, a well-fed ox sits prominently positioned on the grassy bank, while three more are grouped further downhill.

The Volturno, a river that runs through south-central Italy for 175 km and has, since Roman times, occupied a position of considerable military importance, appears placid in the hazy light. The sun, struggling to escape the thick clouds, manages to reflect some of its warmth into the water. Downriver, a boat can be glimpsed through the arches of the Ponte Margherita. The bridge is flanked by an imposing watch tower, emphasising the site's strategic importance. A structure, perhaps housing a guard, sits on the bridge, near a drawbridge. Four donkeys carrying their loads and several figures can be seen crossing the bridge. To the right, two riders trot along the bank with a dog. Together, the different elements of the painting combine to create a scene of pleasant industry and activity. The imposing cliff to the left of the Volturno, covered in dense vegetation, the corresponding hills to the right and the mountain range disappearing into the mist in the distance, give the river valley a private and sheltered atmosphere. This idyllic enclave and its inhabitants appear to be far removed from the cares of the outside world.

Two landscapes by Hackert in the Hermitage's collection also depict views of the Caserta region. *Italian Landscape* shows what appears to be the Ponte Margherita, or an identical bridge, from a further vantage point down the river. The mountain range, which is barely visible on the horizon of *The Volturno with the Ponte Margherita, near Caserta, with a Herdsman Resting and Peasants on a Path,* is a more prominent feature in the Hermitage picture; the other topographical features on either side of the river, however, do not correspond. Hackert evidently used his artistic discretion in both paintings in order to achieve a harmonious and aesthetically pleasing composition, one that in parts appears more to resemble an English landscape park than the wilds of southern Italy.

In *View of Caserta,* also in the Hermitage, Hackert turns from a river view to one of the town that lends its name to the region. The town of Caserta is not far from Naples, and Mount Vesuvius looms on the horizon. Visible in the depths of the painting is the royal castle, built by the architect Luigi Vanvitelli (1700-1773) around 1770 for King Ferdinand IV of Naples (1751-1825). During Hackert's tenure as court painter, he had a studio in the castle, where he no doubt enjoyed a commanding view of his rural surroundings. The scene presented here, as in *Italian Landscape* and the present painting, is picturesque and well-ordered. The primary elements of the painting, such as an expansive blue sky, an imposing tree or two flanking the composition, and the small figures of local inhabitants in the foreground, stay constant throughout Hackert's oeuvre and are integral to the success of his Arcadian landscapes.

Moving from Caserta to the Campania region of southern Italy, *View of Montesarchio* in the Hermitage is, like the previous examples, full of idyllic charm. Women balancing baskets on their heads and a man leading a mule can be seen crossing a bridge to begin the assent towards Montesarchio, a secluded hilltop village made identifiable by its fortified tower which was built in the seventh-century. The peasants appear to live a simple life in harmony with nature, and their gentle movements across the bridge and the calmness of the water flowing underneath are matched by Hackert's soft, restrained brushstrokes.

The dimensions of *View of Montesarchio* and Italian Landscape are roughly the same as *The Volturno with the Ponte Margherita, near Caserta, with a Herdsman Resting and Peasants on a Path,* measuring approximately 60 x 90 cm, instead of Hackert's more usual format of 120 x 160 cm. Dr. Claudia Nordhoff has noted (private correspondence) that after fleeing from Naples in early 1799, Hackert began regularly executing small scale pictures, before reverting to large compositions in later life. Although from the Hermitage example, it is clear that Hackert had already experimented with smaller formats during his stay in southern Italy, presumably after being forced to leave his possessions behind in Naples and make a fresh start, he embraced the smaller format as it would have been easier to handle and travel with.[1]

The smaller size canvas also invites intimacy and is well-suited to the portrayal of peaceful enclaves hidden away within the Italian countryside. *Lake Nemi from the North, with the Town of Nemi and Town of Genzano beyond, with a Donkey and Travellers on a Path in the Foreground,* is a pendant to the present work, although executed four years later, and gives the viewer the same impression of being privy to a scene of great tranquillity and seclusion. Such works were avidly collected by visitors to Italy as souvenirs of their travels and the two paintings have been in a private collection, unrecorded, since Hackert parted with them.

Hackert studied initially with his father, Philipp Hackert (d.1768), and then from 1755 with Blaise Nicolas Le Sueur (1716-1783) at the Berlin Academy. There he encountered, and became enamoured of Dutch landscapes and the work of Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), which were to inspire him throughout his career. In 1762, Hackert left Berlin for a study tour in northern Germany. In 1764 he travelled to Stockholm, where he was presented at court by Baron von Olthoff (1718-1793) and produced a landscape and several drawings for the King and Queen of Sweden, Charles XIII (1748-1818) and Hedvig Elizabeth Charlotte (1759-1818). A year later, he visited Paris, where there was growing interest in Dutch Italianate landscapes, and he studied under the famous engraver Johann Georg Wille (1715-1808). He also met Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), the French landscape and marine artist, who exerted a decisive influence upon his career.

Hackert soon gained recognition for his small landscape gouaches, which were well suited to Parisian tastes. He left for Italy in 1768, stopping in Pisa and Florence before settling in Rome, where he remained until 1786. During this period the colonies of French, German and English artists and scholars in Rome were growing more numerous. Hackert brought to the German group, headed by Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779) and Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), an already rich and complex cultural experience.

In 1782, Hackert was offered a position as court painter to King Ferdinand IV, who ruled Sicily and most of Italy south of the Papal States. Among his most important works executed for the King were a series of paintings depicting the ports of his Kingdom, including views of Naples and Campania (1787), Apulia (1788), and Sicily and Calabria (1790). Hackert was influenced by Vernet's series depicting the *Ports of France,* and his works provide an important pictorial record of these southern Italian ports. In Naples, he established a school and taught the proponents of landscape painting to engravers, including his brother Georg Hackert (1755-1805). He also travelled throughout southern Italy and made sketches of Campania, Apulia, Sicily and Calabria.

In early 1799, the French Revolutionary forces occupied Naples, and in March Hackert was forced to flee. His house was plundered by the Neopolitan *lazzaroni* and his engravings and unfinished pictures stolen. Together with his brother, he went first to Pisa and then to San Pietro di Careggi, near Florence, where he settled. After his death, Hackert's memoirs were edited and published by Johann Wolfgang van Goethe (1710-1782), his good friend and drawing pupil.

We are grateful to Dr. Claudia Nordhoff for her assistance in cataloguing this work.

[1] For a full discussion of this period of his life, see Nordhoff, C., 'Due capolavori per una regina: scoperte su una coppia di quadri di Jacob Philipp Hackert', in *Bollettino d'Arte,* 128, 2004, pp. 115-126.

Artist description:

Hackert studied first with his father, Philipp Hackert, then from 1755 with Blaise Nicolas Le Sueur at the Berlin Akademie. There he encountered, and copied, the landscapes of Dutch artists and of Claude Lorrain. The latter influence shows in two works exhibited in 1761, views of the *Lake of Venus in the Berlin Zoological Garden* (versions of 1764 in Stockholm, National Museum). These much admired paintings retain a rather rigid late Baroque style. Hackert's main interest in these early works was to arrive at a special understanding of a place through alternate views, with reverse directions of observation. This systematic documentation bears witness to his interest in the study of nature.

In 1762 Hackert left Berlin for a study tour in northern Germany. He stopped in Stralsund and the nearby island of Rügen, where he was a guest of Adolph Friedrich von Olthoff, the Swedish councillor in Pomerania. The stimulus these travels provided is reflected in six landscapes in tempera (c. 1763; Potsdam, private collection), painted for the Olthoffs, and four frescoes (1763) in the great hall of Schloss Boldewitz. In May 1764 Hackert went from Stralsund to Stockholm with Baron von Olthoff, who presented him at court. In Sweden he produced a *Viewof Karlsberg* (1766; private collection) for the King and some drawings for the Queen. In the former all traces of decorative painting have disappeared, and Hackert gives a personal interpretation of the Dutch 17th-century painting and the work of Claude that he had copied. During this time he also produced a series of etchings, *Vues de Suède*, which shows his development, from rather perfunctory beginnings, into a remarkably evocative printmaker.

In 1765 Hackert went to Hamburg, and from there to Paris, where there was a growing interest in the kind of landscape developed by Dutch painters. He modelled his work closely on the work of the most famous exponent of this genre, Jean-Claude Wille, and his small landscape gouaches, well suited to contemporary taste, brought him renown. This enabled him in 1768 to depart for Italy. After visiting Livorno, Pisa and Florence, he arrived at Rome, where he remained until 1786. During this period the colonies of French, German and English artists and scholars in Rome were growing more and more numerous. Hackert brought to the German group, headed by Anton Raphael Mengs and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, an already rich and complex cultural experience. He upheld his classical formula of landscape through sketches made on study tours (to Sicily in 1777, to Switzerland in 1778), through oil paintings and through such prints as the four *Views Sketched in the Kingdom of Naples* (1779; Naples, Capodimonte), which mark a new independence for engraving as a medium for landscape.

In 1782 Hackert met King Ferdinand IV of Naples, and in 1786 he settled in Naples as court painter. During his 13 years in the city he consolidated his European fame, largely through the advocacy of Goethe, whom he met in 1787 and who became his close friend. He also started his own school, propounding his ideas about landscape painting to engravers, including his brother Georg Hackert and W. G. Gmelin (c. 1760–1820), and such painters as Christopher Kniep (1755–1825), Michael Wutki (1738–1822), and the Neapolitans Vincenzo Aloja (fl 1790–1815) and Salvatore Fergola (1799–1874). Perhaps Hackert's finest Neapolitan works were the *Four Seasons*, luminous Neapolitan vedute enlivened by figures in local dress. The originals, intended for King Ferdinand's hunting-lodge on Lake Fusaro, were destroyed by 1799, but smaller copies by Hackert survive (Spring, Switzerland, private collection; Summer, Winter, Nuremberg, Germany National Museum; Autumn, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum). Hackert's intellectual interests can be seen among the pictures (1792–3) painted for Queen Maria Carolina's bathroom in the Belvedere di S Leucio near Caserta. Some of these use the old encaustic technique and are inspired by objects that came to light during the archaeological excavations at Herculaneum. Hackert did not merely evoke the Antique; he re-lived the tradition in his own personal way, again confirming his acuteness in interpreting the most recent cultural trends of his time. Another work painted at S Leucio, the *Harvest Festival* (1782; Caserta, Palazzo Reale) is a fine example of his idyllic interpretation of the landscape around him.

When the Revolution of 1799 forced him to leave Naples, Hackert settled permanently at San Pietro di

Careggi, near Florence. Here he returned to his old interest in nature with renewed perception, in fact becoming a sort of proto-Romantic landscape artist. After his death his memoirs were edited and published by Goethe.