

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



**Camille Rogier (Meynes 1810 - Paris 1896)**

## **View of Constantinople after the fire of San Dimitri 1843**

signed 'Rogier' (lower right) and inscribed with title in French and dated '1843' (on the reverse)  
watercolour  
14 x 30.5 cm (5½ x 12 in)

The remnants of a chimney breast and some foundations are all that are left of this particular fire in San Dimitri. Two figures mournfully examine the ruins of what one can only imagine was once their home. The darkening sky echoes the sombre mood and the reddish hues of the setting sun are a metaphor for the blazing and destructive inferno that has razed this house to the ground.

The present work is an excellent example of the work of Camille Rogier. Rogier's work is known mostly through his prints and original paintings such as this are increasingly rare. When compared to his *Syrian Landscape*, (Private Collection) the stylistic similarities are clear, as both works are composed as narrow panoramic landscapes. One of the dominant features of both works is Rogier's depictions of the sunsets, which glow with beautiful pinks, oranges and blues. There are a few figures in each work which serve to animate the scenes, but Rogier's primary aim seems to be to capture the beauty of the oriental landscape.

San Dimitri was a suburb of Constantinople. Although it no longer exists in its own right as a suburb, we can glean some information about it from a description by Edmondo de Amicis: 'Ascending the hill of Pancaldi, and crossing the dry bed of a torrent, we mounted another hill and reached another suburb San Dimitri. Here the population is almost all Greek. Black eyes and thin aquiline noses are to be seen on every side. Old men of patriarchal aspect; slender, haughty young men; women with their hair on their shoulders; boys with astute visages, romping in the middle of the street among the hens and pigs, and filling the air with the sound of their silvery and harmonious speech.'<sup>1</sup>

As described by de Amicis, San Dimitri was a predominately Greek area, and was probably the residential neighbourhood for many of those who worked in Galata. By the eighteenth century, Galata, also a Greek area, had become mostly a commercial district, with stockbroking offices, storage buildings and shops. In the second half of the nineteenth century the principle trade groups included the Levantines, Greeks, Armenians, Jews and also European merchants. The traders, especially the moneychangers, were so affluent that they could lend money to the state. Along with their affluence they brought a Western European lifestyle with them, which they enjoyed in the suburbs.

By the turn of the twentieth century the population of Constantinople had risen to over one million, and

the Greek-Orthodox, or Romioi, accounted for a quarter of its residents. The presence of a strong Greek-Orthodox community in the suburbs played an important role in the visual appearance of the city's architecture, and can still be noted to this day.

The destruction and aftermath depicted in *View of Constantinople after the fire of San Dimitri 1843* was caused by just one of the numerous fires that hit Constantinople and its surrounding suburbs. In February of 1782, a fire burnt 600 houses, in June of that year 7,000 more were destroyed, and during an inferno that lasted three days in August, 10,000 houses, 50 mosques, and 100 corn-mills were destroyed, with a loss of 100 lives. Two years later a fire destroyed two-thirds of Galata, and on August 5th a fire in the main city, lasting 26 hours, burned 10,000 houses. In both 1791 and 1795, 32,000 houses burned; and in 1799 Galata was again swept with fire, with a loss of 13,000 houses, including many magnificent buildings of note.

Rogier lived in Constantinople for just three years, from 1840-1843, but he also travelled extensively throughout the middle-east, and Orientalist subject matter was the dominant theme in his work. He was a well known figure in the region, and is referred to by other writers who travelled there such as Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) and Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880). Rogier exhibited at the Paris Salon between 1833 and 1848, but he is perhaps best known as an etcher, thanks to his 1848 book *La Turquie. Moeurs et usages des orientaux au dix-neuvième siècle* (Turkey. Manners and customs of the oriental in the nineteenth century).

<sup>1</sup> Edmondo de Amicis, *Constantinople*, 1894.

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