

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



Achille Etna Michallon (Paris 1796 - Paris 1822)

A Castle on the Bosphorous

signed and dated 'Michallon/1816' and inscribed in Polish on the mount
brown wash over pencil on laid paper watermarked:..ANDERLEY, with original wash-line mount
33 x 46.5 cm (13 x 18½ in)

The sails of this formidable ship just catch the strong wind, as it tilts and breaks through the fierce waves. Achille Etna Michallon pays particular attention to the intricate detailing of the rigging on the three square-rigged masts above its ribbed hull. A figurehead stands out at the bow, whilst the crew work furiously at the stern to guide the magnificent ship along. Aloft the front mast is a flag, not that of the Ottomans, with its crescent and star, but a simple tricolor, indicating that it is either a French or Italian ship, both of which had strong trade links with Constantinople and saw merchants and their families taking up residence in the Pera region of the city.

The broad belly of this full rigged ship is accentuated by its wide horizontal bands and inside, its probable cargo of raw materials, such as wool, silk, cotton, alum, beeswax and animal hides, is being safely carried. The power of the rolling and breaking waves, as they froth around the hull, are deftly captured by Michallon. This is contrasted by the calmer waters near the shoreline, where other ships and gullets are moored. Above these, on a raised promontory, are the remains of a castle, with fortified walls reaching down to the sea - possibly the remnants of the sea walls which once enclosed the city of Constantinople on the sides of the Propontis (Sea of Marmara) and the gulf of the Golden Horn.

The notable distinction between the tranquillity and furious movements of the water suggests that this watercolour depicts the confluence of the calmer Bosphorus with either the Sea of Marmara or the Black Sea. As the only passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, the Bosphorus was of great commercial and strategic importance and hence was the setting for numerous castles and forts, such as [Yoros Castle](#).

This watercolour is one of a series of Turkish views drawn by Michallon for Edouard De Raczynski's volume on Turkey, *Dziennik podróży do Turcyi odbytey w Roku 1814*, published in Warsaw in 1821, and in German in 1924.¹ Another drawing of the Bosphorus from this series was sold in New York, Sotheby's, 25 January 2002, lot 115.

Michallon was the son of a sculptor, Claude Michallon (1751-1799). He grew up at the Louvre, where his family had a small apartment near his father's studio. At the age of six, Michallon had moved with his family to Sorbonne. Demonstrating a precocious talent, he began working in the studio of Jacques-Louis David, and then under Pierre-Henri Valenciennes who introduced him to landscape painting. At the age of just 15, Michallon exhibited at the Paris Salon where he won a second prize gold medal and at the age of 21 he was awarded the Prix de Rome for historical landscape painting.

He worked under the patronage of famous personalities, such as Prince Yussouppoff, the Duchess of Berry, the Count de L'Espine, all of whom were great admirers of his work. Michallon was considered a master of landscape painting and taught a circle of admiring young artists, one of them being Camille Corot.

His larger landscapes have been likened to Poussin and are marked by their drama and grandeur. His work from his period in Rome, between 1817 and 1821, shows the influence of Romanticism. He died of pneumonia at the early age of 26, leaving behind a large collection of studies, drawings and sketches and only a few finished canvases.

¹see L. Navari, *Greece and the Levant: the Catalogue of the Henry Myron Blackmer Collection of Books and Manuscripts*, London 1989, no. 1375.

Artist description:

After the death of his father, the sculptor Claude Michallon (1751–99), and of his mother in 1813, Achille Michallon he was brought up by his uncle, the sculptor Guillaume Francin (1741–1830). He drew from life at an early age and studied with Jacques-Louis David, Pierre-Henri Valenciennes and later Jean-Victor Bertin. For four or five years starting in 1808 Michallon may have received financial help from Prince Nicolay Yusupov after the latter had seen some of his works in David's studio. Although no works dating from this period are known, Michallon exhibited a *View of Saint-Cloud, Seen from the Vicinity of Sèvres* and a *Wash-house: Study from Life Executed at Aulnay* at the Salon of 1812. It is possible that two small landscapes, a *View of Sceaux* and a *Site in Ile-de-France* (both Albi, Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, on loan to Gray, Museum Martin), date from 1812–15. Their panoramic perspective, spare composition, realistic depiction of weather conditions and the picturesque quality of a figure disappearing into the distance suggest that Michallon was familiar with the work of 17th-century landscape artists.

In 1814 Michallon travelled to Vichy, and in 1815 he drew the fortifications erected around Paris; these views, which follow the 18th-century tradition of topographical landscapes, were published in aquatint in *Les Environs de Paris fortifié*. Three of Michallon's landscapes, representing the *Château of Versailles*, the *Château of Meudon* and the *Château of Vincennes*, recall the Rationalist tendency in landscape painting, in which an accurate description of architecture is combined with a northern European influence, visible particularly in the realistic treatment of the foreground.

In 1817 Michallon won the Prix de Rome, organized that year for the first time, for the *Woman Struck Down* (Paris, Louvre) and *Democritus and the People of Abdera* (Paris, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts). Before leaving for Italy, he executed a series of sepia wash drawings (nine in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale) in Dieppe, Saint-Valéry-en-Caux and Fécamps for Baron Isidore-Justin Sévérin Taylor's *Voyage pittoresque de la France*. Michallon left for Rome in 1818 at the same time as Léon Cogniet, whom he befriended. Little is known of the early part of his stay, although there is a drawing of the *Villa Medici* (Paris, Louvre) dated 1818, which is similar to a landscape in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Orléans. While in Rome Michallon executed the *Death of Roland* (exh. Salon 1819; Paris, Louvre), a commission for the Diana Gallery at Fontainebleau. Two sketches (Strasbourg, Musée Beaux Arts.; Orléans, Musée Beaux Arts) show an idealistic landscape with an air of fiery intensity in the style of Salvator Rosa. Also at the Salon of 1819 he exhibited a *View of Lake Nemi* (ex-Galerie La Scala, Paris), in which the influence of such Italianate painters as Frederik de Moucheron and Nicolaes

Berchem can be seen in the light and the arrangement of the foreground. Michallon executed several studies representing Rome and its surroundings, including the *Sabine Hills* (Detroit, Institute of Arts) and a *View of the Colosseum* (Paris, Louvre).

In 1819 and 1820 Michallon travelled through southern Italy and Sicily. He made numerous drawings and painted studies of architectural subjects, such as the *Temple of Neptune at Paestum* and the *Forum of Pompeii*, and of picturesque characters, such as *Countrywoman, near Rome* (all Paris, Louvre). He also executed landscapes without figures, such as the *Island of Ischia* (Phoenix, Art Museum) and *Eruption of Vesuvius by Night* (Paris, Louvre), in which he displayed his skill at observing atmospheric conditions and the time of day. Some of his drawings were engraved in Gigaud de la Salle's *Le Voyage pittoresque en Sicile* (1822–6) and in *Vues d'Italie et de Sicile* (Paris, 1826).

Michallon returned to France in 1821, travelling through Florence, Bologna, Venice and the Swiss Alps. On his return to Paris he opened a studio that was frequented by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot. He executed several pictures based on his memories of Italy; in these he combined the classicism of historical landscape, in which the organization of elements was sometimes artificial, with a study of changing nature. In such dramatic subjects as *Landscape with a Man Frightened by a Snake* (Barnard Castle, Bowes Museum) and *Philoctetes on the Island of Lemnos* (1822; Montpellier, Musée Fabre), Michallon suggested the violence of the passions depicted and foreshadowed the new approach to landscape painting that flourished from the 1830s. In his last compositions, such as those executed in the Forest of Fontainebleau (1821–2; untraced), Michallon became more sensitive to nature's melancholy and the dramatization of natural elements, without moving away from Poussinesque models. He died of pneumonia, and his paintings and drawings were sold in Paris in 1822.

Collections

Michallon is represented in the following collections: Louvre, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; National Gallery, London; Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Bowes Museum, County Durham, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, amongst others.