

MARTINUS RØRBYE

1803–1848

105. *Cloister at Palermo with a Dominican Friar*, 1840

(*Klostergang i Palermo med en dominikanermunk*)

Oil on canvas, 14½ x 11¼ in. (37 x 28 cm)

Signed with initials and dated lower left: MR 1840

PROVENANCE: Auction of the artist's estate, 1849, no. 50; Winkel & Magnussen Private Collection; Winkel & Magnussen, Auction 31, 1925, lot 105, ill. p. 22; Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 552, 1991, lot 120, ill. p. 36.¹

EXHIBITED: Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen, *Martinus Rørbye*, 1905, no. 186 (according to the chronologically revised catalogue of paintings made by Thorvaldsen's Museum in 1981 on the basis of Mario Krohn's catalogue); Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John Loeb Jr.*, 1994, no. 24.

LITERATURE: Mario Krohn, *Fortegnelse over Martinus Rørbyes Arbejder som Vejledning ved Udstillingen i Kunstforeningen Marts–April 1905*, Copenhagen, 1905; V. Jastrau (ed.), *Martinus Rørbye*, Smaa Kunstbøger nr. 22, Copenhagen, 1933, p. 30 (described as *Klostergaarden San Giovanni in Laterano*, Rom 1834, no measurements); Knud Voss, *Guldalderens Malerkunst, Dansk Arkitekturmaleri 1800–1850*, Copenhagen 1968, fig. 70 (described as *Klostergaard i Fossanuova*, 1846); Dyveke Helsted, Eva Henschen, Bjarne Jørnæs og Torben Melander, *Martinus Rørbye 1803–1848*, Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, 1981, nr. 186 (List of paintings on the basis of Mario Krohn's catalogue for the Rørbye exhibition in Kunstforeningen, 1905; the Loeb collection Rørbye study was not exhibited, but was included in the updated register from 1981); Peter Nisbet, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John Loeb Jr.*, Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1994, discussed and ill. p. 9.

In this scene set in a Palermo monastery, we see a monk reading at the corner of a pergola supported on pillars, near a sun-drenched herb garden where a pair of snake like cucumbers lie below a fountain. Judging by his brown habit, the barefooted monk in this picture is not really a Dominican at all but instead belongs to the order of St. Francis.

The motif derives from the artist's second visit to Italy, in 1839–1841, which was also his honeymoon. The artist and his new wife settled in Rome, where their little daughter Athalia was subsequently born. Before that, they had stayed for a time at the Bay of Naples and, from June 25 to the beginning of October 1840, in Sicily. During his first visit to Italy, Rørbye had wanted to visit this island but had not had the opportunity, because instead he had gone to Greece and Turkey in the company of the architect Gottlieb Bindesbøll.²

According to a picture in the photographic library of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, there is in some private collection (the location of which is unknown) a very exact replica after the Loeb collection's little picture, bearing the date of 1846. The Kunstforeningen catalogue register for 1905 also provides the information that Rørbye was working on the same motif in a rather larger picture titled *Klostergang i Palermo med en franciscanermunk* (*Cloisters in Palermo with a Franciscan Friar*) inscribed *Palermo 1840. M.R.* This work is also in a private collection in someplace unknown.

An aspect of this painting not to be overlooked but difficult to explain is the presence of two cucumbers below the stone fountain. Have they been placed inside the pergola merely for technical reasons, to establish in the picture the relationship between indoors and outdoors? Did Rørbye note the contrast between the green vitality of the vegetables (which look as though they have just jumped over the edge of the foun-

tain) and the other-worldly monk? Or has the artist, in according the cucumbers a prominent position, put into his picture some anecdotal or even allegorical significance that is inexplicable to a modern viewer?

Martinus Rørbye was undoubtedly fascinated by these exotic vegetables, with their long stalks and resemblance to live snakes. There are several instances of the so-called snake cucumber (*Cucumis flexuosus*) in Rørbye's oeuvre, for instance in the work he painted to mark his membership in the Academy, *Scene from Public Life in the Orient* (Fig. A), and in *Harbor Scene in Palermo*,³ which Thorvaldsen had commissioned. In both of these works we see a basketful of the long cucumbers twisting like reptiles with aggressively flickering tongues. They represent an independent story within the actual motif of the work but nevertheless are only a single element in the totality, accorded the same weight as all the other pictorial elements.

Nearly all of Rørbye's motifs are done objectively, almost as a report, without any action as such, something that in his best works endows the presentation with an overall sense of peace and an almost unreal feeling of timelessness. We find this atmosphere in the picture of the monk reading in the monastery. Peace and reflection dominate here; no troublesome forewarnings disturb that peace. The presence of the two cucumbers is, after all, subordinated to the laws of pictorial expression. If they had had the status of a serpent, relating to one of the many symbolic values of that creature, their presence would have disturbed the totality and shattered the work's message.

S.L.



FIG. A Martinus Rørbye
Scene from Public Life in the Orient, 1838
(*Scene af det offentlige liv i Orienten*)
Oil on canvas, 36 $\frac{2}{5}$ x 51 in. (92.5 x 129.5 cm), The Royal Academy of Fine Arts

¹According to the photograph archives in the Academy there is a replica from 1846 of this painting. The provenance of the two works has been confused and cannot be resolved with any certainty. In addition, older literature ascribes two other titles to the same motif; see the Literature list.

²Gottlieb Bindesbøll (1800–1856) is best known as the creator of Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen.

³Martinus Rørbye, *Havnescene i Palermo*, 1844 (*Harbor Scene at Palermo*), oil on canvas, 33 x 49 $\frac{2}{5}$ in. (84 x 125.5 cm), Thorvaldsens Museum.