

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 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 25 June to the beginning of October 1840, in Sicily. Even 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 Bindsbøll.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 entitled *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 some place 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 really see the snake-like vegetables (which look as though they have just jumped from over the edge of the fountain), and note the contrast between their green vitality and the other-worldly monk? Or has the artist, in according a promi-

nent position to the cucumbers, put into his picture some anecdotal or even allegorical significance that is inexplicable to a modern viewer?

Among the many unfamiliar objects that Martinus Rørbye observed on his travels, he was undoubtedly fascinated by these exotic vegetables with their long stalks and their resemblance to live snakes. There are several instances of the so-called snake cucumber (*cocumis flexuosus*) in Rørbye's oeuvre, for instance in the work he painted to mark his membership in the Academy, entitled *Scene from Public Life in the Orient* (Fig. A), and also in his painting *Harbour 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 weighting as all the other pictorial elements.

Nearly always 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 the pictorial expression. If they had had the status of a serpent relating to one of the many symbolical values of this 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, 36²/₅ x 51 in. (92.5 x 129.5 cm.), The Royal Academy of Fine Arts.

¹According to the photograph archives in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts 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 (*Harbour Scene at Palermo*), Oil on canvas, 33 x 49²/₅ in. (84 x 125.5 cm), Thorvaldsens Museum.