

Basic Detail Report



Title: View of Algiers

Date: 1828

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@28f91

Medium: Tempera on canvas mounted on aluminum

Description: The first pictures Salmon executed in Boston included several large-scale panoramic views of the city of Algiers, which he faithfully recorded in his catalogue of pictures: "1 sean for sellf. View of Allgears, 15 f. 3 In. by 8. ft. 4. 19 Days painting and grinding collors in Boston"; a "second sean for sellf, begun the first Janewary, finished the 30. View of the British fleet forming the line in the vicinity of Algears. 30 Days in Boston"; and a third view, a "semeytransparent, nite battell at Algears and the Algereen fleet on fire. size 15 foot 3 by 8 foot 4. 36 days to paint: finished 29 May, 1829." (1) Salmon's subject, the bombardment of Algiers by British and Dutch naval vessels, took place on August 27, 1816. This decisive battle was the culmination of centuries of efforts by European powers to suppress the Barbary pirates, whose activities in the Mediterranean and the eastern Atlantic had justly earned them the title the "scourge of Christendom." The engagement ended with the destruction of the main batteries, the port, and most of the Algerian ships and resulted in the release of Christian slaves and a treaty of peace on August 28. (2) Like other famous skirmishes at sea, the Battle of Algiers inspired several written eyewitness accounts as well as prints and paintings. Large panoramas of the engagement that toured England and the Continent in the 1820s could have inspired Salmon's works. In Greenock, Salmon could have seen "a correct Representation of the City of Algiers, And all the Vessels engaged in that Victorious Enterprise," which was exhibited to the accompaniment of a military band. (3) In Liverpool, he could have seen the moving panorama painted by Clarkson Stanfield and David Roberts, shown from February to June 1825. (4) Stanfield and Robert's work comprised nine very large scenes, including those scenes illustrated by Salmon in 1829--the city before the battle, the British and Dutch ships approaching the city, and several

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nighttime views of the battle itself.(5) Like the British panoramists, Salmon may have based his depictions on prints of the city or on sketches made by eyewitnesses to the battle. Salmon encapsulated the historic battle into three concise pictorial narratives. The first, "View of Algiers", presents a view of the activities of the Barbary pirates before the arrival of the British and Dutch fleets. A small Algerian vessel, which emerges from the left foreground, draws the viewer into the action. Her turbaned sailors look to the right, where several rowboats are hauling in their pirated prizes, one of which is a dismasted merchant vessel. Although a great deal of the background landscape is only broadly suggested, the vessels are described in great detail, from the small rowboats to the larger ships whose riggings are crowded with sailors. In Salmon's second scene of Algiers (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), the flagship "Queen Charlotte" and other large vessels are seen moving into line for the battle. Not surprisingly, Salmon recorded that he spent more time executing this painting, which is absolutely crowded with sailing ships and displays a greater degree of detail and finish than the New Britain scene. The whereabouts of the "semeytransparent" night battle are unknown; it likely illustrated the dramatic bombardment of the fortress and the Algerian ships on fire. This last scene may have been intended as a diorama.(6) Salmon exhibited his pictures of the Battle of Algiers at Boston's Washington Hall, and the event was announced several times in the Boston "Daily Advertiser". In addition, the June 25, 1830, edition of the newspaper printed a laudatory "Communication": Bombardment and Burning of Algiers. There has never been within our recollection an exhibition in this city, which combined so much of deep interest and instruction as that now made by the accomplished artist, Salmon. His views are always correct, seeming to the eye like the present reality of the thing represented, and it may be considered a service to the public, deserving of rich remuneration, that he has produced for our inspection a representation of the city of Algiers, and the circumstances attending a memorable attack thereupon, which conveys an idea of the place and the action, as correct as could be obtained in the bay itself. The entire exhibition is elegant, brilliant and edifying, and seems to be an object of fashionable patronage. We understand that the term of exhibition will be short, and trust, therefore, that all persons of taste and curiosity will take an early opportunity to witness what is every way worthy of attention.(7) Because Salmon's panoramas are executed in tempera, scholars have long speculated that the artist may have worked as a theater painter in England or in Boston.(8) Although documentation is lacking on Salmon's early career, it does appear that he executed at least one other panorama. This view of the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar, a famous subject for panoramists and marine painters, was exhibited in 1806 at the conclusion of a performance of "The Merchant of Venice" at the theater in Whitehaven.(9) One can only speculate on the success of Salmon's panorama of Algiers, which was much smaller than the versions touring Great Britain. Salmon is not known to have produced or exhibited other panoramas in the United States, perhaps due to inadequate exhibition space in Boston, small audiences, and small

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profit margins--factors that also plagued early American panoramists.(10)

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Charles D. Childs, "Robert Salmon, a Boston Painter of Ships and Views," "Old Time New England 27" (January 1938): 91-102; John Wilmerding, "A New Look at Robert Salmon," "Antiques 87" (January 1965): 89-93; John Wilmerding, "Robert Salmon: Painter of Ship and Shore" (Salem and Boston: Peabody Museum and Boston Public Library, 1971). MAS NOTES: 1 . "Catalogue of Robert Salmon's Pictures 1828 to 1840, from His Own Notes, Now in the Possession of Miss Darracott, 1881," manuscript, Boston Public Library, published in Wilmerding, "Robert Salmon", p. 90. 2. For an account of the Battle of Algiers, see W. G. Constable, "The British Fleet at Algiers, 1816," "Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts" (Boston) 41 (1943): 2-7. 3. "The Advertiser", April 25, 1820, quoted in Wilmerding, Robert Salmon, p. 37. 4. Pieter van der Merwe, "The Life and Theatrical Career of Clarkson Stanfield, 1793-1867," Ph.D. diss., University of Bristol, 1979, pp. 162-65, 326. 5. The "Liverpool Mercury" (February 25, 1825) described the nine scenes: the city before the battle; the bay, batteries, approach of the British and Dutch fleets with the flag of truce; the battle at midnight; the fire ships exploding; the city and Algerine fleet on fire; the lightning that struck the city; the city in ruins, boats bringing the slaves; the batteries demolished; the beach crowded with the inhabitants; the Dey of Algiers and his ministers in the ruins; wounded Algerine chiefs in national costume (ibid., pp. 163-64). 6. Dioramas were a type of panorama painted in transparent and semiopaque paints that could be lit both from the front and the back, enhancing the theatrical presentation, often of fires and night scenes. Additional dramatic effects were produced by dropping shutters and shades in front of or behind the canvas. Panoramas were a popular form of entertainment throughout the nineteenth century. See Richard Altick, "The Shows of London" (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1978), chs. 12-15. 7. Daily Advertiser (Boston), June 25, 1830, quoted in Wilmerding, "Robert Salmon", p. 111. 8. Constable, "British Fleet," p. 71; Wilmerding, "Robert Salmon", p. 39. 9. Advertisement in the "Cumberland Pacquet", February 11, 1806, p. 3. Pieter van der Merwe, National Maritime Museum, London, generously shared this information on Salmon's Trafalgar and other British panoramas. 10. Salmon advertised that he would donate the net proceeds of one night's show to aid the Medical Dispensary of Boston "Daily Advertiser" [Boston], June 18, 1830, quoted in Wilmerding, Robert Salmon, p. 110). This generosity probably reflected a desire for favorable publicity more than actual financial success. John Vanderlyn had also used this technique several times to promote his panoramas, though it did not substantially increase his audience; see Kevin J. Avery and Peter L. Fodera, John Vanderlyn's "Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles" (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), p. 26.

Dimensions: 69 x 162 1/2 in.