

Basic Detail Report



Title: St. Peter's, Rome

Date: 1857

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e59e

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: For George Inness, as for most American artists who emerged professionally during the first half of the nineteenth century, Italy held a special fascination as a matchless repository of ideal beauty, both natural and man made. As a landscape painter, Inness was attracted by the countryside's historical dimension, which gave Italian landscapes a greater associative resonance and gravity. Having admired engravings after the Italian landscapes of Claude Lorrain since his youth, Inness was also aware that the grand tradition of landscape painting centered on Italy. Saint Peter's Basilica, which dominates its skyline, has long been emblematic of the Eternal City. Inness represented Saint Peter's in one watercolor and three paintings resulting from his first trip to Rome (1851-52) and in at least two quite different paintings from his trip in the 1870s. Unlike other American painters of his generation, Inness painted very few views of urban Rome, avoiding, for instance, ancient sites such as the Coliseum or the Forum. His characteristic Italian subjects were found while sketching in the countryside near Rome or near other central Italian cities. Instead, like most artists based in Rome, he sketched in nearby areas

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and even distant cities during the summer months. "Saint Peter's, Rome", is one of three closely related paintings, based upon the same watercolor, "Saint Peter's Seen from the Campagna" (ca. 1851-52; Detroit Institute of Arts), which Inness presumably executed from nature sometime between February 1851 and May 1852. The New Britain painting is based upon this watercolor, as seen both in its general resemblance and also in details, such as the silhouette of the middle ground foliage directly below the Vatican buildings. The vantage point is a slope to the northeast of Saint Peter's, near the Villa Giulia, a spot recognized in the standard guidebooks of the day as affording a splendid view of the basilica.⁽¹⁾ Across what was then countryside outside the city's walls, one sees the domes of Saint Peter's rising above the Vatican buildings, which block the view of the rest of the church except for a secondary dome and a portion of the façade to the left. The obelisk in the center of Saint Peter's Square can be seen farther to the left. In the foreground, at the bottom of the slope, is the tunnel that was known as the Arco Oscuro, with a gate in a wall to its left. These foreground details, which Inness did not include in his watercolor study, must have been based upon another drawing or watercolor, now lost. The first painting that Inness derived from the watercolor study, "Saint Peter's, Rome" (ca. 1852-53; private collection) is undated, quite similar to the New Britain painting, and of roughly the same dimensions. It represents the same scene at twilight, the sky colored by the sun about to set behind Saint Peter's, the foreground in shadow. A shepherd drives home his flock, down the slope toward the Arco Oscuro, as a monk, seated on a stone slab in the left foreground, gazes across the vista, which includes both the ancient ruin in the right foreground and the Renaissance church in the distance. The softly atmospheric style and the moralizing note of the musing monk relate this version to the small group of paintings Inness produced during or soon after his first trip to Italy, which generally have a poetic or nostalgic quality. The New Britain painting, dating only four or five years later, partakes of a quite different sensibility. Beginning in 1856 and continuing into 1858, Inness again produced Italian scenes, which gradually become less fanciful and more seemingly documentary. The New Britain "Saint Peter's, Rome" presents the scene in the fuller light of the middle of the afternoon. Although it is a warm light and some intervening atmospheric moisture veils the distant Vatican, the foreground is fully illuminated and highly textured, giving the impression of a literal transcription. During the late 1850s Inness experimented with a number of stylistic changes apparently intended to give his landscapes a more detailed and naturalistic appearance. At the same time, however, he adjusted the composition of "Saint Peter's, Rome" to achieve considerable formality and repose. In comparison to either the watercolor study or the earlier painting, the New Britain version is much more structured, with its foreground, middle ground, and two distant planes brought into parallel alignment, its foreground verticals strengthened, and the strong vertical of the tree on the left added to balance the insistent horizontals. Inness painted one other version of this composition, a painting apparently dated 1861 and more than twice as large,

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whereabouts unknown.(2) The surviving photographic record of the painting is not adequate to afford a detailed comparison to the New Britain picture. When Inness returned to Rome in the early 1870s, he painted at least two views of Saint Peter's, both from the low vantage point of the Tiber, closer and almost due west.(3) Painted in a later, more expressive style, these views present the basilica against a sunset, in one case, and dramatically lighted in the other. In 1852 Inness cut short his stay in Rome, having been assaulted by a French officer and jailed for refusing to lift his hat to the Pope. In view of this experience and the democratic sentiments that led to it, it is somewhat surprising that he painted so many views of the Vatican and Saint Peter's majestic dome. In the New Britain painting the only possibly negative comment might be found in the ancient ruin in the right foreground, a silent reminder of the passing of an earlier Roman grandeur in the course of another historical cycle. MQ Bibliography: LeRoy Ireland, "The Works of George Inness" (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965); Nicolai Cikovsky Jr. and Michael Quick, "George Inness", exhib. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1985); Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., "George Inness" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993); Gail Stavitsky et al., "George Inness: Presence of the Unseen", exhib. cat. (Montclair, N. J.: Montclair Art Museum, 1994). Notes: 1. The vantage point has been identified and its use by other artists has been pointed out by Janet Comey in her entry on the New Britain painting in Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., ed., "The Lure of Italy: American Artists and the Italian Experience 1760-1914", exhib. cat. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1992), pp. 210-12. 2. Reproduced in Ireland, "Works of George Inness", p. 55. The French painter, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, executed a pen drawing from the same slope between 1808 and 1811, "The Vatican Seen from the Arco Oscuro" (The Musée Ingres, Montauban). 3. Ibid., entries 531, 532, and 533. It is possible that no. 533 is a duplicate entry for one of the other two paintings. Dimensions: 29 1/2 x 39 3/4 in. (74.9 x 101 cm) Other: 37.3 x 47.9 x 4.3 cm (14 11/16 x 18 7/8 x 1 11/16 in.)