Pierre Jacques Volaire's *View of Solfatara*

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Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm
Volume 28:1
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Fig. 1 Pierre Jacques Volaire (1729–1799), Attributed to, View of Solfatara, 1770s. Oil on canvas, 77.5 × 111 cm. Transferred from the Swedish National Arts Council 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7581.
he French painter Pierre Jacques Volaire, also known as Le Chevalier Volaire (1729–1799), is perhaps most famous for his dramatic views of the erupting Vesuvius, so popular amongst Grand Tour travellers to Italy in the latter half of the 18th century. However, the present work – which could be firmly attributed to Volaire after it was recently transferred to the Nationalmuseum from the Swedish National Arts Council – shows a more serene view, albeit still with sublime and deadly volcanic activity at its centre, the Solfatara crater (fig. 1).

**Solfatara and Volaire’s views**

The Solfatara crater at Pozzuoli, near Naples, is part of the volcanic Campi Flegrei, the Phlegraean Fields. Solfatara is considered dormant rather than extinct, emitting the toxic sulphurous fumes that give it its name. Solfatara has been a popular tourist attraction for centuries and, long before Volaire painted pictures of it, an etching by Georg Hoefnagel (1542–1600) that depicts visitors marvelling at the crater was included in Georg Braun’s and Franz Hogenberg’s travelogue Beschreibung und Contrahactus der vornembster Stät der Welt (1582). In the late 1760s, Volaire settled in Naples and painted colourful, dramatic landscapes in the grand and somewhat idiosyncratic tradition of Salvador Rosa (1615–1673), catering to the tastes of the Grand Tourists visiting there. His many scenes of Vesuvius became very popular; his works that feature this subject have been previously identified, or at least documented in different sources. There is one version in the Museo di Capodimonte, signed and dated 1774 (fig. 2), a second (probably executed between 1778 and 1782) was part of the collection of the Marquis of Hertford, Ragley Hall, and a third (1778) was sold at Sotheby’s in 1950.

Two works, or the same work referenced twice, are mentioned in two old, separate sources: one by Antonio Canova (1757–1822) after his visit in 1780 to Volaire’s studio in Naples, and the other was part of the 1882 sale of the collection belonging to Domenico Barbaja (1778–1841), the director of the San Carlo theatre in Naples. In addition, an etching was executed by Pierre Duflos (1742–1816), probably after the painting at Ragley Hall. This was used in the second volume of the Abbot of Saint-Non’s (1727–1791) Voyage Pittoresque, published in 1782, testament to the appreciation for Volaire’s works with this subject. Here, the depiction is accompanied by a geological description of the site, highlighting the scientific and industrial importance of the extraction of alum, or aluminium sulphate, from the volcanic soil.

These pictures, as well as the present painting, show the crater from the same vantage point and are all quite similar, but not straight copies. In the centre background, a group of visitors have ventured close to fissures where a rising cloud of steam and sulphurous fumes are clearly visible. Further to the left, another group of tourists seems to be cautiously approaching or moving away from the fissures. There was, and is, a real danger here, not only because of the poisonous fumes and scalding steam, but also because of the site’s characteristic bradyseism, which means the ground is slowly moving, rising or sinking, making it unstable. In the foreground, at a safe distance from the fissure, members of a larger group are resting or engaging in different kinds of seemingly leisurely activities. Some noticeable characteristics are unique to the Nationalmuseum’s painting. For example, there are a few children in the foreground, like the boy playing with two dogs. Also, to the right, locals are hanging laundry out to dry on the roof of an edifice where the processing of volcanic clay probably took place, a supposition supported by the two basins also seen in the picture. In addition, the work seems to show the scene earlier in the season, as there are leaves on the tree in the right foreground, which are missing in the other paintings. In all the known works, the scenes apparently take place in the middle of the day and the artist manages to convey a sense of pastoral serenity and bliss. The view in the Nationalmuseum’s work is more centred, or cropped depending how one interprets it, and with the somewhat warmer colours and the specific details, such as the children, the work has more of an intimate warmth.

**The Nationalmuseum’s View of Solfatara in relation to old sources**

The painting belonging to Domenico Beraja was described in unusual detail in his collection’s catalogue, on the occasion of its sale in 1882. Here, Volaire’s use of the figures, as well as detailed trees and shrubbery, to enliven the work, is particularly highlighted: “ornata da bei gruppi di figurine di vario carattere, quivi accorse per vedere quello spettacolo della natura. La composizione è arricchita di fabbriche, ed alberi e boscaglie, ed altri molti accessori, per rendere pieno e variato un soggetto che per se stesso è secco monotono.” Considering the specifics of its description it is very tempting to identify this work as the Nationalmuseum’s painting. In her definitive catalogue raisonné on Volaire published in 2010, Émilie Beck Saiello mentions that this description could be said to match the work in the Museo di Capodimonte, as well as the two works in England, but neither of these are populated by lively figures or pronounced trees and shrubberies or, for that matter, “many other accessories” to the extent that the Nationalmuseum painting is and, of course, this work was not known to Saiello at the time of publication of the catalogue raisonné. As the way in which the painting from the Beraja Collection entered the art market is well documented, there is a possibility that, through successive acquisitions and donations, it eventually became part of the collections of the Swedish National Arts Council and thus now the Nationalmuseum.

Saiello also mentions the possibility that the work belonging to Beraja, and which
entered his collection no later than 1819, is the same that Canova saw in Volaire’s studio on the 18 May 1780. Canova did not describe the work in any detail, but his account of the visit and the types of works he saw, taken together with the description of Volaire’s work in the catalogue of the Beraja collection, nevertheless has a revealing relevance to the overall character of the artist’s output. Canova mentions three works: an erupting Vesuvius, a coastal scene, and the View of Solfatara. The former two types are also mentioned in the 1882 catalogue, where Vesuvius paintings are described as virtually synonymous with Volaire’s oeuvre as a whole, and therefore this makes the View from Solfatara unique.

The View of Solfatara, the character of Volaire’s work and its representation in the Nationalmuseum

The Nationalmuseum previously owned seven paintings by the artist. Surprisingly, none of these works show Vesuvius, however they are all examples of the other type usually associated with the artist, dramatic coastal scenes in a manner similar to Claude Joseph Vernet (1714–1789) (fig. 3). Volaire came from an artistic dynasty in the coastal town and great naval centre of Toulon. Artists in the family had naturally specialised in marine subjects and in 1755–1763, Volaire was engaged by Vernet to assist and collaborate with him on the prestigious and extensive series of works depicting the ports of France. After this, his close association with Vernet and his work had a lingering and often beneficial impact on Volaire’s career. This lasted well into the latter’s artistic maturation, which he achieved in Italy, where he first settled in Rome in 1763.

Six of the Nationalmuseum’s paintings have a definite provenance, as they were part of the Martelli Collection, acquired en masse by the Swedish Crown in 1797 from the Roman art collector and dealer Nicola Martelli (1733–1829). In the catalogue of this collection, drawn up in 1798, the works are, tellingly, described as by Vernet. The subjects of four of these works may represent the hours of the day. They share format and technique, oil on panel, and were probably executed together for a specific interior during Volaire’s stay in Rome. All six paintings are examples of quite contemporary works in the wide-ranging Martelli Collection. They show the span of Volaire’s work in Italy at the time, as well as the eclectic and up to date taste of Martelli, his clientele and his friends, who included the Prince Sigismondo Chigi (1736–1793) and in whose palace in Rome Martelli rented rooms for exhibiting his collection.

There are now at least four different known versions of the View of Solfatara, including the Nationalmuseum’s painting. This, and the special mention made by Canova and others of works belonging to this group, is testament to their popularity. They form an important part of the artist’s output, which, compared to other works from his period in Naples, are also much
ACQUISITIONS/PIERRE JACQUES VOLAIRE’S VIEW OF SOLFATARA

Notes:
6. Ibid.


Far from tired depictions of an endlessly and monotonously puttering volcano, the artist, in a perhaps intentionally ambivalent way, seems to juxtapose his paintings of Solfatara with the way he paints Vesuvius and the coastal landscapes, where the magnificent forces of nature are often shown in dramatic moonlight, or at least twilight. The View of Solfatara, shown bathing in an almost palpable, strong daylight, comes across as their opposite, and is above all characterised by tranquillity. But, nevertheless, it contains a touch of drama of a different kind, with the cloud of steam and fumes representing an obviously fascinating but more perilous danger, fitting the paradox of a deadly volcano turning into a tourist attraction and by extension, a picturesque landscape by the artist. As such, the View of Solfatara captures the sublime nature of the subject in both a similar and different manner to that typically found in the artist’s other works and, to some extent at least, it can like these, be viewed as Pre-Romantic. Intrinsically, the work is also a fine complement to the collection of works by the artist already in the Nationalmuseum, and hopefully its identification and publication can further add to knowledge about Volaire’s paintings of the View of Solfatara.

Fig. 3 Pierre Jacques Volaire (1729–1799), Shipwreck. Oil on wood, 66 × 96 cm. Transferred from Kongl. Museum 1866 (1804 Martelli). Nationalmuseum, NM 893.