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Italian Subjects from the Golden Age of Artistic Travel

Carl-Johan Olsson Curator, Paintings and Sculpture



 $Fig.\ 1\ Thomas\ Fearnley\ (1802-1842), \textit{Palermo\ and\ Monte\ Pellegrino}, 1833.\ Oil\ on\ canvas, 32\ x\ 51\ cm.\ Purchase:\ Sophia\ Giesecke\ Fund.\ National museum,\ NM\ 7500.$



Fig. 2 Martinus Rørbye (1803–1848), *Palermo Harbor with a View of Monte Pellegrino*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 29.2 x 46.9 cm. Gift of the 1990 Collectors Committee. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, M.90.78.

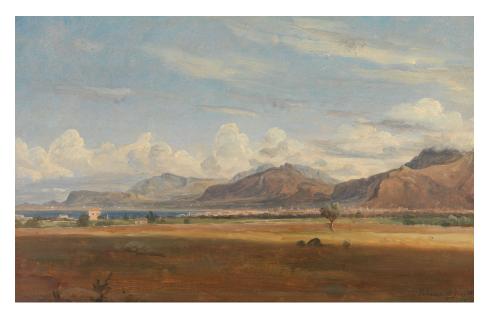


Fig. 3 Thomas Fearnley (1802–1842), View of Palermo, 1833. Oil on cardboard mounted on panel, 24×37 cm. Bequest from Louise and Johs. G. Heftey, 1931. Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, NG.M.01627.

The Nationalmuseum has acquired three paintings of Italian subjects by Carl Morgenstern and Thomas Fearnley, both of whom spent several years travelling in Italy during the 1830s. Fearnley's painting depicts a view towards Palermo and Monte Pellegrino, while both works by Morgenstern are of the same view, from the Grotta dei Cappuccini over Amalfi. One of these was executed on site in Italy and the other at home in his studio in Frankfurt, three years after he returned. Both Fearnley and Morgenstern offer a particular gaze on the atmospheric landscapes of southern Italy. Their paintings are more occupied with the potential of the aerial perspective than those of Danish artists such as Martinus Rørbye and Constantin Hansen, who also travelled through Italy in the mid-1830s. The Nationalmuseum's newly acquired studies in oils are good examples of this and, subsequently, Morgenstern's more elaborate version of the view of Amalfi illustrates what is involved in the transition from a painted experience to an artistically enriched and developed presentation of the same subject.

There is justification for the claim that artistic travel from northern Europe to Italy peaked in the 1830s and then, in the 1840s, declined and became less imperative as the rise of romantic nationalism encouraged landscape and genre painters to turn their gaze on their home countries instead. Artists who had spent time in Rome in the 1810s and 1820s, painting oil studies, had returned home to share their experiences. In Denmark, Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg was made professor at the Academy of Fine Arts and, when his now famous Italian scenes were used in his teaching, they made a great impression on the students. Among Norwegian artists, Johan Christian Dahl had significant influence, accepting and teaching younger talent in Dresden.2 One of these was Thomas Fearnley, who travelled to Italy after studying under Dahl.

During Fearnley's initial period in Italy, which he spent in Rome, he generally

painted in a studio; mainly Nordic scenes, as Dahl had done during his stay in the country. It was on a summer journey to the south, in 1833, that he first became seriously interested in Italian landscapes and depicting them in oils. Even before his arrival in Italy, Fearnley had possessed a rare talent for painting a scene as an atmospheric synthesis, balancing the relationship between its parts while also analysing them as a whole, in relation to light, air and distance. The most successful of Fearnley's early oil studies have a striking naturalistic sharpness, without being dependent on precise details.3 During his summer journeys (1833 and 1834) in southern Italy, he further developed this ability.4 Examples of this include views from Capri and the Amalfi coast, as well as subjects from Sicily, which the artist visited in May and June 1833. As Torsten Gunnarsson says, Fearnley's studies from Italy are often characterised by a personal way of relating to familiar subjects.5 While other artists are happy to depict them in what has become the conventional manner, Fearnley often used his own experience of the place as his foundation.

In this regard, the Nationalmuseum's newly acquired *Palermo and Monte*Pellegrino is in many ways typical of Fearnley (Fig. 1). Not least considering the way he has approached this famous mountain. Monte Pellegrino is one of the most common Sicilian subjects and is often painted from a viewpoint that has become a convention, almost making its outline emblematic, such as in Martinus Rørbye's *Palermo Harbour with a View of Monte*Pellegrino from 1840 (Fig. 2).

The mountain is also central in Fearnley's work and is easily identifiable, even if the angle is not the same as in Rørbye's. However, what makes Fearnley's depiction different to many others, providing a more personal hallmark, is the less hierarchical relationship between the elements in the painting. First, it is not apparent that he has based his composition around the mountain. In Fearnley's view,



Fig. 4 Thomas Fearnley (1802–1842), *Palermo and Monte Pellegrino*, signed 1833 (detail). Oil on canvas, 32 x 51 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7500.

the foreground stretches out, becoming one of the main attractions of the painting. The field and olive groves are, in principle, a subject in themselves, but are supplemented by the meticulous depiction of the mountain and Palermo in the background, in way that also makes them meaningful content.

The study is special in many regards, and there is reason to ask what Fearnley's intentions were. To begin with, we can see that it is dated 21 June 1833, so the artist can be assumed to be claiming that the work was executed over a single day. However, several areas have been worked on with an attention to detail that is quite unusual in oil studies. Compared to a study dated 16 June, from another point outside Palermo, the differences are striking (Fig. 3); that study is painted with broader, faster brush strokes and the primary purpose appears to have been to capture the cloud formations and the play of light on the landscape.

The city is shown in detail, but more suggestively than in the Nationalmuseum's new acquisition, in which shining cupolas and individual buildings can be distinguished without great effort. Additionally,

the agricultural scenery in the foreground of the Nationalmuseum's painting is executed in detail. Is it really possible this was painted on a single day? Taking a closer look, everything indicates that this actually is the case. Fearnley has worked with a small brush using rapid movements and almost entirely alla prima. The detailed image below shows how elements such as buildings and vegetation blend in an almost plastic manner. Close examination of the brushwork and the execution of details shows that much has been done in a flowing, rapid process in which every tiny element can be traced. (Fig. 4). This is the same as the study in Nasjonalmuseet in Oslo, but while that one is largely equivalent to a person's range of vision and focuses on the clouds and light, in the Nationalmuseum's new acquisition he has focused on one area at a time.

The Nationalmuseum's painting, to a greater degree than Nasjonalmuseet's "captured" fleeting view – which can be regarded as a form of observation – represents more extended observation with the intention of registering the place rather than capturing the atmospheric conditions. Even if Fearnley never intended to



Fig. 5 Thomas Fearnley (1802–1842), *Terrace near Amalfi*, 28 July 1833. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 39.5 x 55.5 cm. Gift of Elisabeth and Hunting Master of the Court Thomas Fearnley's heirs, 1933. Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, NG.M.01749.

exhibit or sell it, we can establish that it is more polished, in a manner approaching that of studio painting, which is why it has probably been regarded on similar basis to such works.

From Sicily, Fearnley continued along the coastline to the Amalfi coast. On 28 July, he took himself to a point just above the town of Amalfi. At the Capuchin monastery of San Francesco, he found his way into the Grotta dei Cappuccini and its cooling shade, where he sat to paint the view now in Nasjonalmuseet in Oslo (Fig. 5). A few years later, a German, Carl Morgenstern, would paint a study of exactly the same view and then a number of more thoroughly worked paintings. The Nationalmuseum has now acquired that study and one of the studio paintings.

Morgenstern's study from the cave is distinguished by its unusual colours, sharp and pale as if to show the strength of the sunlight (Fig. 6). The impression is almost reminiscent of a bright view immediately after removing one's sunglasses. Carl Morgenstern was the fourth generation of artists in his family and was schooled in Munich, where landscape painting had a high status in the 1830s. After growing up in Frankfurt am Main, Morgenstern travelled to Munich to study and lived there between 1832 and 1834. He developed into a skilled landscape painter and his depictions of nature are characterised by a rustic naturalism, often with a dark greengrey colour scale.⁶

Carl Morgenstern arrived in Italy in the autumn of 1834, initially staying in Rome. The transition from Bavaria's nature was difficult and he perceived conditions in Italy as negative – he found the light too strong, the colours too monotonous and garish, and he complained about the high horizons and the intense colour of the sea. It was to take about a year for him to become accustomed to this. The

Nationalmuseum's newly acquired oil study from Amalfi was probably executed in 1835, when Morgenstern travelled along the coast south of Naples. Here it seems as if what he first perceived as difficult has instead become a genuine asset. Compared to Fearnley's painting of the same subject, Morgenstern appears to have picked up on precisely the qualities in the landscape's colours that initially troubled him. The result is a picture in largely yellow-violet tones, which, in some ways, can be regarded as an unusually subjective and personally poetic interpretation of the subject. Morgenstern made a number of studies in these pale, sharp colours; these can be regarded as fairly original in relation to most of what other artists were painting in Italy at this time.

In 1840, a few years after returning to his hometown of Frankfurt am Main, Morgenstern painted the same subject on a canvas slightly larger than the paper he used in Amalfi five years earlier (Fig. 7). The perspective is exactly the same, the difference being that much of what is visible of the cave in the study has been removed in the studio version. The other differences are primarily in the execution of the details, where the areas painted using "stenographic" brushstrokes in the study have now been completed with careful attention to detail. For example, the central terraced area, where Morgenstern had minimally articulated its shapes in the study, then presenting them in a richness of detail in the studio version. Otherwise, the biggest differences between the paintings are the light and the colours. The colours in the studio version, like other Italian subjects painted by the artist after returning home, have been changed to those of the more conventional image of Italy, perhaps for commercial reasons or at the request of a client. The addition of figures on the terraces in the foreground is another adaptation for the audience in the north who, at this time, could not get enough of Italian folklife.



 $Fig.\,6\,Carl\,Morgenstern\,(1811-1893), \emph{View towards}\,Amalfi\,from\,Grotta\,dei\,Cappuccini,\,1835.\,Oil\,on\,paper\,mounted\,on\,canvas,\,38.5\,x\,52\,cm.\,Purchase:\,Wiros\,Fund.\,Nationalmuseum,\,NM\,7447.$

The view of Amalfi from the cave at the Capuchin monastery was an incredibly popular subject at that time, particularly among German artists. However, neither Fearnley nor Morgenstern made a big feature of the cave itself, which was otherwise common, as was placing monks in it as staffage. Many artists painted or sketched at this location, but Franz Ludwig Catel is believed to have been the first to achieve popularity with this subject. He visited Amalfi in 1812 and then painted a great

number of versions of the view, of which one is the oil study now found at the Fondazione Catel in Rome, dated c. 1818–25.8 The subject's popularity continued until the mid-19th century, as demonstrated by artists such as Johan Heinrich Schilbach's, Friedrich Nerly and Carl Wilhelm Götzloff. The cave attracted visitors until the end of the 19th century, when it collapsed. The monastery has now been converted into a hotel.

Notes:

- 1. See for example Carl-Johan Olsson, "Familiar subjects and new perspectives Painting on the move in the Golden Age", in *Danish Golden Age* (exh. cat.), Cecilie Høgsbro-Østergaard (ed.), Copenhagen 2019, pp. 217–229.
- 2. Dahl was in Italy for almost twelve months, 1821–22. It is generally believed that this is where he experienced a breakthrough in his painting technique, working on oil studies.
- **3.** There are excellent examples of this from Fearnley's time in Munich. One of the foremost is the *Tyrolean Landscape* from 1832 in the Nationalmuseum's collection (NM 5020).



Fig.~7~Carl~Morgenstern~(1811-1893), View of Amalfi with the Capucines Cloister, signed~1840.~Oil~on~canvas, 46.2~x~66~cm.~Purchase: Sara~and~Johan~Emil~Graumann~Fund.~National museum, NM~7518.

- **4.** For more information about Fearnley's travels in Italy, see for example Ernst Haverkamp, "Thomas Fearnley", in *Nature's Way Romantic landscapes from Norway*, Jane Munro (ed.), Cambridge and Oslo 1993, pp. 22–26.
- **5.** Torsten Gunnarsson, *Friluftsmåleri före friluftsmåleriet*, Uppsala 1989, pp. 212 ff
- **6.** See Mareike Hennig, "das ist ganz recht, wir sollen nicht immer zuhaus hocken", in *Carl Morgenstern und die Landschafstmalerei seiner Zeit* (exh. cat.), Sophia Dietrich, Manfred Grosskinsky, Christian Ring, Birgit Sander (eds.). Frankfurt am Main 2011, pp. 43–67.
- 7. "ich will u. mu β ees doch zu Etwas bringen", quote from Christian Ring, "Carl Morgenstern in Italien (1834–1837)" in *Carl Morgenstern*

- (1811–1893) und die Landschaftsmalerei seiner Zeit (exh. cat.), Sophia Dietrich, Manfred Grosskinsky, Christian Ring, Birgit Sander (eds.). Frankfurt am Main 2011, p. 69.
- 8. Andreas Stolzenburg and Hubertus Gassner (eds.), Franz Ludwig Catel Italienbilder der Romantik, Hamburg 2015, pp. 376–379.
- **9.** See for example a drawing from 1825 in Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, with a perspective that is practically identical to Morgenstern's (Inv. HZ 749).
- 10. Daxer and Marschall, Carl Wilhelm Götzloff View from the Grotto at the Monastery of San Francesco, Amalfi, 1830, https://www.daxermarschall.com/en/portfolio-view/carl-wilhelm-gotzloff/, (accessed 8 May 2020).