

# LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

## KUNST



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FRITZ PETZHOLDT

1805 Copenhagen - Patras 1838

*'Lavatorio Pubblico' in the Roman Campagna*

Oil on board, laid down on canvas; executed c.1833-5.  
22.0 x 29.5 cm

PROVENANCE: Private collection, Denmark

To escape the blistering heat of Rome, the Danish landscape painter Fritz Petzholdt spent the summers of his six-year stay in Italy - from October 1830 through autumn 1836 – in the mountains, on the coast near Naples and Sorrento, and on the island of Capri. He would return to his studio in Rome for the winter to work up the body of sketches and studies he had made over the summer in oil paintings. The long, dark winter evenings were brightened by convivial get-togethers in the company of Danish and German friends from the expatriate artistic community in Rome. Petzholdt was also a close friend of the noted Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen.

He spent the first summer of his extended Italian sojourn in Sicily, but the following year saw him travelling north-east of Rome, to the Monti Sabini in the Province of Rieti. He made a first sketching stop in Tivoli before visiting the small town of Olevano, a site popular with Danish-German artists. The first Danish painter to work in Olevano was Johann Ludwig Lund in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Lund was soon followed by Ernst Meyer, Herman Wilhelm Bissen and a little later, Friedrich Thöming.

Olevano and its surroundings were to be Petzholdt's preferred summer destination. The picturesque hilltop town lies some forty-five kilometres east of Rome at an altitude of just under 600 metres. The first artist reputed to have discovered it was the Austrian painter Joseph Anton Koch.<sup>1</sup> In Olevano, foreign-born artists – most of whom were from Germany and Scandinavia - would converge on the Pensione Casa Baldi, a popular lodging house where they would exchange ideas, discuss aesthetic approaches and plan sketching excursions. For Petzholdt, this vibrant artistic community was an important point of contact.

The oil sketch *'Lavatorio Pubblico' in the Roman Campagna* was almost certainly painted in the vicinity of Olevano. It is unlikely that it was made on Petzholdt's first visit to Olevano in the summer of 1832. He probably executed it on his return to Olevano in one of the three consecutive summers – he is known to have visited the town in 1833, 1834 and 1835. The sketch depicts a *lavatorio pubblico*, a washing place for the local villagers. It appears to have been abandoned, since the trough shown in the lower left corner of the sketch is not filled with water but overgrown with vegetation, an indication that the place is no longer in use. There is no evidence of human activity or sign of the movement of livestock. The high wall at the right shows distinct signs of damp and is partly overgrown with moss,

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<sup>1</sup> Domenico Riccardi, *Olevano e i suoi Pittori*, Rome 2003, pp. 35 ff.

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ivy and other creepers. At the centre of the image is a grotto or cave and on one side of it, an indeterminate building – a house or shed now carpeted with grass and with bare patches at the base of its wall where render has fallen off. A votive altar can be glimpsed beneath the dense vegetation that overhangs the three small steps at the left of the grotto. It shows the slight forms of two figures – probably two local saints – painted in brown on a light blue ground. But devotional acts are clearly no longer performed here. The former washing place is fed by a spring which streams out of the ground into the grotto and is channelled through a pipe into a stone trough. From there it flows down into a second, smaller trough. Such springs are common in Italy. Known as *fontanili*, they differ from wells in that they have an outlet. Each spring usually has a local name and is canalized – the water is led through a pipe to a tap which can be opened to fill a stone trough. The troughs were used by local women for washing clothes, for watering livestock and to collect water for general use.

Rows of olive trees can be glimpsed in the upper left corner of the image. They are set on a patch of steep terrain bordered at the right by a wall or ruined building. The trees are cursorily sketched with a coarse brush, a technique first practised by Petzholdt in 1834, while the foliage and blossom on the tree overhanging the grotto is handled with a fine brush that picks out the detail of each tiny leaf and petal. An oil study titled *Olive Grove* executed in a similar technique may conceivably represent the same subject seen from the opposite end of the olive grove [Fig. 1].<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1832, Petzholdt met up with his friend, the German painter Friedrich Nerly, in Olevano. Nerly, who was based in Rome at the time, had first visited Olevano in 1829. In the summer of 1833, the two friends returned to Olevano together. They may conceivably have continued their hike through Serpentara and Civitella (today's Bellegra) as far as Subiaco on the river Aniene. Nerly had already visited Subiaco a number of times but this would have been Petzholdt's first visit. The two artists shared many common interests and almost certainly influenced one another. Petzholdt may have acquired his somewhat impressionistic approach from his experience of his younger colleague's work. Both painters visited Olevano for the last time in summer 1835.

Petzholdt was a pupil of Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg – the 'father of Danish painting' – at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen from 1825 to 1828/9. He would have had every opportunity to see his teacher's painting, *The Church of SS. Giovanni e Paulo Seen through a Pergola*, when it was exhibited at the Kunstforeningen in Copenhagen in 1828 since he did not set out on his study trip to the Harz region until 1829. The subject of the present oil sketch is certainly indebted to Eckersberg's painting, which depicts a view of the famous Roman basilica with a stone water trough in the foreground.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the oil sketch *Fountain and Pergola in Italy*, the present oil sketch depicts a relatively small, confined space. Here, Petzholdt focuses solely on a small section of the washing place. There is no expansive view and only a segment of the adjoining olive grove is shown. It seems as if he has scrutinized the place so closely that each tiny pebble is magnified and the viewer might fear tripping over one. But he has not dispensed with the play of warm Italian sunlight, using it to accentuate the damp, decaying walls in a nuanced palette of browns, greys and greens. Both studies are devoid of

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<sup>2</sup> Oil on paper, 38 x 46 cm. Den Hirschsprungske Samling, Copenhagen [inv. 3151].

<sup>3</sup> *The Church of SS. Giovanni e Paulo Seen through a Pergola*, oil on canvas, 1824-5. Davids Sammling, Copenhagen [inv. EH 331].

figures. Petzholdt had no time for figure painting and merely equipped his finished studio paintings with figurative staffage out of necessity. The Danish art historian Christian Elling notes: ‘Livestock and figures are simply concessions he makes to a finished painting. A sketch is a pure nature study made in contented seclusion.’<sup>4</sup>

A number of the paintings and studies made during Petzholdt’s last two summers in Olevano in the years 1834-5, and particularly in Serpentara, the area between Olevano and Civitella, show how meticulously he would observe the motif, painting and sketching in extreme close-up, as the present oil sketch demonstrates. Two other examples are his *Study of Rocks near Olevano*<sup>5</sup> and the oil sketch *A Mountain Path in Italy with Overgrown with Vegetation*.<sup>6</sup>

On his journey to Italy in August 1830 Petzholdt travelled with his friend, the history painter Albert Kückler. He spent a fortnight in Dresden, where he met up with a friend from Academy days – the Norwegian painter Thomas Fearnley. During their stay in Dresden Petzholdt and Kückler also visited the Norwegian painter Johan Christian Clausen Dahl, who was Professor at the Dresden Academy. Fearnley then accompanied Petzholdt and Kückler on their route south. The three broke their journey in Berchtesgaden to meet up with the Hamburg landscapist Christian Morgenstern, one of Petzholdt’s greatest friends from his time at the Copenhagen Academy. The two painters were of the same age and, after leaving the Academy, had undertaken a study trip together, visiting the Harz region in the summer of 1829.

After his eight-month stay in Denmark in 1836-7, Petzholdt moved to Munich, where Morgenstern had settled. In Munich, Petzholdt focused mainly on the motifs he had studied and recorded on his travels in Italy. The oil painting titled *The Pontine Marshes with a Herd of Buffalo*, completed in early 1838,<sup>7</sup> is particularly worthy of note. It ranks as one of his major works. It was widely fêted and very favourably reviewed by the critics, although sadly, only posthumously.

Petzholdt had long harboured an intention to visit Greece. This was perhaps prompted by the impressions he gathered from his friend, the history painter Martinus Roerbye, who had travelled there in 1835-6. Another close friend of Petzholdt’s, the architect Hans Christian Hansen, had settled in Athens in 1833. At about the same time, in 1834-5, the German landscapist Carl Rottmann, whom Petzholdt had met in Munich, had spent twelve months on an extended study trip through Greece. In mid July 1838, Petzholdt left Munich for Trieste, where he boarded a ship bound for Corfu. From Corfu he travelled to the Ionian island of Zakynthos, and from there to Patras, where he was to await a ship to Piraeus. On the morning of the sixth day of his wait he was found dead in his room at the inn. The innkeeper maintained that Petzholdt had committed suicide, bequeathing him all his worldly possessions.

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<sup>4</sup> C. Elling, *Fra Sabinerbjergene*, Copenhagen 1954, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Oil on paper, laid down on canvas, 39.0 x 47.1 cm. Statens Museum for Kunst (as *Italian Mountains with Overgrown Rocks* [inv. KMS8152]. See *Paysages d’Italie. Les peintres du plein air (1780-1830)*, exhib. cat., Paris 2001, p. 238, repr.

<sup>6</sup> Oil on paper, 38 x 50 cm. Private collection. See *Under samme Himmel*, exhib. cat., Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen 2000, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Oil on canvas, 110 x 161 cm, Den Hirschsprungske Samling, Copenhagen [inv. 386].

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Fritz Petzholdt is considered to be one of the leading protagonists of the Golden Age of Danish landscape painting.

We would like to thank Lise-Lott Barlas for confirming the attribution and writing the catalogue entry. She is going to include it into her forthcoming catalogue raisonné.



Fig. 1: *Fountain and Pergola in Italy*, oil on paper, laid down on canvas, 39 x 50 cm.  
The Art Institute of Chicago [inv. 2002.377]