

LE CLAIRE

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KUNST



THORALD LÆSSØE

1816 Frederikshavn – Copenhagen 1878

The Cimitero Acattolico [Non-Catholic Cemetery] of Rome with the Pyramid of Caius Cestius

Oil on canvas; 1848

Signed, inscribed and dated: *Thorald Læssøe, Roma 1848*

44 x 64 cm

PROVENANCE: Probably Master of Laws E. Koch (1909) – Private collection, Denmark

The Danish painter Thorald Læssøe received his training during an extremely productive period in the creative arts known as the Danish Golden Age. In 1834, he was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art which he attended until 1839. Læssøe had the privilege of working in the Copenhagen studio of Christen Købke (1810-48), one of the most talented painters of the Danish Golden Age.

In 1842, Læssøe travelled across Europe, finally settling in Italy where he lived from 1844 to 1857. He quickly built a reputation as a landscape painter. From 1846, his work exclusively featured southern motifs – Rome and its surroundings, and Greece – but his preferred themes were the landscapes and architecture of Rome.

Under the ecclesiastical laws of the Catholic Church, non-Catholic foreigners were required to be buried in common graves outside the city walls. An additional reason was that the Papacy considered Rome to be hallowed ground. The earliest use of the Cimitero Acattolico in Rome dates back to around 1716. Records show that Pope Clement XI (1649-1721) permitted members of the Jacobite Court in Exile¹ to be buried in front of the ancient Roman pyramid tomb of Caius Cestius. The cemetery is sometimes referred to as the Cimitero degli Inglesi [Englishmen's Cemetery], or Cimitero dei Protestanti [Protestant Cemetery].

The Pyramid of Caius Cestius stands near the Porta San Paolo [Fig. 1]. It is a spectacular construction, an Egyptian-style pyramid entirely faced with slabs of white marble. It was built as a burial tomb for the wealthy praetor [magistrate] and priest Caius Cestius between 18-12 BC.

A watercolour by Læssøe depicting a view of the Cimitero Acattolico and the Pyramid of Cestius is now held in a private collection. It was very probably executed as a *ricordo* [Fig. 2]. The present, remarkably fine oil is a slightly later version of the motif seen from a very similar viewpoint. Læssøe was clearly drawn by the harmonious architectural composition of the site and distanced himself from intimations of the melancholy and sadness commonly associated with a cemetery. The

¹ After the failure of the Jacobite uprising in 1715, the exiled Stuart king, James III (1688-1766), also known as the 'Old Pretender', was obliged to live in papal territory in France and Italy. In 1719, he accepted the invitation of Pope Clement XI to establish a court in Rome. The Stuart court was to represent an important British presence in Rome for much of the first half of the eighteenth century, acting as something of an 'embassy' for Grand Tourists visiting the city, and as a social and cultural centre.

impressive form of the pyramid stands out against a clear blue sky and warm sunlight illuminates the graveyard and the ancient walls in the background.

Young foreign writers and artists visiting Italy in the early nineteenth century flocked to Rome, and many were to die there. The Cimitero Acattolico is the final resting-place of the two English Romantic poets John Keats (1795-1821) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). The German artist Carl Philipp Fohr (1795-1818) is buried there, and the cemetery is also the final resting-place of August von Goethe (1789-1830), the only one of Goethe's five children to live to adulthood. He became ill on his only visit to Italy and died in Rome.

Goethe made a sketch of the Cimitero Acattolico a year before his son August was born. Little did he know the cemetery would one day play a tragic part in his personal life [Fig. 3]. Writing to his friend Friedrich von Stein in 1788, he noted: *In a recent letter you mentioned the grave of a Miss Gore near Rome. In mournful mood a few evenings ago, I sketched mine in front of the Pyramid of Cestius. I want to add the finishing touches in ink and then you shall have it.*²

A large number of artists are known to have drawn inspiration from the distinctive, somewhat melancholic ambience of the cemetery, among them the German landscape painter Jakob Philipp Hackert (1737-1807), Goethe's greatest teacher during his time in Italy [Fig. 4]. However, Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783-1853), the pre-eminent painter of the Danish Golden Age, chose as the focus of his sketch [Fig.5] the motif of the Pyramid of Cestius, as had J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) before him [Fig. 6].



Fig. 1: The Pyramid of Caius Cestius, Rome, built c.18-12 BC.

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in a letter to Friedrich Constantin von Stein dated *Rom, 16. Februar 1788*. Cited after *Johann Wolfgang Goethe - Briefe: Tagebücher, Gespräche*, Digitale Bibliothek X, p. 4301.



Fig. 2: Thorald Læssøe, *The Pyramid of Cestius in Rome with a View of the Protestant Cemetery*.
Watercolour on wove paper, 20.9 x 32.3 cm.
Private collection

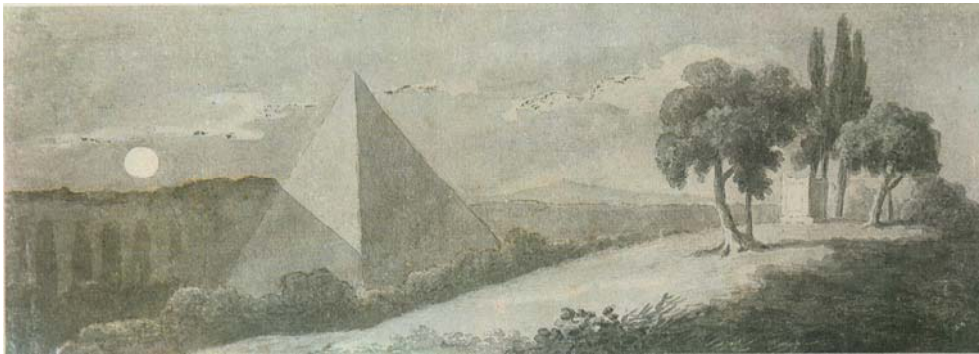


Fig. 3: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Pyramid of Cestius under a Full Moon*, 1788.
Pencil, pen and sepia ink, black ink, brush, grey wash, 13.6 x 38.0 cm.
Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Weimar



Fig. 4: Jakob Philipp Hackert, *The Pyramid of Caius Cestius and the Cimitero Acattolico in Rome*, 1777.

Pen and ink, watercolour.

Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna



Fig.5: Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, *Porta San Paolo and the Pyramid of Cestius, Rome*, 1814.

Pencil, pen and black ink, grey wash, 247 x 334 mm.

Staatens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen



Fig. 6: J.M.W. Turner, *The Pyramid of Caius Cestius, Rome*, c.1794-97.
Graphite, pen and black ink, grey and blue wash on paper, 17.9 x 21.7 cm.
The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford