The Great Exhibition: The Transept from the North Entrance

James Roberts

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Description

James Roberts (circa 1800-1867)
The Great Exhibition: The Transept from the North Entrance

Signed with initials lower left: London/May 20 1851 JR
Watercolour and bodycolour on buff paper
24.6 by 34.4 cm., 9 1/2 by 13 1/2 in.

Provenance:
Andre and Olga Wormser, Paris;
By descent in the family since circa 1930

This watercolour shows a view from the North Transept looking across the crossing of the Crystal Palace with the Indian and Turkish sections visible and an Elm tree in the centre. This appears to be an on-the-spot sketch preparatory to a more finished watercolour of this subject in the Royal Collection, dated `June 1851' (see Delia Millar, The Victorian Watercolours and Drawings in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen, 1995, vol. II, no.4654, ill. p.744, RCIN I9988). Queen Victoria commissioned a series of views of the interior the Great Exhibition from James Roberts, nine of which are still in the Royal Collection. Roberts was paid £33.12s by the Queen in August 1851 for the first group of watercolours and another £36 4s 6d for seven more in November of the same year.

Joseph Paxton (1803-1865) won the commission to design the Crystal Palace on 15th July 1850 and it was built by the engineering firm Fox, Henderson & Co. in only nine months using over 5,000 workers. The building was eventually 1848 feet long, 456 feet wide and 135 feet high. It included 900,000 square feet of glass which weighed nearly 400 tons. At the close of the fair, the whole building was taken down and re-erected at Sydenham in South London with the area still known as Crystal Palace. It burnt down in 1936. The exhibition ran from 1st May to 15th October 1851 and was the first of a series of fairs celebrating the culture and industry of the world and included exhibitors from Britain's `Colonies and Dependencies' and forty-four `Foreign States'. It was an enormous success attracting six million visitors with an average daily attendance of over 42,000 people. The profit from the event was used to fund the three new South Kensington museums - the Natural History, Science and the Victoria and Albert.
James Roberts was born in England but was in Paris by 1817 when he is recording copying pictures in the Louvre at the same time as Bonington. He worked as a drawing master to French aristocracy, including the French King, who is likely to have recommended him to Queen Victoria when he came to London to escape the Revolution of 1848. He worked extensively for the Queen from August 1848 until 1861 drawing interiors of Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle, Osborne House, Balmoral and Clarence House, most of which are still in the Royal Collection although the Queen appears to have given some away as presents. He is likely to have returned to Paris in 1861.

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