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Edwin Lord Weeks

Bab El-Zwayla

EDWIN LORD WEEKS
Boston 1849–1903 Paris

BAB EL-ZWAYLA, CAIRO, C.1872

Signed, monogrammed and dated lower right: "CR 1879"

Watercolour on paper carton
37.2 x 25.8 cm / 14 ½ x 10 inch

Provenance

Acquired from the Estate of Ediwn Lord Weeks;
Private Collection, Spain.

Publications

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إنا فتحنا لك فتحا

Weeks' watercolour places the viewer directly before the Bab al-Zuwayla, one of the three surviving gates of the Fatimid city walls of Cairo, and one of the great medieval monuments of Islamic North Africa. The composition is vertical and close, unlike the expansive horizontality of his Jerusalem watercolour made during the same journey. The arch dominates: a deep, recessed portal in ablaq masonry, its alternating courses of pale limestone and darker stone rising to a calligraphic inscription in a white-on-red cartouche, a lantern suspended in the shadows beneath. Through the gateway, beyond the compressed darkness of the passage, beyond the passage, striped masonry catches the light, and a dense crowd animates the street beyond.

The foreground is richly populated. To the left, a merchant displays his wares beneath an awning, engaged in conversation with a standing figure in white, a dog at his side. Closer still, a figure in a vivid blue robe stands with a donkey, anchoring the lower left of the composition and drawing the eye upward towards the arch. The crowd gathered at and beneath the gate is rendered with the confident shorthand of an artist working from direct observation, loosely grouped but individually differentiated, their robes in pink, lavender, terracotta and white catching the light of the Cairene morning.

Weeks' palette is one of warm earth tones, ochre, sand and the weathered stone of the gate itself, against which the colour of the figures' garments is particularly striking. The handling of light is precise: deep shadow in the recesses of the arch and beneath the awnings of the left foreground, while brilliant light floods the space to the left of the gate and glows through the portal beyond, creating a powerful sense of depth, heat and the particular luminosity of the Egyptian city. The arch functions simultaneously as architectural subject, framing device and threshold; the eye is drawn through it even as the composition holds us firmly on the outside, among the traders and the dust of the street.

The Bab al-Zuwayla is among the most formidable surviving monuments of medieval Islamic Cairo. Built in 1092 CE under the Fatimid Vizier Badr al-Jamali (r.1074-1094) during the reign of the Caliph al-Mustansir (r.1036-1094)[1], it formed part of a comprehensive programme of fortification that enclosed the Fatimid city within walls of dressed stone, pierced by three great gates of which the Bab al-Zuwayla is the southernmost and best preserved.[2] Flanked by two massive semi-circular towers and spanning an entrance of almost five metres, the gate marked the boundary between

[1] While Caliph al-Mustansir remained the nominal sovereign until 1094, the appointment of Badr al-Jamali as *Amir al-Juyush* (Commander of the Armies) in 1074 marked a shift to de facto military rule. For a detailed discussion of this transition and the 'viziers of the sword,' see Paula A. Sanders, *The Fāṭimid State, 969–1171*, in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 151–74.

[2] On the Fatimid fortification of Cairo and the construction of the Bab al-Zuwayla see Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of the Architecture and Its Culture*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 53-55.

the Fatimid royal city to the north and the broader urban fabric of Cairo beyond. Its name derives from the Berber tribe of al-Zuwayla, members of which formed part of the Fatimid army and settled in this quarter of the city in the eleventh century. It was also known locally as *Bab al-Mutwalli*, from the Arabic term for the official custodian appointed to administer it; the name persisted in common use well into the nineteenth century.

Over the following millennium, the Bab al-Zuwayla accumulated layers of history that few monuments anywhere could match. Under the Mamluk sultans, the two towers were crowned with the minarets of the Mosque of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad, built between 1415 and 1422, which rise above the gate to this day and are visible in Weeks' watercolour beyond the arch. It was at the Bab al-Zuwayla that the last Mamluk sultan, Tumanbay, was hanged by the Ottoman conquerors in 1517, an event that marked the end of Mamluk rule in Egypt. Napoleon's forces passed through it during the French occupation of 1798-1801, and it survived the upheavals of the nineteenth century that swept away much of medieval Cairo's urban fabric. Throughout all of this, the gate remained what it had been from its foundation: a working threshold, through which the commercial life of the city flowed daily.[3]

[3] On the Mosque of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad and its minarets see Behrens-Abouseif, op.cit., pp.196-200. On the execution of Tumanbay see André Raymond, *Cairo: City of History*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, p.134.

David Roberts (1796-1864)
A view in Cairo, 1840
Oil on canvas, 91.3 x 69.9 cm
RCIN 403602

The Scottish painter David Roberts depicted the same gate in his celebrated 1840 oil painting *A View in Cairo*, now in the Royal Collection at Osborne House, acquired by Queen Victoria. Where Weeks positions himself outside the gate looking in, among the traders and the dust of the street, Roberts painted from within the city looking out, the great arch framing a view of the world beyond the walls. The contrast between the two viewpoints is instructive: Roberts, working from the interior, renders the gate as a monument of civic grandeur; Weeks, standing in the commercial margins outside, finds it animated by the daily life that has always gathered at its threshold. That Roberts titled a later version of the same subject, *The Gate of Metawaley*, using the gate's alternative local name, Bab al-Mutwalli, is itself a reminder of how thoroughly this monument had embedded itself in the living fabric of the city by the time Weeks arrived in Cairo in 1872.[4]

Edwin Lord Weeks was born in Boston in 1849, the son of Stephen Haines Pickering Weeks, a prosperous speciality grocer whose premises on Tremont Street placed the family at the heart of the city's cultural life. The Studio Building, headquarters of Boston's leading artists, stood a few doors away and it was in this milieu that the young Weeks formed connections that would shape his career. He was a particular intimate of the landscape painter Joseph Foxcroft Cole (1837-1892), who had studied in the Paris ateliers and would serve as his guide to the French academic system, and he moved in the circle of William Morris Hunt (1824-1879), the dominant figure in Boston painting and the city's most energetic champion of the Barbizon school. As a very young man, Weeks shared a studio with the Canadian-American painter Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828-1901), then one of Boston's most admired artists. These were an exceptional network for a grocer's son, and Weeks made full use of it.

His earliest travels took him to Florida in 1869 and to Surinam the following year. In April 1872, aged twenty-two, he sailed from New York for Liverpool in the company of two friends, the illustrator A. P. Close and Edgar Newcomb, bound for the Levant. The journey would prove formative and, in its early stages, devastating: Close died of fever in Beirut in September 1872. He sketched his way south through Syria to Damascus, then on to Jerusalem and Jaffa before arriving in Cairo in November 1872, where the city's medieval architecture and teeming street life would provide subjects he would return to repeatedly.[5] A set of six sketchbooks from this journey, in pencil,

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[4] David Roberts, *A View in Cairo*, 1840, oil on canvas, 91.3 x 69.9 cm, Royal Collection Trust, Osborne House, RCIN 403602. Roberts' later version, *The Gate of Metawaley*, 1843, oil on canvas, is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, given by John Sheepshanks, 1857.

[5] Dana M. Garvey, *Edwin Lord Weeks: An American Artist in North Africa and South Asia*, PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2013, pp. 63-67. Weeks' 1872 journey is documented through a handful of typewritten transcripts of his handwritten notes preserved in the Edwin Lord Weeks papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

watercolour and pen and ink, survives as direct evidence of the visual intelligence Weeks brought to bear on everything he encountered.[6]

Returning to Boston in early 1873, Weeks worked up Eastern subjects from his sketches to considerable critical acclaim before departing for Paris in the summer of 1874 in the company of J. Foxcroft Cole. He entered the atelier of Léon Bonnat, the Spanish-born realist whose insistence on direct observation and the subordination of detail to overall effect would leave a permanent mark on Weeks' practice. He also worked within the broader orbit of Jean-Léon Gérôme. However, it was Bonnat's teaching that contemporary critics consistently identified as the primary formative influence. As one reviewer put it, "*it was Bonnat who taught him how to see and translate the brilliant scenes he conveys to his canvas.*"[7] To the Salon of 1878, Weeks submitted his first major Eastern subject, and his reputation in Paris began to consolidate rapidly. He secured an exclusive contract with the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, who represented Monet, Sisley and the leading Impressionists, and whose Paris and New York exhibitions brought Weeks' paintings before audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.[8]

In September 1877, Weeks married Frances Rollins Hale, known throughout her life as Fannie, a woman of considerable courage and adventurous temperament. The couple travelled together extensively in Morocco, surviving the devastating famine of 1878-79 and a near-fatal bout of typhus in Rabat that left both of them gravely ill. These experiences, vividly recounted in a surviving letter to his Boston friend Alexander Stevenson Twombly, fed the press construction of Weeks as an "artist-adventurer," a persona he cultivated with deliberate care in the pages of *Harper's Monthly*, *Scribner's Magazine* and the *French illustrated press*, where *La Vie Moderne* dubbed him one of "les peintres explorateurs."[9] The authenticity this reputation conferred on his paintings was commercially as well as artistically significant: his North African canvases commanded prices at the very top of the American market by the late 1870s.

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[6] A Set of Six Sketchbooks, 1872, pencil, watercolour, pen and ink on paper, Bonhams, *Orientalist Pictures and Works of Art,* Royal Mirage Dubai, 13 May 2010, Lot. 63.

[7] Ishmael*, American Artists on the Seine,* Illustrated American 6, no. 34 (11 October 1890): 97-101, at 100, cited in Garvey, p. 109.

[8] On Durand-Ruel's relationship with Weeks, see Garvey, p. 1 and note 1. Flavie Durand-Ruel of Durand-Ruel & Cie provided Garvey with a copy of Weeks' file from the gallery archives.

[9] Edwin Lord Weeks to Alexander Twombly, Rabat, 8 December 1878, Alexander Stevenson Twombly papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University. La Vie Moderne's double-page spread of 19 November 1881 was entitled *Les Peintres Explorateurs: Edwin Lord Weeks.*

From 1882 onward, his travels to India transformed his subject matter and secured his international reputation. His monumental paintings of Mughal architecture, princely processions and the sacred ghats of Benares were exhibited at the Paris Salon to outstanding reviews, and in 1895, the Empire and India Exhibition at Earl's Court in London devoted an entire gallery to seventy-five of his paintings and sketches, drawing half a million visitors. He was selected in 1901 to illustrate the first serial publication of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. His works entered the collections of the Musée d'Orsay, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Walters Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Nationalgalerie, Berlin and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. In 1896, the French Government recognised his contribution to the arts, appointing him Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. Weeks died in Paris in November 1903, aged fifty-four; his fellow expatriate and friend, Frederick Arthur Bridgman (1847-1928), served as a pallbearer at his funeral.[10]

The Bab al-Zuwayla had drawn Western artists to its threshold long before Weeks arrived in Cairo in 1872. David Roberts had depicted the same gate thirty years earlier, from within the city looking out. Weeks reverses the viewpoint, planting himself among the traders and animals in the commercial margins outside. It is a small work of considerable authority, made by a young artist who had already learned to look with singular directness.

[10] Garvey, p. 2, note 2.

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