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Luigi Mayer,

*Study for Pompey's Pillar, for the series 'Views in Egypt,
Palestine, and Other Parts of the Ottoman Empire, c. 1792*

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LUIGI MAYER

(1755 – 1803)

*STUDY FOR POMPEY'S PILLAR, FOR THE SERIES 'VIEWS IN EGYPT, PALESTINE,
AND OTHER PARTS OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE'. C. 1792*

Watercolour on paper

38 x 53 cm; (14 3/4 x 20 3/4 in.)

Provenance

Private Collection, England.

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This watercolour stands in an interesting, and not entirely straightforward, relationship to a more famous image. Mayer's drawings of Egypt were engraved by Thomas Milton and issued in London as hand-coloured aquatints across 1801 to 1803; the Pompey's Pillar plate itself, plate 14 of the series, is dated 1802 by the British Museum, though the volume as a whole is sometimes cited by its 1801 first-edition date. The watercolour itself carries no date, and its own moment of making could reasonably sit at either end of that decade: 1792, when Mayer is independently documented travelling through Egypt on the Ottoman leg of a British party's Grand Tour, or closer to 1801, nearer the print's own publication. The earlier date is preferred here, since it reflects Mayer's actual, attested presence in the country rather than mere proximity to the engraving that followed it, though the sheet cannot be dated with certainty from the object alone (Fig. 1).¹ The present sheet shares its subject and general arrangement with that print, but not, on close comparison, a simple mirrored composition: the print places its figures in two discrete groups, left and right, with a plain wall behind, while this watercolour spreads activity, tents and figures, across both sides of the column and gives much greater prominence to the walled city and its minarets in the distance. A related drawing in the Victoria and Albert Museum, itself a later copy rather than an original by Mayer, follows the print's composition rather than this one (Fig. 2).²

¹British Museum, museum number 1948,1125.5: Thomas Milton after Luigi Mayer, Pompey's Pillar, hand-coloured aquatint and etching, plate 14 in *Views in Egypt*, vol. I, published by Robert Bowyer, London, 1802. The Museum's own description of the print, figures grouped left and right of a plain wall, differs from this watercolour's fuller arrangement and more developed city background; the difference is more substantial than a simple mirroring. See Abbey, J.R., *Travel in Aquatint and Lithography, 1770-1860*, 369.I.14.

²Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Drawing, Pompey's Pillar, copy after Luigi Mayer, pen and ink and grey wash, 12.9 x 18.9 cm (museum numbers SD.664:1-16). The Museum's own note suggests these were made by an engraver simplifying the published image for a later edition, or copied from it, rather than by Mayer's own hand. This drawing follows the print's composition, not the present watercolour's.

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Fig. 1 Thomas Milton after Luigi Mayer, *Pompey's Pillar*, hand-coloured aquatint and etching, plate 14 from 'Views in Egypt, Palestine and Other Parts of the Ottoman Empire', published by Robert Bowyer, London, 1802. British Museum, museum number 1948,1125.5. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 2 After Luigi Mayer, *Pompey's Pillar*, pen and ink and grey wash over pencil, early 19th century, probably after a later, reduced edition of Mayer's published view. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, purchased with the assistance of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, Art Fund, Shell International and the Friends of the V&A.

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The column carries a name it has no real claim to. It was raised in Alexandria between 298 and 302 A.D., not for Pompey but for the emperor Diocletian, whom it commemorates in a Greek inscription still partly legible on its base; a colossal porphyry statue of the emperor in armour once stood on its capital, known now only from large fragments recorded at the column's foot as late as the eighteenth century. It stood, too, within a specific sacred precinct rather than in isolation: the eastern edge of the Serapeum, Alexandria's great sanctuary of the god Serapis, itself now almost entirely ruined.³ The familiar story of Crusaders believing Pompey's ashes lay in an urn on the column's summit is a later simplification of a more precise error: the inscription names the Roman governor who erected it, Publius, and once the stone had worn, the Greek spelling of his name was mistaken for that of Pompey the Great. By the time Mayer drew it, the misreading was so settled that 'Pompey's Pillar' was simply what every traveller called it.

Mayer's watercolour sets the column within a wide, populated landscape rather than isolating it as a specimen. The shaft rises from a rough plinth to its Corinthian capital against a pale, even sky; the city walls of Alexandria run along the middle distance, minarets breaking the skyline behind them. Figures occupy both sides of the foreground: a group by a tent at the left, gesturing and seated on the ground; a line of mounted travellers and a laden mule crossing toward the column; and, at the right, a further group with horses and a second tent. Nothing in this activity competes with the column for attention, but the monument is presented throughout as part of an inhabited, working landscape rather than a ruin studied in isolation.

Ainslie is worth knowing about in his own right. Born around 1730, the son of a merchant trading out of Bordeaux, his early career is obscure, though he is thought to

³On Pompey's Pillar and its dedication to Diocletian, AD 298-302, see McKenzie, Judith, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt, c. 300 B.C. to A.D. 700*, Yale University Press, 2007. The name's origin is more precise than the popular Crusader legend: the dedicatory inscription named the governor Publius, whose Greek name, ΠΟΥΠΛΙΟΣ (Pouplios), was confused, once worn, with ΠΟΜΠΗΙΟΣ (Pompeios), the Greek spelling of Pompey. A prefect named Publius is independently attested in two Oxyrhynchus papyri, dating his tenure to AD 297-303, which brackets the monument's completion within that window.

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have worked as an intelligence-gatherer, intercepting correspondence during the Falklands Crisis of 1770-71. He was appointed ambassador to the Ottoman Porte in September 1775 and arrived in Constantinople the following year, remaining until 1792, a long posting during which he built a serious personal collection of antiquities and coins alongside his diplomatic work.⁴ Mayer's employment was only part of a larger project: as well as the Egyptian views, Ainslie financed a parallel series covering Constantinople and its wider region, published as *Views in Turkey in Europe and Asia*. Mayer's own movements followed the shape of that patronage rather than a single continuous journey. In 1792 he travelled with three British gentlemen on the Ottoman leg of their Grand Tour, through Egypt, Palestine, Syria and the coast of present-day Turkey, before returning to Ainslie in Constantinople; two years later, in 1794, he accompanied the ambassador on his own journey home to England, travelling overland through the Danubian principalities.

Mayer did not work alone. During his years in Constantinople, he married Clara, sometimes recorded as Chiara, née Barthold, who became his assistant and produced watercolours closely following his own style and subjects. Her origins are not well established: Wikipedia states she was born in Switzerland and that her father served as a dragoman to Ainslie's embassy, while a specialist researcher who has studied Mayer for many years describes her only as possibly of Bulgarian or Greek origin, her family connected to the embassy's dragomans, and states plainly that very little about her is actually known.⁵ That gap between confident popular summary and honest specialist uncertainty is itself worth noting. What is better established is that the couple settled in London together after 1794 or 1795, and that after Luigi died in 1803 Clara continued to paint and to promote their joint body of work, producing further views of Constantinople in his manner. She belongs to this picture only at one remove; her

⁴On Ainslie's career, see the biographical note in University of Reading Special Collections, 'Views in Egypt, 1801'; on Mayer's movements between 1792 and 1794, see Suffolk Artists, 'Mayer, Luigi', and Levantine Heritage Foundation, 'Luigi and Clara Mayer paintings' (levantineheritage.com). Mayer's entry in *Benezit Dictionary of Artists* (Oxford University Press, published online 31 October 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.article.B00119456>) gives his birth date more cautiously, as 'c. 1755', and confirms the Ainslie connection but adds little further detail.

⁵On Clara Mayer, compare Wikipedia, 'Clara Barthold Mayer' (confident and specific: Swiss birth, a dragoman father, publication details from 1794) with Levantine Heritage Foundation, 'Luigi and Clara Mayer paintings', whose author, a specialist researcher on Mayer, describes her origins as uncertain, possibly Bulgarian or Greek, and states plainly that very little is known of her. The specialist source is preferred here precisely because of its greater caution, not despite it.

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documented work is Constantinople rather than Egypt, but she is a reminder that Mayer's output was never quite a one-man operation.

Whether this watercolour was made in front of the column itself, worked up shortly afterward from notes, or represents an intermediate stage between sketch and the finished design later handed to Milton for engraving, cannot be settled from the sheet alone. What the comparison with both the published print and the later V&A copy does establish is that this is not simply a derivative of the print, its composition is its own, and it belongs somewhere earlier in the sequence of image-making that runs from Mayer's original observation of the site through to the smaller, simplified copies still being produced a decade or more later. Set against the other watercolours in this exhibition, it also marks the earliest point on the timeline: made a full seventy years or more before Bridgman's sketch at the Ramesseum and Werner's views of Karnak and Philae, it belongs to the founding generation of this kind of image-making, before the camera, before Roberts, when a watercolour carried home from the field was still the primary means by which Egypt reached a European audience.

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