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Edwin Lord Weeks

Bathing Ghat: Benares, Holy River Ganges c. 1885

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EDWIN LORD WEEKS
(Boston 1849 – Paris 1903)

BATHING GHAT: BENARES, HOLY RIVER GANGES

Signed on verso: 'Bathing Ghats Benares / E.L. Weeks'

Oil on canvas
51 x 76.5 cm; 20 x 30 1/4 in.

Provenance

Barridoff Galleries, August 2000;
Private Collection, Spain.

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The painting opens at the waterline, where a wooden platform runs out from the stone steps into the Ganges on two roped poles. An elderly sadhu stands on it, both arms raised, his long white beard and bare torso caught in full sun against the pale stonework behind him. Two ash-pale ascetics sit close together to his right, one turned away from the viewer, the other garlanded and bent forward, lowering what appear to be two small vessels on a cord toward the water; behind them a woven reed sunshade throws a shadow onto the platform. On the steps to the left, two women in red and one in indigo blue stand and stoop at the water's edge, a bathing pot set down beside them; a boy in a blue shirt sits on a step behind them, and another boy in a white loincloth stands in profile beside the woman seen from behind. Above the group, the ghat rises through a sequence of terraces to a canopied stone chabutra, a raised, roofed platform used for public gatherings and ceremony, and two carved wooden balconies, from which several figures look down over the scene below. The water itself, worked in broken strokes of ochre, grey and dull red, carries the reflections of the platform poles and the women's saris in long vertical streaks, disturbed by ripples that break the reflected colour into fragments.

The arrangement Weeks paints here is not invented. In his own account of drifting down the Ganges at Benares, he describes precisely this kind of plank platform built out from the steps over the current, and the "huge tent-like umbrellas of straw matting" beneath which holy men sat in meditation, the same reed sunshade and the same seated ascetics that appear in this canvas, suggesting the picture was built from direct observation of a specific, recurring feature of the ghats rather than assembled as a generic devotional tableau.

Weeks has arranged the painting as a study in stages of undress and immersion. The sadhu on the platform has already completed his descent to the water's edge and stands at its very brink, arms lifted in what reads as either invocation or balance. The seated ascetics have arrived and settled but have not yet entered the river. The women on the steps are midway through washing, one viewed from behind, bent over the water. Nothing in the canvas actually touches the river beyond the platform's supports: the human business of bathing is suspended at the point of contact rather than shown within it, a choice that keeps the picture's attention on the crowded architecture of approach rather than on the river itself.

A ghat is a flight of stone steps built down to a river for bathing, ritual washing and, along certain stretches, cremation. At Benares, Varanasi, on the Ganges, one of Hinduism's seven most sacred cities, the ghats run for several miles along the western bank, backed by

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temples, palaces and pilgrim rest-houses accumulated over centuries by different patrons, which accounts for the abrupt changes in scale and style visible along the riverfront in Weeks's background. Bathing in the Ganges at dawn is understood to wash away sin (pāp) and is a central act of Hindu devotional practice; the ash-pale figures gathered on the platform, one wearing a mala, a string of prayer beads, read as Hindu ascetics of a broadly Shaiva type, that is, devotees of Shiva, their bodies covered in the ash associated with renunciation of worldly and bodily concern, though the canvas does not offer enough detail in the sectarian markings to identify a specific order with confidence.

Weeks travelled to India three times: in 1882–83, in 1886–87, and finally in 1892–93, the last a journey undertaken with the English writer Theodore Child (1846–1892) that began on the Black Sea coast and ended, after Child's death from cholera at Isfahan, with Weeks completing the trip alone. Benares held a particular grip on him. He exhibited at least two major paintings drawn from the ghats: *The Last Voyage, Souvenir of the Ganges* (Paris Salon, 1885), a large and, for its time, unusually stark treatment of a corpse being carried to the burning ghats,¹ and *A Fakir's Funeral, India*² (1892), reproduced as an engraving in the *Illustrated London News*. His travelogue *From the Black Sea through Persia and India* devotes an entire chapter to the city.³

Weeks was working within, and against, a long visual tradition of picturing Benares that stretched back through the eighteenth century. Thomas Daniell (1749–1840) and his nephew William Daniell (1769–1837) recorded the ghats in aquatint in the 1780s and 90s; Sir Charles D'Oyly (1781–1845) painted the Chowsathi Ghat around 1840; William Hodges (1744–1797) had painted the city itself as early as 1787. Closer to Weeks's own moment, Edward Lear (1812–1888) made a watercolour of the Bathing Ghats at Benares in 1873, on his own tour of India, and the ghats were an increasingly common subject for the photographers of the 1860s–80s, including Samuel Bourne (1834–1912) and his well-known image of the Burning Ghat. Weeks's contribution to this tradition was less picturesque than ethnographic in ambition: contemporary and modern scholarship alike has noted his insistence on direct

¹The Last Voyage, Souvenir of the Ganges, 1885, oil on canvas, 192 x 289 cm. The Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Collection, 2002, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario. Accession number 2002.33.195.

²"Fakir's funeral in India," engraving after a painting by Edwin Lord Weeks, *The Illustrated London News*, no. 2792, 22 October 1892.

³Edwin Lord Weeks, *From the Black Sea through Persia and India*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1896, chapter "Hindoo and Moslem," pp.346–390, illustrated with plates including *A Fakir*, *Benares* and *Fakirs at Benares*; the passage on the ghats referenced above and in the epigraph appears at pp.383–385.

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observation rather than invented studio composition, a distinction he was at pains to make about his own working method throughout his career.



Samuel Bourne (1834-1912)

The Burning Ghat Benares (date unknown)

Photograph, 23 x 27.30 cm

Gift of Mrs. Riddell in Memory of Peter Fletcher Riddell, 1985

National Galleries of Scotland, Accession number PGP R 917.33

Weeks was born in Boston in 1849 and went to Paris in the early 1870s, where he followed the courses of Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) and Léon Bonnat (1833–1922) at the École des Beaux-Arts. He sent two works to the Royal Academy in London in 1878, but exhibited thereafter almost exclusively at the Salon de Paris, of which he became a regular and decorated presence: an Honourable Mention in 1884, a Third Medal in 1889, a Gold Medal in 1900, and, in 1896, the Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. He travelled first to Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Palestine, and in 1882 to India, building up over successive journeys a

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large stock of studies and, increasingly, photographs, which he used as working material back in his Paris studio. He also contributed writing and drawings to Harper's and Scribner's magazines, and wrote a book on Moorish art. He died in Paris on 16 November 1903.



Edwin Lord Weeks (1849-1903)
The Last Voyage: Souvenir of the Ganges, 1885
Oil on canvas 192 x 289 cm
The Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Collection, 2002
Hamilton Gallery of Art, Ontario
Accession number: 2002.33.195

Set beside Weeks's more ambitious exhibition machines, such as the monumental *Last Voyage*, *Souvenir of the Ganges* shown at the Salon of 1885, at nearly three metres wide, this modestly scaled canvas reads less as a finished public statement than as the kind of working study from which such pictures were built: a record, made on the spot, of one particular stretch of the ghats and the men who gathered there each morning. In that sense, it belongs closer to the Brooklyn Museum's own *Temples and Bathing Ghat at Benares*, a comparable sketch from the same years,⁴ than to the grander institution of the Salon. What

⁴*Temples and Bathing Ghat at Benares*, oil on canvas (sketch), c.1883–85, Brooklyn Museum.

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both smaller pictures preserve, and the exhibition piece cannot, is the ordinary and repeated business of a sacred river at the hour before the city properly wakes.



Edwin Lord Weeks (1849-1903)
Temples and Bathing Ghat at Benares, c. 1883-1885
Oil on Canvas, 50.6 x 76 cm
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Walter Prosser
Accession number: 77.150.1

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Brooklyn Museum. *Temples and Bathing Ghat at Benares*, oil on canvas (sketch), c.1883–85. Gift of Walter Prosser. Accession number 77.150.1.

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