

A M I R M O H T A S H E M I



Watercolour of the Taj Mahal at Agra

William Havell

Agra, India, c. 1817-1825

watercolour on paper

25cm high, 37cm wide

Provenance: UK private collection, purchased in 1978 from the Squire Gallery, No. 12 Baker Street, London

Exhibited in the Reading Museum and Art Gallery in the William Havell, Bicentenary Exhibition (9 January- 20 February 1982), and published in the William Havell 1782-1857, catalogue no. 86.

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A serene watercolour view of the Taj Mahal at dawn from the banks of the river Yamuna, as fisherfolk carry on with their daily tasks. The wash of blue in the sky and the rising sun emitting a glow from the left corner informs us of the time of day. The painter, William Havell, provides an alternative view of the Taj, which is unlike its usual depiction from the front. This is typical of Havell's work throughout his career, avoiding the more obvious and "popular" views. From the bank, one can see the whole Taj complex from an angle, including the beautiful Taj Mahal, the two red sandstone and white domed mirror-structures, and the surrounding walls. The two mirror structures are the mosque by the western wall and the Mehman Khana which serves as the jawab or answer to the mosque for symmetry, by the eastern wall. These two face the sides of the Taj Mahal. All three buildings are set on a sandstone plinth. Great attention is paid to the structures, namely domes, the arches and the minarets as well as to the textural surfaces – both of the buildings and the muddy earth of the riverbank. Fishing boats can be

seen on the river in the background.

William Havell, son of Luke Havell, came from a famous artistic family. He sent his first painting to the Royal Academy in 1804 and was one of the founders of the Society of Painters in Watercolours. In 1816 he was appointed one of the draughtsmen to Earl Amherst of Arracan's embassy to Peking.

However, on account of a conflict aboard the ship, he was forced to leave the ambassador's service. He travelled to Manila and Penang, and from there overland to Calcutta where he found work painting portraits of British officers and landscapes. After a bout of cholera, he left Bombay for Liverpool. After a short time in England, he moved to Italy, on account of further ill health. In 1855 he returned to England, moving to High Row, now Kensington Church Street where he died on 16 December in 1857.

Exhibitions

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