

"Grisogorious Places": Edward Lear's Travels, September 14, 2012-May 19, 2013

If you are absolutely alone in the world, and likely to be so, then move about continually and never stand still.

-- Edward Lear, 1859

Known and loved by generations of children for his limericks and nonsense rhymes, such as *The Owl and the Pussycat*, Edward Lear was, primarily, a landscape painter. Born in 1812, the twentieth child to parents of little means, an epileptic with no early artistic training, Lear's humor and talent shaped his extraordinary life, which included a stint as drawing instructor to Queen Victoria and a working friendship with the poet Lord Alfred Tennyson. Lear began his artistic life as an ornithological painter, but at the age of twenty, he dedicated himself solely to landscape painting, finding in it the perfect focal point for his appreciation of nature and his indefatigable wanderlust. His watercolor and oil paintings of these "grisogorious places"—a nonsense phrase of his own invention—to which he traveled became the sole source of Lear's income until his death in 1888. His journeys to Greece, the Ionian Islands, the Balkans, the Holy Land, Egypt, and India are recorded in scores of diary entries and letters in the voice of a brilliant and self-deprecating humorist.

Lear first left England in 1837 for Rome, where he made his headquarters for several years. In 1848, the outbreak of revolution in Europe compelled him to begin his extensive explorations abroad, mostly undertaken alone or in the company of a friend or servant. Wandering slowly in what he called a "stopping, prying, lingering mode of travel," Lear would choose his subject and gaze for several minutes at the scene through a monocular glass. He then sketched rapidly with a pencil and made extensive notes about color and content. He recorded the specific location, date, and time on the sketch, which he numbered in numerical order by country. In the evenings, working from his notes, he added color washes and "penned out" the graphite in ink. Lear's sketches, which form the majority of works on view here, brought him great pleasure, and served as the basis for the studio watercolor paintings he made for reproduction or sale. Although the more finished studio watercolors were critical to Lear's financial success, he despised making them, calling them "drawings for consumption."

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

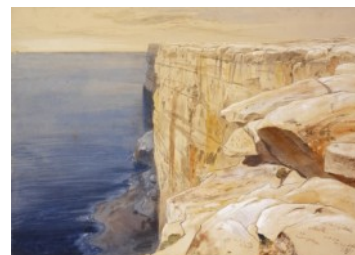
Edward Lear

English, 1812-1888

Garf Harbor, Malta, 1866

Watercolor and gouache applied with brush, ink and pen, and graphite

Anonymous gift 69.154.57



Lear made this sketch on his third trip to the Mediterranean island of Malta, during a lonely winter spent without companionship. *Garf Hásan* (or *Ghar Hasan*) refers to a large cave, just out of view in the

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picture, tied to a legend about a young man named Hasan who once hid there. Unlike Lear's more typically distant views, the sketch

features a massive, elongated cliff at close range, demarcated by quick, long pen strokes against the still water. Lear used the same blue for the water as for the shadows that cover the lower and distant reaches of the rocks.

Edward Lear

English, 1812-1888

Palaeocastritza, Corfu, dated 21 April 1862

Watercolor, pen and ink, and graphite on wove paper

Anonymous Gift 70.118.32

Corfu, a British colony from 1815 to 1863, served as Lear's base for several years beginning in 1855, when his close friend Frederick Lushington served there as judge of the supreme court of the Ionian Islands. Although Lear found the beauty of the island astonishing, he disliked the large British presence there, calling it, in a letter to his sister, a "disorganised fiddlefaddle Poodly-pumpkin place." This image of Paleocastritza, meaning "old castle," typifies the complicated linear patterns frequently found in Lear's studies, with multiple lines, cross-hatching, and shadow laid in with wash.



Edward Lear

English, 1812-1888

"The tree, stands in the sun, and shadows all beneath," Calcutta, India, after 1878

Lithograph with pen and ink, brush and wash, and graphite on wove paper

Anonymous gift 71.153.56

The most important project of Lear's later years was an ambitious scheme to illustrate the work of his friend, the poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–92). Lear meant the project as both an act of homage and a summary of his own life's work. It was never published as he intended, although Lear completed around 300 drawings, matching scenes from his tens of thousands of travel sketches to Tennyson's verse. This scene of Calcutta, derived from Lear's extended trip to India in 1873–74, illustrates a line from "Love and Death," published in 1830:



*Death, walking all alone beneath a yew,
And talking to himself, first met his sight:
"You must begone," said Death, "these walks are mine."
Love wept and spread his sheeny vans for flight;
Yet ere he parted said, 'This hour is thine:
Thou art the shadow of life, and as the tree*

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*Stands in the sun and shadows all beneath,
So in the light of great eternity
Life eminent creates the shade of death;
The shadow passeth when the tree shall fall,
But I shall reign for ever over all.*

Edward Lear
English, 1812-1888
Plain of Thebes, Egypt, 1885
Watercolor and gouache with touches of varnish on wove paper
Anonymous gift 71.153.60



Unlike the other works on view, this is a studio work completed for sale. The composition is based on a sketch Lear executed in 1854, on his first trip to Egypt. Typically, patrons would visit Lear's studio and choose a composition that suited their taste from among his notebooks of sketches. Like most of Lear's studio watercolors, this painting incorporates opaque gouache, and it contains no specifics about time and place. The bold pinks and purples seen here were a distinctive feature of Lear's studio works, which were intended to hold their own next to oil paintings. Lear found making works such as this tedious, and complained in his diary of his labors, "Grinding aching sorrows burn me—thinking of days of freedom & happy beautiful places."

Edward Lear
English, 1812-1888
"Thunderclouds that hang on high," Joannina, Epirus, Albania, after 1878
Pen and ink, brush and wash, and graphite on wove paper [J. Whatman]
Anonymous gift 72.171.36



This scene of Albania derives from Lear's trip to the region in 1848. It illustrates the following Tennyson verse from "Eleänore," published in 1832:

*As thunder-clouds that, hung on high,
 Roofed the world with doubt and fear,
Floating through an evening atmosphere,
Grow golden all about the sky;
In thee all passion becomes passionless,
Touched by thy spirit's mellowness,
Losing his fire and active might
 In silent meditation,
Falling into a still delight,
 And luxury of contemplation.*

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Edward Lear
English, 1812-1888

The Native Bazaar, Kanea, Crete, dated 19 April 1864

Watercolor, pen and ink, graphite, and gouache on wove paper

Anonymous gift 73.204.30

In March 1864, Lear traveled from Corfu to Crete, where he wrote in his diary of his difficulty in sketching the bazaar due to the stream of Cretans going in and out. Lear's shorthand method of depicting them here is unusual in his sketched oeuvre, as is his use of gouache and vibrant colors. Lear was not, in general, a fan of Crete, which he called a "sell" with little of interest except "that of [a] floral nature & the delight of the sweet morning air & thorough calm." Part of his distaste for the island may have stemmed not from the place itself but from his recent forced departure from the exquisitely beautiful Corfu when Britain ceded sovereignty of the island to Greece.



Edward Lear
English, 1812-1888

Philae, dated 7 February 1854

Pen and ink, watercolor, and graphite on grey paper (now tan)

Anonymous gift 74.107.33

Made during Lear's second trip to Egypt, this drawing depicts Philae, an island on the Nile where Lear remained for ten days. In his diary, he referred to Philae as a "fairy island," and described the colors as brilliant, delicate, and mournful. Much later, during his third trip to Egypt, he wrote in his diary, "In no place—it seems to me, can the variety & simplicity of colors be so well studied as in Egypt; in no place are the various beauties of shadow more observable, or more interminably numerous." His color notes on this drawing are particularly extensive, indicating something of the challenge he found in capturing Nile scenery.



Edward Lear
English, 1812-1888

Mahée from Fort St. George, dated November 1874

Watercolor, pen and ink, and graphite on wove paper

Anonymous gift 80.239.11

Lear was more than sixty years old when Lord Northbrook, viceroy of India, invited him to tour India at his expense. Lear's immediate reaction upon arriving in Bombay was one of "violent and amazing delight" at the "colours, & costumes, & myriadism of impossible picturesqueness!," yet Lear made few pictures of the cities or people of India. He instead preferred the more tranquil scenes he found on his long and exhausting journey down the western Malabar coast. In



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the French protectorate of Mahé, he drew this scene from the vantage point of a ruined fort once belonging to the Sultan Tippoo Sahib. Lear's host in the region was one Captain Baudry, whose name appears at the bottom center of the drawing.

Edward Lear

English, 1812-1888

Jerusalem, dated 1 and 28 April 1858

Watercolor, pen and ink, graphite, and gouache on blue wove paper; mounted

Anonymous gift 84.203.6



Lear's trip to Palestine was one of the more harrowing of his foreign journeys, as he and his companions were surrounded on the road by two feuding tribes, each demanding payment for passage through their lands. Of Jerusalem, Lear wrote in a letter that he found "enough . . . to set a man thinking for life," even though its filth made it the "foulest and odioussest place on earth." He evocatively described the color of the landscape outside of the city as "ham in stripes." Like many of Lear's works, this watercolor was only begun in situ. Lear left Jerusalem on April 2, 1858, completing and inscribing the sheet elsewhere in late April.