

Samuel Prout

British, 1783 -1852

The Cathedral of St Peter, Regensburg Porch on the West Facade

c.1823, watercolour, 70.2x52.5 cm
Heathcote Helmore Bequest, 1965



About the work

Prout's subject is the Cathedral of St Peter at Ratisbon, or Regensburg as it is known today. Regensburg stands on the Danube River in Upper Bavaria. This architectural composition is treated in a grand scale, filled with devotional figures, and revealing the busy life of the Bavarian city beyond.

It is an example of Prout's work as a draughtsman of picturesque architecture. He has emphasised the height of the cathedral porch and packed the lower spaces with a crowd of colourful worshippers and hawkers who look very small in comparison to the rearing sculptural figures of the saints and apostles.

Prout was often criticised for the licence he took with accuracy and for packing his compositions with groups of peasants in bright costumes. However, he was responsible for bringing into prominence the more picturesque aspects of building in Europe. His maxim was "Sacrifice small things to great, and matter of fact to the rendering of the idea". ('Reminiscences of an Old Painter: Samuel Prout', W. Collingwood, *Magazine of Art*, 1898, p. 589)

The oblique shaft of sunlight, which balances the vertical planes in the composition, picks out the details of the stone tracery and enhances the finely detailed drawing of the architectural sculpture.

British paintings of this type were influenced by the Dutch architectural watercolourists like Pieter Saenredam (1597-1665), and by the tradition of the architectural and landscape studies purchased on the 18th century Grand Tours of Europe.

It was Prout's practice to make studies and sketches on the spot and then work them up into a finished painting in his studio. In his finished drawings he traced over his pencil studies with a reed pen to outline the compositions before shading and painting them. John Ruskin, an admirer of Prout's art said; "The reed pen outline and peculiar touch of Prout are the only means of expressing the crumbling character of stone". This technique can be seen in the foreground of *The Cathedral of St Peter, Regensburg Porch on the west facade*.

As Prout seldom dated a painting and his work was of a steady uniform type, the precise date of most of his watercolours is difficult to determine. This work has the painterly mannerisms of his post-1820 period with its use of limited colour apart from brighter touches on the costumes of the human figures.

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About the artist

Born in Plymouth in 1783, Prout turned to painting at an early age as he suffered life-long ill health, which prevented him from taking up a more active career. In 1801 he was employed to make drawings for John Britton's publication *Beauties of England and Wales*. He began exhibiting at the Royal Academy in 1803 and joined the Associated Artists in Watercolours in 1810.

In 1819 he became a member of the Old Water-Colour Society and in that same year made his first trip abroad to Northern France. It was at this time he developed the style that he continued to use till his death. In 1821 he toured through Belgium and along the Rhine, and in 1824 he visited Italy. He later travelled through Germany and Switzerland. He died in London in 1852.

Prout is best known for his paintings of grand architectural compositions, particularly the cathedrals of Europe, of which this is a good example. It was shown at the 'International Exhibition' in Glasgow in 1901. A similar version of the same composition exists in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

His style of drawing was suited to lithographic reproduction and his publications of lithographic prints were highly successful and very popular. These include *Illustrations of the Rhine* (1824), *Facsimiles of Sketches made in Flanders and Germany* (1833), and *Sketches in France, Switzerland and Italy* (1839).

He was well-regarded as an artist and teacher in his lifetime and he was championed by John Ruskin who had nothing but praise for him. "We owe Prout, I believe, the first perception, and certainly the only existing expression, of precisely the characters which were wanting to old art; of that feeling which results from the influence, among the noble lines of architecture, of the rent and the rust, the fissure, the lichen and the weed..." (*Modern Painters Vol. 1*, John Ruskin, Dent, 1906, p. 31)

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are no other works by the artist in the Collection

Further reading

'Reminiscences of an Old Painter: Samuel Prout', W. Collingwood, *Magazine of Art*, 1898.

'Sketches by Samuel Prout in France, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Switzerland', E.G. Halton, *The Studio*, Special Series, London, 1915.

