

A View of the Bay of Naples

Giovanni Battista Lusieri
Italian, 1791
Pen and ink, gouache, and
watercolor on six sheets of
paper,
40 1/16 x 107 1/16 in.
85.GC.281



Background Information

Sir William Hamilton, British envoy to the court of Naples from 1764 to 1800, wanted a painting of the panoramic view of the Bay of Naples from his apartment window. He sought out the Italian artist Giovanni Battista Lusieri, whose detailed drawings and watercolors of views of Naples and other Italian sites were popular with Grand Tourists in the 1780s and 1790s.

Lusieri produced this sweeping view on six sheets of watercolor paper. Its clarity, purity of color, and accuracy of detail led many people to believe that Lusieri used a telescope or camera obscura to record the intricacies, proportion, and perspective of his settings. He was a slow and painstaking draftsman; this drawing is one of his few important, completely finished works. He proceeded slowly, first drawing the entire scene in outline down to the smallest detail with a faint but hard pencil and then finishing and coloring the work on location, rather than in a studio. An English tourist wrote of Lusieri: "As an artist he was always slow in deliberation; but it was the tardiness of the most scrupulous accuracy; for he frequently laid on even his colours on the spot..."

About the Artist

Giovanni Battista Lusieri (Italian, 1755–about 1821)

Described by poet Lord Byron as "an Italian painter of the first eminence," Giovanni Battista Lusieri began as a topographical and archaeological painter in Rome. By 1782, he had moved to Naples where he was highly sought after by English visitors for his precision, clarity and purity of color, and, as one admirer stated, the "perfection of his outline and perspective." Lusieri staunchly resisted Romanticism, writing: "[I]t is very true that according to present styles . . . pictures are produced which are created in the main part from imagination, but this way of operating I detest [as] one should faithfully imitate nature."

By 1799, Lusieri was leading Lord Elgin's team of draftsmen, sculptors, and architects in Greece and Turkey. He spent the rest of his life assisting with building Elgin's antiquities collection, and helped him acquire the Parthenon fragments now in London's British Museum. With little time for making art, most of his watercolors remained unfinished, and many were lost in an 1828 shipwreck. Lusieri felt that had he not worked for Elgin, he would have achieved fame as an artist and could have influenced the British watercolor school. He suffered from rheumatism but continued to draw in his home below the Acropolis until his death.

A View of the Bay of Naples, Giovanni Battista Lusieri

Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at the reproduction of the painting.

What do you notice first? Where does your eye travel to next? What did the artist do to draw your attention to these areas?

Lord Hamilton hired Lusieri to paint a view of the Bay of Naples from his apartment balcony. Imagine you are Lord Hamilton standing on his balcony. How would you describe the view?

Many noblemen completed their education by traveling to Italy. Imagine you are a tourist visiting the Bay of Naples in Italy. You are on a boat about to dock. What do you see? What do you hear?

Now imagine you are standing on the roof of the building in the foreground near the line of laundry. What do you see? What do you hear?

What do you notice about the architectural structures in the painting? How would you describe them? How are they being used in the painting?

Lusieri depicted details with such precision and realism that people thought he used a tool called a camera obscura, which projects an image of a scene onto a piece of paper. Does this information change the way you view this painting? How?

Compare Lusieri's painting to another depiction of architectural structures by a contemporary of Lusieri, such as Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Modern Rome—Campo Vaccino*. How are the cities in each painting depicted differently? Consider the composition, **emphasis**, **color**, and light.

Lusieri was praised by the Romantic poet Lord Byron as "an Italian painter of the first eminence." However, Lusieri was not a fan of the Romantic style, which favors imagination over order. When describing works that were created using one's imagination, Lusieri said: "this way of operating I detest [as] one should faithfully imitate nature." How do you think Lusieri would feel about Turner's painting?

Consider the way people interact with the built environment. What are the figures doing? Also consider the relationship between the built environment and nature. How is the natural world painted? How do Turner and Lusieri depict these subjects similarly or differently?

Which artist would you prefer to create a painting of Los Angeles? Why?