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(Extremely Rare American View Book) Les Ports de l'Amerique [8 engraved prints of American Cities: Philadelphia, Boston, Savannah, Fredericksburg, Charlestown, Chesapeake Bay, Quebec, and Port Royal] Graveé d'apres le Tableau de Vernet.

Stock#: 95381
Map Maker: Vernet
Date: 1775 - 1783 circa
Place: Paris?
Color: Uncolored
Condition: VG
Size: 13.5 x 9.75 inches
Price: \$ 12,500.00



Description:

Rare Series of Imaginary American Harbor Views

French Visual Perspective on North America During the Revolution

A suite of eight handsome engravings, being fanciful depictions of several American harbors by the prolific French painter of marine views, Claude Joseph Vernet (1714-1789). According to Gloria Gilda Deák, Vernet recycled European harbor views made years earlier, here labeling them with the names of American ports, all in an effort to meet the demand of the French public to "see" some of America. Any one of these prints is a rarity, we offer here what we believe to be the complete series of all eight engravings. Indeed this is the only complete set of the views that we have been able to locate.

Deák refers to only six of the harbor views in her catalog entry (Savannah, Port Royal, Fredericksburg, Boston, Charlestown, and Philadelphia).

Vernet did not make his drawings on the spot or copy them from authentic depictions, however; he used European scenes he had already painted and passed them off with American attributions in order to take advantage of the French interest in American affairs, especially after the active intervention of the French in the war... Vernet's portrayals of American cities had little to do with their actual appearance, they were welcomed on the French market as manifestations of France's pro-American sympathies. - Deák

Typical of Vernet's coastal views, the present series evokes Mediterranean maritime scenery, rife with overgrown fortified structures, something one might see in Naples rather than on the North American



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coast. Vernet's whimsical American views can claim an affinity with the long history of imaginary depictions of American places, going back to the 15th century with the woodcuts in the illustrated 1494 edition of the Columbus letter, which were also likely adapted from drawings of Mediterranean places. Scholars such as Thomas Busciglio-Ritter have suggested that such imaginative concepts of America were part and parcel of the transatlantic aesthetic exchange, motivated in this case by a European need to understand America through established visual representations:

When Claude-Joseph Vernet... decided to tackle the subject of "American ports," it was through the figment of his imagination and aesthetic culture that he therefore translated the scenes. Recalled from Rome by King Louis XV (1710 - 1774) to paint a series of views of ports of France, a daunting work that would keep him busy for eleven years between 1754 and 1765, the artist produced, in parallel, a series of medallion-shaped views of supposed harbors along the North American coast. More than they attest to Vernet's lack of knowledge about Atlantic colonies, the pictures, which were turned into line engravings, reveal the need for European artists and audiences to comprehend the landscape of America through well-known formulaic aesthetics. Dotted with fantastic lighthouses, defense forts, walls, and crenelated towers, the shoreline of British and French America appears as if extracted from a reverie by Claude Lorrain or an Italian countryside landscape by Nicolas Poussin (1594 - 1665). One of Vernet's views, labeled Entrance to Chesapeake Bay, even faithfully reproduces the architecture of the two towers marking the entrance to the harbor of La Rochelle, on France's oceanic coast. A mirror image, Chesapeake thus adopts the visual traits of a major French port involved both in transatlantic commercial exchange with the Americas and in the Atlantic slave trade. A similar process of visual translation appears in Vernet's additional harbor views: Savannah, Philadelphia, Port Royal (Nova Scotia), Fredericksburg (Virginia), and Boston. Roamed by elegant promeneurs, the fictitious coastlines have no topographic value whatsoever. Though political undertones could be suggested (especially for Port Royal, a French stronghold lost to Britain in 1710), Vernet's paintings, known only through printed reproductions, became a fully transatlantic object. It is undoubtable that these images were destined to be circulated over a culturally-diverse geography, attuned to the Neoclassicism developed by cosmopolitan art circles in Rome. - Busciglio-Ritter.

Donald H. Cresswell has pinpointed the sources for several of Vernet's American views, which often incorporated reversed images of select parts of more elaborate European maritime views. More often than not the source prints were large engravings made after Vernet's *Ports de France* series of paintings. For instance, a circa 1754 print of the port of Marseille, *L'Entree du Port de Marseille*, engraved by Charles-Nicolas Cochin, clearly served as a model for Vernet's Port Royal and Philadelphia



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views. Another print by Cochin (after Vernet), *Le Port de la Rochelle*, was the source for the view of Chesapeake Bay. The Boston view was partly based on an oil painting, *Marine. Retour de la Peche*, painted between 1755 and 1760.

Contextualizing the prints within the wider realm of illustrated Americana may shed light on how European perspectives and aspirations manifested in maritime maps and views of America. What did European viewers make of such fanciful depictions? Creswell suggests:

Too often in our search for truth we hear the word "fraud" connected to such prints, but we need to exercise caution in judging the picture makers of the late eighteenth century. We can neither assume a condescending attitude as we might with fifteenth-century printers who repeated the same woodcuts with various saints' names in devotional books... we might take Robin C. Collingwood's view of aesthetic theory at the time of these prints to see that a dichotomy existed between those who asked "what are the rules for composing a picture?" and those who asked "what is the most effective way of composing this particular picture?" The older, traditional artists were those who engraved these harbor views after Vernet and Paton... Art theory was undergoing a major transition between the traditional and the modern during the late eighteenth century, and prints by conservative artists working in older traditions should not shock the historian. Instead, the historian should consider these prints within both traditions for traces of veracity - Late Eighteenth-Century American Harbor Views Derived from Joseph Vernet and Richard Paton, page 61.

The present atlas of views comprises the following engravings:

- *Vue du Port Philadelphie dans L'Amerique. Graveé d'apres le Tableau de Vernet.*
- *L'Entrée au Port de Boston...*
- *Vue du Port de Savanah...[Savannah, Georgia]*
- *Le Port de Fredericsbourg...[Virginia]*
- *L'Arrivée Au Port de Charles Town [Charleston, South Carolina]*
- *Entrée dans la Baye de Chesapeak...*
- *Entrée au Port de Quebec...*
- *Vüe du Port Royal... [Nova Scotia]*

Rarity

We cannot locate any complete sets of Vernet's American views either in institutional collections or having come through the antiquarian market.



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As far as the individual prints are concerned, Deák described examples of three of the views (Savannah, Port Royal, and Fredericksburg) in the I. N. Phelps Stokes Collection at New York Public; also noting examples of the Boston and Charlestown views in "the association's" collections; and one of Philadelphia held at the Library of Congress. Busciglio-Ritter illustrates the Library of Congress's example of the Chesapeake Bay view in his Ph.D. dissertation. No examples in RBH.

Detailed Condition:

Oblong octavo. Contemporary marbled wrappers. Some wear to the wrappers. 8 engraved plates. Ample margins. Engraved images measuring approximately 9 x 7 inches. Overall condition is very good.