



CHRISTOPH HEINRICH KNIEP

1755 Hildesheim - Naples 1825

The Bay of Naples seen from Posillipo, in the Background Vesuvius

Pen and brown ink, brown wash. Probably executed between 1787 and 1799

645 x 885 mm

PROVENANCE: Private collection, France

As a young man of twenty-six, Kniep left home in 1781 bound for Italy. He was never to return to his native northern Germany. After a short spell in Rome, he settled permanently in Naples in 1785. In an obituary published on Kniep's death in 1825 a journalist noted: *Naples, this veritable Eldorado, this inexhaustible gold mine for the landscapist and draughtsman, had long been the object of Kniep's deepest yearning: he was firm in the knowledge that Salvator Rosa, Claude Lorrain, and other great masters had gathered the material for their finest paintings in the peculiarly diverse surroundings of Naples, Sorrento, Capri, Amalfi, Vietri and Lacava.*¹

Philipp Hackert too was a regular visitor to Naples from 1782 onwards. He had excellent connections to the Neapolitan monarchy and was appointed court painter to Ferdinand IV in 1786. He enjoyed exceptional success in his time as a painter of *vedute*. Kniep owed his own decision to concentrate on landscape drawings to Hackert's influence.

Kniep's meeting with Goethe decisively shaped his later life. In 1787, Goethe finally embarked on his long-awaited journey to Italy and set off from Carlsbad on the first step of his travels. On his arrival in Rome he stayed with Wilhelm Tischbein, with whom he travelled to Naples on 22 February 1787.² In his autobiography Tischbein describes how the meeting came about: *Then I sought out my friend Kniep, who had been living in Naples for a considerable time [...]. I had already told Goethe a great deal about him, about his exceptional talents and great skill in landscape drawing – a genre to which he had dedicated himself exclusively – and Goethe had grown eager to meet him [...]. When I knocked on his door a faint voice called out 'Enter!' But I quickly recognised the voice and when I opened the door and he saw me he sprang up from his drawing, embraced me and said: 'You come as a veritable guardian angel!'. In his parlour I saw on the walls a large number of drawings of the finest spots in the surroundings of Naples, all of which he had made before the motif [...]. When he heard that Goethe was also in Naples his joy was even greater and he immediately accompanied me to see him. Goethe found him pleasant and henceforward he would visit us daily. Goethe commissioned drawings of Neapolitan sites from him and I entreated him to take Kniep with him to Sicily in my stead; since on their journey he would make him drawings of the finest sites, and thus a double advantage might be gained: for Kniep, the journey would be a piece of lifelong good fortune, and Goethe would be blessed with a visible remembrance of it through the drawings. And so it was decided; and Kniep travelled with him.*³

On his return from Sicily, Kniep moved into a rented house in Chiaia shared with Wilhelm Tischbein and Heinrich Meyer. Writing to Goethe in summer 1788, Kniep noted: *We are living in Caja [sic] and have all 4 elements at first hand, that is all that I can say about the position of the house, and thus you know everything; from our windows Vesuvius at the left, immediately ahead Capri and Posilippo [sic] to the right, the light of morning or a clear moon is beyond price.*⁴

Goethe took it upon himself to continue to sponsor Kniep after the journey and obtained commissions for him from Weimar and Gotha. Kniep's reputation as Goethe's travelling companion led to increased demand for his finished drawings. August Emil Leopold, Herzog von Sachsen-Gotha und Altenburg, Herzogin Anna Amalia von Sachsen Weimar und Eisenach, Fürst Moritz Lichtenberg and Graf Ernst Friedrich Herbert zu Münster were among his many friends, patrons and clients. Kniep led the drawing class at the Academy in Naples and was named Professor in 1811. He died in

¹ Haller of Stuttgart (C. F. C. Haller), Obituary: *Christoph Heinrich Kniep, Zeichner und Professor an der königlichen Akademie der schönen Künste in Neapel*, in *Kunst-Blatt, Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände*, VI, Stuttgart 1825, p. 262.

² Georg Striehl, *Christoph Heinrich Kniep – Zeichner an Goethes Seite. Zwischen Klassizismus, Realismus und Romantik*, Manfred Boetzkes (ed.), Roemer-Museum Hildesheim, Lamspringe 1992, p. 12.

³ Lothar Brieger (ed.), *Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, Aus meinem Leben*, Berlin 1922, p. 237 f. Cited after Georg Striehl, *Der Zeichner Christoph Heinrich Kniep (1755-1825). Landschaftsauffassung und Antikenrezeption*, Hildesheim/Zurich/New York 1998, p. 7.

⁴ Kniep in a letter to Goethe dated 17 (July/August) 1788, cited after Georg Striehl, op. cit., 1998, appendix, *Briefe Knieps an Goethe*, p. 298 f.

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1825. A Protestant, he was buried outside the city limits in an area known as S. Carlo all’Arena near the church of the same name.

The present drawing belongs to a group of large-format, highly finished landscapes, the majority of which were executed in the years 1787 to 1799. The drawings were made *sur le motif* and their particular charm lies in the melding of an ideal conception of landscape with very precise observation of nature. The drawing depicts a view of the Gulf of Naples from Posillipo hill. The city of Naples lies to the left, with the long esplanade of the Riviera di Chiaia stretching towards Castel dell’Ovo on the distant headland. Vesuvius is shown on the far horizon and at the right is the Monti Lattari range. An expansive, highly complex ideal landscape fills the foreground, rich in closely observed natural detail such as the crisp filigree foliage of the oaks, the striking silhouette of the tall palm tree, the delicately defined garland of leaves linking a pair of vines, the rock formation and the harmoniously distributed plant still lifes bordering the lower edge of the image. The impression of an idealised, Arcadian world is underscored not least by the bucolic staffage figures and women in flowing classical dress offering weary wanderers grapes from their basket. It is not surprising that drawings like this were so highly prized by travellers from all over Europe wishing to take home a souvenir of their Grand Tour.

A closely related pen and ink drawing heightened with watercolour is now in the collection of the Goethe-Museum in Düsseldorf. It depicts a similar view of the Bay of Naples, albeit with numerous differences in the landscape elements and handling of detail in the foreground [Fig. 1].⁵

⁵ Georg Striehl, op. cit., 1998, p. 329, no. 20, repr. p. 149, fig. 169. – Georg Striehl, op. cit., 1992, p. 89, repr. p. 41.

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Fig. 1: *View of Naples*, c.1788-94,
Watercolour over pen and ink, 515 x 720 mm.
Goethe-Museum, Düsseldorf [inv. 398/1960].