



In the fall of 1187, Saladin and his forces besieged the city of Jerusalem.

It was not the first time the ancient city was subjected to a siege by foreigners. That also happened in 70 AD, when the Romans besieged the city before destroying it.

This image depicts an artist's interpretation of the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD. David Roberts—a member of Britain's Royal Academy—created the oil-on-canvas in 1850, calling it "The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans Under the Command of Titus, A.D. 70."

The original painting—measuring 7 x 12 feet—is now lost. What we know about it comes from lithographs copied from the painting before it went missing.

The trail, of the original, became obscure after 1961, when the enormous work of art was sold in London to an Italian art dealer. We pick-up its trail, just before that sale, with information provided by Vision.org:

The original, dating from the mid-19th century, was sold at auction in 1961 to an Italian art dealer in London. The painting made its way to Rome and was sold shortly thereafter, but there is no record of the transaction.

The original lithograph from which this picture is reproduced is owned by the Jerusalem Historical Society. Its president, author and journalist J.S. Peebles, has authored a book titled The Destruction of Jerusalem.

He began a search for the original painting after he saw a damaged lithographic reproduction in Texas. The 1850 lithograph, measuring 27.5 inches by 42 inches, was taken from the original oil painting, which was an incredible 7 by 12 feet.

David Roberts, a Scottish-born artist, rose from poverty to become one of the most popular painters of the 19th century. He traveled extensively in the Middle East in 1839, creating well over 250 paintings and drawings beautifully depicting majestic and historic scenes of this ancient land. His pictures of the "Holy Land" were his most famous; they catapulted him to his first great success as an artist.

In order to ensure the greatest possible accuracy in this particular painting, which was completed in 1849, Roberts called upon the writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, an eyewitness to the Roman siege and the destruction of Jerusalem. Josephus's account of this turning point in Jewish history is the most extensive account of the event in existence today.

... Many art collectors and critics consider The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem to be the finest work of the prolific Roberts. When it premiered in London, it won unanimous acclaim from critics. But the painting disappeared in 1854, reappearing only briefly at the 1961 sale at Christie's auction house.

Since Peebles began his search for the missing original, he has located two other lithographic reproductions, which, like the one he first stumbled across, were made by 19th-century Belgian platemaker Louis Haghe. Haghe was considered the premier lithographer of that time.

From these well-preserved lithographs and with the help of scientists from the Xerox Corporation's Digital Imaging Technology Center in Rochester, New York, the Jerusalem Historical Society has launched an effort to create a reproduction that will match as closely as possible the original luster and color of the Haghe print.

William Thackeray, a contemporary of David Roberts, said this of the very-prolific, Scottish-born artist:

... he has sketched the spires of Antwerp, the peaks of Lebanon, the rocks of Calton Hill, the towers and castles that rise by the Rhine; the airy Cairo minarets, the solemn Pyramids and vast Theban columns, and the huts under the date-trees along the banks of the Nile. (See the biography of Roberts at the Tate's website.)

Click on the image for a full-page view.

Credits:

Image online via Wikimedia Commons; David Roberts completed his original painting, on which this lithograph is based, in 1849. This image depicts a lithograph, made in 1850, by Louis Haghe. Public Domain.

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