

# Vernet the magician

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The reappearance of someone like Vernet in the art market is a red-letter day for collectors. The Marquis de Marigny, Director General of the King's Buildings, wrote: "Chardin and Vernet are two splendid magicians. We would say of the latter that he begins by creating the countryside, and draws on his stock of men, women and children to people his painting (...). Then he provides them with weather, sky, season, happiness or misery, as he sees fit (...). Jupiter calls this ruling the world; he is wrong. Vernet calls this making pictures, and he is right." Vernet worked on port scenes for ten years, frequently moving around, while also accepting a large number of private commissions. He then decided to move to Paris, where he died in 1789. During his final years, the painter produced a series of paintings on the same theme, varying the position of the figures and

the intensity of the colours, adding or removing a ship or a boat, and so on. In around 1757, he discovered the costly and precious medium of copper. The one offered for sale by Audap-Mirabaud (Drouot, Paris) is painted in a harmonious range of pearly colours, with subtle gradations of warm and cool shades. Wherever the eye falls, it finds enchanting, beautifully observed details blending seamlessly into the composition. In her monograph of 1926, Florence Ingersoll-Smouse tells us that the painting was commissioned in 1780 by an abbot called Alaume. We next find it with a matching picture of 1781 in Prince Gallitzin's collections. Did the pair feature in sales staged in Moscow in 1817-1818? In March 1937, they are mentioned in the sale of the estate of Baron Emmanuel Leonino. This son of a Genoese banker (who moved to Paris in around 1860) married Gustave de Rothschild's daughter Juliette in 1892 – a wedding that was disrupted by violent anti-Semitic demonstrations. Leonino was a collector, like the Rothschilds and Ephrussi (his relations by marriage), with a particular penchant for 18th-century French art.

Anne Foster