

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

ALOYS ZÖTL

Freistadt 1803 - 1887 Eferding
Austrian School

STARFISH

Watercolour and grey ink over black chalk on paper

H. 545 mm; L. 435 mm

Signed and dated lower right: *Alois Zötl fecit am 13. Oktober 1879*

Inscriptions: *Würmer. Taf.* (lower left); *31.* (upper centre) and *Die Sonne. Asterias papposa.* (lower centre)

DATE: 1879

PROVENANCE:

Private collection, France

Between 1831 and the end of his life in 1887, Aloys Zötl created a beautiful bestiary, a series of meticulously created watercolours, mostly describing animals. These aesthetic depictions of animals are both scientific (with captions) and completely imaginary, all full of life and without any dryness. Zötl places his animals against landscape backgrounds that are also drawn and coloured with careful precision. This strange combination of science and fantasy mysteriously attracts us and with our modern gaze we could describe them as surrealist.



Buffon, *Histoire naturelle* (...),
The Unicorn Rhinoceros, Leipzig
edition, 1767.



Joseph Baptist Schütz, *Allgemeine Erdkunde oder Beschreibung
aller Länder der fünf Welttheile*, Vienne, 1830: View of
Bombardopolis Island of Santo Domingo.

Zötl is inspired by the many natural history and ethnographic publications that were in his library, which has never been dispersed and is now owned by a descendant. His favourite books

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were *The Metamorphoses* by Ovid, *Schütz's allgemeine Erdkunde*¹ and Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*,² a text published in German as early as 1750-1754. Zötl worked with an encyclopaedic mind; beginning with mammals, he then painted fish, shellfish, reptiles, birds, insects and amphibians. During the final year of his life, when he painted a huge amount, he treated all sorts of themes. He dated his watercolours by always giving the precise day. He never sought to publish or exhibit his watercolours which he kept in four bound albums, containing a total of 400 sheets.

Through their father, Franz Xavier Zötl, Aloys and his brothers received excellent training in drawing. He drew two albums for them with animals taken from old master prints. As the oldest son, Aloys took over his father's dyeing company. With his wife, Theresia Edtmeir, he settled in Eferding a small town in Upper Austria 60 km from his hometown. He never travelled, unlike his brother Joseph who described natural history cabinets of Germany and England and brought him from London a box of watercolour colours.

The work of Aloys Zötl remained completely unknown until 320 of his watercolours appeared on the market in 1955 and 1956 in Paris.³ Zötl's strange world caused a sensation and seduced many collectors. André Breton, who acquired eleven sheets in 1955 wrote the preface to the second auction in which he praised Zötl's visionary creativity. According to him it was "the most luxurious bestiary that has ever been seen."



Aloys Zötl, *Leatherback sea turtle. Testudo coriacea*, 1867, watercolour on paper, H. 325 mm; W. 420 mm, private collection.



Aloys Zötl, *The Hoolock*, 1863, watercolour on paper H. 295 mm; W. 360 mm, private collection.

¹ Joseph Baptist Schütz, *Allgemeine Erdkunde oder Beschreibung aller Länder der fünf Welttheile*, Vienna, 1830.

² *L'Histoire Naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roi*, an encyclopaedic collection in French of books by Buffon, published between 1749 and 1804. The original edition of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* comprises 36 volumes grouped in series: History of the Earth and Man, Quadrupeds, Birds, Minerals, Supplements.

³ Sale Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 19 December 1955 (150 watercolours from the studio); and 3 May 1956 (170 watercolours, preface by André Breton).