

472 BOQUETA DE WOISERI, JOHN L. – [Jean-Louis Boqueta de Woiseri]

Engraver, Copperplate Printer

Norfolk, Richmond

Engraver and Copperplate Printer in Norfolk (1818) and Richmond (1818-19).

Boqueta is an enigmatic figure in the American printing trade, an artisan from France who apparently made two tours of North America (1802-1811 & 1817-1821) before returning to anonymity in Europe; those tours created a record of urban America in the early-Republic era in images of Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Boston, Richmond, and Charleston.

The first clear evidence of Boqueta's presence in America is found in public records for New Orleans in 1802, though he may have been there as early as 1797 or 1798. In early 1802, President Jefferson instructed the U.S. ambassador in Paris, Robert Livingston, to approach the French government about purchasing that city in order to guarantee that U.S. citizens in the Mississippi Valley had continued access to the coastal and international maritime trade during the ongoing Napoleonic Wars – negotiations that led to the Louisiana Purchase the following year. Shortly thereafter, Jefferson requested that French colonial officials in New Orleans send him copies of maps and charts for that area of the lower Mississippi. It seems those officials could not fulfill his request, as no printed copies of such items then existed, and that Boqueta set out to fill the imprint void, either on his own initiative or at the behest of those local officials. The result was publication of *A View of New Orleans Taken from the Plantation of Marigny* just before Louisiana was transferred to the United States in 1803. Copies of that engraving and an accompanying map of the port city soon found their way to Washington. (Copies of both were later hung on a dining-room wall at Monticello.)

Boqueta moved quickly to capitalize on public interest in the Louisiana Purchase by offering to publish, by subscription, copies of his New Orleans engravings, printed from the original plates, starting in February 1804. It is unclear where Boqueta resided when his subscription campaign began, as notices were printed in Baltimore and Alexandria newspapers that year, as well as ones in Charleston and Savannah in 1806, and in Baltimore and Norfolk in 1807. It could be that he was travelling from place to place then, filling local demand from plates in his possession; but it seems more likely that Boqueta established a workshop somewhere from which he advertised his prints at some distance. Some histories of New Orleans report that Boqueta left there in 1804 for Philadelphia, which may have been the case, as the only indication of an ensuing long-term residence is for New York City in 1807. Such a relocation would have put the artisan at the center of the American printing industry of that time, as well as explain the later publication of a landscape image of Philadelphia during his second tour. Still, wherever he resided then, Boqueta gained a reputation from his New Orleans engraving for images that exhibited unusual accuracy.

In New York, Boqueta was described as a "painter & engraver" by an 1807 city directory. He described himself as a "designer, drawer, geographer, and engineer" in advertising notices he published during his first tour. Together, the two descriptions illustrate Boqueta's *modus operandi* during his American tours. His aquatint engravings were very finely detailed and so time-consuming to produce; notices published during his second tour indicate that he first produced a painting and then completed the engraving from that source. Such a process is

clearly evident in the context of his *View of Boston Taken on the South Side of Boston*. In the winter of 1809-10, Boqueta travelled to Boston where he painted a landscape of the city as a reference for the later engraving; in June 1810, he solicited subscribers by notices placed in a New York daily for the new engraving of Boston that he had recently completed after "long and tedious work." That chronology suggests the production period of these detailed landscapes was measured in weeks and not days. The painting itself was then exhibited as an example of his competence, before he sold it in a lottery in Richmond in 1818.

After the 1810 subscription campaign for his Boston landscape, Boqueta is not seen again in either the newspaper or public record of the United States until 1817. The interval suggests that he returned to Europe before the War of 1812 erupted, and that he only returned once those hostilities ceased. But at the same time, a notice that Boqueta published in Savannah in December 1820 thanked the American public for twenty years of generous patronage, suggesting that he was still in the United States during this period, working in obscurity.

Boqueta's reappearance came in Baltimore in July 1817, where he began a tour of the cities of the South that continued until at least May 1821. From the advertisements he published in this period, it is clear that he had now adopted an itinerancy, rather than attempting to establish himself as a tradesman in any one place as previously. His arrival in each city was heralded by an announcement of an exhibition of his paintings and engravings; that was followed by a subscription campaign to finance publication of new aquatint engravings, now including portraits of prominent Americans; those advertisements also reported the ready availability of prints of his earlier works, as well as offering his services for hire to private individuals; then, just prior to his leaving that locale, he often conducted a lottery in which parts of his exhibition were offered as a prize. From the start of this new tour, Boqueta offered a print of the city of Charleston for sale, indicating that he stopped there sometime during his first tour, most likely before he landed in New York.

Boqueta resided in Baltimore from July 1817 until the spring of 1818. The exhibition that he mounted there was one of landscape paintings, including a representation of Baltimore he took from a 1752 sketch. His exhibition was followed by a subscription drive in support of a new "View of the City of Baltimore," based on a painting he finished early in his residence there, a notice that stressed the city's landmarks made famous by the unsuccessful British siege of September 1814. Yet the end of Boqueta's residence there was apparently the one time that he did not conduct a lottery upon leaving, whether to lighten his baggage or to finance his removal. Rather, it seems that he devoted much of his time there constructing the large, moving panorama that became the centerpiece of ensuing exhibitions.

In spring 1818, Boqueta removed to Norfolk, but did not focus on that port alone. Instead, he took advantage of the newly-established steamboat lines that ran between Norfolk and Richmond to put together a presence in both cities. In June, Boqueta set up his new "*Grand Moving Theatrical and Mechanical Panorama*" in Norfolk, then opened his typical exhibition of paintings in Richmond that July; the *Panorama* continued with daily performances until November, when Boqueta concentrated his energies in Richmond in advance of the 1818-19 session of the General Assembly.

Boqueta's Virginia advertising reported that he

"executes PORTRAIT, MINIATURE, and every other species of FINE PAINTING, both in Oil and Water colours, in a style which he flatters himself would satisfy the best judges of the art. He also ENGRAVES on COPPER, BRASS, &C. &C. and executes Copper Plate Printing in all its variety."

This period also marks his introduction of a portrait series presenting the recent Virginia presidents: Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe.

Yet the most intriguing of Boqueta's offerings in Virginia was the *Panorama* that he set up in Norfolk. The initial notice for its opening provided a lengthy description of the "ingeniously executed" apparatus that was "25 feet broad, 12 feet high, and 18 feet deep." Within this structure, three galleries presented large paintings mounted on up-right rollers that scrolled through changing scenes of mythology and history, with differing story-lines in each gallery. Attendance was apparently considerable at first, but waned during the fall, resulting in a halving of the price of admission in the month before it was closed in November 1818.

Boqueta moved on to Charleston in the spring of 1819, where the *Panorama* was quickly reinstalled; interest there seems to have been even greater than in Norfolk, as the artisan installed a new group of scrolling scenes in the structure in December 1820, which helped sustain its popularity into at least May 1821. His longer stay in Charleston also allowed him to produce two new views of the city, as well as publish a single-sheet montage of six of his city landscapes – Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Boston, Richmond, and Charleston – as *A View of the First Cities of the United States*. In the winter of 1819-20, Boqueta also made a side trip to Savannah in hopes of soliciting subscriptions for an engraving of that city; but that effort apparently failed, as no copy is known extant of the imprint he proposed.

As elsewhere, Boqueta eventually sold off the paintings he brought with him to Charleston. The last notice for such a sale in May 1821 evidently marks the end of his second tour of the United States, as Boqueta is not seen in either the newspaper or public record again. No further trace of him has been found in European sources currently available on this side of the Atlantic, so leaving both his origins and his fate an open question.

No Personal Data yet found.

Sources: MEDSA nos. 9160, 9161, 9162, 9163, 9164, 46514, 92853; *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*; *Encyclopedia of Louisiana*; catalogue notes, Historic New Orleans Collection; newspaper notices in New York (1807-10), Baltimore (1817-18), Norfolk (1818), Richmond (1818-19), Savannah (1819), and Charleston (1819-21).