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A RIVER OF GOLD AROUND THE WALLS

PROBST'S WALLS OF BABYLON, AN AUGSBURG OPTICAL VIEW PREPARED TO TURN DAY INTO NIGHT

[Vue d'optique.] PROBST, GEORG BALTHASAR (1732–1801), publisher. *Babylonii muri, miraculum mundi primum. Les Murailles de Babylone, premiere miracle du Monde. Le Mura di Babilonia, il primo miracolo del Mondo. Die Babylonische Mauren, erste Wunderwerck der Welt.* Augsburg: Georg Balthasar Probst, ca. 1770.

Hand-coloured etching and engraving on paper, the sheet trimmed close to the borderline of the image (405 × 295 mm) and laid down on thick card with perimeter strips. The lettering found on full-margined impressions is trimmed away: the reversed title and plate number above the image, and the four-language caption, series designation and imprint below it. Prepared on the verso for transmitted light: the three rings of walls and the obelisk are outlined with rows of small cuts and pinholes, the river and the statue on the gate are made to carry the light, and rows of short and cross-shaped cuts behind the windows and along the parapets are washed over on the verso with red and blue-green. Early manuscript title in brown ink on the verso, “Les muraille des Babylone premiere [sic] miralle [sic] du monde”.



The same sheet lit from the front and from behind.

[Click to Explore the Day/Night Effect](#)

A hand-coloured optical view of the Walls of Babylon, the first plate of Georg Balthasar Probst's Augsburg series of the Wonders of the World, prepared at an early date as a day-and-night transparency. Lit from the front, the city lies in daylight around the river, with its round walls rising in three rings, its hanging gardens and its spiral tower. Lit from behind, the river turns to gold, the walls are ringed with points of white and red light, the statue on the gate glows and the windows of the city shine red, green and white. The preparation survives intact and still works.

In the river at the centre rise the walls of Babylon: three concentric round walls stepping up in tiers, carved with reliefs of hunters and horsemen, set with statues and a gate, and crowned by a domed pavilion; a rowing boat lies at their foot. On the right a monumental gate carries a tall obelisk on a pedestal, with a female statue between lions. Behind it stretch a long palace and a tall tower wound by a spiral and topped by a red dome. On the left, beyond the river, the hanging gardens rise on two storeys of arcades crowned by trees; a bridge on piers carries walkers and horses across the water, and a round bastion, the town, a distant pyramid and a range of mountains close the view.

In the foreground on the left a tall square tower opens in an arched gate, where soldiers with shields gather and a man leads a knight's horse; a ship with a furled sail and a red pennant lies moored at the quay, and a crocodile with open jaws sprawls on the bank below. In the centre one man leans on a squared block while a helmeted companion points towards the walls, and on the right two soldiers with a halberd and a shield look on.

Like every *vue d'optique*, the print was designed to be seen through a lens, in the drawing-room zogrscope or in the showman's box. This impression can also be shown by night. Lit from the front, it shows the city by day; when the front is darkened and a candle or lamp is placed behind the sheet, the scene turns to night. The river fills with golden light, against which ships, boats and bridge stand out as dark silhouettes. Rows of white and red points ring the three walls and trace the obelisk, while the statue on the gate glows gold. The arcades of the gardens, the windows of the tower, the palace and the town shine red, green and white. Sky, mountains and figures stay dark.

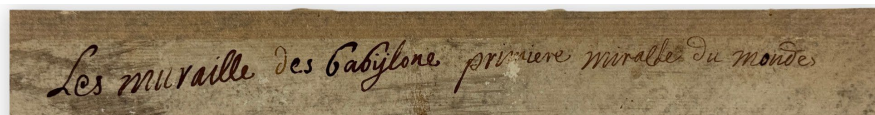
The effect was obtained on the verso, where the colour behind the windows and along the parapets is laid directly over the cuts. The manuscript French title on the back allowed the operator to identify the view from behind, where the subject cannot be seen, while preparing or changing the display.



The gate lit from behind: the obelisk traced by rows of points, the statue glowing gold.



The rings of walls: rows of cuts washed with red and blue-green on the verso (reversed), and the same walls lit from behind.



The manuscript title on the verso.

Optical views were printed in large numbers and sold widely in the second half of the eighteenth century. Produced chiefly in London, Paris, Bassano and Augsburg, they served as entertainment and as a window on distant places, enjoyed at home through the zograscope and in the streets through the *mondo nuovo* of itinerant showmen. Augsburg became a major centre of the genre from the mid-1760s, and its publishers addressed a European clientele.

Ordinary views were often turned into night scenes. Pricking, cutting and backing the sheets with coloured silk or translucent paper, then alternating light from the front and from behind, allowed one sheet to show the same scene by day and by night. A set of sixty-nine views, assigned by the library to Augsburg and mounted as a roll in the second half of the eighteenth century, now in the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome, is entirely

prepared for night viewing in this manner, and a Milanese *mondo nuovo* of 1792 in the Cinémathèque française still holds its fifteen hand-coloured engravings, most of them perforated, together with the shutters that let in the light from front and back.

When the plate was made, nothing of the walls of Babylon was known from the site, and the image owes nothing to their actual appearance. Its composition recalls, in reverse, the seventh plate of Philips Galle's *Octo mundi miracula*, engraved after Maarten van Heemskerck and published in Antwerp in 1572, which already shows the gate with the obelisk and the statue on its pedestal, the spiral tower and the long palace, the three rings of round walls rising from the river with their statues and gate, the hanging gardens on arcades crowned by trees, the bridge on piers and the mountains closing the view. The Augsburg plate leaves out Galle's queen on horseback shooting at a lion, and gives the foreground to armed men, two figures at a great stone block and a quay where a ship is moored.

GEORG BALTHASAR PROBST (1732-1801) belonged to the Augsburg family of print publishers descended from the business of Jeremias Wolff (1663-1724), continued by his son-in-law Johann Balthasar Probst (1673-1750). After Johann Balthasar's death in 1750 the business passed to several successors, and Georg Balthasar gradually enlarged his share, publishing under his own name with an imperial privilege. His optical views, numbered and lettered in several languages, run to more than 400 sheets; they are catalogued by S. von Kapff (2010).

The Wonders of the World comprise seven plates numbered 161 to 167: the Walls of Babylon, the Colossus of Rhodes, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, the Temple of Diana at Ephesus, the Roman amphitheatre and the Pharos of Alexandria, each caption stating its place in the sequence. Impressions with lettered margins, such as that in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, carry above the image the reversed title "LES MURAILLES DE BABYLONE" and the number 161, and below it the caption in Latin, French, Italian and German, "Med. Fol°. N° 43" and the imprint of Georg Balthasar Probst with the imperial privilege.

CONDITIONS: Trimmed close to the borderline of the image, without the lettering; two fine vertical creases in the sky; a small brown spot and a few specks of red colour in the sky; edges slightly irregular with small losses, margins reinforced on the verso. Colour fresh and bright; the night effect in full working order.

PROVENANCE: Early manuscript title in French on the verso, indicating use in a French-speaking context.

CENSUS: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Estampes et de la photographie, LI-72 (9)-FOL, with lettered margins (gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6949583r).

REFERENCES: S. VON KAPFF, *Guckkastenbilder aus dem Augsburger Verlag von Georg Balthasar Probst (1732-1801): Gesamtkatalog*, Weißenhorn: Konrad, 2010; P. GALLE

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