

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Pasquale Mattej

(Formia 1813 – 1879 Naples)

*Figures observing the  
volcanic activity on the  
Crater of Vesuvius*

c. 1850

oil on canvas

61.5 x 74.8 cm.;

24 ½ x 19 ½ in.

signed lower right: *P. Mattej*

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## Provenance

With Galleria Simonetti, Rome;

Anonymous sale, London, Bonhams, 25 October 2016, lot 128;

Private collection, Germany;

Anonymous sale, Berlin, Grisebach, 29 May – 1 June 2019, lot 125, where acquired by the present owners.

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LONDON

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This view of figures on the crater of Vesuvius observing volcanic activity is a relatively late example, around 1850, of a subject which became very popular with romantic landscape painters in the second half of the eighteenth century. For many centuries since the enormous eruption of AD 79 which destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum, the famous volcano had become a slumbering giant with only sporadic eruptions during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Vesuvius sprang to life again in the eruption of 1631 and, during the eighteenth century erupted no fewer than 6 times, notably in 1767 when the eruption was so severe that it significantly damaged Portici and forced the king and his court to flee back to Naples.

The 1767 eruption was celebrated by several artists such as Pietro Antoniani who painted the red flow of molten lava to spectacular effect counterpointed against a moonlit landscape (as in the example in the present exhibition), Pierre-Jacques Volaire, the acknowledged master of these nocturnal views of Vesuvius who observed another severe eruption in 1771 and painted several views of it which were exhibited at the Paris Salon, and the English artist Joseph Wright of Derby, who also painted nocturnal views of Vesuvius in the manner of Volaire, which are amongst his most dramatic landscapes. To an age which saw the formulation of the Sublime in Edmund Burke's famous *Philosophical Inquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Vesuvius came to epitomize that fashionably romantic concept and this was undoubtedly part of its attraction to tourists in the eighteenth century. But there was also a strong scientific interest in natural phenomena such as volcanoes in the eighteenth century: the British Envoy Sir William Hamilton, being a keen vulcanologist, often led parties up to the crater of Vesuvius. This painting by Mattej is a somewhat rare nineteenth-century depiction of this phenomenon showing that the fashion for ascending the volcano to observe the flames and smoke continued well into the nineteenth century, even if Vesuvius had, with the exception of the dramatic eruption of 1871, come to be regarded by artists more as a slumbering than an angry giant, as can be seen in Edward William Cooke's calm view of the volcano observed from the entrance of a fisherman's hut in the present exhibition.

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Pascale Mattej studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Naples under G. Maldarelli and, later, A. Sminck van Pitloo. From 1837 he was active as a draughtsman and publisher involved with the *Poliorama Pittoresco* and later with the magazine *L'Arlecchino*. He exhibited some paintings and watercolour views at the Mostra Borbonica of 1848 and in 1849 painted the *Disembarkation of Pope Pius IX from Portici* (Naples, Museo di San Martino). At the end of the 1840s, Mattej executed some sketches with numerous costumed figures for *La festa dei quattro altari a Torre del Greco*, *Pulcinella imbonitore*, (Naples, Museo di San Martino). His chief artistic preoccupations were the documentation of historical events and folklore traditions and these were reflected in the Bourbon biennial exhibitions of 1855 and 1859, where he exhibited *The landing and solemn reception of the King of Portugal* and *The procession of Corpus Christi in the Abbey of Montecassino*. He was also an accomplished landscape painter who tempered the precision of the Hackert tradition of meticulous view painting, with a romantic feeling for colouristic effects and chiaroscuro.