Franz Richard Unterberger (Austrian, 1838-1902)
En Route to Pompeii
Oil on canvas

A carriage with wealthy women in flowered bonnets and a man wearing a top hat, speeds down the road toward Pompeii, carrying these tourists to the famed volcano seen spewing smoke in the distance. The driver whips the horses causing the carriage to move at a fast clip and kick up a dusty haze that blends with the soft atmospheric light of a pink and blue sky.

The speed of the carriage has forced the poor man on a donkey to move to the left side of the road. To the right, there is an old beggar man accepting a coin from a child, and a pretty dark-skinned woman in exotic dress holding her baby.

This painting underscores Franz Richard Unterberger’s approach which was to show daily life in the context of a large magnificent vista. In keeping with his credo to present “il puro vero” or “the pure truth”, in this painting he draws a contrast between the classes of people within a setting.

In the late 1860s, Unterberger was captivated by scenes in Italy for which he is best known. He travelled there frequently until the end of his life. He specialized in painting panoramic landscapes and cityscapes, including the daily activities of the people in southern Italy and Venice. His views were suffused with a warm Mediterranean light and a shimmering silvery tone.

The oldest son of an art dealer, Unterberger was born in Innsbruck, Austria. He studied at several leading European academies including the Academy of Munich, the Academy of Weimar, and the Academy of Dusseldorf. Unterberger felt that the market might be more lucrative in Belgium, and therefore moved to Brussels in 1864, a place he would return to throughout his life.

As international tourism grew during this period, Unterberger's works such as En Route to Pompeii depicted many of the popular European and Scandinavian destinations and they found a ready market among the burgeoning middle classes. He developed a large international following and by the late 1870s had exhibited throughout Europe as well as in Philadelphia and Boston. Throughout his career, he was repeatedly awarded with medals.

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