

# WILLIAM HAVELL

(Reading 1782 - London 1857)

## *Sunrise on the Grand Canal of China*

inscribed 'Chinese Canal/W. Havell/No 1' on stretcher verso  
oil on canvas  
33 x 41 cm (13 x 16 in)

**T**HE SUN IS RISING ON THIS ANCIENT AND GRAND waterway of China, the light is piercing through the distant trees and casting long shadows across the water and its industrious traders. The masts of the huge canal junks sway together on the calm water its ripples sparkling under the bright sunshine, while the local boatmen, distinguished by their long plaited dark hair and straw hats, busy themselves preparing for a new day of travel.

Begun in 486 BC the Grand Canal is the longest ancient canal in the world. Starting at Beijing it flows through Tianjin and the provinces of Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang, its total length is roughly 1,770 km (1,114 miles). In 1816 William Havell accepted the post of official artist to the Embassy of China led by William Pitt Amherst, Earl Amherst of Arracan (1773-1857) to the Chinese Emperor Jiaqing. The purpose of the mission was to address 'the complaints of injustice and exactions on the part of the Chinese mandarins from the English merchants at Canton'.

The voyage was made via Madeira, Rio de Janeiro, the Cape and Java. He made many subsequent works of the landscapes encountered during his travels, including the *Garden Scene of the Borganza Coast, Rio de Janeiro* (fig. 1). It is not certain whether he accompanied Amherst to Peking or whether he remained with the ships at the Grand Canal of the River Hai near Tongzhou. It is also unclear at which point he left the Embassy, and whether he was on board HMS *Alceste* when she was wrecked on her return journey. Whilst in China Havell completed several versions of the Grand Canal; in 1827 he exhibited *A View on the Grand Canal near Chong-trieu*. In the same year, he displayed *Sunrise; Entrance to the Grand*

*Canal* at the Royal Watercolour Society and in the following year, he exhibited *View of the Grand Canal, near Changtsieu, China* at the Royal Society of British Artists.

Havell was the son of a drawing master from Reading, and he participated in several sketching societies in the early nineteenth century. After showing an early interest in the medium of watercolours, he began to establish himself as an oil painter in the manner of Richard Wilson and J.M.W. Turner (see Sphinx Fine Art inventory), and he exhibited works at the Royal Academy and the British Institution. Initial success was followed by some disappointing reviews of his idealised treatment of brightly sunlit subjects. Subsequently, Havell accepted the post of official artist to the Embassy of China led by Earl Amherst of Arracan, which set out in 1816. Havell was able to sketch the Chinese countryside as the Embassy took the return route overland from Beijing to Guangzhou. From there he moved to India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he spent six years painting portraits and landscapes before returning to England in 1826. In 1828 he travelled to Italy, returning a year later, subsequently he remained in England, exhibiting vivid landscapes.

A number of Havell's works were engraved, notably a *Series of Picturesque Views of the River Thames*, reproduced in coloured aquatint in 1811 by his uncle Robert I Havell; the latter also published a *Series of Picturesque Views of Noblemen's Seats* (1814-23), to which William contributed. In the late 1830s Havell, together with his brother Frederick James, experimented with 'photogeny' and incurred the hostile rivalry of Henry Fox Talbot, the pioneering inventor of modern photography.



William Havell, *Garden Scene of the Borganza Coast, Rio de Janeiro*, 1827, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Figure 1)



William Havell, *Sunrise on the Grand Canal of China* (Detail)

