

The Market Place at Papantla.



Adela Catherine Breton. (1849-1943). Watercolour on paper. (33.2 X 49.8 cms.) Circa 1894.

The artist was the fortunate daughter of a gentleman of means who was deeply interested in archaeology. She lived with her parents in Camden Crescent in Bath and developed her skills in watercolour painting locally.

As a lady of leisure, she travelled widely and recorded landscapes, buildings and people as she went in France, Italy, Switzerland, Japan, Canada and most importantly and extensively, in Mexico.

She became fascinated by the excavations in Mexico and particularly by the wall paintings on the ruins as they were uncovered. Her interest was fortunate, as they were then left exposed and many rapidly deteriorated. As a result, Adela Breton's watercolours remain as the only record of many wonderful works of art. Breton also recorded the surrounding landscapes and towns of which this picture of Papantla is a rare and attractive example.

The market at Papantla was famous particularly for selling natural vanilla. It was known as 'The city that perfumed the world'. At the time it was recorded, it was the world centre for the vanilla trade. Most vanilla flavouring is now chemically produced but the real pods are still collected in Mexico and sold through this market. The site, of course, is redeveloped and drilling for oil has destroyed farms and reduced Mexico's world share of the vanilla market to 5%.

Breton exhibited her pictures whenever she returned home but sadly for this purpose she stuck many of them down on cheap cardboard. On her death, in Barbados, around 100 watercolours came to the Victoria Art Gallery along with a major conservation task as many have become foxed and stained as a result of being mounted in this way.

A long slow process of conservation is underway and a number of pictures have been adopted by Friends. This one was adopted by The Ambassador from Mexico to the Court of St. James in London after an approach from the Trustees of the Friends. Sadly, His Excellency was recalled before he could see the picture shown.