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The Great Comet of 1881

Stock#: 68385
Map Maker: Trouvelot
Date: 1882
Place: New York
Color: Color
Condition: VG+
Size: 28.4 x 38.2 inches
Price: SOLD



Description:

A Stunning Depiction of a Comet. Made by the "Audubon of the Sky", Etienne Trouvelot.

This is a beautiful color lithograph showing a comet's trajectory made by Etienne Trouvelot, relating his observations made in the fall of 1874. The chromolithograph was published as part of Trouvelot's *Astronomical Drawings* set of 15 plates by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1882.

Trouvelot's drawings are known as some of the best images of the sky ever made. Trouvelot's work was very important at the time, as it provided important images of the stars, planets, and phenomena of the sky at a time when popular interest in astronomy was growing, but photography had not yet become advanced enough to capture such dark images. Trouvelot's images are recognized as the last of the great images of the night sky that surpassed the photography of their day. This comet was also the subject of the first successful photograph of a comet, which shows it as just a small ellipse of light. It



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would take decades for photography to surpass this depiction.

C/1881 K1, also known as the Great Comet of 1881

The comet of 1881 was first discovered by John Tebbutt, the Australian astronomer also credited with the discovery of the Great Comet of 1861, in May of that year. It would become visible in the northern hemisphere by mid-June, when Trouvelot made his drawing, and remain visible to the naked eye until September. The sheer brightness of the object earned it the title Great. It was a long period comet, with a time of revolution of at least two hundred years. A time of orbit of four hundred years has been suggested, giving a return at some point in the 23rd century.

Trouvelot's depiction of the comet is fantastic. The dust trail of the comet lights up the night sky and draws the viewer to the bright speck of light representing the comet itself. Trouvelot chooses an attractive scene for the foreground, showing the observatory he presumably worked at alongside a forested scene.

Trouvelot describes the comet as follows in his *Trouvelot Astronomical Drawings Manual*:

A view of the comet 1881, drawn as if seen with the naked eye, the minute details, however, being reproduced as seen with the telescope. The star-like nucleus is attended by four conical wings which cause it to appear diamond-shaped. The coma appears double, the brilliant inner coma, immediately enveloping the nucleus, being surrounded by a fainter exterior coma, which has a noticeable depression corresponding to that of the inner edge of the principal coma. The tail is divided lengthwise by a dark rift and is brightest on its convex or forward side. An inner portion of the tail, brighter than the rest, is more strongly curved, as if by solar repulsion. Stars are seen through the brighter parts of the tail, as they may be seen even through the coma and nucleus, with little diminution of their light.

Rarity

Trouvelot's prints were originally intended for the astronomical and scientific community and most of the larger US observatories purchased copies of the portfolio. In 2002, B.G. Corbin undertook a census to determine the number of surviving copies of the complete set of 15 prints and was only able to confirm the existence of 4 complete sets.

Detailed Condition: