



Lear resided in Italy for many years, during which time he travelled to Egypt no less than four times between 1849 and 1872. He also visited the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Ireland and the Balkans, and travelled extensively in Greece, the Middle East and India, producing an almost unrivalled legacy of sketches and watercolours. These sketches, which Lear referred to as his 'scraps', were originally intended to inform the evocative oil

FIG. 1
PHILAE ON THE NILE
OIL ON CANVAS

paintings he produced for his small circle of faithful patrons. Some served as the basis for more elaborate exhibition watercolours and also provided material for the lithographic plates of his published travel accounts; but to many, Lear's travel sketches and watercolours now deserve far greater admiration than his finished work.

Lear had turned to landscape and travel imagery from his modestly successful output as an ornithological draughtsman. Originally self-taught, he had also briefly attended the Royal Academy Schools in 1849–50 and was friendly with contemporary artists such as William Holman Hunt. Like all his travels, Lear's two journeys up the Nile, in the winters of 1853–4 and 1866–7, were expeditions to discover and sketch picturesque subjects, undertaken in the pursuit of what he called 'poetical topography' (fig. 2). Egypt's ancient and mysterious sites, the legacy of a powerful lost civilization, certainly carried poetic associations for the Western traveller and his audience; but the Nile itself and the gentle mode of the river journey was to shape Lear's experience of the country and his work in an even more particular way. A sense of slow movement conveys itself to the beholder, for example, in a view Lear took on 3 January 1854 (page 30). Placed midstream, the eye follows the rising shoreline of the Nile bank unfolding from left to right, accentuated by palm trees and small whitewashed domed buildings bathed in glorious Egyptian sunlight. A fellow vessel, a *dahabéeh*, is quietly gliding ahead. In other drawings too, having stepped ashore to visit ancient ruins, Lear never loses sight of the

FIG. 2
MAP OF EGYPT
MURRAY'S HANDBOOK FOR TRAVELLERS IN EGYPT
1858

