

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Philip WEBB (Oxford 1831 - Worth 1915)

A Lion: Study for the Morris & Co. Tapestry 'The Forest', 1887

Watercolour and pencil.
580 x 720 mm. (22 3/4 x 28 3/8 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR WIGHTWICK MANOR, WOLVERHAMPTON.

This large drawing is one of a group of five cartoons of animals executed in c.1866 by Philip Webb as studies for The Forest, a tapestry designed by William Morris, John Henry Dearle and Webb. The tapestry was woven by William Knight, John Martin and William Sleath; all senior weavers at Morris's tapestry works, Merton Abbey, in 1887. The tapestry depicts five animals – a peacock, hare, fox, raven and lion – against a background of acanthus leaves, with two banners above which read 'The beasts that be in woodland waste' and 'now sit and see nor ride or haste'.

The large tapestry, which measured 122 x 460 cm., was exhibited at the London Arts & Crafts Exhibition of 1890 and was acquired from Morris by Alexander (Aleco) Ionides for the study of his home at 1 Holland Park. In 1926 the tapestry entered the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

The present sheet is a cartoon for the Lion at the centre of the tapestry, and also depicts the acanthus leaves which encircle the beast. Four other drawings by Webb for The Forest tapestry – a Fox, a Raven, a Peacock and a Hare - were acquired in 1900 by the longstanding Morris & Co. client Laurence W. Hodson (1864-1933) for the sum of £100. This cartoon of a Lion, however, seems to have remained with Cockerell as part of his own collection for several years before eventually being also acquired by Hodson. Exhibited at the Morris Centenary Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1934, four of the Webb cartoons - including the present sheet - remained with Hodson's descendants until 2013, when they were sold at auction. The present whereabouts of the fifth cartoon, depicting a Peacock, is unknown.

Provenance:

Morris & Co.
Sydney Cockerell
Laurence William Hodson, Compton Hall, nr. Wolverhampton
Thence by descent until 2013.

Exhibitions

London, Victoria and Albert Museum, William Morris Centenary Exhibition, 1934, no.60 (part of a set of four drawings).

Literature:

Jane Gallagher, 'Four Beautiful Beasts: Philip Webb and the making of Morris's 'The Forest' tapestry', National Trust Arts Buildings Collections Bulletin, Winter Issue 2013-2014, pp.1-4, illustrated p.4.

Artist description:

An architect and draughtsman, Phillip Speakman Webb worked closely with William Morris when both young artists were employed in the architectural practice of George Edmund Street. The two remained lifelong friends, colleagues and collaborators. As a draughtsman, Webb had a particular penchant for natural history, and in particular studies of animals. However, it was his work as an architect that drew him to Morris, for whom he designed Red House, completed in 1860 and Webb's first independent commission as an architect. Webb also designed the furniture, glassware, metalwork and stained glass for the interior of the house. In 1861 Webb became one of the founding partners of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., a firm devoted to the decorative arts and described in their prospectus as 'Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture & Metals'. The firm became Morris & Co. in 1875. Webb continued to work closely with Morris on various projects until the latter's death in 1896. Among the Morris & Co. products to which Webb contributed were stained glass designs, for which his studies of animals were particularly popular.