

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



John RUSKIN (London 1819 - Brantwood 1900)

Study of a Sprig of Myrtle

Watercolour over an underdrawing in pencil, with pen and brown ink and touches of white heightening.

Indistinctly inscribed Andromeda(?) on verso, laid down.

144 x 184 mm. (5 5/8 x 7 1/4 in.)

Always a keen observer of nature, John Ruskin had been fond of drawing flowers, leaves and twigs from the 1840s onwards. In the 1870s he worked on a book of studies of flowers with botanical illustrations, entitled *Proserpina: Studies of Wayside Flowers*, while Air Was Yet Pure among the Alps, and in the Scotland and England which my Father Knew, which was published in several parts between 1875 and 1886. In this work he attempted to express his love of the pure beauty of wildflowers, shunning the formality of a conventionally scientific approach to botany. As Jeanne Clegg has noted of *Proserpina*, 'Compared to the Modern Painters investigation of leaf beauty, Ruskin's late work on flowers is intensely attentive to the decorative and the symbolic.'

Although this watercolour was not among those used for *Proserpina*, it is closely related to another illustration in the book. Entitled by the artist 'Myrtilla Regina', it was engraved after a watercolour drawn by Ruskin in 1877 at the Piedmontese town of Isella, in northern Italy near the Swiss border. It would therefore seem likely that the present sheet may also date from the same period, and may perhaps be an unused drawing for the same book. Ruskin was struck by the shape of the plant, and noted of his drawing of 'Myrtilla Regina' illustrated in *Proserpina*, in terms equally applicable to the present watercolour, that it 'represents, however feebly, the proud bending back of her head by Myrtilla Regina: an action as beautiful in her as it is terrible in the Kingly Serpent of Egypt.'

As Ruskin writes of this particular plant which he called 'Myrtilla Regina', and also known to him as a blue whortleberry, 'Of all the lovely wild plants – and few, mountain-bred, in Britain, are other than lovely, - that fill the clefts and crest the ridges of my Brantwood rock, the dearest to me, by far, are the clusters of whortleberry which divide possession of the lower slopes with the wood hyacinth and pervenke. They are personally and specially dear to me for their association in my mind with the woods of Montanvert; but the plant itself, irrespective of all accidental feeling, is indeed so beautiful in all its ways – so

delicately strong in the spring of its leafage, so modestly wonderful in the formation of its fruit, and so pure in choice of its haunts, not capriciously or unfamiliarly, but growing in luxuriance through all the healthiest and sweetest seclusion of mountain territory throughout Europe, - that I think I may be without any sharp remonstrance be permitted to express, for this once only, personal feeling in my nomenclature, calling it in Latin "Myrtilla Cara", and in French "Myrtille Chérie", but retaining for it in English its simply classic name, "Blue Whortle"...all the essential loveliness of the Myrtillae is in their leaves and fruit: the first always exquisitely finished and grouped like the most precious decorative work of sacred painting; the second, red or purple, like beads of coral or amethyst. Their minute flowers have rarely any general part of power in the colours of mountain ground; but, examined closely, they are one of the chief joys of the traveller's rest among the Alps; and full of exquisiteness unspeakable, in their several bearings and miens of blossom, so to speak.'

The first owner of the present sheet was the artist W. G. Collingwood (1854-1932), a friend and disciple of Ruskin, who he met at University College in Oxford in 1872. Collingwood worked as Ruskin's assistant and secretary for many years, and published a biography of him in 1893. In 1901 Collingwood founded the Ruskin Museum in Coniston village, not far from Ruskin's home at Brantwood in Cumbria.

Exhibitions

Kendal, Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Ruskin, 1969, unnumbered.

Artist description:

John Ruskin drew constantly, and although he received some training from artists such as Copley Fielding and James Duffield Harding, his talents as a draughtsman were to a large extent the result of natural gifts. As the young Ruskin noted in a letter of his mother of 1845, 'Architecture I can draw like an architect, and trees a good deal better than most botanists, and mountains rather better than most geologists.'

For the most part, Ruskin's drawings were not intended for exhibition, but rather as a complement to his written work. As Paul Walton has noted, Ruskin's voluminous writings, in the form of books, diaries, essays, articles and letters, are enriched by the study of his 'watercolours and sketches of the mountains and skies, cottages and cathedrals, stones and flowers in which he found inscribed the messages that guided his life's work as an interpreter of nature and art.'