Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Anna Airy (Greenwich 1882 - Playford 1964)

Verdure and Decay

Pen and black ink and watercolour.
Signed with the artist's monogram at the lower right centre.
425 x 538 mm. (16 3/4 x 21 1/8 in.) [sheet]

Anna Airy was particularly admired as a draughtsman, and her interest in botanical studies was manifest from the earliest years of her career. In the catalogue to the 1952 exhibition of Airy's work, in which the present sheet was included, Martin Hardie praised her 'untiring patience, a Durer-like analysis, an almost Pre-raphaelite precision, in recording the minutest detail and the material structure and anatomy of living organism in pendant fruit, sprays of blossom, bees, birds, butterflies, struggling twigs or insect-eaten leaves.' '

This large watercolour was the last work to be exhibited by Airy at the Royal Academy, where it was shown in 1956. It must, however, date from at least 1952, as it had been shown that year at the retrospective exhibition held at the R.B.A. Galleries in London.

Exhibitions

London, R.B.A. Galleries, Anna Airy: Paintings, Drawings and Prints, 1952, no.15; London, Royal Academy, Summer Exhibition, 1956, no.880; Ipswich, Ipswich Art Club, Christchurch Mansion, Retrospective Loan Exhibition: Oils, Water-Colours, Pastels, Etchings, Drawings by Anna Airy, 1985, no.90.

Artist description:

A student of Henry Tonks and Phillip Wilson Steer at the Slade School of Art in London between 1899 and 1903, Anna Airy was a gifted and prolific artist, adept in a variety of media and techniques including oil, watercolour and etching. She first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1905, and continued to do so almost every year until 1956, showing a total of around eighty works. By the time of her first one-man show at the Carfax Gallery in London in 1907 was regarded as one of the most promising young female painters of her generation. (In a review of the Carfax Gallery exhibition one critic succinctly noted of the artist that 'she can paint, can draw and she can etch.') In 1908 she was admitted to the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and the following year to the Royal Society of Oil Painters. Airy worked as a war artist during World War I, painting alongside Laura Knight at the Canadian Infantry barracks at

Witney Camp in Surrey and also painting scenes of industrial military production for the Imperial War Museum.

Airy exhibited her work regularly at the Royal Academy, and also at the New English Art Club, the Royal Institute of Painters in Water-Colours and the Royal Society of Portrait Painters. She had many students, and in 1951 published Making a Start in Art, a practical guide to painting and drawing. The following year a retrospective exhibition of Airy's paintings, drawings and prints was held in London. In the introduction to the catalogue, the critic and art historian Martin Hardie noted of Airy that 'She is an artist of infinite variety in her choice of divers themes and manifold methods. She has ranged from delicate intricacy of line with etching needle and pen-and-ink to summary breadth of bold impressionism in oil, watercolour and pastel.'

Airy was particularly admired as a draughtsman, and her interest in botanical studies was manifest from the earliest years of her career. On the occasion of an exhibition of her work at the Fine Art Society in London in 1915, one critic noted that 'We have then in these drawings the expression of passionate sympathy with the refinements of leaf and stem-forms. We have here the realism that alone can satisfy an eager love of Nature for herself. What is novel is the careful art, almost Japanese in spirit, with which naturalism is controlled and exploited on behalf of decoration…An artist has not such a conscience for truth to nature as Miss Airy's for nothing; not a line is drawn by her except in the presence of nature. The pen-work is done out of doors direct from the "model" branch as it grows on a tree, and the colouring is done in the same circumstances. A whole summer, with hours from six until sunset, has been spent in an orchard by the artist.'