

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



William Fraser GARDEN (1856 - 1921)

The Bridge at St. Ives, Huntingdonshire

Watercolour. Signed with initials and dated W. F. G. '99. at the lower right. 120 x 155 mm. (4 3/4 x 6 1/8 in.)

Garden's watercolour views of his native Huntingdonshire and along the river Ouse in Bedfordshire are masterpieces of clarity and detail. As Christopher Newall has written, 'Garden's watercolors are a manifestation of the late-century revival of interest in the representation of landscape subjects in minute and painstaking detail. He chose picturesque but unremarkable subjects in his immediate locality – decrepit mill buildings and riverside inns along the banks of the Great Ouse, as well as pure landscapes...His works of the late 1880s and early 1890s are extraordinary in their pellucid clarity of light and their exact delineation of architectural and landscape detail.' Another writer has noted of the artist that 'his drawing of buildings is nearly photographic in quality. Despite this almost too detailed approach his work lives, though he seldom populated his drawings except with a few high-flying birds.'

The narrow stone bridge in the small town of St. Ives (formerly a village known as Slepe), on the left bank of the river Ouse in Huntingdonshire, was built around 1415. The chapel dedicated to St. Leger (or possibly St. Lawrence), constructed on the eastern, downstream side of the bridge with an altar consecrated in 1426, is one of only three surviving examples of bridge chapels in England. The present sheet depicts the upper two-story extension to the chapel which was added in 1736, when the structure was converted to a house⁴. The bridge chapel was returned to its original appearance in 1930.

Fraser Garden painted several views of town and bridge of St. Ives. A watercolour drawing of the bridge, seen from the opposite side, appeared on the art market in London in 1982, while another view of the bridge and the town, dated 1890, was sold at auction in 2007. Garden also produced views of the bridge from a closer vantage point along the riverbank; one such example, dated 1895 and formerly in the collection of David Fuller, is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Among the latest of Fraser Garden's views of the bridge is a watercolour dated 1903.

Provenance:

Christopher Wood, London and Marston, Somerset.

Artist description:

Born into a family of artists, Garden William Fraser changed his name to William Fraser Garden so as to distinguish himself from his six brothers, all but one of whom were also active as landscape artists. Arguably the best of the so-called 'Fraser Brotherhood', Fraser Garden exhibited his watercolours at the Royal Academy, the Royal Scottish Academy and the Royal Institute of Painters in Water-Colours. The subjects of his watercolours were by and large views of the fen villages along the river Ouse, such as Holywell, Hemingford Grey and St. Ives, characterized by a remarkable attention to detail and crisp, cool lighting. Throughout the 1880's Garden was represented by the Dowdeswell Gallery in New Bond Street in London, who sold a number of his works. By 1890, however, he seems to have given up exhibiting in London, and from then on relied on a small number of local collectors in Huntingdonshire. He was never, however, a very prolific artist.

As Charles Lane has noted of Garden, 'His apparent lack of ambition and the consequently few watercolours which he painted each year, even when at his busiest, resulted naturally enough in his failing to come to the notice of all but a local audience.' Although he was the most successful of the Fraser brothers, Garden was very poor for most of his life, and was declared bankrupt in 1899. He lived at in the village of Hemingford Abbots and in a room at the Ferry Boat Inn in at Holywell, where in his old age he is said to have paid his bills with drawings instead of bank notes. Long unknown to scholars and collectors, Garden's body of work has only fairly recently been rediscovered, and his reputation as among the finest Victorian landscape watercolourists firmly established.