Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Lionel Percy Smythe (London 1839 - Wimereaux 1918)

'The Mother will not turn...'

Pencil and watercolour, with touches of bodycolour and scratching out, on paper laid down on board.
Signed and dated L.P. Smythe / Sept. 1903 at the lower right.
Inscribed with the full title on a plaque attached to the lower part of the frame.
522 x 363 mm. (20 1/2 x 14 1/4 in.)

This large, finished watercolour was one of two works sent by Smythe to the Winter exhibition of the Royal Water Colour Society in London in 1903. As the artist's biographer records, 'To the Winter Show he sent "A Boulogne Matelotte" and 'The Mother will not Turn" – the latter a picture of a woman collecting dandelion roots for salad, which is a regular form of business in the early spring, in a field powdered over with daisies. In the foreground is a crawling baby. The mother has just paused in her work to listen to her child's first attempt at speech.' A preparatory pencil study for the child in this watercolour, from one of Smythe's sketchbooks, is illustrated in an early biography of the artist, published in 1923.

Smythe often took inspiration for his subjects from literary sources. The full title of this watercolour, which is also inscribed on a plaque on the work's original frame, is taken from a sonnet entitled Broken Music by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, written in October 1852 and first published in 1869:

'The Mother will not turn, who think she hears
Her nursling's speech first grow articulate;
But breathless with averted eyes elate
She stands with open lips and open ears
That it may call her twice.'

The first owner of this watercolour was a Mr. Beaumont, who came to own a significant number of works

by Smythe. (Beaumont and Smythe remained good friends and frequent correspondents for several years, and the artist would stay with Beaumont whenever he was in England.) In a letter to Beaumont, written on the 18th of September 1903, Smythe is almost certainly referring to the present work: 'Just a line to say that the water-colour drawing is all but completed, and I hope to send it over on Monday. The weather has caused me considerable delay. We have had a most unusually bad summer, and it always seemed to happen that the particular effect I required for the picture, rather late in the afternoon, brought on cloudy or worse, rainy weather.'

As the artist's biographer has written, 'Over in France, in the quiet of the old walled garden, in the sunlit fields and on the shore, Lionel Smythe caught the living colours of vibrating light and the very spirit of the peasant and fisher-folk. He was a poet who sang in light and colour...He loved everything beautiful – the open sky and the sea – the play of light on the harvest fields – the germination of young life in the spring. But more than all else, he loved the toilers of the soil and shore, the women, with their ever-present burden of little ones – not the dismal workers of Millet to whom he has been compared, but buoyant, laughing human beings. Young maternity full of life and vigour, kicking babies and young girls in all the pride of their strength and freedom of movement in the open air, with wind-tossed hair and the clear sun-browned flesh he gloried in...His women are often dreamy and lost in thought as they pause in their toil, but they are never sad.'

Provenance:

H. Beaumont, Esq., in 1903
J. S. Maas & Co. Ltd., London
Private collection, UK, until 2011.

Exhibitions

London, Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours, Winter Exhibition, 1903, no.10; London, Shepherd's Bush, Fine Art Palace, Coronation Exhibition, 1911, no.2125 (as Mother and Child, lent by Mr. Beaumont).

Literature:

A. L. Baldry, 'Lionel P. Smythe, A.R.A., R.W.S.: An Appreciation of His Work and Methods', The Studio, April 1910, illustrated p.174 (as Mother and Child); Rosa M. Whitlaw and W. L. Wyllie, Lionel P. Smythe, R.A., R.W.S.: His Life and Work, London, 1923, pp.129-130.

Artist description:

The son of the 6th Viscount Stratford, Lionel Smythe spent his early years in France before his family returned to settle in London in 1843. He was trained at the Heatherley School of Fine Art in London and began exhibiting at the Royal Academy in 1863, showing landscapes and maritime scenes. In 1879 Smythe and his wife settled permanently in Normandy, first at Wimereux (where the artist had spent his summer holidays as a child) and, from 1882 onwards, at the Château d'Honvault, between Wimereux and Boulogne, where he was to live and work for the rest of his life.

From 1881 onwards Smythe sent works to be exhibited at the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours in London, and from 1892 showed at the Royal Watercolour Society. He also regularly exhibited in Paris, winning a bronze medal at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 and a silver medal the following year. Smythe was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1898 (on which occasion one newspaper described the new A.R.A. as 'an impressionist painter of open-air scenes...a delicate colourist and a very diligent student of Nature'), rising to Academician in 1911.

Smythe's paintings and drawings of the woods and fields of the countryside of Normandy and the Pas de Calais, as well as maritime subjects and pastoral scenes depicting the daily lives of the rural folk of the region, found a small but appreciative audience among collectors in England. His work came to be associated with that of a group of Victorian artists and illustrators known as The Idyllists - including Frederick Walker, John William North and Hubert von Herkomer - who painted rural subjects tinged with a strain of social realism.

Although the fact that he lived in France meant that his work remained less well known in England than that of many of his contemporaries, the paintings and watercolours he sent for exhibition in London continued to garner critical praise. Writing in 1910, one scholar noted of the artist that 'Mr. Smythe proves plainly that a man may be as realist and still retain his poetic sense; that he may record the life about him faithfully and convincingly and yet miss none of its poetry, none of its imaginative suggestion, and none, certainly, of the beauty it may happen to possess.' Characterized by a lightness of touch and subtlety of tone, watercolours by Lionel Smythe are today in the collections of the Tate, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and elsewhere.