

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



George Price BOYCE (London 1826 - London 1897)

Newcastle at Night from the Rabbit Banks, Gateshead

Watercolour. Signed and dated G. P. Boyce 64 at the lower right. Further inscribed Newcastle at night – from the Rabbit Banks, Gateshead / GPBoyce 1864 on the verso. Inscribed Newcastle looking towards / Gateshead / from the / Rabbit Banks. / by G. P. BOYCE / 1864 on an old label on the backing board. Further inscribed Mrs. Hueffer / The Lodge / Campden Hill Road on the backing board. 101 x 209 mm. (4 x 8 1/4 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.

This watercolour dates to a trip made by Boyce to the north east of England in the late summer and autumn of 1864. The scene depicted is a distant view of Newcastle, seen from across the river Tyne at Gateshead, with the prominent tower of the cathedral of St. Nicholas barely visible at the left of centre. The steeply sloping Rabbit Banks from which Boyce made this watercolour has long since been built over, and may today be identified with Pipewellgate in the area of Bensham in Gateshead.

It has been suggested that the artist may have been encouraged to visit the industrial landscapes around Newcastle-upon-Tyne, with a view towards finding potential subjects for his watercolours, by the ironmaster Isaac Lowthian Bell, who had purchased several works from the artist earlier in the year. As well as a number of smaller works, Boyce's trip resulted in at least two large finished watercolours; a view of Newcastle from the Windmill Hills, Gateshead in the collection of the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle, and another, larger version of the present composition of Newcastle from the Rabbit Banks, Gateshead - depicted in daylight and with the addition of a sleeping figure in the left foreground - which appeared at auction in 1995. While the present sheet has been regarded as a study for the larger work, the latter is, however, not a night scene. As Christopher Newall has noted of a different watercolour from the same 1864 trip to Newcastle, 'Boyce seems to have relished such quietly understated, but honest, urban scenes..., combining a response to a landscape that was changing as a consequence of industrialisation with a characteristic aesthetic fondness of incidental pattern and texture.'

Boyce exhibited two Newcastle subjects - Newcastle from the Windmill Hills, Gateshead and Newcastle from the Rabbit Banks, Gateshead - at the Old Water-Colour Society in 1865. Although it has been suggested that it was the larger, daylight version of Newcastle from the Rabbit Banks that was shown at the OWCS, a description of the exhibited work in a review in the Athenaeum would however seem to favour the present, more dramatic, nighttime scene as the work exhibited. As the anonymous reviewer noted, 'Among the recently elected members of this Society, by far the most original artist in landscape is Mr. Boyce, who treats with such perfect solemnity, beauty, richness and truth of colouring, some of the most commonplace themes...a distant view of a manufacturing town interests us in its million lives and fortunes; its subtle colouring seems pathetic, and a glowing sky looks full of prophecy...Given these successes with unchallengeable fidelity, and we have a great artist. Such is Mr. Boyce.'

Provenance:

Probably Ford Madox Brown, London
His daughter, Catherine Hueffer (née Madox Brown), The Lodge, Campden Hill Road, London, and
thence by descent
The Maas Gallery, London, in 1998
Christopher Cone, Whitby.

Exhibitions

Probably London, Pall Mall East, Exhibition of the Society of Painters in Water-Colours, Summer 1865,
no.128 ('Newcastle, from the Rabbit Banks, Gateshead-on-Tyne').

Literature:

Christopher Newall and Judy Egerton, George Price Boyce, exhibition catalogue, London, 1987, pp.56-
57, under no.42.

Artist description:

George Price Boyce was trained, and began his career, as an architect. Following a meeting with David Cox at Betws-y-Coed in Wales in 1849, however, he decided to take up landscape painting. He received lessons from Cox, whose influence can be seen in Boyce's early watercolours. Not long afterwards he met Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was to become an intimate and lifelong friend, and, a few years later, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais. These three young artists, who formed the nucleus of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded in 1848, discovered a kindred spirit in Boyce. Of independent means, he began avidly collecting their work (eventually owning more than forty works by Rossetti), while writing about them in his diaries between 1851 and 1875, which serve as an important record of the Brotherhood's activities.

Boyce only rarely painted landscapes in oil, and most of his work is in watercolour. His landscapes, usually of views in the Thames valley, were exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1853 onwards, and frequently at the Old Water-Colour Society, of which he became an Associate in 1864 and a full member in 1877. Having once considered a career as an architect Boyce was passionately interested in old buildings and produced a large number of precise watercolour views of rural architecture; of farms, mills and manor houses. On the advice of John Ruskin, he made trips to Venice and Verona in 1854 and Switzerland in 1856; he also spent a few months in Egypt between 1861 and 1862. On his return from Egypt he began using Rossetti's old studio in Blackfriars, on the Thames, and there became friendly with James McNeill Whistler. In 1869 he had a house built for him in Chelsea by the architect Phillip Webb, where he lived until his death in 1897.

As Virginia Surtees has written of Boyce, 'From his own water-colours he expected little, his innate modesty debarring any confidence of success...The touchstone of his whole working life was the desired excellence of execution. His subjects were mostly architectural, usually seen in the context of a peaceful English countryside, perhaps at sunrise or in the blaze of midday when the successful contrast of shadow to the full exposure of the summer heat, or that of red brick to a harvested cornfield, were all that he aspired to...Faithful to a vision of simplicity and goodness he interpreted these with a serenity and unpretentious charm which were the reflection of his own character.' Christopher Newall has added that '[Boyce's] works, although small in scale and most intimate in their means of expression, are sincere and delicately beautiful.'