Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Arthur MELVILLE (Loanhead-of-Guthrie 1855 - Whitley 1904)

A Street Market by a Church, probably in Granville, Normandy

Watercolour, over an underdrawing in pencil.

Signed A. Melville at the lower left.

314 x 277 mm. (12 3/8 x 10 7/8 in.)

Datable to the late 1870s, this vibrant watercolour is a rare example of Arthur Melville's early work, much of which is now lost. The present sheet may have been drawn in Granville, a coastal town in Normandy a few kilometres north of Mont Saint-Michel, which Melville visited in June 1878. The church depicted here is probably Notre-Dame du Cap Lihou in Granville, and this watercolour provides an apt example of a particular characteristic that the scholar Kenneth McConkey noted in Melville's work: 'he could...place the cutting edges of architecture with acuity, and his observation of crowds, the moving masses of humanity, was unmatched.'

Writing a few years before Melville visited the town, an English traveller described the area around the church of Notre-Dame du Cap Lihou in Granville: 'The upper town, surrounded by its fortified walls, and crowned by its church and lighthouse, stands on a lofty promontory of rock, with the sea stretching out behind it...when we had climbed up the steep ladders leading to the walls of the upper town, we found endless pictures among the bright and varied scenes of the market...the view of the Bay of Granville is charming; and the church, on the verge of the lofty promontory, although gloomy-looking – being built of dark granite – has a solemn impressive interior: but the smells and dirt of the place are overpowering, even in the open air and in the fresh sea breezes.'

Melville produced only a handful of watercolours in Granville, and the present sheet may be tentatively identified with one of two unlocated works by the artist; a Market Day at Granville, exhibited at Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh in 1879, or A French Market Place (Granville), included in the posthumous Melville exhibition at the Royal Institute of Painters in Water-Colours in London in 1906. Among other extant watercolours of Granville by Melville is a Street Market, Granville, dated 1878, in the Glasgow Museums collection. It was during his early years in France that, as the artist Romilly Fedden noted, 'Melville's work in water-colour began to reveal special qualities. He had discovered his medium.

These were no tinted drawings dependent on a scaffolding of pencil work, but painting – painting so strong and virile that it could hold its own with any other medium – even with oil. The Frenchmen were astounded.'

Fedden adds that 'Melville may be called the great technician of water-colour...[His] job was water-colour, and he knew it so well, its ways, its difficulties, its capabilities, its limitations – he understood his medium and he mastered it. He was daring, unconventional. He tried things which no one else had tried, he followed no one, belonged to no accepted school, and in that, in his individuality, he stands apart.'

Artist description:

One of the finest British watercolourists of the 19th century, Arthur Melville was of humble origins. The son of a coachman, he was apprenticed to a grocer but, from the age of thirteen, took evening art classes and drawing lessons in Edinburgh. In 1875 his painting A Scotch Lassie was shown at the annual exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy, and within a few months he was studying at the RSA Schools and sharing a studio in Edinburgh. In 1878 Melville had a painting exhibited at the Royal Academy in London, and later the same year he moved to Paris to study at the Académie Julian. He remained in France for much of the next two years, painting at Cancale in Brittany and Granville, Honfleur and Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy, before settling in the town of Grez-sur-Loing, seventy kilometres south of Paris, where there was a thriving artistic community. After a brief period back in Edinburgh, the young Melville embarked on a journey to Egypt, where he spent the latter half of 1881 and the first few weeks of 1882, before continuing his travels on to Jeddah, Aden, Karachi, Baghdad, Mosul and Constantinople, returning to England in August 1882 via Vienna, Strasbourg and Paris. This trip resulted in a number of fine watercolours of Oriental subjects, which were exhibited at the Dudley Gallery in London in 1883.

The years 1884 and 1885 found Melville working as a portrait painter, and travelling throughout Scotland and to Orkney. Elected an Associate of the Royal Scottish Academy in 1886 and to the Royal Society of Painters in Watercolour in 1888, Melville moved to London the following year, although he continued to make frequent trips back to Scotland. In 1890, 1891 and 1893 he travelled around southern Spain and Morocco, working in Ronda, Córdoba, Granada, Seville, Toledo, Madrid and Tangier, while also spending time in northern Spain in 1892 and Venice in 1894; these trips also resulted in several splendid watercolours. Melville died at the age of just forty-nine, from typhoid contracted while on a final trip to Spain. Shortly after his death, retrospective exhibitions of his work were held in London, Glasgow, Newcastle and Nottingham.

Although Melville produced a number of oil paintings, mainly from the late 1890s onwards, these were only rarely exhibited in his lifetime, and it is the medium of watercolour which accounts for the bulk of the artist's output. Indeed, it is as a brilliant and gifted watercolourist that Melville is best known today. As his biographer Agnes Mackay aptly noted of the artist, 'He could lay on colour with the freshness of a shower of rain. His control of touch was masterly...He drenched his tones with brilliant colour, making them sing together to create astonishingly fresh harmonies. Colour became alive under his hand.'

Melville was particularly admired for his ability to capture bright sunlight, while his compositions were often radical and inventive. As Mackay writes, 'Another gift was that of composing a picture, of grasping the pictorial aspects of a scene. Where others saw only confused movement and formless glitter, Melville imposed rhythm and shape...we find over and over again in his water-colours that everything is turned to effect, but that only the essentials are used. For he was content, especially in his later work, to depend on some striking arrangement of colour, on the play of light and shadow, leaving much of the paper merely tinted in a harmony of toned white. Thus apparently with the simplest means, bright splashes of colour and wide spaces of light, he realised his effects.'

In his seminal and posthumously published Water-colour Painting in Britain, the artist, curator and scholar Martin Hardie gives a detailed account of Melville's watercolour technique, as described to him by the artist Theodore Roussel, a friend of Melville's who later married his widow: 'Melville's method

was pure water-colour, but water-colour applied on a specially prepared paper. This paper was soaked in dilute Chinese White, till it was literally saturated and impregnated with white. He worked often into a wet surface, sponging out superfluous detail, running in those warm browns and rich blues and reds which he knew so well how to blend and simplify. His colour was often dropped onto the paper in rich, full spots or blobs rather than applied with any definite brush-marks. The colour floats into little pools, with the white of the ground softening each touch. He was the most exact of craftsmen; his work is not haphazard and accidental, as might be rashly thought. Those blots in his drawings, which seem meaningless, disorderly and chaotic, are actually organised with the utmost care to lead the way to the foreseen result.'