

John RUSKIN (London 1819 - Brantwood 1900)

Sunset with a Distant View of Abbeville

Watercolour.
Inscribed Abbeville / Painted by Mr. Ruskin and given by him to me. / Francesca Alexander on the old mount.
137 x 220 mm. (5 3/8 x 8 5/8 in.) [sheet]

Many of John Ruskin's later watercolours reflect an interest in the close observation of skies and clouds - studied at dawn, sunset and in varying weather conditions - and the atmospheric light effects that often resulted. The artist's interest in such themes was a lifelong one, evident as early as the publication of the first volume of Modern Painters in 1843, when he observed, 'It is a strange thing how little in general people know about the sky. It is the part of creation in which nature has done more for the sake of pleasing man, more for the sole and evident purpose of talking to him and teaching him, than in any other of her works, and it is just the part in which we least attend to her.' And, at the other end of his life, one of the very last drawings he made was a watercolour of a sunset seen from the coast at Seascale in Cumbria, done in 1889, shortly before he underwent a massive stroke that ended his literary and artistic career. Perhaps Ruskin's most significant study of clouds and skies, however, was undertaken in the years 1884 and 1885, when he was working on two projects related to studies of skies; Coeli Enarrant, a selection of texts and images from Modern Painters, and a pair of lectures given by him at the London Institution entitled The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, in which he railed against the 'malignant aerial phenomena' caused by industrial pollution, and its effect on the natural world.

This striking watercolour of a sunset above the northern French town of Abbeville is a new and previously unknown addition to Ruskin's oeuvre as a draughtsman. Ruskin visited Abbeville several times in his life, and it was among his favourite towns in France. He stayed there for the first time when travelling with his parents in June 1835, and was enchanted by the unspoiled architecture of the town, and in particular the Late Gothic church of St. Wulfran. He returned for a few days on his honeymoon in 1848, and again twenty years later, in 1868, when he spent nearly two months in Abbeville, making a number of drawings of the town and its buildings, as well as the surrounding countryside. He returned to Abbeville for three days in the summer of 1880, during a period of several weeks spent in northern France that would eventually result in his book The Bible of Amiens. Ruskin made a final visit to Abbeville in June 1888, during his last trip to France when, accompanied by his friend, the painter Arthur Severn, he spent about a month there.

As Ruskin reminisced in later years, 'My most intense happinesses have of course been among the mountains. But for cheerful, unalloyed, unwearying pleasure, the getting in sight of Abbeville on a fine summer afternoon, jumping out in the courtyard of the Hotel de l'Europe, and rushing down the street to see St. Wulfran again before the sun was off the towers, are things to cherish the past for, - to the end.'

A number of his diary entries record the sunsets he saw or drew while in Abbeville. On September

22nd, 1868, during his third and longest stay in the town, he made a drawing of a sunset at Abbeville, as he noted in his diary: 'Sunset on ramparts as opposite [sketch], first; then, ruby below; and at last thunderous and wild with delicate bars of flecked cloud mixed. I never saw anything more noble.' Ruskin was, in fact, always particularly interested in the sky at dawn and in twilight. As one scholar has noted, 'what he takes to heart…is what he had long before perceived in art and literature: that sunrise and sunset mean the same. In Modern Painters V red is the colour of both, and of mortality: "The rose of dawn and sunset is the hue of the rays passing close to the earth. It is also concentrated in the blood of man."'

The present sheet may be likened to a number of stylistically comparable watercolour studies of skies at dawn or sunset by Ruskin. Particularly close to this Abbeville watercolour, in both subject and technique, is a view of Beauvais Cathedral, Light in the West in the Ruskin Library at Lancaster University, which shares with the present sheet a dramatic and vibrant depiction of the sunset above the cathedral. The Beauvais watercolour was later engraved for Vol.V of Modern Painters, alongside Ruskin's detailed description of its dramatic sky, which underscores his abiding interest in capturing such light effects: '[this] is a sketch of an actual sunset behind Beauvais cathedral (the point of the roof of the apse, a little to the left of the centre, shows it to be a summer sunset), the white cirri in the high light are all moving eastward, away from the sun, in perfectly parallel lines, curving a little round to the south. Underneath, are two straight ranks of rainy cirri, crossing each other; one directed south-east; the other north-west. The meeting perspective of these, in extreme distance, determines the shape of the angular light which open above the cathedral. Underneath all, fragments of true rain-cloud are floating between us and the sun, governed by curves of their own. They are, nevertheless, connected with the straight cirri by the dark semi-cumulus in the middle of the shade above the cathedral.'

Other, similar watercolour studies by Ruskin include Sunset at Herne Hill through the Smoke of London, drawn in 1876, in the Ruskin Museum in Coniston, and Dawn at Neuchâtel, dated 1866, in the collection of David Thomson, as well as Study of Dawn: The First Scarlet on the Clouds and Study of Dawn: Purple Clouds, both drawn in 1868 and now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

This vibrant watercolour is likely to date from one of Ruskin's last two visits to Abbeville, in 1880 or 1888. In 1880, he noted in his diary: '26 August. Abbeville! How happy, once, I was in writing that word!...Came here from Calais, in thundrous sun and shadow, a glowing furnace of sunset opening over St. Valery. Lightning and red clouds over the towers and market place...' On the same day, Ruskin made a small, rapid pencil sketch of a view of Abbeville with the church of St. Wulfran below a sunset, today in the Ruskin Library at Lancaster University.

As the inscription on the old mount notes, this watercolour was given by Ruskin to an American amateur artist, living in Florence, who was to become one of his closest friends towards the end of his life. Esther Frances ('Francesca') Alexander (1837-1917) was born in Boston but had settled with her family in Italy in 1853. It was in Florence in 1882 that she and Ruskin met, when Francesca was in her mid-forties and Ruskin was in his early sixties, and undertaking what was to be his penultimate trip on the Continent. Soon after their meeting, Francesca and Ruskin began a written correspondence which continued, almost daily, until Ruskin's death in 1900. In their letters, full of stories and accounts of their daily lives, she called him 'Fratello' ('brother' in Italian) and he in turn referred to her as 'Sorella' (sister) or sometimes 'Sorel'. Francesca kept all of Ruskin's many letters to her, arranging them in order by date, and found great comfort in them.

From a very early age, Francesca Alexander had written stories and made drawings to illustrate them, and while living in Florence had made a practice of translating and transcribing Tuscan stories of peasant life and local folk songs, which she illustrated with her own drawings of landscapes and genre scenes. Ruskin greatly admired both her drawings and her writings, and was determined to promote her work. He purchased the manuscript of what was to be her most famous work, Roadside Songs of Tuscany, for £600 not long after their first meeting in 1882. The illustrated book was eventually published, with a preface by Ruskin, in twelve parts between 1884 and 1885. The publication of her work, and Ruskin's passionate championing of it, soon made Francesca Alexander famous.

Provenance:

Given by the artist to Francesca Alexander, Florence and Boston
Henry Upham, Sagamore Beach, Massachusetts, in the 1970s
Given by him to Helen Kelly, Sagamore Beach, Massachusetts, in the 1980s
Thence by descent.

Artist description:

John Ruskin drew constantly, and although he received some training from artists such as Copley Fielding and James Duffield Harding, his talents as a draughtsman were to a large extent the result of natural gifts. As the young Ruskin noted in a letter of his mother of 1845, 'Architecture I can draw like an architect, and trees a good deal better than most botanists, and mountains rather better than most geologists.'

For the most part, Ruskin's drawings were not intended for exhibition, but rather as a complement to his written work. As Paul Walton has noted, Ruskin's voluminous writings, in the form of books, diaries, essays, articles and letters, are enriched by the study of his 'watercolours and sketches of the mountains and skies, cottages and cathedrals, stones and flowers in which he found inscribed the messages that guided his life's work as an interpreter of nature and art.'