Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



William ORPEN (Stillorgan 1878 - London 1931)

On the Hill of Howth, Co. Dublin

Pencil and watercolour, with framing lines in pencil.

Signed ORPEN in pencil at the lower right.

524 x 750 mm. (20 5/8 x 29 1/2 in.) [sheet]

This very large sheet, drawn in a fine pencil with light touches of watercolour, depicts a woman on the clifftop at Howth Head in Co. Dublin. Orpen first visited Howth in 1907, and with his family rented a house called 'The Cliffs' there for a number of summers afterward. The house enjoyed a spectacular location, overlooking Dublin Bay with the city in the distance; as Orpen was to write several years later, 'The view looking towards the mainland in the evening, from the top of the Hill of Howth, is wonderful and ever-changing. From Wicklow Head away off to the south, the chain of hills and mountains swing round in modulating curves right up to the near the city itself…Of an evening, as the sun dips, the water of the bay becomes brilliant gold…Or if the night is fine, the lights all along the shore, from Bray Head to Dublin, begin to twinkle.'

It was during these August vacations that Orpen was at his happiest, enjoying the company of his young family, as well as visits from friends and students in Dublin. As the artist's biographer P. G. Konody noted, 'These pictures of life by the sea and among the Irish hills...of open-air sketching and children playing, breathe the spirit of physical well-being and freedom from mental worries. They are filled with sunlight – the mild sunlight of a damp climate – and caressed by the gentle breezes of heaven.'

Orpen produced several paintings, watercolours and drawings while at Howth, mainly between 1909 and about 1913. As a recent scholar has noted, during this period the artist 'managed, on top of everything else, to produce a magnificent series of works, conceived and drawn out of doors, mainly at Howth, and taking as their subject matter the everyday human material that surrounded him.' His favourite subjects were his wife Grace and his two daughters; Mary, known as Bunnie, born in 1902, and her sister Christine, known as Kit, who was born in 1906.

The identity of the young woman depicted in this fine drawing, lying in the sun with her right arm raised in a carefree manner and holding a bunch of tiny flowers in her hand, remains to be determined. The same

woman appears, dressed in an identical manner and with the same hat, lying on her stomach looking over the cliff edge, in a large drawing of similar technique, dated 1913, that was exhibited in London in 1987. It has been suggested that the model for both drawings may be Vera Hone (1885-1971), the wife of the Irish writer and biographer Joseph Maunsel Hone and a neighbour of the Orpens at Howth. Born Vera Brewster in New York, she was very beautiful, as was noted by the painter in letters to his wealthy patron and mistress, Florence Evelyn St. George. In one letter he included a drawing of Vera, adding 'I'm afraid this does not give much idea of Mrs. Hone but she really is very good to paint.' For a brief period of about two years Vera Hone posed for several important paintings and a number of drawings by Orpen. As his pupil and assistant Seán Keating later recalled of Hone, who was known as 'the lovely Vera', 'We all loved her. She was a most beautiful woman. She had such lovely eyes. I think he was half in love with her, too. He thought she was wasted on Joe Hone. Whenever we met I couldn't take my eyes off her.'

As the artist's biographer Bruce Arnold has noted of Vera Hone, 'She was his favourite model. Mrs. St. George's daughter, Vivien, said of her: 'Were there an "Orpen type" she'd be it.' She was an American, and very beautiful...The Hones lived for about a year in the house next door to the Orpens. It was there that Orpen met them, and in the period of about two years which followed, he painted a magnificent series of portraits of Vera…She was, without question, the most beautiful woman he ever painted. She had deep blue eyes, golden hair, an almond-shaped face which strongly emphasised the full mouth and slighty dimpled chin…There is no doubt that Orpen was himself enchanted by Vera, as were many other artists...To some extent the pictures Orpen painted of her represent an almost perfect synthesis of his talents as an artist…Through all his paintings of Vera Hone there runs a thread of enticement; Orpen invests his subject with a loveliness that appeals for reasons other than her beauty, which itself is great.'

Among the major paintings by Orpen for which Vera Hone posed are The Chinese Shawl (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne), The Angler (Tate, London) and The Blue Hat, all painted in 1912, and The Roscommon Dragoon and The Irish Volunteer, both completed in 1913. Vera's contact with Orpen seems to have ended later that year, however, when the Hones settled in Dublin and began to raise a family.

This drawing may be compared in stylistic terms with a number of drawings made by Orpen at Howth between 1910 and 1913, some of which were published as a portfolio of ten photogravure reproductions by the Chenil Gallery in London in c.1915. One of these, a pencil drawing entitled After Bathing, seems to depict the same woman, wearing the same hat.

Artist description:

William Orpen showed a talent for art at an early age, and in 1891 was admitted into the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. He soon came to the attention of his teachers and contemporaries as an immensely gifted draughtsman, and won several prizes for his drawings. In 1898, he transferred to the Slade School of Art in London, where his drawings continued to impress all who saw them. At the Slade, where his professors included Philip Wilson Steer and Henry Tonks, he met and befriended Augustus John. The two young artists soon came to dominate their class at the school, where they were quickly recognized as head and shoulders above their fellow students in terms of talent. Orpen joined the New English Art Club, and exhibited at the Royal Academy and the Royal Hibernian Academy. He was appointed an Official War Artist in 1917, and his powerful paintings and drawings of the trenches in France were exhibited in London the following year. Knighted in 1918, Orpen later published more of his scenes of the war in An Onlooker in France, 1917-1919, which appeared in 1921. The 1920's found

the artist at the height of his success, firmly established as one of the leading portrait painters in England, with a fashionable clientele and no shortage of commissions. Yet after his death at the age of only fifty-two his reputation lapsed into obscurity, and it has not been until relatively recently that he has regained something of the stature he once enjoyed.

Throughout his career, William Orpen was admired as one of the finest draughtsmen of his day. He drew for long hours every day, and left behind a large corpus of drawings and sketches. As the critic of The Art News commented of a publication of a portfolio of ten photogravure reproductions of his drawings in 1915, 'These drawings are remarkable not only for their delicacy of handling, but for the loving care with which the pencil has revelled in beauty of form. Mr. William Orpen is thoroughly modern, yet he continues a tradition which has been handed down from the great draughtsmen of the past. His work does not suffer when placed by the side of the work of the Old Masters, a supreme but dangerous test.'

Another critic, writing at the same time in The Ladies' Field, noted that 'Mr. Orpen may be described as a tender draughtsman, tender in his care of and love for his materials. His hand is so marvellously delicate. His pencil hovers over the paper with the grace of a butterfly…He does not strive for the beauty of feature, as the French draughtsmen of the eighteenth century tried to capture those qualities. At times he is almost ugly and brutal; but he never loses the beauty of form.'