

# 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 drawing remains to be determined, although it has been tentatively suggested that she may be Mary ('Bunnie') Orpen. She has also been identified as

Vera Hone (née Brewster), a neighbour of the Orpens at Howth, who posed for a number of the artist's paintings of this period, notably *The Angler* of c.1912 in the Tate. 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 identical technique to the present sheet which was exhibited in London in 1987.

The present sheet may be compared stylistically with a number of drawings made at Howth in 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.'