

James MCBEY (Newburgh 1883 - Tangier 1959)

Fishing Boats at Sizewell, Suffolk

Pen and brown ink and brown wash and watercolour.

Signed and dated McBey / Sizewell 1920 july(?) at the lower right.

Inscribed Light on the verso.

285 x 447 mm. (11 1/4 x 17 5/8 in.) [sheet]

James McBey began working in watercolours in Morocco in the winter of 1912, mainly as aids towards his etchings. He was, however, soon persuaded by his London dealers, Colnaghi and Obach, that his watercolours would find a ready market, and as a result an exhibition of them – mainly views in Holland, Scotland and Suffolk - was held at the gallery in 1914, and all were sold. In 1922 McBey bought a Dutch flat-bottomed boat which he named ‘Esna’, and which he used for sketching expeditions along the Essex coast.

The sea had fascinated McBey since his childhood, and fishing boats appear in many of his landscapes. As one critic noted, with reference to one of the artist’s watercolours exhibited in 1914, ‘Mr. McBey has evidently drawn the boat with enjoyment, as indeed he seems to draw every kind of water-craft. Was he not born and bred among boats, so that for him, as he says, the unforgivable sin is to draw a boat badly?...boats are the appealing motive, boats as locally typical as the atmosphere that surrounds them. And with what comprehensive truth of vision, what delicate power of expression, the artist has given to these pictorial life! Much may yet be expected from this gifted young artist, who is scarcely out of his twenties.’

The small fishing village of Sizewell in East Suffolk sits on the southeast coast of England, between Aldeburgh and Southwold on the North Sea. (It is today the site of two nuclear power stations.) McBey is known to have worked at Sizewell several times, notably in the summers of 1914 and 1919. Two watercolours, entitled 'Afterglow, Sizewell' and 'Waiting for the Tide, Sizewell', both dated July 1914, were included in an exhibition of etchings and watercolours by the artist held in New York in 1915.

A charming watercolour by the artist Martin Hardie (1875-1952), a close friend, of McBey sketching on the beach at Sizewell, drawn in 1914, is in the collection of the Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums in

Scotland.

Artist description:

Born in a small village a few miles north of Aberdeen, the Scottish artist James McBey had little or no formal training, and from the age of fifteen worked as a bank clerk. He began painting and drawing as a hobby, and in the public library in Aberdeen came across a book on etching. Fascinated by the medium and determined to work as an etcher, despite lacking access to a press, he went so far as to print his first etchings using a domestic laundry roller. By 1902, using the premises of a local blacksmith, McBey had built himself a handmade working press, making the steel rollers out of a propeller shaft taken from a derelict fishing boat. In 1905 one of his etchings was exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy and two others at the Royal Glasgow Institute. By 1910 he had abandoned his career in banking to devote himself full time to art, travelling to Holland to study Rembrandt's prints and later visiting Wales, Cornwall, Spain and Morocco. In 1911 he held his first exhibition of etchings in London, which proved highly successful with both critics and collectors, and by 1914 McBey was earning around £1,000 a year from the sale of his etchings and from portrait commissions. During the First World War McBey was appointed an official war artist - at the suggestion of Campbell Dodgson, Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum - and spent two years recording the military campaigns of the British Expeditionary Force in Egypt. (Over 250 works from this period are today in the collection of the Imperial War Museum in London.) By the 1920s McBey had become one the best known and most successful etchers in Britain, with his landscape etchings and drypoints fetching very high prices. He visited Venice for the first time in 1924, and his etchings of the city account for some of his finest work in the medium. By the end of the 1920s, however, the Depression and the decline of the once-booming market for prints led McBey to focus more on watercolour and oil painting. His technique as a landscape watercolourist developed considerably in the 1930s, resulting in works of remarkable virtuosity. During this decade he also developed a career as a portrait painter, working in oils, although these commissioned works often lack the vitality of his landscape subjects. Although he never joined any artist's group or exhibition society, McBey continued to work and travel extensively throughout Britain, Europe, Morocco (where he owned a house in Tangier) and America until his death in 1959.