Muirhead BONE (Glasgow 1876 - Oxford 1953)

The Bronze Sculpture of Saint Michael and the Dragon on the Façade of the Cathedral of Orvieto, Looking Down on the Piazza del Duomo

Pencil on two sheets of joined paper.

Signed, dated and inscribed Muirhead Bone / Orvieto 1912 at the lower right.

505 x 288 mm. (19 7/8 x 11 3/8 in.)

One of the first trips that Muirhead Bone made outside Britain was a long stay of about a year and a half - from the autumn of 1910 to the summer of 1912 – in central and northern Italy, accompanied by his wife Gertrude. Bone made a number of drawings and etchings of the cliff town of Orvieto in Umbria, some of which were used to illustrate an article written by his wife Gertrude and published in the magazine Country Life in February 1914. As Dodgson writes of this time, ‘at Orvieto, on its great cliffs, with its golden wine and the mellow, almost equally golden, stone of the west front of its great cathedral – there, and in many a mountain stronghold of Central Italy, further from railways and less renowned, he made a memorable series of drawings, now scattered among many collections.’

In her 1914 Country Life article, Gertrude Bone noted that 'the great Duomo of Orvieto is almost always empty, save for tourists and intoning priests. Built on the tide of one of those waves of inspiration which visited Italy, it would seem as though with the ebbing of that wave the people's interest in their treasure slackened and they returned to the half-pagan beliefs which sustained their ancestors.'

This unusual view of the façade of the great cathedral at Orvieto is dominated by the 14th century bronze sculpture of The Archangel Saint Michael and the Dragon by Matteo di Ugolino da Bologna, cast in 1356, which adorned the top of the gable above the right-hand (south) door of the Duomo. (Matteo di Ugolino succeeded Nino Pisano as capomaestro of the works at the Duomo.) Now replaced by a copy, the sculpture of Saint Michael and the Dragon is today in the collection of the Museo del Opera del Duomo in Orvieto. To make this drawing, Bone stood at the level of the open arcade running above the three gabled doors and below the rose window, leaning out to draw the sculpture and the piazza below.

During his time in Italy Bone produced thirty-two copper plates and several fine drawings, some of which were sent from Italy to London and Glasgow to be sold by his dealers. A number of his drawings of Italy were exhibited at the Colnaghi and Obach gallery in London in 1914, to very positive reviews. Other drawings by Bone of the cathedral of Orvieto are today in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In a letter to The Times written shortly after Bone's death, the artist Sir William Russell Flint noted that 'Muirhead Bone's extraordinarily alert and sensitive eye was merely the instrument of his inner vision and uncanny perception. In his more sombre architectural subjects dignity always prevailed. His buildings seemed part of Nature, carrying ornamentation and finicky detail as a great oak carries its leaves…We have lost one of the great draughtsmen of all time.'

Exhibitions

Possibly Berlin, Austellunghaus am Kurfürstendamm, Fünfundzwanigste Ausstellung der Berliner Secession: Zeichnende Künste, November-December 1912, no.83 ('Orvieto').

Artist description:

Born in a suburb of Glasgow, Muirhead Bone was initially trained as an architect, but abandoned this career is favour of working as a draughtsman and printmaker. His first etchings date from 1898, and, as the collector and scholar Campbell Dodgson has noted, 'Like several etchers who have distinguished themselves in after life by a style of marked originality, he found out the technique for himself, or at least without a definite course of study under any teacher or in any school of engraving.' Bone's early etchings were of scenes in and around Glasgow and the banks of the River Clyde, and a handful of his prints were exhibited at the Royal Academy and the New English Art Club in London. In the winter of 1901 the artist settled in London, where a few months later an exhibition of his prints was held at the Carfax Gallery. From 1904 his prints were published by Obach and Co., and the same year Bone became a founding member and honorary secretary of the Society of Twelve, established as an exhibition society devoted to original prints and drawings. (Other founder members included William Strang, David Young Cameron, George Clausen, William Nicholson, Augustus John and William Rothenstein.) Bone participated in several of the society's exhibitions, which were held between 1904 and 1915. Among his most significant works of the first decade of the 20th century were the drypoints of The Demolition of St. James's Hall of 1906 and 1907 and The Great Gantry, Charing Cross Station of 1906, and a large

pencil drawing of The British Museum Reading Room of 1907. Each of these works, characterized by a novel viewpoint of a well-known building and an abiding attention to detail, were prefaced by numerous studies and drawings. As his grandson and biographer has noted of Bone, 'his method of working seems to have been to record as much as he could in a detailed, on-the-spot drawing and to work this up over several months to a finished print or drawing, which would be the centrepiece of his submission to the next exhibition of the Society of Twelve.'

By 1909 Dodgson had published a catalogue raisonné of Bone's oeuvre as a printmaker, which at that point amounted to 225 works. (A later unpublished typescript by Dodgson listed a further 252 prints, dating up to 1939.) During the First World War Bone was appointed Britain's first Official War Artist. From 1916 onwards he spent much of the next two years on the Western Front, working at a furious pace and producing numerous drawings and watercolours of the military campaigns and its effect on the surrounding countryside, intended for both journalistic and propagandic purposes. Many of his drawings were published as The Western Front: Drawings by Muirhead Bone, which appeared in monthly instalments throughout 1916 and 1917, eventually amounting to some 30,000 printed copies all told. In 1918 Bone published The Western Front; a series of one hundred drawings of military life.

After the First World War Bone found his stature in England secure, and enjoyed considerable commercial and critical success over the next thirty-five years. He was much honoured, and served as a trustee of the Imperial War Museum, the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery, although he declined to be considered for membership in the Royal Academy. He travelled widely within Britain and throughout Europe, especially Spain, and made drawings and etchings of the places he visited. After the Wall Street Crash of 1929 the market for fine prints declined considerably in the 1930s, and Bone turned more towards marketing and exhibiting his drawings, usually at Colnaghi's, and taking on illustration commissions for newspapers and magazines. During the Second World War Bone served on the War Artists' Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Information, chaired by Kenneth Clark, and produced a number of fine, large-scale drawings of London during the Blitz and scenes of the Home front.

Bone's drawings were as much admired as his etchings, and his larger and more ambitious drawings were often sold for between £20 and £50 apiece. Several of his drawings were reproduced in such publications as the Architectural Review, the Pall Mall Gazette, the Art Journal, the Illustrated London News and the German Die Graphischen Künste. Bone produced only a handful of oil paintings, however. As Dodgson noted, 'he is much more at home with pencil and charcoal, ink and water-colour wash and pastel, than with the pigments and utensils of the landscape painter in oils. He is a "black and white" artist first and foremost, and one of the most gifted, varied and accomplished draughtsmen that have ever been known. Gifted with a fresh and eager interest in the forms of things, singly and in relation to others, that enables him to discover beauty of surface or shape or proportion in objects that the less curious eye ignores as dull and ugly…gifted, above all with a most astonishing eyesight, keen, searching and tireless, and with equally unfailing sureness of hand.'

As Campbell Dodgson has further written, 'Muirhead was brought up to be an architect, and he owes to that apprenticeship the thorough knowledge of construction, the extraordinary eye for significant detail, and the sureness of hand whether in finished or in summary drawing, which no etcher could acquire who should approach architecture merely from the outside. For him, however, drawing soon came to be of paramount interest, and he relinquished all thought of practicing architecture as a profession.'

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