

William STOTT OF OLDHAM (Oldham 1857 - Belfast 1900)

Open Sea

Pastel on board.

Signed *WILLIAM STOTT OF OLDHAM* at the lower right.

Dedicated *To John Swan* at the lower centre.

245 x 327 mm. (9 5/8 x 12 7/8 in.)

From 1883 onwards William Stott began working in pastel, 'almost exclusively for plein-air landscape work and in preliminary sketches for exhibition pictures - and he proved to be a superb pastellist.', as one scholar has noted. He was influenced by the pastel landscapes of Edgar Degas, whom he may have met around this time, and Whistler, who had recently returned from Venice with a large number of pastel views which were exhibited in London. While Stott sometimes used his pastel sketches as studies for the background of his paintings, he also regarded them as fully-fledged works of art and often exhibited them.

The present sheet is one of a number of pastel seascapes executed by Stott in the 1880s and 1890s. As Roger Brown has noted, 'At Ravenglass, in the summer of 1884, Stott worked on a series of seascapes and coastal views in pastel, which follow Whistler's simplicity and economy of expression almost to abstraction. Stott was to produce many such landscapes in the remaining years of his life, almost exclusively on the Cumberland coast. These figureless, subjectless scenes…are a celebration of Stott's belief in the beauty and symbolism of nature unsullied by the human presence or the limitations of narrative. More and more these small landscapes and seascapes seem to display a form of pantheism, where emotional and spiritual values are expressed through the moods of nature. Like Whistler, Stott was pushing further the boundaries of the apparently limited subject.'

This pastel was presented by the artist to the English animalier painter and sculptor John Macallan Swan RA (1847-1910), with whom Stott is known to have corresponded. Among comparable works is a pastel seascape today in the collection of the Gallery Oldham.

Artist description:

The son of the owner of a cotton mill in Oldham in Lancashire, William Stott studied at the Oldham School of Art and often sketched in the surrounding countryside and on the Lancashire and Cumbrian coasts. He initially worked mainly in watercolour, producing small-scale views notable for their freshness and atmospheric quality. He decided to complete his artistic education in Paris, and moved there in 1878 to study with the Orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme. By this time, as the Stott scholar Roger Brown has noted, the young Englishman 'was already a proficient artist of landscapes, which displayed a sensitivity to tone, atmosphere and colour that was to stay with him throughout his short artistic life.' Stott also studied briefly with Gérôme's friend Léon Bonnat, and showed a few watercolours at the Paris Salons between 1878 and 1880. He also spent some time in the town of Grez-sur-Loing, which hosted a thriving community of foreign artists such as Arthur Melville, Frank O'Meara and Theodore Robinson. A particular influence on Stott at this time was the work of the Realist painter Jules Bastien-Lepage, and it was his exhibition, at the Salon of 1881, of two large paintings whose subject and style were indebted to the example of Bastien-Lepage which first brought him a measure of fame and commercial success. Both paintings were sold to an important collector, and the artist came to the attention of John Singer Sargent, who began promoting his work. Stott was invited to exhibit at the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1881, and the following year sent two more large canvases, both painted at Grez-sur-Loing, to the Salon, one of which won a third-class medal, and also showed a painting at the Royal Academy in London.

Stott worked in oil and watercolour, and became best known for his atmospheric landscapes. In 1882 he returned to England from France, and soon began adding 'of Oldham' to his signature on his paintings and drawings, so as to avoid confusion with the well-known artist Edward Stott. Newly married, he settled in the small harbour village of Ravenglass, in the Lake District in Cumbria, where he was to live and work for the remainder of his career. He maintained close contacts with France, and in December 1882 was invited to exhibit at the inaugural exhibition of the Société Internationale de Peintres at Sculpteurs, alongside Bastien-Lepage, Jean Béraud, Giovanni Boldini, Jean-Charles Cazin, Max Liebermann and Sargent. In London Stott exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery and the Society of British Artists, to which he was elected in 1885, at the invitation of James McNeill Whistler, who was soon to become the President of the Society of British Artists. Before long, Stott came to be regarded, together with Walter Sickert, as one of Whistler's foremost disciples, and his influence is particularly noticeable in the younger artist's portraits of the 1880s. By 1887, however, Stott had begun moving away from Whistlerian subjects in favour of themes associated with the Aesthetic Movement, influenced by the example of Edward Burne-Jones and the Symbolist artists in France. That year he exhibited a large painting of The Birth of Venus at the Society of British Artists, for which Whistler's mistress had posed nude, and which received scathing critical reviews. The result was a scandal and a lasting rift with Whistler, which tainted Stott's reputation in England for the remaining years of his career.

Nevertheless, Stott's standing in artistic circles outside England remained high, in particular in France, where he had kept a studio throughout the 1880s and continued to send paintings to the Paris Salons, as well as in Belgium and Germany. In 1889, for example, a retrospective exhibition of sixty oils, pastels and watercolours was held at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris, while in the same year one of his paintings was shown at the Exposition Universelle and he was also invited to exhibit with the artist group Les XX in Brussels. Yet what he seems to have most wanted, namely acceptance into the Royal Academy and recognition by the artistic establishment in London, was never forthcoming, although a few of his paintings were shown there between 1891 and 1899. Stott died suddenly, at the age of forty-two, on board a ship sailing from Southampton to Belfast, and was largely forgotten within a few years of his early death. Only two articles about the artist were published, in 1889 and 1894, and no monograph devoted to his work appeared until the early years of the 21st century.