Stephen Ongpin Fine Art

John MARTIN (Haydon Bridge 1789 - Douglas 1854)

The Thames at Twickenham

Watercolour, heightened with bodycolour and gum arabic and scratching out, over a pencil underdrawing.

280 x 699 mm. (11 x 27 1/2 in.)

In excellent condition, the present sheet is a fine example of John Martin's skill as a watercolourist, in which he arguably remains underappreciated today. In May 1854, not long after the artist's death, an auction of sixty of his watercolours was held at Christie's in London. As the scholar Martin Myrone has noted, 'Many critics felt that the sale was a revelation: a number of the works displayed a delicacy and quietude that had been considered lacking in Martin's early oils.' Many of these watercolours were of tranquil landscapes and were quite different from the visionary compositions that had established the artist's fame. Writing in The Athenaeum, one critic commented that 'These works, beautiful in execution, finished with all the dainty minuteness of even a woman's hand, and deep and bright in colour, presented us with a new view of the artist's character. He who revelled in vastness and sublimity…could go out and watch, it seems, with a poet's love, the pool where the water-lilies lie asleep, the golden waves of ripe corn rippling into furrows of exceeding lustre, the pale shadows that the trees cast on sunless days, and rivers winding "at their own sweet will" calm and child-like under the benediction of the sun. It did us good to see the same mind exulting in the blue chasms and frozen billows of Alpine scenery…and then to behold the creator of these wonders go forth to be lulled asleep on the soft breast of our common mother Nature, as if in these drawings a reaction from the wildness of his imagination has led Mr. Martin to display his tenderest feelings…The scenes he selected seem to have been of the quietest and most pastoral character: - such as Leith Hill, Richmond Park, views on the Thames (Runnymede, Twickenham, &c.)…The drawings realized very good prices.'

During the latter part of his career, in the 1840s and early 1850s, Martin produced a number of watercolours of the area around Richmond and Twickenham on the river Thames. Characterized by an elongated, frieze-like format, several of these works were exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1844 and 1852. As William Feaver has noted, 'These scenes of Richmond Park…are comparable to the topographical water-colours of Copley Fielding, or Samuel Palmer in his post-Shoreham days. Ideally suitable as designs for steel engravings and, in many instances, softened into haze around the margins so as to lie at ease on the paper, they invite the onlooker to become absorbed, by almost imperceptible degrees, into the central and fully formulated area of each composition.'

The grounds of Richmond Park, a historic Royal deer park, and the banks of the Thames at nearby Twickenham were among Martin's favourite places to sketch. In a series of articles on 'The Banks of the Thames', published in 1841, the Saturday Magazine noted that 'Of the Thames in the vicinity of Twickenham, it has been remarked by writers of all grades, poets, painters, and topographers, that it

presents scenes of extraordinary beauty. The river rolls on through meadows of the richest verdure, while its banks are adorned with the contrasted beauty of the villa and the cottage.' During much of the 19th century, this stretch of the Thames at Twickenham was particularly known as the location of the Palladian-style villa built for the 18th century English poet Alexander Pope, despite the fact that the building itself had been demolished in 1807.

This large sheet may be likened to a watercolour view by Martin of The Banks of the Thames, Opposite Pope's Villa at Twickenham, signed and dated 1850, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy the following year and is today in the Paul Mellon Collection at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven. Also comparable are two watercolour views of Richmond Park, one dated 1843 in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the other, signed and dated 1847, in the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery (now The Higgins) in Bedford. Other paintings and watercolours by Martin of the area around Richmond and Twickenham are in the collections of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, the Denver Art Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, as well as in a number of private collections.

Exhibitions

London, Agnew's, Watercolours and Drawings, 2004, no.53; London, W/S Fine Art Ltd., Watercolours and Drawings 1750-1950, Summer 2006, no.44.

Artist description:

Born in Northumberland, John Martin was apprenticed to a coach painter in Newcastle until 1806, when he settled in London, finding employment as a glass and china painter. He aspired, however, to be a painter of grand historical and literary subjects, and in 1812 achieved his first measure of success when his painting of Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion was accepted by the Royal Academy for exhibition, and was sold soon afterwards for fifty guineas. Nevertheless, in the early part of his career, Martin's livelihood was earned with small-scale landscape paintings, watercolours and sepia drawings of a classical inspiration, or topographical views in the Home Counties and elsewhere.

It was not until 1821, when his grandiose canvas Belshazzar's Feast was exhibited to popular acclaim, as well as both critical and financial success, that Martin's international reputation was firmly established. The dramatic compositions, imaginative effects and apocalyptic themes of Martin's immense, visionary canvases of the 1820's and early 1830's – notably The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum of 1822, The Seventh Plague of Egypt of 1823 and The Deluge of 1834 – captured the imagination of the viewing public. The artist's celebrity was enhanced not only by the exhibition of these works, but also by the popularity of the prints that were published after (or inspired by) them, which were to eventually number more than 130. Indeed, in the late 1820's and early 1830's, Martin's activity as a commercial printmaker provided a large portion of his income.

Martin's last major paintings were a series of three massive canvases depicting The Last Judgement, begun in 1845 but not completed until 1853. Arranged in the form of an enormous triptych, the paintings were exhibited very widely over the next quarter of a century; not only throughout Britain but in several cities in America and as far afield as Australia.