

John CRAXTON (London 1922 - London 2009)

Greek Water Jug

Black and white conté crayon on brown packing paper.

Signed and dated Craxton. 46. in pencil at the lower right.

491 x 348 mm. (19 3/8 x 13 5/8 in.)

Drawn in 1946, the year that John Craxton first came to Greece, this large drawing is closely related to a painting of the same subject by the artist, executed three years later in 1949, which was sold at the auction of the Evill/Frost collection in London in 2011. The same jug or amphora is also found, alongside a potted plant, in a still life drawing of 1946, dedicated by Craxton to Lucian Freud, in the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery (now The Higgins) in Bedford. A comparable still life composition of the same date, drawn on blue paper and depicting a jug and a potted plant by a window, is in a private collection. Common to each of these drawings is a simplicity of design and clarity of draughtsmanship. As Sir David Attenborough has noted of Craxton, 'Line was, from the beginning, crucially important in his painting. He didn't care for the smudgings of other styles. He liked to know where an object began and ended. The lines in his early drawings, which he drew with both brush and pen, already had an extraordinary incisiveness and eloquence.' Characteristic of Craxton's drawings is his use of conté crayon (a supply of which he had discovered while studying at Goldsmiths) whose effect is here further emphasized in the use of a simple brown packing paper as a support.

Apart from the Evill/Frost canvas of 1949, Craxton depicted this jug or amphora in a handful of other later works. It appears prominently in the painting Galatas of 1947, today in the collection of the British Council, and in a large pencil and gouache drawing of a Water Pot in a Window of the same year, in the

Victoria and Albert Museum in London. A related, monochromatic gouache drawing of the same jug, signed and dated 1948, was formerly in the collection of Richard Attenborough and has appeared twice at auction in recent years.

Artist description:

Born into a large family, John Craxton displayed a talent for drawing and painting from an early age. In 1939, at the age of seventeen, he enrolled at the Atelier de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, taking life drawing classes there before having to return to England with the outbreak of war. Encouraged by the painter Eric Kennington, the father of a school friend, who had admired his drawings, Craxton completed his studies at the Westminster School of Art and the Central School of Arts and Crafts. Rejected from active service on the grounds of pleurisy, he served as a fire warden in London. Among his earliest patrons was the wealthy art collector and benefactor Peter Watson, publisher of the literary magazine Horizon and a co-founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, who also supported artists such as Francis Bacon, Robert Colquhoun, Lucian Freud, Robert MacBryde and Keith Vaughan. Craxton and Freud soon became inseparable friends, sharing an apartment in London, paid for by Watson, and studying drawing together at Goldsmith's College. During this period the two artists worked in a very similar style. As Craxton's biographer has noted, 'The pair became so interwoven that it was unclear whose art was being influenced and how. John seemed the more proficient draughtsman. He certainly worked with greater speed and spontaneity, yet each had an original wit that spurred the other to fresh imaginative flights and feats of invention.' The two made portraits of each other and often exchanged drawings, although Freud later sold his works by Craxton to settle gambling debts.

Craxton sold his first painting at the age of twenty and spent the proceeds on a colour print by William Blake which, many years later, he sold to the Tate Gallery. Watson introduced Craxton to the older painter Graham Sutherland, with whom he travelled to Pembrokeshire in southwest Wales in 1943, and also to Paul Nash and John Piper. In May 1944 the twenty-one year old Craxton had his first solo gallery exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in London, which was a great success, with over thirty works sold to such prominent collectors as Colin Anderson, Kenneth Clark, John Lehmann and Peter Watson. After the end of the war Craxton, always keen to travel abroad, visited Paris, Zurich and Milan before making his first visit to Greece in 1946. Soon after he arrived in Athens in May, he met the writer Patrick Leigh Fermor, who suggested that he visit the small island of Poros, in the Saronic Gulf. As has been noted of Craxton, 'Poros was to be his first real contact with the Greek landscape. Craxton found on Poros, and by extension in Greece, what he had always been looking for. He felt as though he was returning home. It was not only the colour and the light of the Greek landscape which charmed him, but the temperament of the people suited his own philosophy of life. He could live on very little money, mix with simple people, enjoy moments of everyday life and set down a record of these in his works.'

Craxton developed a lifelong attachment to Greece. As he was later to recall, 'Greece was more than everything I had imagined and far more than I had expected. As my first contact with the Mediterranean and the discovery of the actions of light and shadow, the way light behaves, the arrival in Greece was astonishing.' Freud soon joined Craxton in Poros, where the two young painters rented a pair of small rooms with a view of the harbour and worked there very productively for several months. The works produced by Craxton during this period on Poros were exhibited in a solo show at the British Council in Athens in December 1946 and in a joint exhibition with Freud at the London Gallery the following year. In 1948 a small monograph on Craxton, commissioned by Peter Watson, was published by Horizon magazine.

Although Freud was to spend only a few months in Greece before returning to London, Craxton fell in love with the country and never really left. In 1947 he visited the island of Crete, returning there several times in the following decade before eventually settling for good in the island's capital city of Chania in 1960. He was to live in Crete for the next forty-five years, becoming an indelible part of Greek cultural life and enjoying friendships with such prominent artists as Nikos Ghika. Apart from painting and drawing, Craxton produced a number of fine book illustrations, particularly for works by Leigh-Fermor, and designed sets and costumes for Frederick Ashton's ballet Daphnis and Chloe at the Sadler's Wells Ballet in 1951, as well as a 1968 production of Igor Stravinsky's Apollo at the Royal Opera House. Throughout his mature career he divided his time between Chania and London and showed regularly at galleries in both England and Greece. In 1967 a large retrospective exhibition of Craxton's work was

mounted at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, and in 1993 he was appointed a Royal Academician.