

**William Henry HUNT (London 1790 - London 1864)**

**Sunset After a Storm**

Watercolour, with touches of white heightening, on blue paper.

86 x 118 mm. (3 3/8 x 4 5/8 in.)

This watercolour may have been done during one of William Henry Hunt's winters in the coastal town of Hastings, where the artist went for his health during the early part of his career, and where he spent much time sketching out of doors. As the 19th century poet and critic William Cosmo Monkhouse has written of Hunt, 'Some of his best landscapes were also painted at Hastings, which he visited regularly for thirty years, taking up his residence in a small house in the old town overlooking the beach...He was debarred by his infirmity from active exercise, and in later years his health prevented him from drawing in the open air. Many, if not most, of his landscapes were drawn from windows.'

In his 1982 monograph on the artist, Sir John Witt noted of Hunt that 'in his early impressionable days [he] was steeped in the spirit of the eighteenth century, and in his early landscapes and views of churches, many done with reed pen and watercolour, and others in pure watercolour, his best qualities as an artist can be seen. He possessed an innate and unobtrusive sense of composition which never deserted him. There is a liveliness and spontaneity in these early landscapes and in his seascapes and shore scenes around Hastings which he gradually lost as he came in his later years, and for good financial reasons, to concentrate on plums and grapes and birds' nests. These early works which have only recently begun to become widely known and appreciated should rank far higher in the hierarchy of nineteenth-century watercolours…for the present writer, Hunt's finest and most memorable works are his early landscapes…These by their directness and unerring sense of composition best convey Hunt's passionate love of nature and his skill in portraying it in loving and simple terms. His talents as an all-round watercolourist deserve a far greater and wider recognition than they have hitherto been accorded.'

The art dealer Cyril Fry (1918-2010) specialized in 18th and 19th century British works on paper and worked from a gallery in London between 1967 and 1986, and later in Aldeburgh in Suffolk.

**Exhibitions**

Norwich, Castle Museum and London, Maas Gallery, William Henry Hunt 1790-1864: Water-colours and

Drawings from the Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Cyril Fry, 1967, part of no.34 ('Three Studies of Sunsets, Water-colour, 2 signed. circa 1820-25'); London, Guy Peppiatt Fine Art, 'Simplicity & Intensity': Drawings and Watercolours by William Henry Hunt, 2024, no.36.

**Literature:**

John Witt, William Henry Hunt (1790-1864): Life and Work, London, 1992, p.151, no.80 ('Sky and Trees'), where dated 1820-1830.

**Artist description:**

One of the finest British watercolourists of the 19th century, William Henry Hunt was born with a disability, with weak and deformed legs, that prevented him from physical labour, although from his youth he exhibited a talent for drawing that was to lead to a long and highly successful career as an artist. He was apprenticed to John Varley for a period of some seven years, while also studying at the Royal Academy Schools, and became close friends with two of his fellow students in Varley's studio, John Linnell and William Mulready, with whom he went on sketching expeditions along the Thames. Like Linnell, Hunt was part of the informal drawing academy established by Dr. Thomas Monro, and was able to study Monro's collection of watercolours. Monro became a close friend of the artist, eventually owning nearly 170 of his works and often inviting him to stay with him at his country home in Bushey in Hertfordshire. It was through Monro that the artist met the 5th Earl of Essex, who in the early 1820s commissioned Hunt to draw the house, grounds and servants at Cassiobury Park, near Bushey. The artist also did the same for another early aristocratic patron and landowner, the 6th Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth. In general, however, and perhaps due to his infirmity, Hunt did not travel much around Britain, or indeed ever visit the Continent, and was always content to work relatively close to London.

In the early part of his career, between 1807 and 1825, Hunt showed both watercolours and paintings at the Royal Academy, but after his election as an Associate of the Society of Painters in Water-Colours in 1824 and gaining full Membership two years later, he abandoned working in oils to concentrate fully on watercolours. Between 1824 and his death forty years later Hunt exhibited well over 750 works at the Society of Painters in Water-Colours, averaging some twenty-five a year during his most productive years of his career, between 1831 and 1851. (He also showed eleven watercolours at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1885.) His oeuvre as a draughtsman included landscapes, rural genre subjects, interior scenes, rustic figure studies, portraits and still life subjects, and his watercolours were widely collected in his lifetime, fetching increasingly higher prices as the years went by.

Among Hunt's occasional pupils was John Ruskin, who was a lifelong admirer of his work and often mentioned him in his lectures and writings. (Ruskin also hung Hunt's watercolours alongside those of his idol, J. M. W. Turner, in his bedroom at Brantwood.) The later 1830s found Hunt beginning to move away from landscape subjects towards interior scenes, studies of country folk, and still life subjects, particularly of fruit, flowers and bird's nests, painted with a particular fineness and delicacy that meant that the artist worked very slowly. Characterized by an often innovative technical mastery, these carefully painted, detailed and highly finished still life subjects proved especially popular with collectors, and earned the artist the sobriquet 'Bird's Nest' Hunt. Hunt's watercolours were much admired by critics such as Ruskin, who believed him to be the finest still life painter of the period, and F. G. Stephens, and by the 1840s his works were also being engraved.