

John VARLEY (London 1778 - London 1842)

A View of Conwy Castle, North Wales

Watercolour over a pencil underdrawing.

Inscribed 'I certify that this is an Original Drawing / by Old John Varley / Born 1779 / Died 1842 / Herb. Varley / Grandson / 18th July 1899' on a label formerly attached to the reverse of the frame.

Inscribed *Conway Castle* on another label formerly attached to the reverse of the frame.

318 x 226 mm. (12 1/2 x 8 7/8 in.)

From early in his career, John Varley made numerous sketching tours of Wales, and Welsh subjects made up a large part of his output throughout his long career. He first visited Wales in 1798, in the company of the landscape painter George Arnald, and returned there often. The artist made several visits to the town of Conwy (or Conway), in Caernarvonshire on the north coast of Wales, and views of the town and its 13th century castle were among his earliest exhibited watercolours, shown at the Royal Academy in 1800, 1803 and 1804.

Built by King Edward I between 1283 and 1287, during his conquest of Wales, Conwy Castle had fallen into ruin by the middle of the 17th century. Its picturesque setting was much admired by artists in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Varley painted numerous views of the Castle, several of which were exhibited at the Old Water-Colour Society between 1805 and 1823. The artist was particularly fond of depicting the castle from a distance, with trees acting as repoussoir elements in the foreground of the composition, as here. One such example, a very large and finished watercolour with a similar distant view of Conwy Castle framed by trees in the foreground, is in the collection of the Pierpont Morgan

Library in New York.

Exhibitions

London, Martyn Gregory, *An Exhibition of British Watercolours and Drawings 1730-1870*, 2012, no.69.

Artist description:

Born in the inner London borough of Hackney, John Varley was apprenticed to a silversmith at the age of thirteen, having been forbidden by his father to train as a painter. Following the death of his father a few months later, however, and with the support of his mother, Varley was able to pursue a career as an artist. In 1798 he exhibited his work for the first time, at the Royal Academy. Not long afterwards he became one of the group of young artists, including Thomas Girtin and J. M. W. Turner, who met regularly at the home of the physician and collector Thomas Monro, who also introduced Varley to a number of other collectors. It was around the turn of the century that Varley began to take on students and develop a reputation as a fine teacher; among his pupils were Anthony Vandyke Copley Fielding, William Henry Hunt, John Linnell and William Turner of Oxford. In 1804 Varley was one of the founding members of the Society of Painters in Water-Colours (later known as the Old Water-Colour Society), and he exhibited numerous works there every year between 1805 and 1842, as well as posthumously in 1843. In 1815 he published his influential book A Treatise on the Principles of Landscape, and his work was to have a profound influence on such later watercolourists as John Sell Cotman, David Cox and Peter de Wint. Varley's reputation lasted well after his death; in their A Century of Painters of the English School, first published in 1866, Richard and Samuel Redgrave described the artist as 'a perfect master of the rules of composition.'