

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**David COX (Birmingham 1783 - Harborne 1859)**

## **The Porte Saint-Denis, Paris**

Watercolour over a pencil underdrawing.

A repaired tear at the upper right edge of the sheet.

366 x 260 mm. (14 1/2 x 10 1/4 in.)

Watermark: T. EDMONDS 1825.

David Cox travelled to the Continent only three times in his career, visiting Holland and Belgium in 1826 and making two excursions to France, in 1829 and 1832. This superb watercolour dates from the earlier of his two trips to France, when the artist undertook his first (and only) visit to Paris. Accompanied by his son, Cox spent several days in Calais, Amiens and Beauvais before arriving in the French capital. They had intended to travel further into France and make a tour along the Loire to Orléans, but a bad fall and a sprained ankle meant that the artist remained in Paris for six weeks. He spent this time exploring the city in hired carriages from which he sketched.

This view was taken from the rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis, looking south towards the Porte Saint-Denis, a triumphal arch built on the site of one of the great gates of the city. Commissioned by Louis XIV from the architect François Blondel and the sculptor Michel Anguier and built in 1672, the Porte Saint-Denis is the second largest triumphal arch in Paris, after the Arc de Triomphe (which was still under construction when Cox visited the city), and was the entry point into Paris for most visitors coming

from Britain. As the English painter and diarist Joseph Farington, writing in 1802, noted of the Porte Saint-Denis, 'We now saw the character of one part of Paris. Approaching the gate the view to a painter's eye is picturesque, the forms, & variety & colour of the buildings & the arch which is lofty, make an assemblage very well calculated for a picture.'

Among the lively watercolours produced by Cox during his stay in Paris in 1829 are examples today in the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery in Birmingham, the Leeds Art Gallery in Leeds, the Tate in London, the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as in several private collections. As Stephen Duffy has noted, 'The sketches that Cox made during his stay in Paris, and in the other French cities he visited in 1829, are among his most impressive works. The experience seems to have inspired him to produce works of exceptional brilliance and vigour, in which he paid unusually close attention to topographical accuracy.' The artist exhibited only a handful of Parisian subjects at the Society of Painters in Water-Colours, however; two in 1830, five the following year, and one several years later, in 1838. As the scholar Scott Wilcox has pointed out, 'the body of Parisian sketches, which have come to be among the most highly regarded of Cox's watercolours, were in his own lifetime known only to a small coterie of family and friends.'

An unfinished variant of this watercolour view of the Porte Saint-Denis, formerly in the collection of H. S. Reitlinger, was sold at auction in 2003. As Wilcox has noted of the present sheet, 'Among his Parisian subjects, Cox's view of the Porte St. Denis is unusual in that it exists in at least two versions. While the present work with its forceful pencil drawing and bold use of watercolor is typical of the works produced during his weeks sketching in the streets of Paris, the other version (private collection)...with its more controlled pencil outlines and application of watercolor seems less a sketch than a piece intended for exhibition and/or sale but left unfinished.' A third version of the composition – a smaller watercolour, signed and dated 1831 and worked up from sketches made earlier in Paris – recently appeared at auction in London.

The first known owner of the present sheet was the Welsh Liberal politician Herbert Roberts, 1st Baron Clwyd (1863-1955), who owned a number of other watercolours by David Cox, including a study of clouds now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

### **Exhibitions**

London, John Manning Gallery, Spring Exhibition: English and Continental Drawings, March 1960; New Haven, Yale Center for British Art, and Birmingham, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, Sun, Wind, and Rain: The Art of David Cox, 2008-2009, no.47.

### **Literature:**

Orance Shipp, 'Current Shows and Comment. Sure Eye, Sure Hand', Apollo, March 1960, illustrated p.61; London, Spink-Leger Pictures, 'Air and distance, storm and sunshine': Paintings, watercolours and drawings by David Cox, exhibition catalogue, 1999, unpaginated, under no.30; Scott Wilcox, Sun, Wind, and Rain: The Art of David Cox, exhibition catalogue, New Haven and Birmingham, 2008-2009, p.176, no.47; London, Lowell Libson Ltd., Lowell Libson Ltd., 2012, pp.114-115.

### **Artist description:**

Among the finest watercolourists in England in the first half of the 19th century, David Cox was trained as a theatrical scene painter in Birmingham before settling in London in 1804 and establishing himself as a watercolourist. Much influenced by the work of John Varley, with whom he may have briefly studied, Cox exhibited for the first time at the Royal Academy in 1805. Between 1809 and 1812 he showed his work at the Associated Artists in Watercolours, and in 1812 was admitted to the Society of Painters in Water-Colours, where he exhibited almost every year for the remainder of his long and productive

career. Almost all of his sketching trips were in England and Wales, and he only rarely travelled abroad.

A celebrated teacher and drawing master, Cox published several technical manuals for amateur watercolourists, including *A Treatise on Landscape Painting and Effect in Water Colours*, *Progressive Lessons on Landscape for Young Beginners* and *The Young Artist's Companion*.

Cox enjoyed a successful career which lasted over half a century, exhibiting numerous watercolours and the occasional oil painting in London each year. Between 1844 and 1856 he spent part of every summer or autumn in the small village of Betws-y-Coed in the Conwy valley in North Wales, which he used as a base for sketching expeditions, sometimes in the company of younger artists such as George Price Boyce. A stroke, suffered in 1853, left him temporarily paralyzed, and although he recovered, his eyesight began to suffer and by 1857 had started to fail completely. While his output lessened considerably following his stroke, he continued to be well represented - usually with earlier works - at the annual exhibitions of the Society of Painters in Water-Colours in London. Shortly after his death, an account of his career described Cox as 'pre-eminent among landscapists, and the founder of a school of landscape painting purely English, but new to England itself when he created it.' Two large posthumous retrospective exhibitions of Cox's work, each numbering several hundred works, were held in Liverpool in 1875 and Birmingham in 1890.