

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**John Singer SARGENT (Florence 1856 - London 1925)**

**Loch Moidart, Inverness-shire**

Watercolour and pencil.

253 x 353 mm. (10 x 13 7/8 in.)

A gifted watercolourist, John Singer Sargent produced numerous vibrant watercolours throughout his long career, exhibiting them in public as early as the Salon of 1881. Several watercolours were included in his first one-man exhibition in London, held at the Carfax Gallery in 1903, where they attracted some critical acclaim. Four further exhibitions of Sargent's watercolours were held in his lifetime; two at the Carfax Gallery in 1905 and 1908 and two at the Knoedler Gallery in New York in 1909 and 1912.

Sargent preferred to keep his watercolours close at hand, however, and almost none of the works he chose to exhibit in London were for sale. This only changed with the two later exhibitions in New York.

Almost the entire contents of the first Knoedler exhibition, amounting to eighty-three works, were acquired by the Brooklyn Museum for the sum of \$20,000, while another large group of forty-five watercolours were purchased from the second Knoedler show by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. A third tranche of watercolours was acquired directly from the artist's studio in 1915 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, while two years later another group was accessioned by the Worcester Art Museum. Apart from these museum purchases, however, and a number of works given away as gifts, most of Sargent's watercolours remained in his studio at the time of his death. Although seventy-five watercolours were included in the artist's studio sale in 1925, a further two hundred sheets were kept by his sisters Emily Sargent and Violet Sargent Ormond.

Sargent's watercolours were, for the most part, private works done on his extensive travels in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, and they served as a welcome respite from the portraits done in his studio. As the artist wrote in a letter of 1909 to a friend, 'I have an entirely different feeling for sketches and studies than I have for portraits...sketches from nature give me pleasure to do + pleasure to keep + more than the small amount of money that one could ask for them.' His virtuoso technique as a watercolourist is readily evident in these spirited works, which allowed the artist a particular freedom of expression, heightened by the necessary speed of execution.

One scholar has written of Sargent's watercolours that 'Restricting his palette to six or seven colors and using a fistful of brushes, he would work on damp paper, spreading washes of color to the edges of the paper and using Chinese white (gouache) and the white paper to create highlights. His two primary

hues were ultramarine blue and sienna brown, and with these colors he was able to create extraordinary effects. By varying the intensity and value of these colors he achieved tonal harmonies that at first glance seem Impressionist, but it was a plein-air approach, with broad washes highlighted with dashes of color and light that enlivened the surface.'

Sargent made two visits to the west coast of Scotland, in the summer and autumn of 1896 and 1897, both times staying with his friend, the obstetrician Dr. William Playfair, his wife Emily (known as Milly) and their family. The present sheet was executed on the first of these two visits, when the artist was a guest of the Playfairs on the island of Eilean Shona, situated at the entrance to Loch Moidart in the Inner Hebrides and only accessible by boat. As Dr. Playfair recorded, in an unpublished autobiography, '[In 1893] we spent our holidays in Scotland in a particularly lovely place. Eilean Shona is situated in the middle of Loch Moidart; there is a good family house on the island and we enjoyed our holiday to the full. A more beautiful setting cannot be imagined and we returned on three further occasions... On the last occasion that we went there J. S. Sargent came with us and, during his stay, he painted three water colours of Loch Moidart for Milly. They remind us of some of our happiest times as a family in Scotland.'

As Lillias, one of the Playfair daughters, recalled many years later, 'we have three sketches he did (among many) when he stayed with us at Eilean Shona Moidart... They were painted in 1896 & given to my mother as Xmas presents, in three successive years. He generally dined with us on Xmas day...'

The two other watercolour views of Loch Moidart that were once in the Playfair collection are today in private collections.

In their magisterial catalogue raisonné of Sargent's oeuvre, Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray note that 'The three water-colours that Sargent gave to Emily Playfair... are all of a piece. They are painted from the rocky shoreline of Eilean Shona across narrow passages of water to hills and headlands. They are like separate frames from a scenic panorama, recording different facets of an all-embracing view. Tonally, they match one another, with their fresh blues set off by browns, mauves, and greens... [The present sketch of Loch Moidart] was probably painted looking toward the western end of the island... The foreground slab of rock reflects the blue light from the water, and it is topped by brown seaweed. The colour of the open stretch of water beyond is predominantly pale blue and grey green. The brown tone of the seaweed is picked up in the earth colours of the headland spur, and this gives way to a pale blue sky. Though the day is seemingly overcast, the water-colour conveys the translucent atmosphere of the place in clear, crisp tones.'

Two other watercolours thought to depict Loch Moidart, of vertical format, are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, while a handful of other watercolours, some now untraced, have also been associated with this period of Sargent's career. The watercolours produced by Sargent in Scotland were, however, the last significant watercolours that he was to paint in Britain.

Ormond and Kilmurray have written extensively of the artist's Scottish watercolours: 'In them, he charts the constantly shifting weather, the movement of the sea, and the fleeting patterns of light on rocks and water. The brush flickers over the surface, creating the sense of a landscape alive and in flux. He also captures that pearly, translucent quality of light you find in the west of Scotland in the way that he manipulates the clear tones and the wet washes of his medium. Sargent was refining his technique and developing that breadth of effect and fluency of the medium that would amaze his contemporaries in the period after 1900. His habit of isolating fragments of landscape, of seizing a motif in close-up to the exclusion of everything else, are very much in evidence in his Scottish water-colours. He was forging a new style that was altogether bolder and more exuberant than anything he had painted before... The water-colours that Sargent painted in Scotland point the way to the plein-air studies he was to paint in Europe post-1900. In his spirited use of the water-colour medium and his keen eye for the vagaries of light and weather, he anticipates the themes of his mature landscape work.'

## **Exhibitions**

London, Royal Academy, Exhibition of Works by the Late John S. Sargent, R.A., 1926, no.506 ('Loch Moidart, Inverness-shire', lent by the Misses Playfair).

## **Literature:**

William Howe Downes, John S. Sargent: His Life and Work, with an Exhaustive Catalogue of his Works, London, 1926, p.363 or pp.367-368; Stephanie L. Herdrich and H. Barbara Weinberg, American Drawings and Watercolors in The Metropolitan Museum of Art: John Singer Sargent, New York, 2000, p.290, under no.258; Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, John Singer Sargent: Figures and Landscapes, 1883-1899. Complete Paintings, Volume V, New Haven and London, 2010, pp.289-290, p.295, no.990, p.360, no.990 (where dated 1896); Richard Ormond, 'Sargent and Watercolor', in Erica E. Hirschler and Teresa E. Carbone, John Singer Sargent Watercolors, exhibition catalogue, Brooklyn, Boston and Houston, 2013-2014, p.22, fig.9.

## **Artist description:**

Born in Italy, the son of expatriate Americans, John Singer Sargent received his artistic training in Paris. He travelled widely throughout France, Italy and Spain, and became established as the leading portrait painter working in England and America in the latter part of the 19th century. Sargent settled in London in 1886, although he continued to make regular trips to the Continent, often in the company of his younger sisters Emily and Violet, and also to New York and Boston. In 1894 he was elected an Associate member of the Royal Academy in London, becoming a full Academician three years later. Although he was arguably Sargent was the most fashionable portrait painter in England and America by the end of the 19th century, he chose to abandon commissioned portraiture in 1907, working instead on landscapes and mural projects as well as working as a war artist during the First World War. This resulted in a monumental canvas of soldiers injured by poison gas, completed in 1919 and today in the Imperial War Museum in London.