James Webb (London c.1825 - London 1895)

A Barge in a Norfolk Landscape
signed and dated 'James Webb 59' (lower left)
oil on canvas
72.5 x 102.2 cm (28½ x 42¼ in)

In the centre of this highly atmospheric work by James Webb, a barge lies moored alongside a reedy bank on the Norfolk Broads. While at rest, the sail catches the wind, which by the looks of the brooding sky, is increasing in strength. Although for the most part overcast, patches of vivid blue are visible between the clouds and a bright swathe of sunlight on the horizon reflects across the water and highlights the red and white accents of the figures along the banks.

In 1859, when Webb painted *A Barge in a Norfolk Landscape,* the Broads served as major transport routes, and the flat-bottomed barges that traversed them were specially designed to navigate shallow waterways. The most common were the local wherries, which were identified by their single, often black, sail, although Thames barges, such as the one depicted here, were also highly prevalent as they were used for trading from London to estuaries and ports along the east coast. They carried commercial goods as well as raw materials including stone, coal, bricks, timber and reeds. Most towns and villages had a 'staithe', a place where barges moored to load and unload their goods.

Activity abounds in Webb's composition and the eye is drawn across the canvas from one group of people to the next. On the right, a woman kneels down at the water's edge to wash while another stands with a flat basket balanced on her hip and a third sits, nursing a baby at her breast while two children gather around. On the right, a small square vessel sits in the muddy shallows. A man leans over the edge, hauling up a net, possibly intended to catch eels, which were once one of the more commercial catches of the Broads. Fishermen used flat-bottomed boats such as the one here to trawl the waters, either spearing the creatures or trapping them in baited nets. Two further figures sitting in a small row boat are loosely indicated by streaks of vibrant colour.

Webb was principally a painter of marine subjects and his pictures often feature a lone vessel that dominates the canvas. He generally included sufficient topographical detail to make it possible to identify the locations of his scenes. His depiction of *A Swim-Headed Barge,* in the National Maritime

Museum, London, shows a similar craft to that in the present work venturing through the choppy waters of the Thames, with the white cliffs of the English coast visible on the left.

Very little is known about Webb's life. He was born in London, where he spent the majority of his career, exhibiting regularly at the Royal Academy between 1853 and 1888, as well as at the British Institution, Suffolk Street, the New Watercolour Society and Grosvenor Gallery. He travelled widely throughout Europe, indicated by his numerous paintings of coastal scenes set in Holland, Italy, France and Spain, as well as England. A view of Constantinople in the Manchester City Galleries, and several other similar scenes depicting Oriental architecture and Arab figures suggest that he also ventured farther east. Webb's work features in the Tate Gallery, London and the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, among other notable collections.

Artist description: