SPHINX FINE ART



Alexander Nasmyth (Edinburgh 1758 - Edinburgh 1840)

A View of Loch Lomond with Figures and Boats in the Foreground

signed 'Alex. Nasmyth' (lower right)
oil on canvas laid down on board
63.5 x 88.9 cm (25 x 35 in)

'By yon bonnie banks
And by yon bonnie braes,
Where the sun shines bright
On Loch Lomond
Oh we twa ha'e pass'd
Sae mony blithesome days,
On the bonnie, bonnie banks
O' Loch Lomond.'
- Traditional Scottish song

A View of Loch Lomond with Figures and Boats in the Foreground by Alexander Nasmyth delightfully encapsulates the beauty of the lake, the largest in mainland Britain. Loch Lomond, ever popular and exalted in traditional song and poetry, is here immortalised by Nasmyth in visual form. As is typical of the artist's work, the view is highly romantic and slightly idealised as Nasmyth often worked up his studies in the studio, modifying certain elements to achieve a harmonious balance in composition.

The sun has just dipped behind the rocky outcrop on the left of the painting and its late afternoon glow reflects on the surface of the water, the jagged faces of the surrounding hills and the luxurious clouds in the sky. The lighting has a soft Mediterranean feel, no doubt inspired by Nasmyth's travels through Italy, which enhances the poetic mood. In the foreground, a couple stands on the bank conversing, while a woman sits admiring the view and two men unload provisions from a rowing boat. At a slight distance, other sightseers alight from a boat and take in their surroundings.

Nasmyth's concern with atmospheric effects and his adherence to the ideals of the Picturesque, which were highly popular in his day, are in evidence in the present painting as well as in works such as *Dumbarton Castle and Town with Ben Lomond*. The two images have a number of compositional

parallels, and are both marked by the brilliant rendering of the sky and weather conditions, features that have garnered Nasmyth widespread praise and distinguish his best works.

Nasmyth intended to train as an architect, but an early inclination towards painting led him to apprentice with James Cummyng (c.1730-1792), a house decorator and antiquarian. Nasmyth's talent impressed Allan Ramsay (1713-1784), who visited Crichton in 1774, and decided to take him on as an apprentice in London, where he spent four years. On his return to Edinburgh in 1778, Nasmyth set himself up as a portrait painter, initially following Ramsay's practice of painting his sitters bust-length against plain backgrounds, before gaining confidence and experimenting by placing his subjects in landscape settings. He soon developed an inclination towards landscape painting, and in 1783, an acquaintance loaned him £500 in order to broaden his artistic education on the Continent. His sketchbooks suggest that Nasmyth visited Rome, the Bay of Naples, Bolsena, Ancona and Tivoli, as well as Lakes Lucerne and Geneva in Switzerland. He returned to Edinburgh in 1784, now aged twenty-six, and resumed painting portraits, although in the following few years he increased his output of landscapes. Nasmyth's predominant theme was the Scottish landscape, and he soon developed a consistent style and compositional formula that he maintained with great success throughout his career.

Artist description:

Alexander Nasmyth was a painter, illustrator, landscape gardener and engineer. He was educated for a career in architecture, but at an early age he showed artistic talent, and in 1773 he was apprenticed to James Cummyng (c. 1730–92), a house decorator and antiquarian. Nasmyth painted panels for carriages at Alexander Crichton's coachworks and attended evening classes at the Trustees' Academy. When Allan Ramsay visited Crichton in 1774, he was impressed with Nasmyth's ability. Nasmyth subsequently accompanied Ramsay to his London studio where he continued his apprenticeship for four years.

Nasmyth returned to Edinburgh at the end of 1778 and soon obtained ample employment as a portrait painter. His earliest works, for example *John Scott of Malleny* (1781; Malleny House, Lothian, National Trust Scotland), followed Ramsay's practice of showing the head and shoulders of the sitter against a plain background, but Nasmyth gradually liberated himself from the conventions of his master, and within a few years he was placing his figures within landscape settings, lavishing as much care on the landscape details as on the sitters. He painted *Patrick Miller and his Children* (1782; Dalswinton, Dumfries & Galloway, private collection) around the theme of a shooting-party, with the family set in their own parkland. Miller, a retired banker, discovered Nasmyth's scientific capabilities and loaned him £500 with which to broaden his artistic education on the Continent.

Nasmyth arrived in Rome in April 1783. Views painted by him in later life from sketches made on the Continent suggest that he also visited the Bay of Naples, Bolsena, Ancona and Tivoli. His homeward route may be traced through pictures of *Lake Lausanne, Lake Lucerne, Lake Geneva from the Jura Mountains* and *Haarlem*. His sketches were the basis of many paintings by his children. He returned to Edinburgh at the end of 1784 and resumed painting portraits, the best known being of his close friend *Robert Burns* (1787; Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland). *The Gordon Family at Braid* (c. 1790; Cluny Castle, Grampian) represents the high point of Nasmyth's portraiture. The handling of the dresses and attention to the details of the house in its landscape setting are particularly fine.

Nasmyth's liberal politics and outspokenness on the glaring abuses of the government embarrassed his aristocratic patrons. Despite warnings that commissions would cease, he persisted in expressing his beliefs, even 'refusing to paint their…faces, preferring instead the beautiful face of nature'. His portrait of *Thomas, 7th Earl of Haddington and his Brothers* (c. 1792; Mellerstain, Scottish Borders) remained half complete in Nasmyth's studio at his death. Henry Raeburn's dominance of portrait painting in Edinburgh during this period further encouraged Nasmyth to turn to landscape painting.

As early as 1788 Nasmyth described himself in the Edinburgh directories as 'portrait and landscape painter'. His predominant theme was the Scottish landscape, usually containing an architectural feature often seen across water, the distance bathed in mist, for example *Lugar Water* (Aberdeen Art Gallery) and *Loch Tay with Kenmore Bridge* (1810; Tayside, private collection). A fine foreign view is the *Ponte Molle on the Sylvan Side of Rome* (1810; Manchester, City Art Gallery). In the 1820s he turned his

attention to Edinburgh street scenes, recording fashions, daily activity and architecture, such as *Princes Street, with the Royal Institution Building under Construction* (1825; Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland). *Edinburgh with the High Street and Lawnmarket* (exhibited at the Royal Academy 1824; now held by the Royal Collection, Balmoral, Grampian) and its companion *Shipping at Leith* (exhibited at the Royal Academy 1824; now held by the City Chambers, Edinburgh) were probably painted to mark the visit of George IV to Edinburgh in 1822.

Nasmyth's style appears to have been moulded principally on that of Claude Lorrain in arrangement, colour and mood, and on Jacob van Ruysdael in the handling of water, trees and foreground details. Rather than paint directly what he saw, Nasmyth would generally follow prevalent Picturesque theories as propounded by William Gilpin, first searching out the finest view and then editing or improving it to achieve a harmonious balance. He painted his pictures in the studio, working from small pencil sketches often made many years earlier. The paintings were then worked up from several layers of pigment and glazing to achieve a feeling of layered depth, the top leaves painted in minute and regular clusters of three or four. Throughout his life he used greens, browns and russet for the trees and foreground; pinks and browns for the paths and buildings; blue, grey–white, pinks and oranges for the skies, which were often the most colourful part of the composition. Nasmyth's style, once formulated, displayed a remarkable consistency in both vision and technique throughout his career. From 1832 he suffered from gout and rheumatism, and the effects of old age rendered his later works less precise.

Admired during his lifetime as 'the father of landscape painting in Scotland', Nasmyth was later accused of repetitiveness. He frequently painted the same view several times, only varying the positions of the figures. Few of his works are signed, and because many 'Nasmyths' contain the hand of one or more of his talented children, care must be exercised in attributing lesser works to him, particularly as they vary considerably in quality. His best works, however, are distinguished by a rare interpretation of local weather conditions, which gives them an indefinable aura of romance, poetry and tranquillity. He sent his most ambitious pictures to London and also exhibited in Edinburgh, Manchester, Carlisle and Liverpool.

Nasmyth owned the upper floors of 47 York Place, which included a large studio, from 1799. As the Napoleonic Wars rendered the Continent unsafe for travel, Edinburgh assumed greater importance as a cultural centre, and Nasmyth responded to an increased demand for art classes. Among his pupils were David Wilkie, David Roberts, Clarkson Stanfield, William Allan, Andrew Robertson, Andrew Geddes, Hugh William Williams and John Thomson. Nasmyth's teaching methods involved short instructive talks at the easel combined with copying objects, sometimes using the camera obscura. He did not take on apprentices in the conventional sense, and his relationships with pupils were informal.

Nasmyth was often called on to paint a large house or castle in its landscape: for example *Castle Huntly* (Dundee, McManus Galleries). At times he was employed to help his clients improve the landscape appearance of their estates by making the garden or park resemble his pictures of them. He made sketches and models to demonstrate how vistas might be opened up by judicious pruning, emphasizing the importance of preserving mature trees. He was often asked to select a suitable site for a new house, looking through the eyes of what Sir Uvedale Price termed the 'architetto-pittore', or to modernize an old castle. Between 1800 and 1810 he provided designs for follies, bridges, stable complexes and grand mansions, the latter including Taymouth Castle (Tayside), Dunglass House (Lothian), Loudoun Castle (Strathclyde), Dreghorn Castle (Lothian) and Rosneath (Dumbartonshire).

Nasmyth also produced the stock scenery for the principal Scottish theatres and those in Drury Lane in London. His scenery for Glasgow, which consisted of streets, houses, cottages, palaces, interiors and landscapes, 'excited universal admiration', according to David Roberts. Possibly as a result of the success in 1818 of the scenery for *The Heart of Midlothian* (sketches in Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland), Nasmyth was commissioned by Walter Scott through his publisher Archibald Constable to provide vignette engravings for the 1821 edition of the *Waverley* novels. In all Nasmyth contributed over 60 illustrations to Scott's works.

Nasmyth had considerable talents as an engineer. He designed a tunnel under the Forth (*Scotsman Magazine*, 1807, pp. 189, 243) and made designs for bridges and bridge-building (Edinburgh, National

Galleries of Scotland). The bow-and-string bridge and arch, used commonly for spanning rivers or the roofs of factories and railway stations, was his invention (1794), as was compression riveting (1816). He appears in John Graham Gilbert's *The Distinguished Men of Science of Great Britain Living in 1807/8* (London, National Portrait Gallery) beside Sir William Herschel, John Dalton, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, James Watt and Thomas Telford.

Nasmyth continued the family tradition of beautifying his native city. He designed St Bernard's Well, the small temple over the Waters of Leith, and provided the original design for the Dean Bridge. He was keenly interested in the progress of the New Town, frequently making suggestions and models and discussing his ideas with the architects and builders. *Princes Street from Hanover Street with the Foundation of the Royal Institution* (exhibited at the Royal Academy 1826; now in Edinburgh, private collection) and *Edinburgh from the Calton Hill* (exhibited at the Royal Academy 1826; held in Glasgow, Clydesdale Bank Collection) show the progress of the New Town. *Edinburgh from St Anthony's Chapel* (1832; Dalmeny House, Lothian) depicts in great detail the Old and completed New Towns side by side.

Collections

The work of Alexander Nasmyth is represented in the following collections: National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh; National Portrait Gallery, London; National Trust Scotland; City Art Gallery, Manchester; Royal Collection, Balmoral, Grampian; City Chambers, Edinburgh; Clydesdale Bank Collection, Glasgow; Dalmeny House, Lothian; McManus Galleries, Dundee; various private collections, amongst others.