

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Julius Caesar Ibbetson (Leeds 1759 - Masham, N. Yorks 1817)

Loch Maree, Scotland

oil on canvas
30.5 x 35.5 cm (12 x 14 in)

Known for combining Romantic sentiment with the technical precision of Dutch landscape painting, Julius Caesar Ibbetson depicted scenes which combined topographical accuracy with atmospheric beauty. The present work, an idyllic representation of Scotland's Loch Maree, exemplifies Ibbetson's mastery of the landscape painting genre.

The serene waters of Loch Maree permeate the lower half of this composition: a grey and silver translucent surface which brilliantly reflects the light of the cloudscape above. A canoe, two passengers onboard, interrupts the stretch of water as the viewer's eye is drawn back to the monumental hills in the distance. Down the left-hand side of the scene and in the foreground, a protruding mass of land frames our view of the Loch. Two figures, slightly removed from the view of the lake, distance the scene from any associations of idealised, allegorical depictions of nature by marking it as one of human activity and everyday life.

Known as the most beautiful loch in the Northern Highlands, Loch Maree was one of several scenic Scottish sites to be painted by Ibbetson. On a compositional level, the work calls for an obvious comparison with the Tate Collection's [*Sand Quarry at Alum Bay*](#), a smaller scene in which the point of union between sea and landmass is also captured on the left side of the foreground, and an impressively vast sky dominates two thirds of the composition.

Ibbetson generally produced small works, and the scale of *Loch Maree, Scotland* makes it larger than many of his landscapes. This enables the viewer to fully appreciate the technical and linear precision of Ibbetson's painting technique. The definition and clarity afforded to his forms is remarkable: for example, the distinct outline and dramatically executed shading on the red cloak of the left-hand figure in the foreground. Moreover, when one observes the beautifully rendered sky which dominates the upper

half of the painting - clearly influenced by the Dutch landscape tradition - and the intensity of the perspectively obscured, atmospherically rich backdrop of hills, it is not difficult to understand why Ibbetson was dubbed the 'Berchem of England'. This high standard of technical skill and artistic finesse can be linked to his formation as a scene painter and picture restorer.

Ibbetson was an English painter, printmaker and writer. The son of a clothier, he was apprenticed to John Fletcher, a ship painter in Hull; in 1775 Ibbetson became a scene-painter there. In 1777 he moved to London, where he worked as a scene-painter and picture restorer. From 1785 he exhibited landscapes, genre scenes and portraits at the Royal Academy. In 1787-88 Ibbetson was personal draughtsman to Col. Charles Cathcart on the first British Mission to Beijing, a voyage that included visits to Madeira, the Cape of Good Hope and Java. His watercolour *False Bay, Cape of Good Hope* (London, V&A), made on this journey, shows a picturesque roughness of foliage and rustic staffage adapted from his English landscape style. Cathcart's death forced Ibbetson to return to England; thereafter he lived by painting landscape oils and watercolours, the subjects culled from his frequent tours. Ibbetson moved in 1798 to Liverpool, where he worked for William Roscoe and Thomas Vernon. From that year until his death he lived in the north, at Edinburgh, Rosslyn and the Lake District, finally settling at Masham, North Yorkshire, in 1805.

Artist description:

Ibbetson was an English painter, print maker and writer. He began his career as a copyist, predominantly of Dutch works in London which gained him the nickname 'the Berchem of England'. By 1785 he began to exhibit landscapes, genre scenes and portraits at the Royal Academy where he continued to do so for the next thirty years. He travelled extensively which did much to influence his landscape painting. Between 1787 and 1788, Ibbetson was the personal draughtsman to Colonel Charles Cathcart on the first British mission to Beijing, which encompassed visits to Madeira, the Cape of Good Hope and Java. On his return to England, Ibbetson stayed with John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute at Cardiff Castle and also visited the Isle of Wight in 1790. The rugged beauty of the island evidently made a profound impact on the artist as he subsequently began to paint scenes of shipwrecks and smugglings. His bleak and evocative [*A Storm on the Isle of Wight*](#), stands in sharp contrast to the softly tranquil scene of this *Landscape with Travellers in a Horse Drawn Carriage and Figures Conversing by a Track*.

Equally significant in Ibbetson's artistic development was a visit to Wales and the surrounding area with the painter John 'Warwick' Smith (1749-1831). The visit resulted in the publication of a book of engravings: *A Picturesque Guide* (1793). Not long after his Welsh travels, Ibbetson was commissioned in 1794 by the 2nd Earl of Mansfield to decorate the library ceiling of Kenwood House. In 1803 he published *An Accidence, or Gamut, of Painting in Oils and Watercolours* which was part autobiography and part technical treatise. In it he cited Claude Lorrain (?1604/5-1682) and Albert Cuyp (1620-1691) as masters of landscape composition. The book also provides important insights into Ibbetson's own methods, one of which was modelling through 'inner light' achieved through the application of thin glazes.