

The Barber

William Henry Hunt



Description

William Henry Hunt O.W.S. (1790-1864)
The Barber

Signed and dated 1837 lower right
Watercolour over pencil heightened with bodycolour and scratching out
45.7 by 32.4 cm., 18 by 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Provenance:

Lady Rolle (née Hon. Louisa Trefusis) (1794-1885), second wife of John Rolle, 1st Baron Rolle (1750-1842);
Anonymous sale, Sotheby's Bearn sale, 23rd July 1980, lot 257;
With the Fosse Gallery, Stow-on-the-Wold;
Anonymous sale, Christie's London, 8th June 1999, lot 99

Exhibited:

London, Old Watercolour Society, 1837, no. 251;
Stow-on-the-Wold, Fosse Gallery, 1980;
Wolverhampton, Central Art Gallery, Preston, Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, William Henry Hunt 1790-1864, 1981, no 124

Literature:

Old Watercolour Society's Club, 1935, vol. 12, pl. 12;
H. M. Cundall, English Painters of the Victorian Era, 1877, opp. p. 50;
Fosse Gallery, Exhibition Catalogue, 1980 ;
Tom Jones, William Henry Hunt 1790-1864, 1981, no. 124, p. 61

Engraved:

By Charles Turner, A.R.A., 1841 for 'Hunt's Comic Sketches'

During the 1830s Hunt began to explore comic subjects. They proved hugely popular with the public, so much so that in 1844, he published a series of coloured lithographs entitled 'Hunt's Comic Sketches'. Numerous artists including Sir Edwin Landseer (1802-1873) and Sir Hubert von Herkomer (1849-1914) also worked in the genre. However, not all of the subjects that the Victorians found amusing have endured. Their humour can appear cruel or patronising to the modern eye and lacking in sensitivity or awareness of the plight of those less fortunate. However, unlike some of his contemporaries, Hunt generally avoided the worst of these and the present watercolour is amongst his best works in this genre. Hunt's affection for his sitter is evident, the humour is gentle and reflects his delight in all aspects of life.

The sitter appears to be one of the three Swain brothers, boys who Hunt met at Hastings in 1831 and who became such regular models for the artist throughout the 1830s that they became known as 'Hunt's Boys'. William Collingwood noted that 'He took the eldest of the lads into his service as his page and model, until he outgrew the office and was fit for other employment. Then the next brother came in for his place, and he in his turn made room for the younger of the three' (William Collingwood, 'Reminiscences: William Hunt,' Magazine of Art, vol. XXI, 1898, p.504). He left £10 each to the younger two brothers, William and John in his will.

The appeal of the boys was in their ability to 'assume a variety of expressions and retain them long enough for the artist to fix them on his paper for all time...just the character for Hunt's pencil and fed his lively zest for fun' (John Witt. William Henry Hunt (1790-1864) Life and Work with a Catalogue, 1982, pp. 44-5).

Hunt has employed his characteristic scratching out in the present watercolour to great effect, as Tom Jones notes in the catalogue for the 1981 exhibition of Hunt's work at Wolverhampton 'the paper has been cut and scraped to produce an illusion of creased cloth' (Tom Jones, op. cit, p....