The Gamekeeper

William Henry Hunt

Sold

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REF: 2997

Description

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

Signed lower right, W.HUNT
Pen and brown ink and watercolour over pencil heightened with gum arabic
34.9 by 23.6 cm., 13 ¾ by 9 ¼ in.

Provenance:
Cyril Fry (1918-2010)

Literature:
Norwich, Castle Museum and London, J.S. Maas Gallery, William Henry Hunt 1790-1864, Water-colours and Drawings from the Collection of Mr & Mrs Cyril Fry, 1967, no 36;
John Witt, William Henry Hunt, Life and Work, with a Catalogue, London 1982, p. 177, no. 377;
Joanna Selborne and Christina Payne, William Henry Hunt, Country People, London, 2017, p.10 detail, cat no, 5, pp.30-1

Exhibited:
London, Old Watercolour Society, probably 1824, no. 62 or 1825, no. 133 or 341;
London, The Fry Gallery, Watercolours and Drawings from the Collection of Mr and Mrs Cyril Fry, 1967, no. 2;
Norwich, Castle Museum and London, J.S. Maas Gallery, William Henry Hunt 1790-1864, Water-colours and Drawings from the Collection of Mr & Mrs Cyril Fry, 1967, no 36;
London, Courtauld Institute of Art, William Henry Hunt; Country People, 2017, no. 5

During the early 19th Century depictions of rural working people were popular in both art and literature. William Henry Pyne, Robert Hills, Joshua Cristall and Thomas Uwins, as well as William Henry Hunt, all exhibited watercolours of rural figures. It was a period of profound social and economic change, with radical developments in both industry and agriculture and the rapid growth of urban centres gathered pace during Hunt's lifetime. Economic depression at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 led to periods of unrest in both towns and the countryside, culminating in the Swing Riots of 1830 and anger at the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, making it compulsory for people to enter the poorhouse before they could obtain poor relief.

Such subjects could be interpreted in two ways. They were either seen as symbolic of a lost, or vanishing way of life and a harking back to a more peaceful, simpler way of life, in contrast to the destitution, poverty and violence of life for the urban poor. Alternatively they were interpreted as symbolic of the tough existence of rural life. Hunt's figures were usually of skilled workers, head gardeners, gamekeepers etc. They were dignified individuals, secure in their social position and happy with their standing as important figures in the running of large estates. He avoided overt social comment and concentrated instead on an extreme realism and a sense of individuality.

Hunt appears to have started painting these subjects when working for his two aristocratic patrons, the 5th Earl of Essex and 6th Duke of Devonshire during the 1820s. His first exhibited portrait of a Gamekeeper

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(1824) depicted the keeper in the service of the Earl of Essex. At Chatsworth the artist created a series of portraits of the butler, housekeeper, groom of the chamber and footman, all in the service of the Duke of Devonshire, and these are still in the family collection. Such works were commissioned to be hung in the servant's hall and reflected the often genuine affection and bond between the senior...

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