

Purchase of watercolour by Alexander Nasmyth

Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

12 October 2006

Purpose of report

- 1 To consider the purchase of a watercolour by Alexander Nasmyth (1758-1840).

Main report

2. The following painting by Alexander Nasmyth is presented to the Committee for consideration:

Edinburgh from the East

Gouache, oval, on paper

33 x 43.5cm

Price: £7,500

3. In a letter to Nasmyth's widow, the artist David Wilkie wrote that Nasmyth was "The founder of the landscape painting in Scotland, by his taste and talent took the lead for many years in the patriotic aim of enriching his native land with the representations of her romantic scenery". Born in the Grassmarket area of the City, Alexander Nasmyth began his artistic career as a portrait painter. Spotted by Allan Ramsay while studying at the Trustees Academy, he moved to London to join the master's studio. By the time he returned home, Henry Raeburn had established himself as the leading portraitist in Scotland, and so Nasmyth turned to landscape.
4. Nasmyth was a true Enlightenment figure. Not only was he one of the leading painters of his day, but he was also an architect, landscape and theatrical designer. The oval gouache painting before the panel has all the hallmarks of a typical Nasmyth. Our view of the Castle Rock and distant Arthur's Seat is carefully framed on both sides by delicately painted trees in full leaf. Our eye is lead into the picture by the winding Water of Leith, whose twists and turns are echoed by the road (then the main entry route into the city from Queensferry), which corresponds to the route taken today by Bell's Brae and Belford Road as it enters Dean Village.

5. This leafy, pastoral view serves as a visible reminder of just how compact Edinburgh was, even by the late 18th century. In many ways this work stands in contrast to Nasmyth's later Edinburgh paintings, in which the City's industrial and intellectual prosperity appear to be the main focus. Here too we have a much freer interpretation of the subject, and it is this light touch which gives the work its particular appeal. The painting is not dated, but visual evidence, and that of city maps around the time, would suggest a date c.1790. It would therefore be the earliest work by Nasmyth to be included in our collection.
6. The City already possesses a number of works by this important Edinburgh born artist. Nevertheless, this is still a significant addition to our topographical collection, especially as there are no comparable views of this aspect of the City. It captures a time before the Second and Third New Town developments changed this view forever.
7. The painting is being offered for sale by Bourne Fine Art. The price is £7,500, which includes a gallery discount. Unfortunately the painting cannot be shown to the Committee at the meeting, as it is presently in an exhibition in Hong Kong, but has been inspected by a member of City Art Centre staff when on recent display in Edinburgh.

Recommendations

8. Approve the purchase of the painting *Edinburgh from the East* by Alexander Nasmyth.



Herbert Coutts
Director of Culture and Leisure

5.10.06

Appendices	N/A
Contact/tel	Ian O'Riordan 0131 529 3955 David Patterson 0131 529 3575
Wards affected	City Wide
Background Papers	The Jean F Watson Bequest files are held by the Museums and Arts Division