

Purchase of a painting by Arthur Melville

Committee on the Jean F Watson Bequest

12 October 2011

Purpose of report

- 1 To consider the purchase of a painting by Arthur Melville (1858-1904).

Main report

- 2 The following paintings by Arthur Melville are presented to the Committee for consideration:

The Rialto

Watercolour on paper, 1894
58.5 x 84cms
£120,000

The Procession of Corpus Christi

Watercolour on paper, 1890
78 x 55cms
£220,000

- 3 Arthur Melville was born in Angus in 1855 but moved to East Lothian at an early age. He enrolled as a student at the RSA Schools in Edinburgh under John Campbell Noble. In 1858 he visited Paris where he met Robert Weir Allan, who introduced him to the work of the Impressionists. The Impressionistic style was to have a significant influence on Melville's approach to watercolour.
- 4 Melville lived at Grez-sur-Loing for a period where other members of the Glasgow Boys were working, and there he was first introduced to the work of Bastien-Lepage. It was in Grez that Melville started experimenting with the transparent qualities of watercolour. After travelling around the Middle East for two years Melville produced some of his most sparkling watercolours of Eastern subjects and quickly began to develop a distinct watercolour style. He returned to Scotland in 1882.

- 5 Melville is considered one of the greatest watercolourists of his period, lifting the medium, as Turner did, onto new planes. His technique was unique, working onto wet paper, sponging out superfluous detail and carefully allowing certain areas of colour to run together. As the paper dried other touches were added, giving an appearance of an almost spontaneous work of art.
- 6 However, Melville's watercolours are about a lot more than just technique: he captures the heat and sun of the Mediterranean and North Africa, as well as moments of great drama. He builds up psychological tension within his works, which are usually of a large scale, further heightening their impact.
- 7 The first painting under consideration, *The Rialto*, was painted in 1894 and depicts a view of the Grand Canal in Venice, looking south from the western side of the bridge. The bridge of the Rialto spans the composition and its great arch divides the painting into light and shadow, where it sits in heavy contrast against the sunlit buildings above and beyond. Melville visited Venice in the summer of 1894 in the footsteps of Turner and Whistler for whom Venice and its light had been a primary inspiration. Melville's bold choice to depict the bridge from the shadowed side creates a dramatic scene filled with striking oppositions of light and shade. Although the painting is simply constructed, the shape and structure of the Rialto bridge are fully described even while Melville evokes the dancing light of Venice.
- 8 The second painting, *The Procession of Corpus Christi*, depicts a procession in Toledo which is held to celebrate the Body of Christ consecrated in Mass. The piece is filled with figures dressed in a wide range of clothing, all of whom march away from the viewer into the depths of the painting. The procession is watched by eager spectators from their balconies. The piece, like *The Rialto*, plays with the perception of light. In this case, however, the sense of spatial depth is heightened due to the viewpoint looking down the street. Melville again makes a bold choice in depicting the procession from this high vantage point. By the same token, this unusual view allows him maximum scope to capture the festivities and excitement of the scene.
- 9 The City already has two works by the artist in its collection, both oil paintings. Large watercolours by Melville rarely come on the open market; the Council has waited for an opportunity to buy this type of work by Melville since 1999.
- 10 *The Rialto* is being offered for sale by Bourne Fine Art. *The Procession of Corpus Christi* is being sold on behalf of a private client by Euan Mundy Fine Art in Glasgow and the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh.

Financial Implications

- 11 The funds for the purchase of one of the above paintings will come from the Jean F Watson Bequest. Grant aid will be sought from the National Fund for Acquisitions, The Art Fund, and Friends of the City Art Centre and Museums.

Equalities Impact

- 12 The contents of this report are not relevant to the public sector equality duty of the Equality Act 2010.

Environmental impact

- 13 There is no direct environmental impact arising from this report.

Recommendations

- 14 It is recommended that the Committee:
- a) approves the purchase of one painting by Arthur Melville subject to successful applications to the above grant-giving agencies; and
 - b) notes that progress will reported to the next meeting.

Alastair Maclean
Director of Corporate Governance

Appendices	None
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Wards affected	All
Single Outcome Agreement	Supports National Outcome 1: “We live in a Scotland that is the most attractive place for doing business in Europe”
Background Papers	The Jean F Watson Bequest files are held at the City Art Centre