



Fine Paintings (316)

Thu, 2nd Jun 2011, Edinburgh

Lot 52

Estimate: £30000 - £50000 + Fees

WILLIAM MCTAGGART R.S.A., R.S.W (SCOTTISH 1835-1910) THE SHORES OF THE ATLANTIC

Signed and dated 1880-1901, oil on canvas

71cm x 98cm (28in x 38.5in)

Provenance: John Mathewson, Dundee
Fine Art Society Ltd, London 1973 no.5391

Literature: James Caw, William McTaggart 1917,
p.245 **Exhibited:** Royal Glasgow Institute 1889
New Zealand 1890
Dundee Exhibitions 1912 (as Their Native Element)

Born on Aros, Kintyre, to a family of very modest means, his father an agricultural labourer who frequently moved his family for work, William McTaggart showed early signs of interest in the arts and a talent for drawing and painting. The twelve year-old McTaggart was apprenticed with the apothecary Dr John Buchan in Campbeltown, who appears to have had an active role in encouraging and nurturing the talent of the boy, introducing him to the painter Daniel MacNee. McTaggart was fortunate enough to be able to enrol into the Trustees' Academy in Edinburgh in 1852 and attend courses for free, earning his lodgings and living by painting portraits. His arrival at the Academy coincided with the arrival of Robert Scott Lauder, who was an inspirational teacher and was responsible for creating a particularly strong crop of young Scottish artists in his time there.

McTaggart began to exhibit in 1856 and was made an associate of the Royal Scottish Academy in 1859, aged only twenty-four. His roots in portraiture are evident in the work from the late 1850s and 1860s. Indeed, lot 51, painted in 1864 and exhibited at the Royal Glasgow Institute in 1866, is inscribed 'Emma Shiels' on the reverse, hinting at a particular model/sitter for the young girl in the composition. McTaggart's work at the beginning of his professional career is strongly aligned to that of the Pre-Raphaelites. Indeed, he visited Manchester in 1857, where he saw work by William Collins, Holman Hunt and Millais. Those artists' profound interest in colour and focus on pastoral or poetic subject matter, figures in the landscape, and children, as in the case of Millais, seem to have produced a strong response in McTaggart, with lots 51 and 53 being particularly strong examples of this development. He remained rooted in his Scottish heritage, however, and his landscapes, increasingly important in his compositions, continued to be recognisably Scottish, both in topography and in his treatment of them, looking back to the great Scottish landscape painting tradition of Alexander Nasmyth and almost-contemporary Alexander Fraser. An interesting comparison might be drawn between lot 51 and the much larger composition, Spring, painted for his important patron G B Simpson, and now in the collection of the National Galleries of Scotland. The treatment of the figures, in the level of detail and their

setting within a welcoming landscape that mirrors the youth and charming attributes of the girls, is very similar indeed.

McTaggart's reputation grew considerably in the 1860s and he was elected a full member of the R.S.A. in 1870. Several of McTaggart's contemporaries at the Trustees' Academy had departed to London and frequently exhibited at the Royal Academy. McTaggart refused to exhibit 'outside his country' in the 60s but did send pictures to the Royal Academy in the early 1870s. Lot 53 was one such work, shown in London in 1872 and at the R.S.A. in 1875. It features a composition related to the earlier important work *Spring*, two young children resting in a landscape, one lying down, the other more upright, but the palette and treatment of his subject matter has begun to change irrevocably. The range of colours used is now far narrower, whereas the application of paint is much looser, almost cursory in the typically Highland landscape that serves as our setting. As his style developed his critics reproached McTaggart for his broader handling of paint, advising him to burn his large brushes and revert back to finer ones. He remained steadfast on his course however, declaring 'They will change; I cannot' (p.7, Exhibition Catalogue for Paintings by William McTaggart, June-July 1937, City of Manchester Art Gallery). A review of his portrait of Mrs Orchar, his friend's wife, intoned 'some fine qualities but it is slovenly in execution, wanting in texture and definition.' (The Arts Journal, 1887, p.125)

Lot 52 fully demonstrates the radical change in direction the artist's work took in the 80s and 90s. The palette is even narrower and the composition supremely simplified, creating a harmonious and extremely simple landscape with the two figures an intrinsic and natural part of it. Lindsay Errington has shown how McTaggart was greatly influenced by the work of Whistler and as a result how he ceased to use his paint in a descriptive manner but rather applied oils in an evocative way, producing a harmonious and almost abstract work in the process.

The artist began to frequently visit both the East and West coasts of Scotland, in particular Crail and Carnoustie, and Campbeltown and Machrihanish in the West. The present lot is most likely to have been painted at Machrihanish, which is described in a book from 1876 which McTaggart owned as:

'The long crescent of Machrihanish, girdled by sands, wind-tossed into fantastic hillocks, receives the full weight of the Atlantic...Even in calm there is a weird suggestiveness in the ceaseless moaning of that surf, like the breathing of a wild beast.'

By the 1880s McTaggart frequently worked outdoors, painting the landscape in situ, preferring to add any human figures in the studio afterwards. The figures in these later landscapes are an intrinsic part of nature, and become even more entrenched into the sea and sand in the later, and even more loosely painted series of the *Emigrants* and *The Coming of St Columba*.

McTaggart's painterly technique, great interest in light and evocative rather than descriptive depiction of his subject matter in his mature works have rightly earned him the title of a Scottish Impressionist. We might argue that he was to 19th-century Scottish art and to the Glasgow Boys, what Edouard Manet was to the Impressionists: a forefather and important precedent for the development of Modernity in painting in his

country.