

British & European Paintings (463)

18th May 2016, Edinburgh

Lot 31



KENNETH DENTON SHOESMITH R.I. (BRITISH 1890-1939) THE SPANISH FLEET DRIVEN TOWARDS THE FLANDERS COAST AFTER . . .

FIGHTING ALL DAY, MAKE FOR THE NORTH SEA. Signed, oil on canvas

102cm x 203cm (40in x 30in)

Provenance: Commissioned by Lord Vestey 1930 for his home, Kingswood, Dulwich
Radley College, donated by Lord Vestey 1945
Sotheby's London, June 1998 lot 174

Literature: The Journal of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners, issue 2/2014 vol. xxxiii, no.006

Note:

Kenneth Shoesmith was born in Halifax but grew up in Blackpool and despite showing promise as an artist, in his early teens decided on a career at sea. Aged 16 he became a Conway Cadet on HMS Conway, the Merchant Navy training school ship moored at Liverpool. After completing his studies, Shoesmith joined the Royal Mail Line but continued his enthusiasm for drawing and painting as he travelled the world, working for the Royal Mail and for Southern Railways. Aged 28, in 1918, Shoesmith left the sea to devote himself to painting. While mainly self-taught, he also took a correspondence course early in his new career.

Shoesmith produced many paintings for use as advertising posters for his original employers the Royal Mail Line and also worked for the publishers Thomas Forman who produced Cunard's famous postcards, creating some of their best-known images. His highly colourful, flamboyant early style captured the essential romance of ocean liner travel in the early 20th century, although it changed profoundly from a Brangwyn-esque freedom to a more stylised and restrained 'Art Deco' coolness.

Shoesmith was a member of the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours and also of the British Society of Poster Designers. The Ulster Museum has 300 of Shoesmith's original paintings and sketches in its collection.

Kenneth Shoesmith died in 1939, aged just 48. His obituary read: 'As a poster artist - he was quite definitely in the front rank of those who are content to paint what they see and know. He was direct in his methods, sound in his drawing and brilliant in his colour. His ships were not only correct in detail but they were always in and not on the water, for he painted with a seaman's knowledge as well as an artist's perception.'

In 1930, the First Lord Vestey, owner of the Blue Star Line, had commissioned Shoesmith to paint a series of murals depicting the events surrounding the English victory of 1588 over the Spanish Armada, for the dining room of his home, Kingswood in Dulwich.

In ten panels, telling the story, from Sir Francis Drake's game of bowls on Plymouth Hoe, to the return of the English fleet at Dover Castle, Shoesmith's oil paintings recreated the classic schoolboy history image of the great sea battle, with richly coloured galleons, lively anecdote and not least wrecked Spanish ships. Each panel was 40 inches high, constrained by the dimensions of Vestey's walls, while their width fitted the individual bays and alcoves of the dining room.

In 1939, after just nine years in place, the murals were taken down when, with the outbreak of War, Kingswood became War Department offices. They were put into storage and with the coming of peace in 1945, were donated by the Vestey family to Radley College, where Lord Vestey's son, Captain William Vestey (killed while serving with the Scots Guards, in 1944), had been educated.

At Radley they hung on the walls of the College Dormitory for more than thirty years. However, when that building was altered in 1976 the paintings were again taken down and put into storage. In 1988 Radley decided, with the Vestey family's agreement, to sell the murals to fund the purchase of works by young artists, and in 1998 the murals were sent to auction.

Arguably, the two highpoints of Shoesmith's career were the Armada series, included in this sale and similar series of large decorative murals he painted in 1933 for the interiors of the Cunard White Star liner Queen Mary. These included two works for the cabin class drawing room, the monumental Flower Market and The Madonna of the Atlantic, (an altarpiece, covered by a folding screen when not in use) and The Madonna of the Tall Ships for the tourist class library.