

JOHN MITCHELL

FINE PAINTINGS



William Hodges (1744 - 1797)

A capriccio landscape with travellers below a rocky outcrop

oil on gessoed canvas, 45 ¼ x 68 ½ in. (115 x 174 cm.)

Hodges is best known as the official artist on James Cook's second voyage to the Pacific from 1772 to 1775. Only in recent years has the true significance of his remarkable paintings of New Zealand, Polynesia, the Antarctic and Easter Island begun to be appreciated, for not only was he the first professionally trained artist to see these unknown regions, but in his unprecedented concern for atmospherics and the play of light on his surroundings, he was forty years ahead of Turner and a century before the Impressionists. Hodges is also known for his innovative paintings of India, where he stayed for six years under the patronage of Warren Hastings. In 1793 he published a book about his travels there, illustrated with his own views of landmarks such as the Taj Mahal. Upon his return to England in 1784 Hodges needed to continue working and there may still exist as many as several hundred landscapes yet to be identified from this later, more obscure phase of his career.

This extraordinary capriccio landscape has only just come to light, with no known history as yet, and it is even more curious for the medium on which it is painted, evidently the only known fresco by Hodges.

The fine passages of colour, with what Colonel Grant called 'their chromatic iridescence', mark the picture indelibly as Hodges' own, idiosyncratic work. The darker foreground with its gnarled trees and roots echoes two of his better-known works, Jacques and the wounded Stag and Waterspout off New Zealand, while the luminous, roseate sky takes us back to his tranquil Pacific sunsets. The dilapidated architecture finds its prototype in his neglected Mughal palaces and 'chhatris'. The subject is, of course, entirely fictitious, and the ethnology of the figure groups charmingly vague, but in its physical scale and

Salvator Rosa-like imagination this vista compares well with his famous pictures. The closest comparison we have been able to establish is to a work listed in the attempted catalogue raisonné of his work of 1979 by Isabel Combs Stube, no. 544, A Grand Romantic view on the Rhine, a Banditti Chief Bargaining for Fish (oil on canvas, 32 x 45 inches, D. P. Leydell-Bouverie, Glen Ellen, California.)