

JOHN MITCHELL

FINE PAINTINGS



Alfred Stevens (Brussels 1823 - Paris 1906)

L'Ours blanc

oil on canvas

21.8 x 70 cm.

signed with monogram upper right

with period parcel-gilt 'Degas' frame

[Stevens's work is] the best example, after Vermeer, of what modest realism can achieve, served by an eye that is able to pick out fleeting radiances, and by a craftsmanship that is able to bring these into harmony.

G.Vanzype, Les Frères Stevens, 1936, p.43

I often wonder if, when my late father was working on his book about Alfred Stevens, he could have imagined that more than fifty years later his sons would still be finding unknown treasures by the artist, and still learning about his remarkable life.

In 2016 we held a small Stevens exhibition to mark the re-emergence after eighty years of his beautiful and important *Mappemonde* of 1869, showing a lady holding a letter and contemplating a globe to chart the progress of a far-away lover. *Le Repos du Modèle* could scarcely be more different in mood and subject, but is of the same exquisite quality – and almost certainly of the same model. Unlike *Mappemonde* there is as yet no record to be found of this unprecedented picture either in our own extensive Stevens archive or in that of the Comité Alfred Stevens in Paris, and so its discovery adds yet another dimension to what we already know of Stevens' prodigious output and of his glittering career in Paris at the time of the Impressionists.

Like most dyed-in-the-wool painters with turpentine in their veins, Stevens must, from time to time, have painted for the sheer pleasure of it. We have no means of knowing today if this was the case with this ravishing canvas, but perhaps the model was posing for an important commission and this study was painted during a break from the main task? Whatever gave rise to this intimate and sensual work, it leaves us in no doubt as to Stevens' stature as an artist.

In his book *Impressions sur la Peinture* Stevens reminds us that a profound understanding of and empathy with subject matter was of little use if the painter did not have the skill and craftsmanship to put his vision into paint, the perfect harmony of eye and hand. His ability to draw a woman perfectly, perhaps one-sixth lifesize, and lay on paint with the speed, accuracy and finesse we see here, is a concise summary of Alfred Stevens, all on a relatively small canvas. Excessively dirty and yellowed on arrival at the gallery, the cleaning has been nothing short of miraculous, for it shows the painting – among other attributes - to be a virtuoso exercise in different shades of white, off-white, cream and grey, in the tradition of the greatest Old Masters. Contrast the icy white of the polar bear rug with the delicate warmth of the model's pale skin; note, too, the extraordinary treatment of her clasped hands and the wholly convincing pose of one at peaceful rest. Not often do we find in Stevens' work such prominent pencil underdrawing, but then this is a real 'flesh and blood' woman, not the *poupée* of one of his imitators, and he was clearly at great pains to draw accurately her prone figure. How bold, too, to work on this unusual, landscape canvas – almost unknown in the many hundreds of his other paintings of which we have illustrations.

Perhaps precisely because of his many hundreds or even thousands of paintings, Stevens' reputation has been wrongly impugned by association with many weak seascapes and figure paintings from later in his career, when penury dictated in his work 'quantity', not 'quality'. Reluctantly we have come to accept that not everyone therefore shares in the Mitchell family's belief in him as a great painter, but Stevens deserves to be judged by his greatest achievements, of which this must surely be one. Today over thirty American museums and institutions own one or more of his paintings as a direct result of the prestige he enjoyed in the United States in his lifetime, and it comes as no surprise that as recently as last autumn the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston acquired another. I used to laugh off my father's observation that Stevens' greatest misfortune in life was to have been Belgian and not French, but now I realise that he was entirely right: in his adopted country of France Stevens has never received the recognition he deserves, and is loftily dismissed as 'Ecole belge'! With such paintings as the present one we can be confident of their mistake.