

Peaks & Glaciers

2016

JOHN MITCHELL
FINE PAINTINGS

EST 1931



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2016

All paintings, drawings and photographs are for sale unless otherwise stated and are available for viewing from Monday to Friday by prior appointment at:

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² In keeping with my past exhibitions I have made quality, topographical accuracy and diversity of subject matter the priorities in selecting these works. Whether these records of the 'Playground of Europe' survive in oil, watercolour or early photography they represent a fascinating and rich diversion in the course of the history of art; a heritage which many of us are lucky to enjoy through collecting, climbing or skiing throughout the several hundred mile arc of the Alps.



FIG 2

Charles-Henri Contencin
Les Contamines Valley, near Chamonix
sold by Hotel Drouot, Paris, December 2015



This is our fifteenth winter catalogue of Alpine paintings, drawings and antique photography from the early 1840s to the present day, and I am confident that the pictures offered for sale represent some of the best of their kind available today.

There are now more buyers and enthusiasts of Alpine landscapes than ever before. As the leading specialist I am proud to have handled some remarkable pictures of the Swiss and French Alps since our inaugural exhibition in 2001. I am equally encouraged by the significant rise in auction values of the work of the best of the *peintres-alpinistes*, climbers who were gifted amateur artists, such as Gabriel Loppé, E.T. Compton, Charles-Henri Contencin and Jacques Fourcy. And the more one sees of the latter's work, the more original and appealing it becomes; Fourcy's pictures are always a welcome addition to any *Peaks and Glaciers* catalogue (see pages 6, 16 and 20). Nothing highlights this overall interest better than the upsurge in prices paid for vintage travel posters of the Alps which, after all, are nothing more than lithographs, or in today's parlance, 'multiples' (see fig. 1 for 1934 Gstaad lithograph sold for £ 62,000 in January 2016).

Contencin's attractive paintings appear with some regularity at auctions in his native France and the good ones often fetch strong prices, see for example (fig. 2) a small view of the Contamines valley near Chamonix which was sold in Paris in December 2015. E.T. Compton's oils and watercolours, on the other hand, are now relatively rare and the same can be said for Gabriel Loppé's paintings too. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule and I was excited to have had the chance last summer to buy Loppé's important painting of *Le refuge des Grands Mulets, Chamonix* (see pages 12-13). Against a good deal of competition I nonetheless paid a world record auction price for the artist in the knowledge that this is one of the finest pictures I have seen by him outside of the Chamonix museum collections. However, it isn't all about the big names and numbers. One of the principal aims of telling the story of the discovery of the Alps through painting is to keep evolving and broadening our



FIG 3
Florentin Charnaux
Les Grandes Mulets et le Mont-Blanc, Chamonix

knowledge of these specialist artists. By learning more about the early photographs it becomes clear that they complement the paintings and drawings.

The story of the early photographers and the Alps is a fascinating one which will doubtless result in more museum acquisitions and exhibitions in the coming years. Indeed, in last year's *Peaks and Glaciers* exhibition we were delighted that, thanks to a generous benefactor, the Herbert F. Johnson Art Museum of Cornell University, New York, acquired the rare photograph of the Grands Mulets by Florentin Charnaux (see fig. 3).

In spite of their different choice of mediums the Alpine photographers and some of the *peintres-alpinistes* were in fact more closely related than may be assumed. On 25 July 1861 Gabriel Loppé climbed Mont Blanc for his second time in the company of the Bisson brothers, Louis-Auguste and Auguste-Rosalie, who were some of the earliest pioneers of large-plate photography. More importantly, and commissioned by the Emperor Napoleon III to do so, the *frères* Bisson were the first ever photographers to make photographs on the way up to the summit of Mont Blanc. Notwithstanding the considerable dangers and obstacles involved in carrying all the equipment the challenges were compounded by the enormous distances that needed to be covered which makes the photographs all the more remarkable to look at today. Loppé himself became mildly obsessed with photography getting involved with it in the wake of its 'golden age' in the mid-1850s and although he never considered his photographs anything more than a time-consuming hobby its novelty readily appealed to an extrovert who lived and breathed challenges and innovation. The same can be said for other *peintres-alpinistes* of the time who embraced this new way of documenting the high Alpine world: with technological advances in cameras and film by the early 1900s, mountain photography became a mainstay for tourists, scientists and climbers alike.

In many cases these photographs enhance the paintings and drawings in offering irrevocable proof of retreating glaciers and the changing faces of what were once small mountain hamlets and empty valleys. They also celebrate man's achievements and conquests in such hostile terrain and the marvellous Tairraz photograph of the Aiguille du Midi (see pages 8-9) captures a lone climber peering over the abyss of the Frendo Spur offset by the cable car in the background.

Detail from *The Jungfrau seen from near Interlaken* by Alexandre Calame (see pages 18-19)





Jacques Fourcy (1906-1990)

Les Courtes seen from the Petites Aiguilles Rouges du Dolent, Chamonix, France
oil on panel
22½ x 30½in (57 x 77cm)
signed

A native Savoyard and a true *peintre-alpiniste*, Fourcy's work erred towards drama rather than atmosphere. Despite wartime injuries he was the longest active member of the Paris based Société des Peintres de Montagne, exhibiting every year from 1925 to 1990. Fourcy tended to depict bright, sunny days in the Alps and was, in every sense, a 'colourist' who excelled at high altitude scenery. His was an unusual technique and like the older French *peintre-alpiniste*, Charles Henri Contencin, Fourcy learnt to paint by himself. This fine view of the north-east face of les Courtes is a perfect example of his ability to develop a sense of distance and awe in his paintings. The use of a palette knife throughout meant he could create blank areas of smoothed over paint to depict the snowfields and couloirs and, crucially, to heighten the impact of the shadows of the rocky needles in the middle ground. Les Courtes rise up 3856 metres at their highest point and form part of a chain of mountains that run from the Aiguille du Triolet to the south extending northwards to the majestic Aiguille Verte. The long, unbroken high mountain ridge straddles the Glacier du Talèfre on the Mont Blanc facing side and the Glacier d'Argentière on the eastern side.

Georges Tairraz II (1900 - 1975)

The Frendo Spur on the North face of the Aiguille du Midi, Chamonix, France

silver gelatin print
15¾ x 12in (40 x 30cm)
stamped on verso

For over four generations the Tairraz family were mountain guides and photographers based in Chamonix. In 1857, on a trip to the dentist in Geneva, Joseph Tairraz (1827-1902) bought an early Daguerrotype camera. He began taking portraits of family members and tourists in Chamonix and four years later, in 1861, he took one of the earliest known photographs of Mont Blanc. Subsequent sons and grandsons, namely Georges I, Georges II and Pierre who only died in 2000, continued the tradition as well as making mountaineering films. Today, original Tairraz photographs, including reprints from the old negatives and plates, are the most published and sought after of all the early Chamonix views.





R. Fischer (20th century German school)

The Alpspitze in winter seen from above Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria, Germany

oil on card laid down on board

9¾ x 13in (25 x 33cm)

signed



Benjamin Morel (1845 – 1938)

The Dent Blanche and the Grand Cornier Glacier, Valais, Switzerland

watercolour on paper

12¾ x 17½in (32.5 x 44.5cm)

signed and dated: 9.8.1916

During his lifetime Gabriel Loppé earned an international reputation as the leading *peintre-alpiniste* and the most accomplished artist to have painted the Alps. He was in many ways the 'Canaletto' of Chamonix, Zermatt and the Bernese Oberland; the master of his subject but in this case one who had actually stood upon many of the major summits in the Alps.

This wonderful panorama looking down onto the Chamonix valley dates from 1880. The sun is setting on climbers coming off Mt. Blanc heading to the safety of the Refuge des Grands Mulets at an altitude of 3015 metres. The hut is perched on the tower of rock in the middle of the composition which divides the Glacier du Taconnaz and the Glacier des Bossons. At the time this was the only route up to Mont Blanc via the Montagne de la Côte from Chamonix and in August 1862 Loppé spent two weeks up there climbing and painting without descending to the valley floor. The Grands Mulets hut was a special place for Loppé in other ways too. Having first climbed Mont Blanc in 1861, the first of his approximately forty ascents of the mountain in his lifetime, he took his sixteen year old daughter, Aline, to the summit in 1873. And then in 1896, to commemorate his fiftieth year of climbing, Loppé took Aline's daughter, Gabrielle, up to the Grands Mulets hut. His intrepid grand-daughter was ten years old at the time.



Alexandre Calame was not only the most important Swiss landscape painter of the early nineteenth century but the first artist to dedicate himself to depicting the Swiss Alps with topographical accuracy and from first-hand experience. Calame enjoyed international success during the nineteenth century and by the end of his life over three hundred pupils had passed through his studio in Geneva. In 1835 he went on his first study trip to the Bernese Oberland, famous for its spectacular mountains and valleys and would spend nearly every summer in the Alps for the next twenty-five years. This oil study of the Jungfrau and the Monch was painted looking south from the village of Unterseen near Interlaken in September 1852. On the left of the composition the shoulder of the Schynige Platte plunges down into the valley floor at Zweilütschinen where the valley divides; one branch of the valley leads along the Lauterbrunnen and the other up to Grindelwald.

Calame was a late Romantic, ever aware of the transience and feeling of the moment, whose words from a letter to his wife offer a lasting interpretation of his landscapes: "Nothing elevates the soul as much as the contemplation of these snowy peaks...when, lost in their immense solitude, alone with God, one reflects on man's insignificance and folly."



Alexandre Calame (1810-1864)

The Jungfrau seen from near Interlaken, Bernese Oberland, Switzerland

oil on canvas

17½ x 28¾in (46 x 74cm)

inscribed and dated: 3 7embre 1852

with fine period frame



R. Fischer (20th century German school)

A mountain hut in the Engadine Valley, Switzerland

oil on card

15 x 19½in (38 x 49cm)

signed

Jacques Fourcy (1906-1990)

Crevasses on the Mer de Glace, Chamonix, France

oil on panel

30½ x 22½in (77 x 57cm)

signed

The Grandes Jorasses and Dent du Géant form the backdrop to this inspiring view of the Mer de Glace with the Aiguille du Tacul in the middle ground of the composition. In choosing a panel over a canvas as a support for this painting, Fourcy could apply liberal amounts of paint with brushes and a palette knife to conjure the crevasses and tumbling seracs in thick impasto with hints of green, turquoise and purple colours. The composition was ambitious but Fourcy knew how to juxtapose the rocks in the extreme foreground with the fine gradations of light in his far-off sky drawing our gaze up, over and beyond the bulging 'sea of ice.'



Charles-Henri Contencin (1898-1955)*Winter sunset in Wengen, Switzerland*

oil on panel

12½ x 18in (32.5 x 46cm)

signed

Contencin grew up in the Savoie where he learnt to paint and climb. The regions of Chamonix, Zermatt and the Bernese Oberland were probably his favourite place to work in. Towards the end of his life he was the President of the Paris based *Société des Peintres de Montagne* and his paintings were frequently displayed in regional and national exhibitions. He favoured a warm coloured priming on his supports, either canvas or pine panels, to counteract too much saturation of blue and white in his compositions. This original and self-taught painter often applied the paint in thick sections with a palette knife creating passages of impasto to suggest crevasses and folds in a snow field. In this instance and despite his reduced colour scheme, Contencin used the darker stands of trees and shadows over the valley to evoke the cold temperatures of a setting sun.

**Pierre Tairraz (1933-2000)***Mont Blanc seen from le Brevent, Chamonix, France*

silver gelatin print

12 x 21½in (30 x 53cm)

stamped and numbered on verso: 87



Fourcy painted this panorama of the Mischabel mountains from the side of the Hoch Saas Glacier which descends into Saas-Fee. At 4,545 metres the Dom is the highest mountain in Switzerland. The clouds rising from the valley increase the drama of the lofty viewpoint and in a subtle technique which can sometimes be overlooked in Fourcy's work, the colours and shadows strengthen from the bottom of the composition upwards and above the summits of the Dom and Tässchhorn.



Jean-François Roffiaen (1820-1898)*Sunrise on Monte Rosa seen from Monte Moro, Valais, Switzerland*

oil on paper

10½ x 15in (27 x 38cm)

signed lower left and inscribed on verso: *Le mont Rosa vu des plateaux de Riffel. Esquisse peinte sur nature en 1868 par J.F. Roffiaen*

In 1845 Roffiaen saw two paintings by Calame at the Salon de Bruxelles. He was so impressed by them that the young Belgian was awarded a place to train in his new mentor's Geneva studio for six months. His style and subject matter remained close to Calame throughout his life but he travelled further afield. Roffiaen's work was admired and collected by the royal families of Europe and this fine oil study of Monte Rosa was most likely the prototype version for a large two-and-a-half metre canvas, dated 1875, now in the Brussels museum together with several other pictures by him.

**Gabriel Loppé (1825 -1913)***Sunset seen from the Grands Mulets Hut, Chamonix, France*

oil on card

5 x 8in (12 x 20cm)

signed and inscribed on verso: *a Mademoiselle Françoise E. Scott hommage d'un des amis de M. Tucker G.Loppé Londres 14 juin 1879*

SOLD AUTUMN 2015

This sunset scene was painted as a study for a larger format picture sold in last year's Peaks and Glaciers exhibition (see fig. 4). Loppé would often work on these pieces of card no bigger than a large postcard as they were portable and would dry quickly. Indeed the faster an oil sketch dried the more likelihood there was of shrinkage cracks as seen in the lower right of this dramatic sunset. The wisps and tendrils of clouds seem to have caught fire in the setting sun over the glacier on the side of Mont Blanc. The diagonal flashes of blue that recreate the crevasses lend a sense of scale to this dramatic little picture.



FIG 4

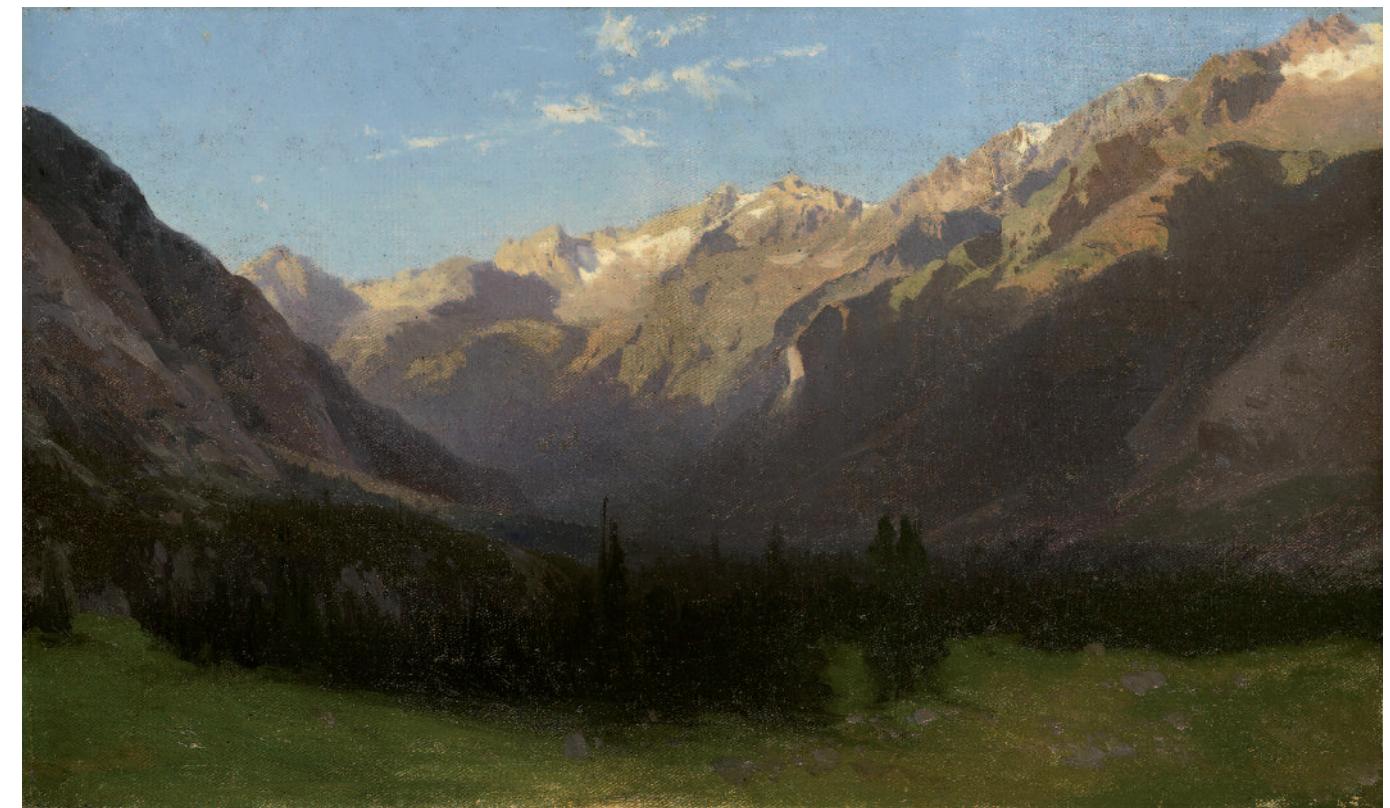
Gabriel Loppé
Sunset at the Grands Mulets refuge on Mont Blanc
 sold 2015



Alexandre Calame (1810-1864)

A boy asleep next to a rocky outcrop
watercolour on paper
6 x 9¾in (15 x 24.5cm)
signed

Calame was an excellent draughtsman, a prolific watercolourist and lithographer and yet his good watercolours do not appear for sale as often as his oil paintings. His fir trees were always particularly well rendered with looser strokes of the watercolour brush than other parts of his landscapes. The topography of this lively watercolour isn't yet clear but the fading trees receding down into the valley give the impression of height and a remote location. Calame included figures infrequently in his landscapes and the sleeping boy may well have been a prop to add scale to the composition.



Alexandre Calame (1810-1864)

A valley in the Bernese Oberland, Switzerland
oil on canvas
8½ x 14½in (22 x 37cm)
with studio sale seal : Vente Calame, 1865, no. 391

Despite assembling a large number of pupils in his Geneva studio and receiving many more commissions than it was possible to carry out during his career, relatively little is known about Calame's character. Frequently, biographical details are restricted to the fact that he grew up in great poverty, was a 'fervent Calvinist' and only had one eye! Nearly all of his painting tours were carried out alone and given the amount of undated oil sketches that he produced in his lifetime, he had an inexhaustible capacity to record the landscape of his homeland. Many of his *plein air* sketches, such as this Bernese Oberland one, were never converted into formal studio paintings and this speaks volumes about the difference between Calame the artist and Calame the studio entrepreneur.



Charles-Henri Contencin (1898-1955)

The Aiguille Verte seen from the Lac Blanc, Chamonix, France

oil on panel

15 x 23½in (38 x 60.5cm)

signed

opposite

Georges Tairraz I (1868-1924)

A climber ascending the North East face of les Droites, Chamonix, France

silver gelatin print

15 ¼ x 11½in (38 x 29cm)

signed lower right

At 4015 metres the Dôme de Neige is just under one hundred metres lower than its more famous neighbouring summit, the Barre des Ecrins. Both peaks rise up in the western French Alps, the Dauphiné, and offer some spectacular climbing with a lighter footfall of visitors in the summer season. Contencin was often at his best in these small format compositions; filling the pictorial space with diagonals, bold brushwork and great depth. The Dauphiné was an area that he returned to many times during his painting and climbing career.





Henry Anelay (1817 – 1833)

The Lauterbrunnen Valley, Bernese Oberland, Switzerland
watercolour on paper, 22 x 30½in (55.5 x 77.5cm)
signed



Edward Theodore Compton (1849-1921)

Crevasses on the Gorner Glacier, Zermatt, Switzerland
watercolour on paper
6¾ x 10in (17 x 25.5cm)
signed with monogram lower left and inscribed: *Gorner Eisfall*

P. von Thun (20th century Swiss school)

Villars in winter with the Dents du Midi
in the distance, Vaud, Switzerland

oil on canvas

24 x 30in (61 x 76cm)

signed





Charles-Henri Contencin (1898-1955)

*The Wetterhorn in winter seen from near First,
Grindelwald, Switzerland*

oil on canvas
21½ x 25½in (54 x 65cm)
signed

This winter view of the Wetterhorn is without doubt one of Contencin's most successful compositions, or judging from the two dozen or so known variations of the subject, most sought after by contemporary collectors of his work. The combination of a snowbound farmer's hut with sled tracks, a stand of pine trees and a majestic Alpine summit were often all that Contencin needed in his mountainscapes. The hut not only puts in proportion the size of the Wetterhorn's north face but also adds a sense of isolation up above the valley. A century later this view remains more or less the same to skiers and walkers and admirers of Contencin's work continue to appreciate his gentle but highly effective colour scheme. In this canvas, the sky is particularly well painted; a range of ochres, pale greens and bruising pinks are dappled throughout the clouds and behind the mountain to great effect.



Johann Martin Steiger (1829-1899)

A panorama of the Val d'Hérens, Valais, Switzerland

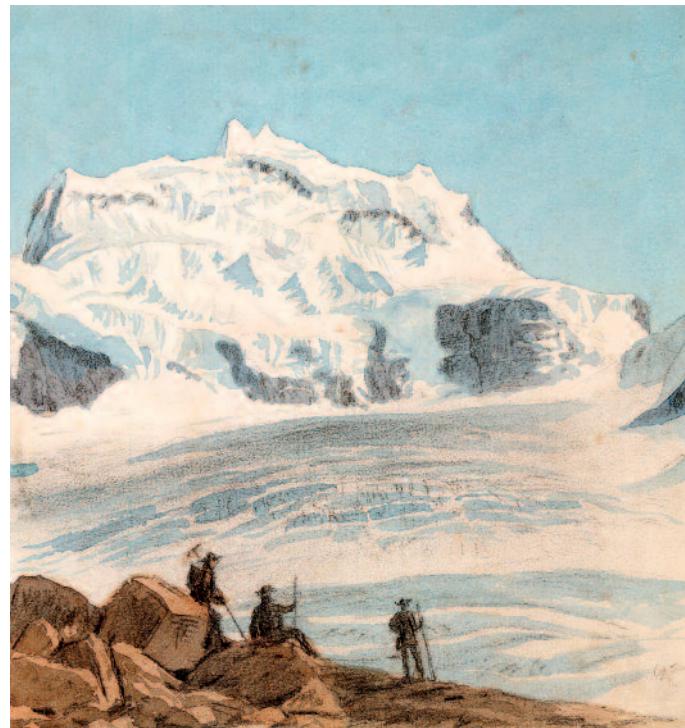
watercolour on paper

5½ x 19¼in (14 x 49cm)

signed

A talented amateur artist and keen mountaineer, Steiger was born in Herisau, capital of the Appenzell Ausserrhoden canton, in the far north-eastern part of Switzerland. His sketch books reveal that as a twelve year old he had already begun making drawings further afield in the Appenzell and Sankt Gallen region. Not much is known about Steiger's artistic apprenticeship, if any, but he also began a career in the cloth business moving into banking and later regional politics. In 1861, he founded the largest embroidery manufacturer in Herisau, spending the next decade between Belgium and the United States in trade. In his banking life he was the first president of the Cantonal Bank from 1876 to 1881 as well as a member of the Grand Council of Appenzell

Ausserrhoden (1870-1875, 1881-1882) and State Councillor for Finance between 1875-1881. In 1869 he co-founded the Säntis section of the Swiss Alpine Club becoming its Vice President and Treasurer until 1883. Although some of his drawings are sporadically dated, given the sheer quantity of high mountain sketches, it is likely that he recorded his climbs and glacier tours throughout his whole life. In the early 1880s Steiger earned a topographical commission for die Schweizerische Post. Once published six years later the drawings were intended to advertise the extent of the postal network across the passes and valleys of the Alps. These two panoramas are excellent examples of Steiger's commissioned work from this project.



Johann Martin Steiger (1829-1899)

Three climbers in front of the Grand Combin, Valais, Switzerland

watercolour on paper

8 x 7½in (20 x 19cm)



Johann Martin Steiger (1829-1899)

A panorama of the Engelberg Alps, Bernese Oberland, Switzerland.
watercolour on paper
6½ x 15¼in (16 x 39cm)



Georges Tairraz I (1868-1924)

The Aiguilles du Chardonnet and Argentière, Chamonix, France
silver gelatin print
11 x 23½in (28 x 60cm)
signed on verso



Georges Tairraz I (1868-1924)

A panorama of the Chamonix Alps seen from Le Grepon
silver gelatin print
11 x 23½in (28 x 60cm)
signed on verso

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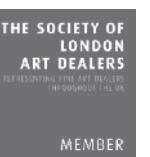
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Opposite, detail from *The Frendo Spur*
by Georges Tairraz II (see pages 8-9)



Designed and produced by Sinclair Communications Photography by Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd



The background of the entire page is a landscape painting. It depicts a range of mountains in the distance, their peaks partially obscured by a hazy, orange-tinted sky. In the foreground, there's a dark, rocky slope leading down towards a valley. A thin, light-colored path or stream bed winds its way through the valley floor, eventually disappearing into the base of the mountain range.

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