

Loppé pays homage to Mont Blanc

Two studies by the climber/artist/photographer are bought by London dealer Mitchell

by Alex Capon

The author and critic Sir Leslie Stephen, the father of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, once joked that **Gabriel Loppé (1824-1913)** was 'the court painter to his Majesty Mont Blanc'.

The French artist and photographer climbed Europe's tallest peak no fewer than 30 times and is regarded as the first artist who, as an accomplished mountaineer, was able to paint at altitude in a way that captured the sense of grandeur, discovery and beauty of the mountains and glaciers covered in snow and ice.

His small encampment where he stored his equipment at the top of the Montagne de la Côte became known as 'Le château de Loppé' and, despite the obvious challenges, he made a point of painting en plein air, producing numerous oils during the 50 seasons he spent climbing and painting in and around Chamonix.

With his life and work epitomising the spirit of the Golden Age of mountaineering, Loppé remains at the summit of the market for Alpine art.

Although his work was in constant demand from English tourists and also consistently sold well at the Alpine Club's winter or summer exhibitions in London, today his works are relatively scarce at auction in the UK (only a few hundred pictures are thought to remain in private hands in this country).

Signed works

Two signed works did appear, however, at Taunton saleroom **Greenslade Taylor Hunt (19.5% buyer's premium)** on March 25. The paintings were consigned as part of a house clearance in west Somerset and were pitched at 'here to be sold' levels of just £200-300 apiece.

First up was a depiction of Mont Blanc at sunset, a 15¼ x 11½in (39 x 29cm) oil on canvas which had a thick layer of varnish but sold at £5000.

Next came a glacial landscape, a 15¼ x 11½in (40 x 29cm) oil on canvas that drew even stronger competition and was knocked down at £20,000. The difference in price was explained by the fact that collectors tend to



Above left: the glacial landscape by Gabriel Loppé that made **£20,000** at Greenslade Taylor Hunt. It was a study for an epic view the artist painted of the Aiguille du Midi across the Glacier des Bossons on the way up Mont Blanc – a famous picture which now hangs in a hotel in Chamonix. William Mitchell of John Mitchell Fine Paintings, who bought the study at GTH, is pictured in front of the painting, **above right**.

Left: Mont Blanc at sunset by Loppé – **£5000** at Greenslade Taylor Hunt, another study also bought by William Mitchell.

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prefer Loppé's 'pure glacier' images rather than his more conventional mountain landscapes. The second lot in Taunton also showed the teetering seracs and swirling clouds that gave it more of an 'other worldly' sensation that buyers look for too.

Both works sold to John Mitchell Fine Paintings, with the London dealer seeing off strong interest from other internet bidders. The gallery's annual exhibition of Alpine art, *Peaks & Glaciers* (this year taking place online), still had three days to run at the time of the auction.

William Mitchell of the gallery, a keen climber himself, said the works were both studies, painted on the

spot, for two gigantic canvases that Loppé painted in the late 1870s and brought to London for exhibition.

The large finished pictures now hang in a public space in Chamonix's L'Hôtel Majestic, with the glacier landscape, a view of the Aiguille du Midi on the way up Mont Blanc, being one of the painter's most well-known pictures.

Mitchell added: "When I first got interested in Loppé in the mid-1990s, a beautiful, undisturbed glacier picture came up for sale in the same saleroom in Taunton in 1998. I remember paying about £4000 for it... It seems history repeated itself but this time with bigger multiples!" ■