

Basic Detail Report



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Title: The Beach at Selsey Bill

Date: ca. 1865

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3f170

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: Whistler, whose work does not fit into any one school, period, or country, and the painting "Beach at Selsey Bill", which does not fit neatly into his known oeuvre, present problems for art historians and connoisseurs alike. There have been doubts regarding the authenticity and condition of "Beach at Selsey Bill", since portions have been repainted, but not about its intrinsic quality. The composition is strikingly simple; the figures are summarized with masterly broken strokes; the brushwork expressive and the paint thin, laid on with confident flowing strokes blending to a lustrous surface. Selsey Bill lies east of the Isle of Wight and south of Chichester, on the south coast of England. The prevailing westerly winds drive long Atlantic rollers onto the broad shingle bank. Whistler stayed there with a friend, the charming and unscrupulous Charles Augustus Howell. Born in Portugal, Howell settled in London about 1864, working as secretary to, among others, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who had "complete confidence in his judgement on questions of art." (1) Howell pawned, promoted, sold, and even collected Whistler's work-not always with the artist's approval. He sold one sketch, Whistler claimed, as a Michelangelo. (2) Howell also commissioned a portrait of his mistress, Rosa Corder, the magnificent "Arrangement in Brown and Black" (1878; Frick Collection, New York), paying, according to Whistler, with money the artist had lent him. A year later, he was one of the chief creditors involved in Whistler's bankruptcy. In 1879, when the insolvent artist returned from Venice, he visited Howell, who had converted a row of fishermen's cottages called "Old Denner" at Selsey into a house. Whistler painted the house in watercolor and etched "Lobster-Pots", which was published in the "Second Venice Set" in 1886, helping to re-establish the artist's reputation. Whistler's fortunes improved as Howell's declined. Howell died in 1890 in sordid circumstances, and several seascapes, including a "Selsey Shore," in his estate sale were attributed to Whistler, but their authenticity is uncertain. (3) Two oil paintings in the sale are associated with Whistler's Selsey visits: the New Britain "Beach at Selsey Bill" and "The Selsey Shore" (Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Conn.). In August 1894 Whistler objected to the sale of what he called "Selsea Bill Sands" at Messrs. Dowdeswell, "an odd scrap that I left at Howell's when I once went down there, and that I never meant should exist at any price!" He continued: I suppose that, being miserable without painting something, I strolled out on the beach, and found all "Nature" in a shocking state-bleak sky-hard as nails, in an east wind-cheap mean sea-and cold sands-in short everything abominable and only fit for the British landscapist!-Of course I could do nothing-and ought never to have dipped my brush in such company!-There is no excuse for it. (4) He then wrote a label for

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the back: This rag of canvas, bought of Messrs. Dowdeswell, "Beach at Selsey Bill" was never meant to be signed. It is no more fit for signature than would be the odd scrap of paper that had fallen between waste basket and fire when thrown aside by the author too careless to see the destruction he intended completed before him.- Nothing in the house of Howell was ever lost-and so this sweeping of an afternoon's visit was gathered and stowed away for future transaction. (5) This denunciation corresponds to the canvas now called "The Selsey Shore", which is an unfinished, thinly painted, battered study of surf breaking on a beach. In contrast, "Beach at Selsey Bill" is richly painted and in reasonable condition, though it has been repaired. Despite Whistler's objections, "The Selsey Shore" was bought by Alfred Atmore Pope. Thus it appears that Pope bought both "Beach at Selsey Bill" and then "The Selsey Shore" from Dowdeswell's in 1894. Years later, in 1948, Pope's daughter sold "The Selsey Shore" to Macbeth Gallery, New York, where it was joined in 1949 by "Beach at Selsey Bill". At this point all record of the history of "Beach at Selsey Bill" and any justification for the title had been lost. Unfortunately, Whistler either did not see or did not comment on "Beach at Selsey Bill" in 1894. The distinction is vital: if he saw the painting, or consigned it to Dowdeswell's, then obviously it is authentic. Otherwise, it's authorship is in doubt. "Beach at Selsey Bill" has affinities with Whistler's work, and it is possible that just as the watercolor "Selsey Bill" was innovative in Whistler's oeuvre (he had worked almost exclusively in pastel and etching in Venice), the oil may also have been experimental. No other large-scale landscape or seascape by Whistler resembles "Beach at Selsey Bill" in style and technique, but comparable subjects and format are seen in several small works, such as the watercolor "Note in Opal-The Sands, Dieppe" and the oil "Harmony in Blue and Pearl: The Sands, Dieppe" (both 1885; private collection). Both works have a narrow upright format, a high horizon with a few sailing boats, a low shoreline scattered with figures, and a sea painted with fluid strokes that cross the picture cleanly from edge to edge. The asymmetrical composition and expressive brushwork suggest the influence of Asian art. While the smooth brushstrokes across the beach in "Beach at Selsey Bill" are perfectly controlled and consistent with Whistler's work, the figures are loosely constructed with broad brush strokes that lack Whistler's usual painterly precision. The sky and clouds, effective as they are in color and brushwork, find no equivalent elsewhere in his oils. These discrepancies raise questions of authenticity-as to whether the painting, fine as it is, is by Whistler or was perhaps started by him and completed by another, albeit competent, hand. Messrs. Dowdeswell saw many alleged Whistlers pass through their gallery, including works the artist is known to have destroyed at the time of his bankruptcy and those reworked by other artists. Walter Greaves, Whistler's erstwhile pupil, was suspected of retouching works. In the case of "Beach at Selsey Bill", a more obvious candidate is Howell's mistress, Rosa Frances Corder. She studied painting with Felix Moscheles, drawing with Frederick Sandys, etching with Whistler, and forgery with Howell. Corder faked drawings by Henry Fuseli, Dante Gabriel

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Rossetti, and possibly Whistler, judging from works in Howell's collection. (6) As few of her paintings survive, it is not clear if she was capable of original work of the caliber of "Beach at Selsey Bill". These unresolved questions do not affect the underlying quality of the painting. A powerful work, "Beach at Selsey Bill" is beautiful in color, expressive in brushwork, and indeed worthy of being called a Whistler.

MFM Bibliography: James McNeill Whistler, "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies" (London: W. Heinemann, 1890); Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, "The Life of James McNeill Whistler", 2 vols. (London: W. Heinemann; Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1908); Edward G. Kennedy, "The Etched Work of Whistler", 3 vols. (New York: Grolier Club, 1910); Andrew McLaren Young, Margaret MacDonald, and Robin Spencer, "The Paintings of James McNeill Whistler", 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Richard Dorment and Margaret F. MacDonald, "James McNeill Whistler", exhib. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995); Margaret F. MacDonald, "James McNeill Whistler: Drawings, Pastels, and Watercolours": A Catalogue Raisonné (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). Notes: 1. D. G. Rossetti to anon., April 29, 1872, Tate Gallery, London, Archives. 2. MacDonald, James McNeil Whistler, nos. 716, 720-21. 3. Christie, Manson & Woods, London, sale, November 13, 1890, lots 435-38: (as "Selsey Shore," "A Symphony in Sand," "A Coast Scene," and "A Portuguese Coast Scene,"). 4. Whistler to D. C. Thomson, August 18, 1894, E. R. and J. Pennell Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 5. In a letter of 1966, Whistler scholar Andrew McLaren Young suggested that the label was switched from "The Selsey Shore" to "Beach at Selsey Bill" in 1949 (Young to George Watson, Director, Hill Stead Museum, Farmington, Conn.). 6. Mark Jones, ed., "Fake? The Art of Deception", exhib. cat. (London: British Museum), 1990, no. 239.

Dimensions: 24 x 18 3/4 in. (61 x 47.6 cm)