

The Skirts of a Wood

David Cox



Description

David Cox (1783-1859)
The Skirts of a Wood

Signed and dated lower left: David Cox 1856
Watercolour over pencil, heightened with scratching out on oatmeal paper
52 by 73 cm., 20 ½ by 28 ¾ in.

Provenance:
Private collection, UK until 2023

The present large-scale watercolour demonstrates Cox's extraordinary ability to adapt his handling of watercolour to reflect the essence of the landscape that he was capturing. The interplay of light and shadow on individual forms and on the wider landscape fascinated Cox and woodland edges proved a rich subject for exploring these elements in both oil and watercolour. He exhibited several watercolours of the subject including at the Royal Watercolour Society in 1840, 1846, 1855.

Cox's mastery of watercolour allowed him to work as effectively on large sheets, adapting his technique and using bold, free strokes and broad washes. During the 1840s and early 1850s, Cox produced a number of large-scale exhibition watercolours, which are all characterised by a dynamic and bold freedom of handling and expression. Cox himself, however, was often critical of working in watercolour on a large-scale, preferring instead to work in oil. In 1843, he wrote to his son, 'There is not half the trouble with oil as with watercolours. I should never again touch water-colours only for my honour and duty to the society I belong to. I have had more plague with two of my large drawings this year than I should with twenty in oil. (N. Solly, *The Life of David Cox*, 1873, p. 186). However, the evidence of works such as the present sheet bely such concerns and suggest that Cox continued to push and develop his own mastery of the watercolour medium.

There is a slightly larger version in oils of the subject in Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, with the same figures on the path and the same central tree with its long, low overhanging branch. Although in the present watercolour there are fewer trees, so the emphasis is more on the figures and the single large tree and on the hills in the background. Solly in his *Memoir of the life of David Cox*, says that the painting represents part of Old Sherwood Forest (p.120). However, in the present watercolour, Cox has taken the tree and located it in more mountainous surroundings.