Venice - Steps of a Palace

John Singer Sargent

Sold

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REF: 3075

Description

John Singer Sargent, R.A. (1856-1925)
Venice - Steps of a Palace

Signed and inscribed lower left: to my friend Rathbone / John S. Sargent
Watercolour over pencil heightened with bodycolour
25.5 by 36 cm., 10 by 14 in.

Provenance:
Given by the artist to William Gair Rathbone VII (1849-1919);
Thence by descent

Exhibited:
London, Royal Academy, Exhibition of Works by the late John S Sargent, R.A., 1926, no.495;
Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery, American Artists in Europe 1800-1900, 1976, no.56;
Nottingham, University Art Gallery, Queen of Marble and Mud: the Anglo-American Vision of Venice: 1880-1910 : Works by Whistler, Sickert and Sargent, 20th February to 20th March 1978;
Cardiff, National Museum of Wales, Impressions of Venice from Turner to Monet, July -September 1992, no.15

Literature:
R. Ormond and E. Kilmurray, John Singer Sargent: Venetian Figures and Landscapes, 1898-1913, Complete Paintings: Volume VI, New Haven and London, 2009, p.85, no.1040, illustrated

The steps depicted are at the base of Palazzo Contarini degli Scrigni e Corfu, a double-fronted palazzo just past the Accademia Bridge on the Grand Canal. Scamozzi added a classical palace to the existing structure in 1609 and the two facades stand side-by-side unaltered since Sargent's time. The present picture depicts the base of the Scamozzi facade and the structure beyond is the neighbouring Palazzo Mocenigo-Gambara. It is typical of Sargent's use of a very low viewpoint, at canal level, with water lapping at the base of the steps. It is painted looking south-south-east down the Grand Canal in the direction of the Accademia Bridge. as well.

This watercolour was given by Sargent to William Gair Rathbone VII (1849-1919) of the well-known trading house Rathbone's originally based in Liverpool. Rathbone married the American Blanche Marie Luling (1856-1938) in 1877 while representing the firm in New York before returning to the London office in 1879. He was a close friend of John Singer Sargent and they shared a mutual taste in music, both helping to promote the careers of several young composers. He commissioned work from Delius and held recitals in his home, including by Francis Korbay and Percy Grainger. At one point Rathbone also owned a Sargent drawing of Korbay (now Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). He, his wife, children and daughter-in-law were all sketched by the artist and Rathbone built up a collection of Sargent's watercolours through purchases and gifts from the artist.

Sargent preferred not to sell his watercolours and sketches, as he explained to Rathbone in 1904: 'I feel rather ridiculous at not wanting to sell that sketch, especially when such a friend and such a knowing one lusts after it - But if my sketches are not here, how could I prove to myself and others that I am not a duffer…These sketches keep up my morale and I never sell them.'

Sargent and Rathbone met several times in Venice, including in 1903 and 1906. One such occasion was in February 1906, when Sargent wrote about a sketch he was working on, asking if he would like to '…see

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some more watercolours? If so come on Wednesday after 3, but by daylight - and bring Miss Rathbone if s...

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