Study of Silver Birches

John Ruskin



REF: 2931

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Description

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John Ruskin (1819-1900)
Study of Silver Birches, 1856

Signed lower right: J Ruskin/1856
Pen and grey ink and watercolour over pencil
21.3 by 10 cm., 8 by 4 in.

Provenance:
Anonymous sale, Phillip's, 16th July 1990, lot 18

Ruskin was passionately interested in trees, for their majestic beauty and for their place in the natural world. In 1842, he wrote to his father of an almost mystical experience he had when sketching an Aspen tree in Switzerland, 'languidly, but not idly…and as I drew the languor passed away, beautiful lines insisted on being traced - without weariness. More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing every instant, I saw that they 'composed' themselves, by finer laws than any known to men. At last the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere' (Cook and Wedderburn, Works, vol. XXXV, p. 314).

He encouraged his students to not just look at the overall form or a tree, but to draw their component parts. He would bring in his own studies, as well as twigs and leaves for his students to copy. He would also encourage them to look to other artists for inspiration, particularly Turner, who he believed to be the most accomplished at capturing trees. A study of trees in the Ashmolean Museum is a detail taken from Turner's Crossing the Brook, dating from 1815 (Tate Gallery, London). Ruskin intended it as a teaching aid to show his students at Oxford, how best to render the subtleties of light and shade in foliage without the use of colour. The composition is very similar to the present study.

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