

Joseph Severn



Sketching at the Baths of Caracalla, Rome

Reference: 11141

Dimensions:

Height: 25 cm / 9⁷/₈ in

Width: 39.50 cm / 15¹/₂ in

Inscribed on the reverse: Henry Acland from W (?) Severn- March 26 1839 - Drawn together May 1838

Oil on paper

25 by 39.5 cm., 9 ³/₄ by 15 ¹/₂ in.

Provenance:

Given by Joseph or Walter Severn (b. 1830), to Sir Henry Wentworth Acland;

By descent to his daughter, Sarah Angelina Acland;

Purchased from her estate in 1931 by Sir Roger Mynors, and thence by descent

This sparkling oil sketch of the top of the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla with the Alban hills beyond shows a seated figure, wearing a blue coat and grey trousers, drawing in the sunshine in May 1838. The inscription on the reverse suggests it was executed while Severn and Acland were sketching together at the Baths and that it was given to Acland when Severn visited England in June 1838. One of his aims was to find a school for his son Walter.

KAREN TAYLOR

FINE ART

Joseph Severn was the eldest son of a music teacher from Hoxton. At the age of 14 he became apprenticed to the engraver William Bond before entering the Royal Academy Schools in 1815. Here, in 1820, he was awarded the gold medal for historical painting for his 'Una and the Red Cross Knight in the Cave of Despair', which granted him a travelling scholarship. This coincided with the illness of his friend, the poet John Keats, and together they travelled to Rome in search of a better climate for the ailing poet. During the winter of 1820-21 Severn nursed Keats in their apartment near the Spanish Steps, his detailed letters from the period of great importance, but on 23 February 1821 Keats died. Severn remained in Rome, launching his own artistic career as a painter of landscapes, portraits and subject paintings. A companionable and likeable character, his large apartment in the Via de San Isidoro became an artistic centre for English visitors to Rome. In the winter of 1837 he met Sir Thomas and Lady Acland who were to become important patrons, and helped to promote his work in England. In 1838 their son, Henry, visited Severn in Rome. Sir Henry Wentworth Dyke Acland, later Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, became a great friend of Severn and his family. Acland gave his Oxford friend John Ruskin a letter of introduction to Severn when he visited Rome in 1840, resulting in another key relationship for the Severn family.

The sketch remained in Acland's collection in Oxford, passing along with the other contents of the house to his daughter, the pioneering photographer Sarah Angelina Acland. On the death of Sarah Acland in 1930, it was acquired by Sir Roger Mynors, then a fellow and classics tutor at Balliol.

Severn remained in Rome for most of his life other than a spell in England from 1841-1861. With the help of William Gladstone, a patron, he became British Consul from 1860-72. He died in Rome in 1879 and, at his request, was buried next to Keats in the Protestant cemetery near Porta San Paolo and adjacent to the Pyramid of Cestius. Shelley, who died in 1822, lies nearby, and Severn's posthumous portrait of him writing 'Prometheus Unbound' at the Baths of Caracalla of 1845 is on display at Brantwood. This portrait shows the same stretch of the Alban hills in the distance.

Severn's children, Walter, Arthur Joseph and Ann Mary Newton also became artists. Arthur Joseph was to marry Ruskin's niece Joan Agnew and looked after him during his last years at Brantwood.

The Baths of Caracalla were the second largest public baths in Rome, probably built between AD 211/212 and 216/217, during the reigns of emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla. They were excavated in the 1780s and became a very popular sketching ground for visiting artists.