

G W (fl. late 19th century)



A portrait of the artist Benjamin Walter Spiers smoking in his studio

Reference: 11209

Dimensions:

Height: 13.50 cm / 5¼ in

Width: 18 cm / 7⅛ in

Signed and inscribed verso: Far away in Cloudland/BWSpiers/And when the smoke ascends on high/Then thou behold'st the vanity of worldly stuff/Gone with a puff/thus think, and smoke tobacco-/G.W.-Smoking Spiritualised, watercolour over pencil heightened with gum arabic and touches of white, and further inscribed on original backing: B.W. Spiers Far Away

13.5 x 18cm; 5 1/2 x 7 1/8 inches

Benjamin Walter Spiers (1845-1894) was an idiosyncratic painter of studio still lifes who lived in London, at 70 Hereford Road in Bayswater, where the current watercolour may have been drawn. He crammed his antiquarian pictures with books, furniture, objects and paintings a number of which reappear in several of his still lifes. He often drew corners of interiors of his favourite antique shops in London's Wardour Street. The bust and the chair shown in the present work

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appear in several of his compositions. He was captured here by an artist with the initials G W who has caught him relaxing with a cigarette in his studio. Spiers often penned a verse to accompany a picture, as in the present work.

It is amusing seeing the tables turned and the artist drawn as the subject of his own studio interior. Spiers' extraordinary fidelity in his own painting and his eclectic taste makes him the leading exponent of a particular type of 19th century interior painting. The dealer and scholar Christopher Wood considered him to be 'one of the most remarkable painters of still-life in English Art' (see C. Wood, 'Knickknacks and silly Old Books', 'Country Life', 10 June 1993, pp. 124-125).

Christie's London had a large group of Spiers work for sale on 14 December 2016. In one of these works 'Worthless old knickknacks and silly old books', based on the poem 'The Cane-Bottom'd Chair' by Thackeray, the same painting of Gainsborough's (lost) 'Cottage Children', which hangs over the fireplace in the present work, can be seen.

Spiers was interested in possessions rather than objects of nature and his curiosity for antiquarian objects, books, maps, prints and china is displayed with trompe-l'oeil accuracy in his watercolours. The same objects repeatedly appear which suggests that Spiers owned them.

Little is known about Spiers' life. He lived in London, first at 17 Hereford Street, Bayswater, and then at Longwood in Acol Road, West Hampstead. He is thought to be related to Richard Phené Spiers, the architect, whose brother, Walter Spiers was a curator of the Soane Museum. He exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1876 to 1891, and 'The Times' Academy notice for 27 June 1881 says of his two exhibited works, 'We consider these two works to be the gems of the water-colour gallery.'

Christie's London 14 December 2019, lot 80