

John Nixon



A Cit's Country Box

Reference: 11243 / KT705

Dimensions:

Height: 48.20 cm / 19 in
Width: 64.50 cm / 25³/₈ in

John Nixon (c. 1760-1818)

A Cit's Country Box, as described in the 135th number of the Connoisseur
Signed and dated l.r.: JNixon/1804, watercolour over pencil on wove paper
48.2 x 64.5 cm.; 19 x 25 3/8 inches

Provenance

Private Collection, UK until 2025

Exhibited

London, Royal Academy, 1805, no. 595, entitled The Cit's country box, as described in the 135th number of the Connoisseur.

The eponymous poem by Robert Lloyd which inspired this work was first published in the London weekly newspaper The Connoisseur in the 135th edition. The 1757 poem mocks the fashion for building country houses a few miles from

KAREN TAYLOR

FINE ART

London:

'The wealthy cit, grown old in trade/
now wishes for the rural shade/
and buckles to his one-horse chair/
Old Dobbin, or the founder'd mare;
while wedg'd in closely by his side/
sits madam, his unweildly bride'.....

'The trav'ler with amazement sees/
A temple, Gothic, or Chinese,
With many a bell, and tawdry rag on,
And crested with a sprawling dragon;
A wooden

arch is bent astride/
A ditch of water, four foot wide,
With angles, curves, and zigzag lines,
From Halfpenny's exact designs.
In front, a level lawn is seen,
Without a shrub upon the green,
Where Taste would want its first great law,
But for the skulking, sly haha,
By whose miraculous assistance,
You gain a prospect two fields distance.'

(<https://www.eighteenthcenturypoetry.org/works/o5089-w0090.shtml>)

Nixon evidently had Strawberry Hill in his sights in the present large-scale watercolour of a house by the Thames with Gothic decorations around the roof, a round tower and the prominent urn which is a memorial to a cat (Grim in this case) on the lawn. Horace Walpole's affection for cats was well known and immortalised by his friend the poet Thomas Gray in Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat (memorialising the unfortunate Selima who drowned in a Chinese goldfish bowl).

Nixon has included a self-portrait in this work and can be identified as the figure with a prominent nose talking to a lady in the centre of this watercolour wearing a characteristic blue coat.

A smaller sketch of the subject by Nixon was sold at Christie's, London on 6 November 1973, lot 15.

Dr Johnson defines a 'cit' in his 1771 Dictionary of the English Language as 'a pert low townsman'. The aspirational citizen of Nixon's caricature is drawn with his family and friends in a garden on the banks of the Thames with a distant view of the City of London. His 'country box' has been designed with Gothic decorations, a tower and classical columns. A large sign hanging in the tree warns of 'REAL MAN TRAPS in these GARDENS' and a man trap is strung up in the branches. However, the chaos, oversize statues and lack of finesse make it clear that we are witnessing the life of an aspirational nouveau riche.

Nixon's caricatures are generally small in scale. The present work is one of a handful of important and exceptionally large sheets that he produced, all of which are of almost identical dimensions.