

Adam Calvert Bentley and Ardgowan Antiques

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John Varley (1778-1842) watercolour Returning Home

£890

A watercolor by John Varley showing a man on horseback accompanied by another packhorse returning home along a track towards an early manor house. Signed *J. Varley* lower right. Watercolour on paper, presented mounted within an ebonised frame with giltwood slip

SKU: C4892

Height: 41 cm (16 inches) including frame

Width: 55 cm (21.5 inches) including frame

Year: English. Circa 1810



John Varley was an energetic English watercolourist, astrologer, and close friend of the romantic poet, William Blake. Celebrated by many of his peers, he made a significant contribution to the evolution of early 19th-century watercolour painting.

Varley trained initially as a silversmith before pursuing an artistic education at Joseph Charles Barrow's sketching school. Enamoured with the potential of the enthusiastic young man, Barrow took him on a tour of Peterborough where he produced a fine drawing of the cathedral. It was subsequently shown at the Royal Academy and met with much acclaim.

He had a particular skill for flat washes of colour, which conveyed a tranquil, thought-provoking solemnity. Inspired by the masters of landscape, such as Claude Lorrain and the Poussins, he sought to elevate his views above mere topographical representations. Seeking to elicit a feeling of the heart rather than an observation of the mind.

His early works were generally drawn 'on the spot' with fresh transparent tints. Lazy sunsets fall across placid lakes. Airy clouds hug subtle peaks with an effortless sense of purity. Less was often more - he omitted the finer details in favour of the overall effect. The wild North Walien mountains were a frequent destination. As too were the Home Counties, Yorkshire and Northumberland.

In 1805, following several years exhibiting at the Royal Academy, he co-founded the Old Water-Colour Society where he became an influential contributor, showing over 700 works. His genial manner brought much popularity and he was exceedingly generous with artistic advice (whether required or not).

John Constable once wrote that Varley "has just called on me, and I have bought a little drawing off him. He told me how to do landscape, and was so kind as to point out all my defects. The price of the drawing was a guinea and a half to a gentleman, and a guinea only to an artist; but I insisted upon his taking the larger sum, as he had clearly proved to me that I was no artist."

Eager to develop others, and landscape painting more broadly, he taught numerous students such as David Cox and John Linnell. They'd board with him and work diligently, often accompanied by impromptu poetry or song. Occasionally after class, Varley would don boxing gloves and spar with them. Apparently, he possessed extraordinary agility for a heavysset gentleman.

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His snippets of wisdom extended beyond his students as when presented with a drawing, he felt entirely compelled to critique it. On one occasion, the sketching ability of a footman at a country house was immeasurably enhanced, to the extent that he too became an artist.

At the peak of his career, Varley was earning in excess of £3,000 per annum. A considerable sum. Yet, due to a combination of endless curiosity and hapless financial decision-making, he was continually broke. Frequently arrested in lieu of payments.

Forever the inventor, he designed and patented a six-wheel carriage, investing over £1,000 in the process, but it failed to repay his optimism. He also frittered away countless hours in an attempt to create perpetual motion, eventually dissuaded by his brother, Cornelius.

Stories such as these are plentiful and his name frequently appears in the fond recollections of contemporaries. Such was the nature of his gregarious personality that many were enchanted by his witty anecdotes.

Many knew him primarily as an astrologer and often upon meeting a stranger, he'd predict their future. Numerous ladies called upon him under the guise of acquiring a drawing, but in fact, sought to discuss their 'nativities'.

His fascination for these other-worldly matters was brought to the fore during lengthy discussions with the poet William Blake, which often extended throughout the night. The pair would exchange ideas, with Blake frequently proclaiming that he'd been joined by a vivid apparition - such as a figure from antiquity, or on one occasion, the spirit of a flea. After dozing at a table, Varley was known to rouse in a stupor and ask Blake to call upon Julius Caesar, Edward III or Moses. Blake would retort "There he is!" and proceed to sketch the vision before him, with Varley gazing somewhat blankly into space.

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