The Ruined Castle, a view of Dunure from the south west

Sir William Nicholson

Sold

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Height: 42 cm (16.5")

Width: 34 cm (13.4")

Description

SIR WILLIAM NICHOLSON
(British, 1872-1949)
The Ruined Castle, a view of Dunure from the south west
Signed with initials and inscribed 'W.N. for H.N.' (lower right)
Oil on canvas-board. Cleaned. Old restorations.
Painted circa 1924.
The location has been identified as Dunure, Ayre, from the SW. This supports the dedication of 'HN' to Helen North, whose maiden name was Kennedy. Dunure was the ancestral stronghold of the Kennedys.

The frame with a window containing a signed and illustrated letter to Lord Horder dated 22nd November 1937 thanking him for flowers sent. The fingerprint & ink composition represents 'M' for Monday and the petals of a daffodil.

Board Height 41.9 cm., 16 in., Length 34.3 cm., 13 in.
In a black and gilded Romano frame
Frame Height 59 cm., 1ft. 11 ¼ in., Length 50 cm., 1ft. 8 ¾ in

The location has been identified as Dunure, Ayre, from the SW. This supports the dedication to HN of Helen North, whose maiden name was Kennedy. Dunure was the ancestral stronghold of the Kennedys. The remains of a crenellated four-storey tower in what appears to be red-brown sandstone, contrasting with the grey boulders on the beach and separated by a strip of sand, dominates the scene. Despite the grey, overcast sky, the use of white behind the tower suggests sunlight reflecting off the sea somewhere in the distance, while the cold east wind sends the seagulls spiralling high towards the ruined battlements. Nicholson had only recently left Rottingdean on the Sussex coast where he had painted many seascapes over the years, and the play of light reflected off the sea had always appealed to him.

The spontaneity of the paintwork, with the use of impasto and some sgraffito, suggests the artist huddled down among the boulders to capture the scene. There is supporting evidence in the lower centre left section of the picture indicating that the painting was packed away before the paint had completely dried.

This is an unusual subject for Nicholson but Dunure was the ancestral stronghold of the Kennedys hence the dedication to Helen Kennedy North (1889-1975).

In 1947 this work was among four Nicholsons sold at Christie's from the estate of late W.J.R.Turner (1889-1946), a friend of Nicholson and Robert Graves. Also included was another Nicholson painting with the dedication 'To Helen'. Born and brought up in Scotland, Helen Kennedy was deeply involved in the folk dance revival. She married Stanley North in 1920 and they took the name of Kennedy North. Under the byline S.K.N., her husband wrote a monograph on William Nicholson published in June 1923 in Benn's Contemporary British Artists series, and the following month published an article on him in Design. The couple became close friends of the artist and his wife Edie. In July 1924 Nicholson travelled from London to Inverness for a portrait commission and it is suggested that The Ruined Castle dates from this trip. It is thought that the painting was acquired from Helen by a mutual friend, the writer W.J.Turner, either in the early 1930s when her marriage broke up, or in 1939 when she emigrated to South Africa.

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