

Durham Cathedral from across the river Wear

George Fennel Robson



Description

George Fennel Robson (1788-1833)
Durham Cathedral from across the River Wear

Watercolour over pencil heightened with bodycolour, stopping out and scratching out
67.1 by 44.8 cm., 26 1/4 by 17 1/2 in.

Exhibited:

Possibly, London, Society of Painters in Water-colours, 1832, no. 200, as 'West Front of Durham Cathedral'

Robson was born in Durham but was in London by 1804 and first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1807. He travelled extensively in the north of England and Scotland and exhibited frequently at the Old Watercolour Society. His first trip to Scotland was financed by the sale of a print of a View of Durham and he produced several views of his home city including the present large-scale, dynamic watercolour. His works are often characterised by dramatic light, or stormy effects, such as captured here with the dramatic, dark sky, rainbow and play of light across the spectacular architectural details of the West façade.

In 1819, aged just 32, Robson was elected President of the Society of Painters in Oil and Watercolours, having gained a considerable reputation as a watercolourist of note and for his ability to rival oil painting with his bravura technique in capturing dramatic and atmospheric effects with a delicacy and subtlety. Robson became instrumental in developing the large-scale exhibition watercolour in response to growing public interest in the medium. The critics of the time devoted much time to acclaiming Robson's prowess with one writing in 1827, 'Mr Robson has justly estimated his powers, for the breadth and massiveness of his style are peculiarly adapted to the representation of the more grand and imposing effect of nature.' Robson died early, at the age of just 45, and the Minute Book of the Society of Painters in Water Colours recorded the members' grief at the loss of their 'revered excellent friend and fellow labourer'.

Robson has chosen to depict Durham Cathedral from across the River Wear, looking toward the West End and the Galilee Chapel, which was added in the 1170s. The distinctive towers which rise above the cathedral were added in c.1200 and are of architectural significance, with their bases open to the aisles and nave, rather than closed off.

This large watercolour may be the work exhibited at the Society of Painters in Water-colours in 1832, no.200 as 'West Front of Durham Cathedral'. It was bought by Mrs Swindell of 9 Fortiss Terrace, Kentish Town, London for 25 guineas.