

Melville's The Chalk Cutting acquired for The National Galleries of Scotland



A painting which used to hang in Langan's Brasserie, and which the painter kept in his own collection till his death in 1904 has to be viewed as important and interesting!

The National Galleries of Scotland has acquired The Chalk Cutting, 1898, a major work by the influential Scottish artist Arthur Melville (1855-1904), with generous support from the Art Fund and Patrons of the National Galleries of Scotland. The painting was acquired for £72,000 with a grant of £25,000 from the Art Fund.

The museum believes that the Chalk Cutting greatly enhances the holdings within the national collection of paintings associated with the Glasgow School, an important group of artists working in Scotland in the late 19th century. Melville is increasingly recognised as one of the most consistently innovative and significant Scottish painters of this period

Michael Clarke, Director of the Scottish National Gallery, commented: "One of the key aims of the National Galleries is to acquire the very best of Scottish art and to show these works in a wider international context. This remarkable painting by Melville demonstrates how Scottish artists at the end of the 19th century could be just as innovative and ambitious as their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Following on from recent acquisitions by Guthrie and E.A. Walton, the new Melville further strengthens the presentation of the Glasgow Boys and adds a dramatic new note to the displays."

Stephen Deuchar, Director of the Art Fund, said: "The Art Fund trustees were struck by the fresh modernity of Melville's luminous painting *The Chalk Cutting*. He is one of the most significant Scottish painters of the later nineteenth century, and this quietly radical work will find an ideal home at the Scottish National Gallery. If the reception of its temporary display in May is anything to go by, it will prove an extremely popular and important acquisition."

Susan Rice, Chairman of the Patrons of the National Galleries of Scotland, added: "The invaluable support of the Patrons has enabled the Galleries to take on a number of important projects and acquisitions over the years. On behalf of the Patrons, I would like to say how honoured we are that we have been able to play a major part, along with the Art Fund, in securing this particularly significant and striking Scottish work of art for the nation."

Painted in London in 1898 during the artist's last decade, this stunning composition reveals Melville to have been the most forward-looking and inventive of all the painters associated with the Glasgow School. By the 1890s he was highly regarded for the technical brilliance of his watercolours, some characterised by a truly exceptional modernity. Although executed on an exhibition-scale canvas, the picture was not shown publicly in the artist's lifetime, perhaps because of this extreme experimentalism.

The sheer visual power of *The Chalk Cutting* suggests that it was painted in response to immediate experience rather than from recollection. However, the actual location of Melville's subject is still unknown. As in many of his late watercolours, his approach to landscape tends towards near-abstraction, revelling in pure colour. Carefully calculated touches subtly add definition – the sign-post on the cliff edge and the tiny human figures at the head of the rail track. But Melville's essential motif is the dazzling light reflected from the exposed white chalk face, suffusing the whole composition.

Born in Angus and raised in East Lothian, Melville studied art in Edinburgh, finally settling in London after a period in France. The Chalk Cutting remained in the artist's own collection until his death in 1904. Sold by order of his executors, in Edinburgh, in 1922, it remained in a Scottish collection until 1982. It was bought by the well-known Irish entrepreneur Peter Langan, in 1983, for his celebrated Brasserie in London's Mayfair and was part of the celebrated collection of artworks associated with Langan's Brasserie sold at Christie's in December 2012.

Since 1999 the Scottish National Gallery has purchased several outstanding works by leading artists connected with the Glasgow School, complementing the great collection held by Glasgow Museums. In 2007, Melville's pioneering early work, *A Cabbage Garden, 1877* (currently on display next to *The Chalk Cutting*), and E.A. Walton's, *A Herd Boy, 1886*, were acquired. More recently, in 2012, there was the ground-breaking joint purchase, with Glasgow Museums, of *In the Orchard* by Melville's close friend, Sir James Guthrie. These followed the important acquisitions in 1999 of: E.A. Walton's, *A Daydream, 1885*; David Gauld's *Saint Agnes, 1889-90*; and Margaret Helen Sowerby (known as Helen Sowerby), *1882*, one of Guthrie's earliest known portrait commissions.

A complementary display of some of Melville's most stunning watercolours of Northern Africa and the Middle East is on show at the Scottish National Gallery, allowing visitors to appreciate the wealth of works by Melville now present in the national collection.