Finch & Co

SARAH STONE (ENGLAND 1760

SARAH STONE (1760 - 1844)

BORNEAN PEACOCK PHEASANT

'POLYPLECTON SCHLEIERMACHERI'

SIGNED: SARAH SMITH AT THE BOTTOM OF THE IMAGE, WITH A THIN BLACK BORDER.

THE ORIGIN OF THIS SPECTACULAR WATERCOLOUR PRESENTS SOMETHING OF A MYSTERY. THE SIGNATURE (SARAH SMITH) MAKES IT CLEAR THAT THE PICTURE WAS PAINTED AT SOME PERIOD AFTER SARAH'S MARRIAGE IN 1789, BUT CURIOUSLY THE SPECIES WAS NOT SCIENTIFICALLY DESCRIBED UNTIL 1877 – LONG AFTER HER DEATH.

EVEN TODAY IT RARELY OCCURS IN CAPTIVITY AND HOW SHE CAME BY THE SPECIMEN SHE PAINTED IS UNKNOWN. IT MAY HAVE BEEN IN THE LEVERIAN COLLECTION OR SHE MAY HAVE COME BY IT AFTER THE MUSEUM WAS DISPERSED.

HOWEVER, DESPITE THE PHEASANT'S SPECTACULAR AND DECORATIVE APPEARANCE, THE SPECIMEN SHE WORKED FROM DOES NOT SEEM TO HAVE BEEN FULLY MATURE AS IT LACKS SOME OF THE FEATURES OF THE MATURE MALE PLUMAGE. INTERESTINGLY, THE PICTURE FEATURES A FULLY RENDERED BACKGROUND, WHICH IS NOT ALWAYS THE CASE WITH HER PAINTINGS.

EVEN TODAY THIS IS A VERY LITTLE-KNOWN SPECIES, RESTRICTED TO BORNEO, AND IT IS REGARDED AS THREATENED. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF RELATED SPECIES WITH SIMILAR 'EYE' SPOTS BUT MOST OF THESE SHOW A PLUMAGE THAT IS GREY IN COLOUR RATHER THAN BROWN.

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LITERATURE

THE STORY OF MISS SARAH STONE 1760 – 1844, A WOMAN WHO ACHIEVED COMMERCIAL SUCCESS AS AN ARTIST AT A TIME WHEN SUCH ACHIEVEMENT WAS USUALLY DENIED TO FEMALES. LIKE MANY LADIES WHO PAINTED DURING THE ERA IN WHICH SHE LIVED, MISS STONE PRODUCED EXQUISITE PAINTINGS IN WATERCOLOUR. HOWEVER SHE WAS ALMOST UNIQUE IN THAT SHE ENJOYED A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF COMMERCIAL SUCCESS ! HER PAINTINGS DIDN'T JUST STAY ON THE WALLS OF FRIENDS OR RELATIVES, THEY WERE ACTIVELY SOUGHT AFTER BY CONNOISSEURS AND COLLECTORS ALIKE. IN AN AGE WHEN THE EFFORTS OF WOMEN WERE OFTEN DISREGARDED OR EVEN ENTIRELY DISMISSED SHE 'BUCKED THE TREND' AND STOOD OUT AS A WOMAN WHO 'MATTERED'. IN THIS WAY SHE MIGHT BE COMPARED TO HER SLIGHTLY LATER CONTEMPORARY MARY ANNING, THE WOMAN FROM LYME REGIS WHO KICK-STARTED THE SCIENCE OF PALAEONTOLOGY. LIKE THE ACTIVITIES OF MISS ANNING, SARAH STONE'S WATERCOLOURS BECAME OF ENORMOUS HISTORICAL AND SCIENTIFIC VALUE.

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT HER THAT STOOD OUT FROM THE REST ? FIRSTLY, SHE WAS HIGHLY SKILLED AND PRODUCED BEAUTIFUL IMAGES OF BIRDS, MAMMALS, FISH, INSECTS, SHELLS, MINERALS AND ETHNOLOGICAL OBJECTS WHEN SUCH CURIOSITIES WERE BEING BROUGHT BACK FOR THE FIRST TIME FROM FAR CORNERS OF THE WORLD. IN MANY CASES THE IMAGES SHE PRODUCED ARE THE ONLY RECORDS THAT NOW REMAIN OF THE IMPORTANT TREASURES BEING BROUGHT BACK TO BRITAIN ON SIGNIFICANT AND HIGHLY CELEBRATED EXPLORATORY VOYAGES, MOST FAMOUSLY THOSE OF CAPTAIN COOK. SO HER WATERCOLOURS FORM A UNIQUE RECORD OF DISCOVERIES THAT IN MANY RESPECTS CHANGED THE WORLD.

SECONDLY, SHE WAS REMARKABLY INDUSTRIOUS AND PAINTED ALMOST EVERY DAY. THE DAUGHTER OF A PAINTER OF FANS, SHE WAS LARGELY SELF-TAUGHT AND BEGAN HER CAREER AT AN EARLY AGE. ALTHOUGH MANY OF HER PAINTINGS SURVIVE, ALMOST ALL NOW EXIST ONLY IN MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES FROM WHICH THEY WILL NEVER BE RELEASED. ONLY A VERY FEW REMAIN IN PRIVATE HANDS, WHICH IS WHY THE EMERGENCE OF THIS REMARKABLE COLLECTION OF NO LESS THAN 23 WATERCOLOURS IS SO SURPRISING. AND WHAT A COLLECTION IT IS, CONTAINING HIGHLY DETAILED PAINTINGS OF EXOTIC BIRDS THAT WERE BEING SEEN IN BRITAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE DAYS WHEN SARAH PAINTED THEM. IT MAY BE ASKED, 'HOW DID SHE GET ACCESS TO SUCH RARE AND VALUED ITEMS' ? THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE, WHEN SHE WAS STILL A YOUNG LADY, SHE WAS COMMISSIONED BY SIR ASHTON LEVER, OWNER OF THE CELEBRATED LEVERIAN MUSEUM TO PAINT SOME OF HIS MOST INTERESTING OBJECTS. SHE FULFILLED HER OBLIGATIONS IN STUNNING AND BEAUTIFUL WAYS, AND IT WAS JUST AS WELL THAT SHE DID, FOR THE ENTIRE LEVERIAN COLLECTION WAS DISPERSED AT AN AUCTION THAT TOOK PLACE IN 1806, AND MANY OF THE ITEMS WERE LOST FOREVER.

THE REMARKABLE COLLECTION OF NEWLY DISCOVERED WATERCOLOURS WILL, OF COURSE, ONLY BE TEMPORARY, HOWEVER A MORE PERMANENT RECORD WILL LIVE ON IN THE FORM OF THIS NEW PUBLICATION FOR YEARS TO COME.

PROVENANCE

BY GIFT OR DESCENT TO FRANCES SMITH BEALE (1800-1849), THE ARTIST'S NIECE, DAUGHTER OF FRANCES MARY STONE (1769-1852), SISTER OF THE ARTIST; BY DESCENT TO ELLEN BEALE BROOKER D. 1900, (M. IN 1868 WILLIAM WATKISS LLOYD, 1813-1893); BY DESCENT TO EIREENE WATKISS LLOYD; DAUGHTER OF THE ABOVE, M. WILLIAM DOCKAR DRYSDALE (1866-1952) OF WICK HALL, RADLEY, OXFORDSHIRE; BY DESCENT TO (WILLIAM) PATRICK DOCKAR DRYSDALE (1929-2020), WICK HALL, RADLEY FROM 1982

EX PRIVATE COLLECTION