Case 20 2013/14: a painting by Benjamin West, *Milkmaids in St James’s Park, Westminster Abbey beyond*

Expert adviser's statement

Reviewing Committee Secretary's note: Please note that any illustrations referred to have not been reproduced on the Arts Council England Website

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1. **Brief Description of item(s)**
   - **What is it?**
     A painting of *Milkmaids in St James’s Park, Westminster Abbey beyond*
   - **What is it made of?**
     Oil paint on panel
   - **What are its measurements?**
     100.6 x 143.5cm
   - **Who is the artist/maker and what are their dates?**
     Benjamin West PRA (1738-1820)
   - **What date is the item?**
     c.1801
   - **What condition is it in?**
     We believe the work is in good condition, although described as 'not quite finished' after the artist’s death.

2. **Context**
   - **Provenance**
     By descent to the artist's sons, who sold at Robins, London, 20-22 June 1829, lot 86, ('St James's Park with a view of Westminster Abbey, scene, morning; a highly interesting topographical picture represented with great local fidelity, by the late B. West P.R.A., not quite finished') ... anonymous sale, Christie's, London, 20 January 1928, lot 158, as 'St James's Park, 1815' (260 gns. to F. Howard); with Leggatt Brothers, London, from whom purchased on 28 July 1948 by Professor Sir Albert Richardson, P.R.A. (1880-1964), and by descent to Simon Houfe; sold Christie’s 2 July 2013, lot 41.
Key literary and exhibition references

'A Correct List of the Works of Mr. West', Universal Magazine, III, 1805, p. 530.
'A Correct Catalogue of the Works of Benjamin West, Esq.', La Belle Assemblée or Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine, IV, 1808, Supplement, p. 17.
Lauren Lessing and Terri Sabatos, "Not unworthy of his hand": Crossing Borders in Benjamin West's A Drayman Drinking', Trän(s)tuđies, 2:1 (Summer 2012), p.2.

3. Waverley criteria

Which of the Waverley criteria does the item meet? (If it is of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art learning or history' which area of art learning or history).

Three: the painting is of outstanding significance for the study of art history, social history, and the history of London.

Very briefly why?

This is an extremely rare and important painting of contemporary London life in around 1800, painted by one of the most professionally distinguished artists of the time, Benjamin West (1738-1820), President of the Royal Academy and Historical Painter to George III. It represents the St James's Park Milk Fair, at which milkmaids sold milk direct from the cow, a tradition permitted in the royal park from c1700 to 1905. It is highly unusual as an example of an artistically ambitious urban pastoral, presenting a recognisable scene of everyday life in the metropolis with identifiable landmarks but also aspiring to comparison with the Old Masters in its carefully balanced composition, evocative atmospheric effects and dignified conception of individual figures. It is outstanding as a document of the social life of London, and in relaying in visual form culturally potent ideas about the city, the country, and the particular figure of the milkmaid; as a major example of the painting of
everyday life created as the genre was emerging as a leading feature of British art; and as one of a handful of experimental genre paintings by Benjamin West produced at a key turning point in his career (it is the only one of this group surviving in a UK collection).

DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

What does it depict?
The painting represents the east end of St James's Park, looking south towards Westminster Abbey. The foreground is taken up by the Milk-Fair. This took place daily in the park from the turn of the eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century. The cows were kept in the Park near water and driven to the east end each morning for milking. The several cows at the centre of the composition are shown in the process of being milked by young women, who would sell the fresh and warm milk directly to visitors to the park. A French visitor in 1772, P.J. Grosley, described it as udder fresh cow’s milk ‘served with all the cleanliness peculiar to the English in little mugs at a penny a mug’. While the milkmaids are shown as attractive young women in rustic costume, West shows an array of fashionable Londoners ranged to the left and right of the composition, including women in classicising costume and a group of dashingly uniformed Hussars. The picture is rich with small narrative details creating a panorama of contemporary London life: the soldiers and their female companions engaged in conversation; the pair of children in the left foreground with a hobby horse, observed by a girl in a fancy white lace outfit; the modestly-dressed Quaker family behind them; the pet dogs playing to the bottom right. The parkland setting opens onto an immediately identifiable silhouette of Westminster Abbey, lightly shrouded in morning mist in the distance.

What does it tell us about that period?
The painting is an artistically ambitious rendering of a scene of everyday life in the metropolis. There are numerous points of documentary interest, in the representation of military uniform and fashionable costumes, and in the topographically accurate rendering of the park and Westminster Abbey from an unusual angle. It illuminates the history of daily life in London, and the premium put on fresh milk sourced from cows kept in the centre of the metropolis. The health benefits of fresh milk were beginning to be better understood, and were especially pointed during a time of national crisis (with the long wars with France), industrialisation and urbanisation, the extent of which was revealed by the census of 1801 (documenting that London’s population had risen to over 860,000). The painting further highlights the cultural pertinence of the figure of the milkmaid, a common figure in late eighteenth-century poetry, songs, pornography and graphic art as recent scholarship has demonstrated (see for example Robin Ganev, ‘Milkmaids, Ploughmen, and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Britain’ Journal of the History of Sexuality, 16:1 Jan 2007, pp.40-67; Sean Shesgreen, Images of the Outcast:...
Who made it/painted it/wrote it?
Benjamin West (1738-1820, President of the Royal Academy, Surveyor of the King's Pictures, and Historical Painter to the King.

No. of comparable items by the same artist already in the UK, in both public and private collections?
There are no comparable items by the same artist in any UK public or private collection. Primarily a history and portrait painter, West is known to have created only around a dozen genre paintings at all comparable to the present work, created at the end of the 1790s and early 1800s apparently to test out the market at a time when the royal patronage he had long enjoyed was coming to an end.

Broadly comparable works are now in the US or un-located. West's painting of \textit{The Paddington Passage Boats Returning from Uxbridge in the Evening} (1801) on the same size and considered by some experts to be the partner to the present painting, is in Detroit Institute of Arts, USA. A smaller painting of London life, \textit{Drayman Drinking}, is in a private collection in the US. This has some intriguing points of comparison with \textit{Milkmaids}, showing the iconic silhouette of St Paul's in the distance just as Westminster Abbey figures in the latter. A fishing scene set in Dagenham Reach is un-located, smaller and represents a more definitely rural setting. The same point about setting applies to the \textit{Sheep Washing} (1793; Rutgers University Art Gallery, New Brunswick, New Jersey). A West drawing, inscribed 'Characters in the Streets of London' (1799) includes a milkmaid and is in the Yale Center for British Art.

A small (35.5 x 44.5 cm) oil painting by West of \textit{The Bathing Place at Ramsgate} (c.1788) bears comparison as a lively representation of contemporary social life, apparently based on direct observation, and as such as novel as \textit{Milkmaids}: however, this is also in the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

Landscapes by West showing scenes in Windsor Great Park are in the Royal Collection, Tate and the V&A and were created over the same time-frame and in the same experimental manner as the genre paintings. But these are of a fundamentally different character lacking the urban theme and figurative content of \textit{Milkmaids}.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

Significance of figures associated with the item(s):
maker/client/owners?
Benjamin West was the most successful history painter of his time and, by virtue of his extensive royal patronage and his role as second President of the Royal Academy, a dominant figure in the British art world. He was a pioneer
of a new form of literary and narrative painting, and his severe classical
subject pictures and, particularly, his famous Death of Wolfe (1771) brought
about a ‘revolution’ in British art. The painting of Milkmaid is quite
exceptional within his extensive oeuvre, which is dominated by historical and
religious paintings and portraits. The unusual nature of this work within West's
output was recognised by contemporaries: the journalist Leigh Hunt recorded
that: 'Mr West was so pleased with this pastoral group of cows and
milkdrinkers in the park, that he went out of the line of his art to make a
picture of it'.

**Significance of subject-matter?**
St James’s Park was a major social venue in the eighteenth and early
nineteenth century and ‘the most supremely royal’ of London’s open spaces
was one of the attractions of London, and was frequently described in travel
books and guides. For instance, Sir Richard Phillips *A Morning’s Walk from
London to Kew* (London 1817):

> On my entrance to the park, I was amused and interested by an
> assemblage of a hundred mothers, nurses, and valetudinarians,
> accompanied by as many children, who are drawn together at this hour
every fine morning by the metropolitan luxury of warm milk from the
cow. Seat are provided, as well as biscuits, and other conveniences,
and here from sun-rise till ten o clock continues a milk fair,
distinguished by its peculiar music in the lowing of cows, and in the
discordant squalling of the numerous children. The privilege of keeping
these cows, and of selling their milk on this spot, belongs to the gate-
keepers of the Park; and it must be acknowledged to be a great
inconvenience to invalids and children, to whom this wholesome
beverage and its attendant walk are often prescribed.

The Milk-Fair ran from around 1700 until 1905 as a privilege granted from
royalty to gatekeepers. The stalls were almost invariably manned by
successive generations of the same families, and they provided milk at a time
before it was a staple food (see PJ Atkins account of 'The Retail Milk Trade in
When West depicted the scene – with its array of social types - it was a
fashionable event, although the sale of syllabub and other alcoholic drinks
contributed to fears of disorder in a park which was already associated with
thiery and prostitution. By the mid-nineteenth century the milk retail trade
was increasingly sophisticated and the fair entered into a steady decline,
before the first wave of evictions of the stall began in 1885 (The Graphic, Sat
Sept 12, 1885), the last eviction was in 1905. The Milk-Fair is thus an
important event in London’s social history, and West’s painting an important
rendering of it into high art. Only Gainsborough’s *The Mall* (The Frick, New
York) compares as an oil painting of similar ambition referring to the Milk-Fair,
presenting an urban pastoral evocative of Watteau. This was on the London
art market in the 1790s, and West would doubtless have known it; the Milk-
Fair itself is, though, only suggested by the presence of cows seen through
trees to the left.
West's painting belongs to an emerging genre of the painting of everyday contemporary life. Though Wheatley and Morland were immediate precedents for West, the painting also looks forward to the rendering of everyday scenes by Wilkie and Mulready, the *fetes galantes* of Stothard, or even the freshly observed scenes of contemporary life by the Pre-Raphaelites or Tissot. The classical proportions of the figures, the Cuypian treatment of the cattle, and the Watteau-esque conception of the whole reflect, though, a distinctly academic referencing of art historical tradition.

The painting is particularly important as evidence for our understanding of the developing metropolitan culture of the early nineteenth century and the representation of the city at a critical juncture in its history. Recent scholarship by Dana Arnold, Celina Fox, Elizabeth McKellar and others has enriched and complicated our understanding of this topic. In particular, the painting provides a pastoral and picturesque view of the urban scene which confounds conventional distinctions between the city and the country. The painting illuminates what McKellar has called, with reference to London’s suburbs ‘the interaction of the cosmopolitan and the rustic’ which ‘requires us to reformulate our characterisation of city and country as two necessarily opposed and discrete entities’ (‘Peripheral Visions: Alternative Aspects and Rural Presences in Mid-Eighteenth-Century London’, *Art History* 22:4 (November 1999), p.511). Surveying the tradition of the ‘Cries of London’ (the serial representation of London working types in graphic art), Sean Shesgreen offers a similarly suggestive commentary on the figure of the milkmaid as expressing ‘an idealized rural sympathy’ and presented as ‘preserving ancestral traditions and performing unchanging rites, as if, in the centre of London, they still belonged to an untroubled, pre-industrial age’ (*Images of the Outcast: The Urban Poor in the Cries of London*, New Brunswick NJ 2002, pp.179-80). Also pertinent are the comments made by Lessing and Stabados regarding a small genre painting by West; they propose that by ‘Depicting a liminal space between countryside and city, West documented London’s growth as it became a modern metropolis. Through his commingling of classes and genders, work and leisure, he also hinted at the rapidly evolving social relations within the city’s shifting borders’ (Lessing and Stabados, p.23).

Viewed in the light of such scholarship, West’s painting stands out as an extraordinarily rare, rich and important piece of visual evidence about the city and city life at the dawn of the modern era.

**Significance of materials/process/usage?**

According to Leigh Hunt the picture was based on first-hand observation, but it would have been created in the studio. It was referred to as 'not quite finished' when it was sold by West's sons in 1829. It had, however, already been displayed in West's own gallery by 1804, and the degree of un-finish is a matter of interpretation. The looseness with which the painting is executed, albeit with a generally firm and visible under-drawing of a distinctly classical style, reflects its experimental character and contributes to its freshness and vitality. It is presented both as a record of time and place and as an ambitious and complex oil painting which references art historical tradition. While there are many other images of St James's Park from the later eighteenth century
these are almost all in the form of drawings, watercolours or prints. Meanwhile, milkmaids are a common theme in oil painting of the eighteenth century, but with the exceptions noted here these inevitably show countryside settings and sit much more conventionally within a tradition of rural, pastoral landscape art. Finally, the work is painted on panel, an unusual support for West to use but one he deployed (along with the even more unusual slate) for some of his landscape and genre painting.

**Is/are the item(s) of local/regional/national importance?**
West’s painting is an important document of London’s social history, being the only ambitious painting of the Milk Fair in the art of the period. It has been integrated into Brian Harwood’s history of its precise location – near the Horse Guards – but it also has relevance for the study of the history of a Royal Park, the depiction of Westminster Abbey, London’s food history and retail trade, the study of fashionable London habits and social life, and the study of London as a whole. In representing a scene in the metropolis, with an iconic building evocative of Britain’s history and values in the background, and with a soldier figured prominently in the foreground, the painting offers a reflection on national life in the midst of the long wars with France.

**Summary of related items in public/private ownership in the UK**
*Milkmaids* is exceptionally rare as an ambitious oil painting from this date showing a scene of everyday London life involving a multitude of figures, and in being created by a major British artist. The majority of comparable images are by lesser figures and almost always in the form of graphic art.

There are a few earlier paintings representing St James’s Park, including Marco Ricci’s topographical *View of the Mall - St James Park*, c. 1710 (Castle Howard) and Joseph Nickolls’s rambunctious *St James Park and the Mall* c. 1745 (Royal Collection), which does feature the Milk-Fair. George Morland’s modest (40.6 x 48.3) *St James’s Park* (c.1788-90), showing a more intimate scene of a soldier and his family drinking milk, and a milkmaid with her cow, is the closest point of comparison and this is in the Yale Centre for British Art. The companion, *The Tea Garden*, set in Ranelagh Gardens, is in the Tate collection. Rowlandson’s well-known watercolour of *Vauxhall Gardens* (V&A) is comparable as a scene of a contemporary social gathering in an urban park but is relatively modest in size and a work of satirical graphic art rather than a serious-minded painting. There are many more drawings, watercolours and prints showing London life in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century in public and private collections in the UK, often of a comical or topographical nature, and none having the physical presence and artistic ambition of *Milkmaids in St James’s Park*.