Oil painting - East Cowes Castle

Object: Oil painting

Place of origin: Great Britain (probably, painted)

Date: 1827-1828 (painted)

Artist/Maker: Turner, Joseph Mallord William, born 1775 - died 1851 (artist)

Materials and Techniques: oil on canvas

Credit Line: Given by John Sheepshanks, 1857

Museum number: FA.210(O)

Gallery location: Paintings, Room 87, The Edwin and Susan Davies Galleries, case EAST WALL

Public access description

This is one of two paintings by Turner depicting the Royal Yacht Club races at the Isle of Wight. They were painted for the architect John Nash, who lived in East Cowes Castle, which can be seen in the background. The critic John Ruskin believed this to be 'one of the highest pieces of intellectual art existing'.

Descriptive line


Physical description

Oil on canvas depicting East Cowes Castle on the Isle of Wight. The castle is pictured faintly in the distance with numerous sailboats and rowing boats on the water in the foreground. The shoreline is packed with lines of people watching the boats.

Dimensions

Height: 91.4 cm estimate, Width: 123.2 cm estimate, Height: 133.4 cm frame dimensions, Width: 164.3 cm frame dimensions, Depth: 16 cm frame dimensions

Museum number

FA.210(O)

Object history note

Exhibited: RA 1828 (152); Painted for John Nash; his sale, Christie's 11 July 1835 (87), bought Tiffin acting as agent for John Sheepshanks; John Sheepshanks; by whom given to the museum 1857

[John Sheepshanks]


John Sheepshanks (1784-1863) was the son of a wealthy cloth manufacturer. He entered the family business, but his early enthusiasms were for gardening and the collecting of Dutch and Flemish prints. He retired from business at the age of 40, by which time he had begun collecting predominantly in the field of modern British art. He told Richard Redgrave RA, then a curator in the South Kensington Museum (later the V&A) of his intention to give his collection to the nation. The gallery built to house the collection was the first permanent structure on the V&A site, and all concerned saw the Sheepshanks Gift as forming the nucleus of a National Gallery of British Art. Sheepshanks commissioned works from contemporary artists, bought from the annual RA summer exhibitions, but also bought paintings by artists working before Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837. The Sheepshanks Gift is the bedrock of the V&A's collection of British oil paintings, and served to encourage many other collectors to make donations and bequests.

Historical significance: FA210 was painted for the architect John Nash (1752-1835), who owned East Cowes Castle, in 1827-8, and was exhibited at the RA in 1828. Turner visited from the end of July to September 1827, and Reynolds, and Butlin and Joll, fully discuss the circumstances and progress of the commission. Nash designed the neo-Gothic castle, which was built in 1798 (since demolished; see the view in the Polite Repository 1800, copy in the V&A collections). In the painting it is seen on the hill above the River Medina, at Cowes, Isle of Wight. The Royal Yacht Club was founded at Cowes in 1812, the second series of races being in 1817, in the first week of August.

The full title of the work, given in the RA catalogue, was 'East Cowes Castle, the Seat of John Nash, Esq.; the Regatta Starting for their Moorings'. The painting was admired by the critics, particularly as the subject was preferred to those of Turner's other exhibits in 1828, 'Boccaccio Relating the Tale of the Birdcage' and 'Dido Directing the Equipment of the Fleet' (both now Tate Gallery). In a long passage in Modern Painters, John Ruskin analysed the painting with characteristic care for detail, beginning by noting that 'Intensity of reposes is the great aim throughout, and the unity of tone of the picture is one of the finest things that Turner has ever done', and concluding that it is 'not only a piece of the most refined truth ... but, to my mind, one of the highest pieces of intellectual art existing'. Butlin and Joll compare this painting and its companion with the pair of views of Tabley House exhibited at the RA in 1809 (pp61-2, cat nos 98, 99), and the two views of William Moffatt's house at Mortlake exhibited at the RA in 1826 and 1827 (pp130, 133, cat nos 235, 239), which they
note as anticipating the present work in that 'although the exhibited titles give prominence to “East Cowes Castle”, the castle itself plays an extremely minor role in the finished compositions'. They also draw attention to the figures just discernible in the background, which are sketched in the manner of Watteau, as in the 1822 painting "What You Will!"

The companion painting 'East Cowes Castle, the Seat of J Nash, Esq., the Regatta Beating to Windward', also exhibited at the RA in 1828, is now in the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana (see Butlin and Joll p135, cat no 242, repr pl 262). Preparatory oil sketches made on his visit to Cowes are in the Tate Gallery (Butlin and Joll pp142-5, cat nos 260-8); three relate to the present work, and Reynolds suggests two were painted directly on the spot. There is a small (33.1 X 49.2 cm/13 X 19? ins) picture, 'Yachting at Cowes', in the Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand, supposedly signed and dated 1835, with a similar composition; Butlin and Joll doubt its authenticity (repr Connoisseur March 1959, p91).

Reynolds deals at length with the physical condition of the present work.

**Historical context note**

JMW Turner was born Covent Garden, London, 23 April 1775, son of a barber. Entered RA Schools 1789. In a long and exceptionally distinguished career, exhibited 259 works at the RA between 1790 and 1850 and 17 at the BI 1806-1846, predominantly landscapes, sometimes with historical themes. Generally considered the greatest painter in the history of British art. Died Chelsea, London, 19 December 1851 and buried in St Paul's Cathedral. Bequeathed his extensive collection of oil paintings and watercolours to the nation, now principally housed in the Clore wing of the Tate Gallery.

**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O80862/east-cowes-castle-oil-painting-turner-joseph-mallord/