LOT 183
JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER, R.A.
LONDON 1775 - 1851
THE MEWSTONE, DEVON
Watercolour, heightened with touches of white; the verso with a faint pencil sketch of Barden Tower, North Yorkshire, indistinctly inscribed: ... Rivaulx [sic]... [?] / Farnley House / Lindley Hall Pheasant Mr F [awkes] / Partridge shooting / Woodcock ...[?] / Moor [sic] grous / Bolton Abbey / Bardon [sic] Tower / Pheasant / Moore [sic] Grouse / Gleadow [sic] [Hall, Leeds]
178 by 260 mm

ESTIMATE £120,000-180,000 GBP
Lot Sold: 266,500 GBP

PROVENANCE
John Ruskin (1819-1900);
sale, London, Christie's, 15 April 1869, lot 8 as 'Sketch for, or more probably commencement of drawing of the Bass Rock'; bt. Agnew's with Agnew's, London;
with Spink's, London, 1956 (as A Storm off Margate);
by whom sold to Denys Sutton (1917-1991); thence by descent to the present owner

EXHIBITED
London, Leggatt’s Gallery, Turner, 1960, no. 15

LITERATURE

CATALOGUE NOTE
In this dramatic watercolour Turner depicts the imposing form of the Mewstone, an island that lies about a mile from Wembury Point in Devon. Enveloped by a raging sea and thunderous sky, the rock appears under attack from a violent storm. Turner had experienced these fierce elements at first hand while staying at Plymouth during the summer of 1813. His friend Cyrus Redding (1785-1870) recorded the memorable occasion when they sailed past the Mewstone on their way to Burgh Island in Bigbury Bay. He noted that the passage was extremely rough and although ‘others grew decidedly queasy, Turner sat in the stern sheets intently watching the sea, and not at all affected by the motion.’ Although Turner was able to create several rapidly drawn sketches of the Mewstone in his Plymouth and Hamoaze Sketchbook, the weather on this trip appears to have prevented him from working further on the subject.

The present watercolour was executed from memory and both Ian Warrell and Peter Bower have confirmed that the sheet once formed part of Turner’s The Devonshire Rivers and Wharfedale No.3 Sketchbook, a volume he used between 1814 and 1816. This explains the existence of the pencil sketch of Barden Tower in North Yorkshire and the list of northern locations that appear on the verso of this work.

Turner revisited the subject of the Mewstone on several occasions throughout his career. The Mewstone at the Entrance of Plymouth Sound dates from circa 1814 and shows the island in stormy weather from out to sea. That image was engraved in 1816 for George and William Cooke’s project: Picturesque Views of the Southern Coast of England. There is also a mezzotint, entitled The Mewstone, which dates from circa 1823 and which Turner made for his unpublished Little Liber Studiorum. Lastly, at Tate Britain, London there is a ‘colour-beginning’ of the Mewstone that dates from circa 1824. Connected to the mezzotint, it too shows the island under leaden skies and besieged by heavy seas.

The present work demonstrates Turner’s mastery of the medium of watercolour and his eye for the dramatic. Applying his colours with the upmost energy and confidence, he goes far beyond simply recording the Mewstone as a topographical landmark. Instead the island finds itself at the centre of a highly charged scene; the sea churns, waves crash and an almighty tempest breaks overhead. On this small sketchbook page Turner reveals the awesome power of nature.

This watercolour has been owned by several distinguished collectors. In the 19th Century it was in the collection of John Ruskin, while in the second half of the 20th century it belonged to Denys Sutton, the highly respected and long-serving editor of the Apollo Magazine.

We are grateful to Ian Warrell, Peter Bower and Eric Shanes for their help in cataloguing this lot.
2. Tate Britain, (T.B.CXXXI 53, 54, 55, 57, 172a, 173a, 174a, 175a, 177a, 178a, 179a)
3. Tate Britain, (T.B. CXXXIV)
4. National Gallery of Ireland
6. Tate Britain, (T.B. CXCVI-F)