

John Wilson Carmichael

British, 1800-1868

Shannon and the Chesapeake

1841, oil on canvas, 70.0x100.5 cm

Bequeathed by Major A.C.D. Spencer to the Canterbury Society of Arts, 1931, and presented to the Gallery 1932



About the work

Shannon and the Chesapeake belongs to the tradition of marine painting, which emerged as a separate category of painting in the 17th century. John Wilson Carmichael was keenly interested in the exploits of the Royal Navy and incidents from British naval history often featured in his painting. This work is thought to commemorate the deeds of Sir Philip Bowes Vere Broke, who died in 1841, the year it was painted.

Broke, or 'Brave Broke' as he became known, was the central figure in a duel that occurred outside Boston Harbour on 1 June 1813. This engagement was just one that took place in American waters in 1813, after the United States had declared war on Britain. The Americans were confident of success as 'Chesapeake' carried 50 guns and a crew of 376, but the 'Shannon' carried 52 guns and 'Chesapeake' proved no match for Broke's highly disciplined men, who had learned their skills during the war with France.

Carmichael's depiction of the fight is highly dramatised. Captain Broke is shown heroically, with his sword raised, being rowed towards 'Chesapeake' in a stormy sea. In fact the duel occurred in a calm sea and lasted just 15 minutes. Broke was severely wounded but later recovered and continued his service in the Royal Navy. When Broke fell, Povo Wallis, his second lieutenant, took command and escorted the captured 'Chesapeake' to Halifax in Nova Scotia. As a result of the conflict the total casualties were 71 killed and 174 wounded.

Marine painting came into its own with the works of Dutch

painters like Hendrick Vroom (1566-1640), William van der Velde (The Younger) (1633-1707) and the English marine painter Samuel Scott (c.1702-1772). Following the power shift from the Dutch to the English fleet in the 18th century, Scott tended to follow Van der Velde's style and was possibly an influence on this work by Carmichael.

Shannon and the Chesapeake is a mid-career work for Carmichael. He used a succession of thin glazes of oil paint, producing the smooth finish and fine detail favoured by the Royal Academy. The colours are carefully modulated within a fairly constricted range, creating the desired unity in the three main elements of ships, sea and sky.

Carmichael has followed the established formula of the heroic naval battle, with the two ships pictured with careful accuracy in the treatment of their sails and rigging. The storm-tossed waves lend romantic drama to the scene. The use of the dark shadow in the foreground and the forward motion of the boarding party's boat help to carry the eye into the middle of the picture space. The rearing storm cloud is an important compositional device. Its steep angle contributes to the sense of the wind, which has whipped up the high, breaking waves, filled the sails and tilted the tall ships.

Shannon and the Chesapeake was previously in the collection of Major Archibald Claude Douglas Spencer.

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About the artist

Carmichael was born in 1800 in Newcastle-on-Tyne, a major centre of shipbuilding on England's northeast coast, and lived there for much of his life. The son of a ship's carpenter, Carmichael was apprenticed as a ship builder and gained a thorough knowledge of ships, which proved invaluable when he turned to painting. He was an acquaintance, and possibly a pupil, of Thomas Miles Richardson (1784-1848). Carmichael established himself as a painter in 1823 and for the next two years mainly worked with watercolours. In 1825 he exhibited two marine paintings at the Northumberland Institution and from 1835 to 1858 he exhibited at the Royal Academy.

In 1854 Carmichael was employed by the *Illustrated London News* as their artist in the field to record the Crimean War and he accompanied the British Baltic Fleet between 1854 and 1855. He published *The Art of Marine Painting in Watercolours* in 1859. The death of his son in 1862 greatly saddened Carmichael and he retired from painting in 1865. He died in 1868.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are no other works by the artist in the Collection.

Further reading

Marine Painting in England, 1700-1900, D. Cordingly, London, 1974.

