

RICHARD GREEN

FINE PAINTINGS • ESTABLISHED 1955

CHARLES WELLINGTON FURSE ARA

Staines, Middlesex 1868 – 1904 Camberley, Surrey

Ref: BY 156

*Gathering flowers*



Signed and inscribed on a label attached to the stretcher:

*C.W. Furse Esq / 1 Abbey Gardens / Westminster*

Oil on canvas: 30 x 25 ½ in / 76.2 x 64.8 cm

Frame size: 39 x 34 x in / 99.1 x 86.4 cm

Painted *circa* 1891



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*Provenance:*

The artist;  
by descent to Rear Admiral John Paul Furse (1904-1978);  
Hussey's, Exeter, *circa* 1980;  
private collection, UK

In August 1892, when popular misconceptions abounded, Charles Wellington Furse launched a tirade in support of Impressionism. It had been characterised as a style for charlatans who were using 'public indignation and disgust as stepping-stones to notoriety'. Impressionists were, according to some, 'painting with lumps of neat colour' and indulging in 'aimless scratching and scrawling'. It was Furse's objective to counter these misconceptions, and to do so he contrasted the laborious Pre-Raphaelite 'catalogue of facts' with the essential, 'one big truth' of the ensemble.<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1868, Furse was the son of a cleric who rose to become Archdeacon of Westminster.<sup>2</sup> As an art student emerging from the Slade School in 1887, he came late to the Impressionism debate – but early enough to witness the conflicting views expressed around John Singer Sargent's *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (Tate), a work that greatly impressed him.<sup>3</sup> Its message was shortly to be underscored by the arrival of Monet's first solo exhibition in London and by the winter of 1891, when Furse's *In the Abbey Garden* (unlocated) was exhibited at the New English Art Club, two further works by Monet were also on display.<sup>4</sup>

At that time Furse had moved briefly to the family house at 1 Abbey Gardens, Westminster, the address on the reverse of the present work. It seems not unlikely that the present sketch was painted at this time since from the following spring until 1899, he would use his studio address in Tite Street, where Sargent was his neighbour and to some extent, mentor.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between the present work and Sargent's sketches for *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* is, nevertheless, obvious at first glance (figs 1&2).

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wellington Furse, 'Impressionism – What it Means', *Albemarle Magazine*, August 1892; quoted from *Illustrated Memoir of Charles Wellington Furse*, ARA, 1908 (Burlington Fine Arts Club), pp. 46-50.

<sup>2</sup> The Furse family hailed from Halsdon in Devon, Furse being the fourth of five sons. His mother, Jane Diana Monsell, was also from a clerical family. As a boy Furse was diagnosed with tuberculosis – a condition that led to his premature death at the age of thirty-six; see *Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004 (online; entry by Kenneth McConkey).

<sup>3</sup> Furse was a favourite pupil of Alphonse Legros, then Principal of the Slade School of Fine Art. Sargent's *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, 1885-6 was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1887 where it sparked furious discussion in the press on the subject of Impressionism; see Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent – Figures and Landscapes, 1883-1899, The Complete Paintings, Volume V*, 2010 (Yale University Press), pp. 120-139. For the wider critical and artistic debate, see Kenneth McConkey, *Impressionism in Britain*, 1995 (Yale University Press/Barbican Art Gallery).

<sup>4</sup> McConkey, 1995, pp. 42-52. Monet's London exhibition was held at the Goupil Gallery, in the spring of 1889, and his *Early Spring* and *Orange and Lemon Trees* were exhibited in the New English Art Club in the winter of 1891, along with two recent works by Sargent. Neither Monet can be identified with certainty – the first is possibly a recent work painted at Giverny, while the latter may be a view of the gardener's house at the Salis Gardens, Antibes, 1888 (Wildenstein nos 1165 or 1166, and 1243 or 1245).

<sup>5</sup> We cannot be certain precisely when Sargent and Furse met. It may have been as early as 1887, but certainly before the New English winter exhibition of 1891.

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Fig 1 Charles Wellington Furse, *A Young Woman Picking Flowers*, c. 1891, 76.2 x 64.8 cm, the present picture

Fig 2 John Singer Sargent, *Study for 'Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose'*, c. 1885-6, 72.4 x 47 cm, Private Collection

Both artists work with complete freedom, blocking in the figure and its immediate surroundings. The application of paint is swift and confident, and neither is preoccupied with 'finish', for these are private notes that have all the freshness of an initial impression. The encounter is glancing; it is what Walter Sickert winningly described as a raid on the 'unsleeping mobility of life itself'.<sup>6</sup> The touches of Furse's brush are far from 'aimless'. Indeed, they express an acuity that is carried forward in later masterpieces such as *Return from the Ride*, 1902-3 and *Diana of the Uplands*, 1903-4 (both Tate).

The present picture, originally part of the contents of the artist's studio at the time of Furse's death, was one of a group of works sold from the estate of Rear Admiral John Paul Furse (1904-1978) in Exeter. In large measure its subject matter and handling appears to coincide with *Girl with a Parasol* which was sold along with the study for Furse's *Diana of the Uplands*, and other works, by the artist's descendants, in a second ex-studio group in 1982, in London.<sup>7</sup> Both studies convincingly deliver the impressions of a garden subject that may relate to *In the Abbey Garden*.

When he died prematurely of tuberculosis, in his mid-thirties, *The Times* described Furse as an 'admirable painter ... a man of unusual mental force and culture', who had been tipped as a future President of the Royal Academy.<sup>8</sup> It was however his instinct, his natural ability and fresh visual sense that marked him in the early 1890s as one of the most radical painters in Britain, and one for whom Impressionism was the

<sup>6</sup> A Gruetzner Robins, *Walter Sickert, The Complete Writings on Art*, 2000, Oxford University Press, p. 511 (from 'The Wisest Sorrow', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1st April 1925; Sickert was writing about Whistler).

<sup>7</sup> Sotheby's London, 10th March 1982, lot 4.

<sup>8</sup> 'Obituary', *The Times*, 18th October 1904, p. 5.

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‘spontaneous expression of the painter’s intuitions, not evidence of the tortuous means whereby that expression has been arrived at ...’

That ‘spontaneous expression’ is conveyed in the dappled sunlight that falls on the girl’s dress, and in the flash of ochre that lines the handle of her flower basket. There is no requirement for long poses and detailed drapery; no topography or botanical study is necessary; just the swift and sure record of a fleeting glimpse – fragmentary, but well-felt. In such circumstances, Furse, like Sargent and Monet, was considered a master.

*Kenneth McConkey*