



ANNIE FERAY MUTRIE (1826-1893)

A Wild Bank with Primroses and a Bird's Nest

1850s

17 1/8 x 14 1/8 in. (43.5 x 36 cm)

Oil on canvas

Signed 'A F M' lower left

PROVENANCE

Private collection;

Ellis Willis Beckett, Sheffield, lot 78;

Philip Mould & Company, London.

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Highly respected during her own lifetime, Annie Feray Mutrie's work was long underrepresented in twentieth-century accounts of Victorian painting, reflecting the broader neglect of many women artists of the period. However, her reputation is now being reassessed, and she is once again recognised as a leading flower painter of the Victorian period.[1] The present example shows Mutrie turning her attention from the arranged blooms that defined contemporary flower painting to wildflowers observed directly from nature.

Born in Ardwick, near Manchester, Mutrie trained alongside her sister Martha Darley Mutrie at the Manchester School of Design and privately with George Wallis, before the sisters moved to London in the 1850s. Both artists established themselves as leading practitioners of flower painting, exhibiting at the Royal Academy, the Society of Female Artists, and other major London venues.

Mutrie's painting is built around the theme of spring and rebirth, with a bank of spring flowers - primroses, violets, ivy and grasses growing around a small bird's nest. This focus on wild nature matters in light of a critique made in 1855 by John Ruskin, the most influential British art critic of the period. Ruskin admired Mutrie's handling of colour and texture, noting her "very lovely, pure, and yet unobtrusive colour ... and a richness of petal texture that seems absolutely scented", but he wished she would paint "some banks of flowers in wild country, just as they grow." [2] The present work seems closely attuned to that advice. The flowers are still carefully composed, but they are shown as part of a living setting of moss, soil, grasses and ivy, rather than displayed as cut blooms, as in many of Mutrie's other works. In doing so, Mutrie brings her refined skill as a flower painter into closer contact with the Victorian ideal of direct, truthful observation from nature.

Mutrie's reputation continued to grow in the decades that followed. By 1861, critics could suggest that other flower painters should "give way" to the Mutrie sisters and, between them, their works were sought by collectors and artists including Julius Sichel, Thomas Creswick, and Sir Harry James Veitch, the celebrated horticulturist who was instrumental in establishing the Chelsea Flower Show.

[1] Tate Britain's recent catalogue *Now You See Us: Women Artists in Britain 1520–1920* included Mutrie among the artists whose achievements have been obscured or overlooked in traditional art-historical narratives.

[2] John Ruskin, (1855) *Notes on Some of the Principal Pictures Exhibited in the Rooms of the Royal Academy: 1855*. London: Smith, Elder & Co., p. 7.