



SIR HENRY RAEBURN (1756-1823)

Portrait of a Naval Officer, possibly Admiral Sir Houston Stewart (1791-1875), when Lieutenant

c. 1810-15

Oil on canvas

35 x 26 ¼ in. (88.5 x 67cm)

In its original frame bearing a label for the frame maker Alexander Hill at 67, Princes Street, Edinburgh, where he was based from 1841

PROVENANCE

Possibly Brown & Co., Chester, in the 1940s/50s (as suggested by a label previously affixed to the reverse which bore the code '159054') by Major William Martin Archdale (1912-2003);

Cheffins, Cambridge, 24 June 2026, lot 190, sold by the great-nephew of the above;

Philip Mould & Company, acquired from the above

PHILIP MOULD
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& COMPANY



Fig. 1 | Sir Henry Raeburn, Admiral Sir Houston Stewart (1791-1875), Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in. (76.1 x 63.5 cm), Private collection.

The present work is one of the best-preserved examples of Sir Henry Raeburn's work to appear on the market in recent years and, until only recently, was unknown to scholars. Its reemergence is a refreshing reminder of the artist's idiosyncratic style of painting, the virtuosity of which can be properly admired given its near-pristine state.

The late-Georgian period witnessed a cluster of great portrait painters who, each in their distinct way, captured the great and the glamorous of the period. In London, Thomas Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds laid the foundations for a style of portrait painting that fused lyricism and grandeur, prioritising – especially in their later works – movement and posture. Raeburn, however, pursued a different approach, focusing more directly on the character of his subjects, foregrounded through a clever use of colour, lighting, and more natural poses. Although adaptable – indeed some of his most successful works are large-scale ambitious portraits showing figures out of doors – Raeburn's success lay in the type of quiet sophistication epitomised in the present work.

It has been suggested that the sitter in the present work could be Admiral Sir Houston Stewart (1791-1875), whose portrait Raeburn painted some years earlier in around 1805 when he entered the navy as a midshipman (fig. 1).^[1] Based on the uniform, this portrait must have been painted whilst Stewart was a Lieutenant, a rank to which he was promoted on 1st August 1811. Around this time, he was serving on HMS Alexandria at Leith, before transferring to HMS Tigre and participating in the blockade of Rochefort in Spring 1812. Stylistically, the work corresponds with Raeburn portraiture from around 1810-15, and it is possible, therefore, that Stewart sat to the artist when he was based in Leith, just a few miles from Raeburn's studio in central Edinburgh. Later, on 13 August 1814, Stewart was promoted to Commander and was made a full Captain on 10 June 1817 whilst stationed in Jamaica. Following a brief return to Scotland in 1818, Stewart was posted to North America where he remained until 1826. If the sitter is indeed Stewart, then the present work may perhaps relate to the recovered debt listed in Raeburn's posthumous inventory of 1824: "February 17 Captn. Houston Stewart £52. 10". His prolonged absence from

Scotland, combined with Raeburn's relaxed approach to debt collecting, may explain why the work remained unpaid for many years.

Born in Edinburgh to a modest family, Raeburn was orphaned at an early age and initially trained as a goldsmith, a background that no doubt influenced the precision which later defined his portraiture. Largely self-taught, his remarkable talent soon attracted influential patrons, and following an advantageous marriage, he was able to devote himself entirely to portrait painting. After a formative visit to Italy in the mid-1780s, Raeburn returned to Edinburgh, where he established a thriving practice that attracted Scotland's leading lawyers, physicians, merchants, landowners and intellectuals. Unlike many contemporaries who settled in London, he remained in Edinburgh and became a key iconographer of the Scottish Enlightenment. His bold handling, dramatic lighting and restrained elegance gave his portraits an immediacy that in modern times has a contemporary resonance.

In 1822 Raeburn was appointed His Majesty's Painter and Limner for Scotland, and the following year became the first Scottish artist to be knighted specifically for his achievements in painting. His portraits, including *The Skating Minister*, remain enduring symbols of Scotland's artistic and cultural identity, celebrated for their humanity and psychological insight.

[1] The identification and dating of the portrait are supported by Dr Duncan Thompson and Dr Stephen Lloyd. Dr David Mackie, however, dates the work to around 1820 and believes the debt recovery record does not relate to the present work.

