Archibald Thorburn (1860 - 1935)

Ptarmigan in the snow

Signed and dated, lower left: *A. Thorburn/1929.*

Watercolour heightened with bodycolour on paper

7⅓ x 10⅞ in – 18.5 x 27.5 cm

Frame size

15¾ x 19 in – 40 x 48.3 cm

Provenance:

Richard Haworth, Blackburn;
Private collection, UK

Artist description:

Archibald Thorburn was born in Lasswade near Edinburgh on 31st May 1860 and was destined to become Britain's, and some would say the world's, greatest wildlife artist of all time. Even by the age of 30 in 1890 he was regarded as the best to have been seen in Britain, and that reputation has remained intact and unchallenged ever since.

He was the fifth son of Robert Thorburn (1818-1885) the leading miniaturist painter of the day and a great favourite of Queen Victoria, and the young Archibald received much of his early training from his father, whose insistence upon anatomical accuracy and careful attention to detail was to stand the young man in good stead throughout his life.

Even as a child Thorburn had shown exceptional artistic talent and by the age of 12 was already producing some exquisite little watercolours and pen and ink drawings that heralded much promise for the future.

One of his earliest and enduring loves was that of wild flowers and we see this discreetly though beautifully expressed in almost all his work. Whether a major composition or an identification book illustration, we notice some bloom or blossom adding an environmental hint to the work as well as greatly embellishing it.

It was in 1882 that Thorburn's first published coloured plates appeared in W. F. Swaysland's "Familiar Wild Birds" and his last, posthumously, in 1927 in Archer & Godman's "The Birds of British Somaliland and the Gulf of Aden".

In between saw innumerable volumes illustrated by him, some with him as author too, for as an illustrator his remarkable technical abilities, combined with a freshness and a liveliness not seen before, quickly established him as without equal and a firm favourite as principal illustrator for many of the leading sporting and natural history authors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The monumental work he carried out for Lord Lilford between 1885-98, in which he completed some 268 superlative water-colours for Coloured Figures of the Birds of the British Islands, brought to the world for the very first time a perfect blend of art and science as his birds, technically correct in every detail, remained soft, round, delicate and alive. Thorburn's place in bird art was established beyond doubt.

Today, a century later, we still use his plates for identification purposes, some originally drawn for Lilford, as we purchase "The Observers Book of British Birds" or "Thorburn's Birds" from our nearest bookshop. Such is the charm, accuracy and timelessness of Archibald Thorburn's work.

Thorburn first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1880 when but 20 years old and continued to do so until 1900. His entries were invariably huge, compelling and technically brilliant watercolours, often of grouse, deer or eagles. However, by 1900 he had become disenchanted at the way his work was regularly hung, often high and difficult to see, and he decided to forego further entries and concentrate upon book illustrative work and private commissions that were by now arriving on his doorstep in ever growing numbers.

Archibald Thorburn began life very much as a sportsman, regularly finding himself as an invited guest at shooting parties on estates in both Scotland and England, including Sandringham at the invitation of the King, to both shoot and paint. However, he ended his life very much the conservationist, having hung up his gun for good on wounding a hare and hearing its pitiful squeals in the early years of the century. In 1927 he was elected Vice President of the RSPB (for whom he had painted many of their annual Christmas cards) in recognition of his services on behalf of bird presentation.

Thorburn often recalled the debt he owed his father, particularly his insistence upon perfection in all aspects of art and although he attended art school for a time and took lessons from Joseph Wolf, RI (1820-1899) a kingly old man who Thorburn rated the finest bird and animal draughtsman of all time, he never failed to acknowledge the patience and devotion of his father's teaching.

Following his father's death in 1885, Thorburn moved south to London residing at a number of addresses there before moving to Hascombe in Surrey in 1902, where he was to live and work for the rest of his life. He had married in 1896 Constance Mudie (whose father had founded the famous lending library of that name) and they had one son, Philip.

At Hascombe, surrounded by some of the most beautiful woodland in the country, Thorburn found himself amid an abundance of the creatures he loved to sketch and paint. Here most of his pheasant and woodcock pictures of 1902 and onwards were conceived and painted as well as those of mice and hedgehogs and host of small birds that dwelt in the surrounding countryside. However he never lost his love for his homeland and returned each year to the Highlands of Scotland to paint. There amid the desolation and remoteness of Gaick in Inverness-shire (which he first visited in 1889 when he saw his first live red deer and ptarmigan), and other favourite haunts, he would replenish his sketchbooks with hints of hare, red deer, ptarmigan and eagle.

These would then be redrawn and used in the innumerable commissions he would produce once back home in his studio.

All his pictures were based on the truth, constructed from original sketches of creature and countryside. Thus a pheasant painting would almost certainly be based on an original sketch drawn in Hascombe woods or nearby whilst one of red grouse would arise from sketches done whilst staying with his great friend John Henry Dixon at Inveran on Lock Maree or, after 1902, on the hills near Pitlochry to which Mr Dixon moved.

From his earliest days of fame in the late 1880s Thorburn's renderings of game birds have remained extremely popular and much sought after around the world. As a young man his ability to capture the mood of a place and the stance of flight of black-game, pheasant or partridge was quickly acknowledged. While his father Robert Thorburn has painted for Queen Victoria, Archibald in turn became a great favourite of both King Edward VII and King George V who particularly admired his skills at portraying sporting scenes at Sandringham and elsewhere. Archibald Thorburn lived out a peaceful and largely uneventful life quietly recording for us scenes of our wildlife set amongst the countryside of the time. He was a quiet, helpful, generous man, shy and unassuming almost to the extreme. A tall, distinguished looking gentleman with white beard and hair and twinkling blue eyes, he was a much loved sight in the village of Hascombe, where just occasionally he could be coaxed to the village school there to draw birds upon the blackboard with breathtaking ability to the wonder of children and teachers alike.

Thorburn's pictures, unlike many of the period, remain free from sentimentality, his creatures restless, wild and free. With deft touch and great economy, he cleverly captured the rigours of life in the countryside, be it by mountain tarn or lowland stubble.

Today, some now a 100 years old, his pictures remain just as bright and fresh as when painted, simply timeless in their accuracy, charm and appeal. In his day one could number the recognised bird artists upon the fingers on one hand.

Now, with a hundred or even more known names, remarkably his work still stands clear of the field, quietly and with distinction, withstanding the bombardment of competition in which, in order to attract the eye of the beholder (and thereby a potential purchaser), a veritable galaxy of artistic gymnastics of style, gimmickry and novelty have been employed.

Archibald Thorburn's painting was his passion as well as his profession. He told the truth about our countryside with paint upon paper, simply and as well as he knew how. Such an approach, in the hands of such a knowledgeable and skilful technician ensured success. Indeed, life eternal.