

Robert Spear Dunning (1829 - 1905)

Still life of flowers and fruit

Signed and dated, on the reverse:

R.S. Dunning/1891

Oil on canvas

13 x 8½ in – 33 x 21.6 cm

Frame size

16½ x 12¼ in – 42 x 31 cm

Price - £27,000

Artist description:

Robert Spear Dunning was born in Brunswick Maine in 1829, the family moving to the wealthy town of Fall River, Massachusetts, between Providence and Newport Rhode Island in the early 1830's. As a youth, Dunning worked in a cotton mill and on coastal vessels while also painting and sketching.

In 1849 Dunning enrolled at the National Academy of Design in New York where he studied under Daniel Huntingdon (1816-1906), a member of the Hudson River School and noted painter of historical subjects and portraits. It was portraits, a source of income, and marine painting, which related to his time working on sailing vessels, which formed the majority of his oeuvre early in his career. However, from 1865 he concentrated on still life painting, and usually a combination of fruit and flowers with accoutrements including silver, glass, mirrors, ceramics and tabletops, the latter often being carved giving the artist further means of displaying his fine technique.

Dunning and his friend John E. Grouard, with whom he shared a studio, both taught at the Fall River Evening Drawing School which had been established by statute in 1870, and owing to Dunning's reputation as a painter of still life the 'Fall River School' of still life painting became renowned, including artists Bryant Chapin (1859–1927) and Mary Macomber (1861–1916).

Dunning's compositions emphasise the texture of the fruit and flowers and the disparate reflections of varying elements whether they be from silver or as here the glass and polished carved wooden tray inset with a ceramic plaque.

Dunning was hugely successful in his lifetime; he kept a studio in Providence in addition to that in Fall River and in the public library of the latter painted a large portrait of George Washington.

He exhibited in New York, Boston and Providence and his work can be seen in public collections in the Fall River Historical Society, Massachusetts; Columbus Museum, Ohio; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; Providence; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC.