

36 **ALFRED SHARPE**

1836 - 1908

Shoal Bay, Auckland Harbour, NZ

Watercolour 30 x 45.6

Signed, inscribed & dated 1907

35,000 - 45,000

Provenance:

Private Collection, Wellington

Purchased from International Art Centre,

Fine Art Auction, November 2005

Alfred Sharpe rarely repeated exact views but the panorama of this vibrant work is seen in an earlier work of 1883 where the trees are older than those we see here. There is more concentration on the frontal plane enlivened with a seated figure to the right. Fourteen years later, a year before his death, he produces a similar New Zealand scene; the same trees but younger! Why did he do this?

Roger Blackley's monograph *The Art of Alfred Sharpe*, published in 1992 by the Auckland Art Gallery, may provide us with a clue. Alfred Sharpe had moved to Newcastle leaving his wife in New Zealand in a rest-home and paying the expenses of her care. He dropped the final e from his name and began life again as a poet, painter, landscape designer and even architect!

Having won a competition for the design of Hill Reserve (now known as King Edward Park) in Newcastle, Sharpe set about implementing his plan for the planting of Pohutukawa. No better site for this New Zealand tree could this reserve offer – a cliff above the sea.'

Sharpe returns to such a view in this *Shoal Bay, Auckland Harbour, NZ*. He is near the end of his life but he shows the trees younger, in full Christmas bloom with the primary colour red juxtaposed with the primary blue of the sea and yellow of the foreground. The warm Claude Lorraine-like lighting of his earlier work has been replaced with a canvas reflecting accurately the bright light of New Zealand. This light-filled, sharp-focused scene could be his swan-song to painting the New Zealand flora from his newly-adopted country, Australia.

He still has the elevated view, the trees as framing devices, the clear details and his use of the Hogarthian serpentine is more subtle. The clefts of the blue cliffs take up the local colour of the water in which they are reflected, their shape mimicking in reverse the curve of the shore which, together, produce an aesthetically pleasing oval finishing at the right in a Cezannesque triangle of two trunks, an S-shaped curve of a third repeating the form of the branch on the left-hand side and a fourth trunk providing the "full-stop".

The subsidiary view on the left through the bare serpentine curved Pohutukawa branches shows the cliff on the far shore whereas in the earlier work the viewer saw merely water. Views on the right and in the middle show yachts and a canoe, the old against the new, just as the artist seems to be contrasting the new life of the young red blooms of the Pohutukawa with his own fading years. Sharpe was furious that the locals in Newcastle took to stealing the red branches to decorate their homes "filling vases with the blooms" (op cit p. 115). Perhaps this is yet another reason for his giving us a late work of such vibrant colour, a celebration of life with his beloved New Zealand Pohutukawa.

Angela Mackie (Ashford)



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View from Shoal Bay, Auckland Harbour NZ and showing Pohutukawa, or Xmas Trees in flower & Karaka - or Laurel Trees. Shoal Bay is on the North Shore

Artist's Inscription on original backing board verso