

**WILLIAM FRASER GARDEN**

1856–1921

**WINTER IN THE OUSE VALLEY**

Watercolour, body colour and ink  
11 x 15 inches; 280 x 381 mm  
Signed and dated: 'W.F. Garden 91.'  
Painted in 1891



This extraordinary, intensely worked watercolour is one of the most atmospheric landscapes by the late nineteenth-century British artist William Fraser Garden. Almost unknown in his own lifetime, Garden produced a sequence of watercolours which are startling for their haunting effect and technical virtuosity. Garden worked slowly and meticulously, producing a relatively small number of beautiful atmospheric watercolours which have long been highly prized by collectors. In the present work, showing a view across the Ouse valley in winter, Garden carefully records the scene with painstaking precision producing a vivid almost photographic treatment of the landscape. As Christopher Newall has observed, Garden's 'works of the late 1880s and 1890s are extraordinary in their pellucid quality of light and their exact delineation of architectural and landscape detail.'<sup>1</sup>

Garden was born into a large family of artists of Scottish descent. His father Robert Winchester Fraser was an army surgeon, who settled in Bedford in 1861. In order to differentiate himself from his five artist brothers, Garden William Fraser used the name William Fraser Garden. Garden spent all his life painting the flat fen landscape of the Great Ouse, living in a series of houses between Bedford and Huntingdon, ending up bankrupt, lodging at the Ferry Boat Inn at Hemingford Grey. Garden had little professional success in his lifetime, he sent a series of watercolours to the Royal Academy during the 1880s but achieved no critical attention and little commercial success.

This exquisitely worked watercolour shows a view across the river Ouse to the village of Houghton, with the spire of St Mary's church in the distance. Made from an unusually high vantage point, Garden has meticulously observed the cool winter landscape: trees bare of all but brown leaves, snow on the ground and banks of low cloud. The oblique framing of the composition and avoidance of conventional picturesque motifs suggests Garden was much influenced by photography. By the time Garden was painting, photography was widely available, and the potential of the medium was already decisively affecting the way landscape painters approached the world. Garden may even have known the pioneering photographer Peter Henry Emerson, whose naturalistic depictions of the same landscape were published in 1886 in an album entitled: *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads*.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Wilcox and Christopher Newall, *Victorian Landscape Watercolours*, exh. cat., New Haven (Yale Center for British Art), 1992, p.172.

Garden was a master of watercolour technique, a perfectionist and an innovator. His landscapes, in their verisimilitude and precision, capture unerringly the feeling of a winter in the flat landscape of East Anglia. Using watercolour and carefully chosen paper, Garden portrays the effect of cool winter light and snow by extraordinary means. The carefully silhouetted trees are frosted with dry brown pigment, suggestive of winter leaves, Garden's meticulous delineation of each branch never lapses into derivativeness, preserving a fresh organic quality throughout. Garden's work moved in a decisively different direction from the trajectory of British watercolour art, away from an aesthetic that privileged fleeting impressions made on the spot, towards a more solid vision, inflected by the rise of photography. Garden's work revels in atmospheric effect, but it is effect that was hard won through laborious work in the studio.



William Fraser Garden

*Trees in a landscape, 1885*

Watercolour

8 x 11 inches; 203 x 279 mm

Signed and dated: 'W.F. Garden / 1885'

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