English School, mid-19th Century Portrait of a Prizefighter in the Ring

19th Century English School

$15,500

David Brooker Fine Art
UK: +44 (0)7870 851 498 • US +1 203 232 2807
info@davidbrooker.com • www.davidbrooker.com

REF: 2382

Height: 139.65 cm (55")

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Width: 86.33 cm (34")

Description

English School, mid-19th Century
Portrait of a Prizefighter in the Ring
Oil on canvas, circa 1850
Unsigned
Frost & Reed label verso

This compelling mid-nineteenth-century portrait captures a bare-knuckle prizefighter poised within the roped ring, embodying the courage, discipline and physical prowess that made prizefighting one of Britain's most celebrated sporting pursuits during the Georgian and early Victorian periods. Painted around 1850, the work belongs to a distinguished tradition of British sporting portraiture that immortalised the nation's most admired athletes alongside its celebrated racehorses, hunting scenes and military heroes.

Standing confidently in a classic fighting stance, the boxer is depicted wearing the traditional costume of the bare-knuckle era: tightly fitted white drawers secured with a blue sash, black fighting shoes and bare torso, his fists raised in quiet readiness. His calm expression and balanced posture suggest not the heat of combat but the measured confidence of an accomplished professional awaiting the opening exchange. Behind him, the simple rope ring, supported by painted corner posts, establishes the setting, while the softly painted English landscape beyond lends the portrait a surprising elegance and serenity.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, prizefighting occupied a unique place within British sporting culture. Long before the introduction of the Marquess of Queensberry Rules, contests were fought under the London Prize Ring Rules and attracted enormous public interest, drawing spectators from every level of society. Champions such as Tom Cribb, Jem Ward, Ben Caunt and Tom Sayers became national celebrities, their portraits widely commissioned and engraved. Paintings such as this celebrated not merely athletic achievement but qualities of honour, endurance and gentlemanly courage that Victorian audiences greatly admired.

Executed with considerable skill, the artist balances the formal conventions of portraiture with the immediacy of sporting art. The boxer's carefully modelled figure stands in striking contrast to the atmospheric landscape, while the restrained palette and finely observed facial features lend the painting a quiet dignity that elevates it beyond simple sporting illustration. The composition reflects the influence of notable nineteenth-century sporting painters such as John Ferneley, Henry Barraud and the circle of George Sharples, artists who documented Britain's sporting life with remarkable sensitivity and precision.

Adding further interest is the Frost & Reed label preserved on the reverse. Founded in Bristol in 1808, Frost & Reed became one of Britain's most respected fine art dealers and publishers, handling important British sporting paintings and portraits throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their association with the picture provides an additional layer of provenance and reflects the enduring appreciation such works have long enjoyed among collectors.

Rich in historical character and sporting significance, this handsome portrait offers a fascinating glimpse into the golden age of English prizefighting. Combining the refinement of Victorian portraiture with the rom...

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