

Eugène-François-Marie-Joseph Devéria, *Portrait of Laurence Davidson and His Three Sons*

oil on canvas

72 x 58 1/8 inches (183 by 147.5 cm)

signed and dated at center right: 'Eug Deveria/Edinb 1850'

provenance: By descent from the sitter to the firm of Dundas & Wilson, C. S., Edinburgh; sold Sotheby's, London, July 15, 1992, lot no. 51; Private collection, United Kingdom

exhibited: *Annual Exhibition*, Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh, 1851, no.225.

literature: *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, March 1, 1851, p. 2.
The Royal Scottish Academy Exhibitions 1826-1990, vol. I, 1991, p. 407.
Eugène Devéria: 1805-1865, exhib. cat., Musée des Beaux-Arts de Pau, Pau, 2006, pp. 71, 92-93, 95 and ill. p. 80.

note: Eugène-François-Marie-Joseph Devéria was born in Paris on April 22, 1805. Devéria, who had studied with Girodet in the 1820s, first exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1824. When he then showed there next in 1827 presenting his grand history painting of *The Birth of Henri IV* (purchased by the French State and now in the Louvre), he was considered to be one of the leading lights of the Romantic movement. With his brother, the printmaker Achille, they established their family home in Paris as a popular meeting place for the young Romantics including Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Delacroix, Alfred de Musset, and Franz Liszt. Devéria's later historical and religious subjects were not as well received, but he did obtain notable commissions for the decoration of various churches and for rooms at the Louvre, Versailles and the Palais Royal.

Devéria was resident for a time in Avignon where he worked on paintings for the city's cathedral, and after marrying there, he settled in Pau. In 1843 he converted to Protestantism and became very active in promoting his new faith. He was called to Holland In 1849 to paint a portrait of the Dutch queen and later that year traveled to Scotland where he had an uncle living near Edinburgh. He was well received in this Protestant land, especially by the family of the francophile Duke of Hamilton. Devéria was invited, probably by the duke's son, the marquis Douglas, to the family's castle of Brodick on the island of Arran to paint a portrait of the grand duchess Stephanie de Bade, the duke's French mother-in-law (fig. 1).¹ Then spending time at the family's magnificent residence of Hamilton Palace near Glasgow, the painter had a chance to study Scottish portrait painting, and, as he noted in his journal and letters, he especially admired the works by Sir Henry Raeburn, who had died in 1824.² Feeling comfortable in this Protestant milieu, Devéria settled at Edinburgh and in 1850 began showing his works at the annual exhibitions of the Royal Scottish Academy, where he was identified as "an

Edinburgh artist” rather than a French one.³ He remained in Scotland until July 1851, and returned in November for a short visit before going back to France. He again visited England and Scotland from June to August of 1853, and then definitively settled in France, where he spent his last years at Avignon and Pau. However, Devéria continued exhibiting paintings at the Royal Scottish Academy until 1856. His final offering at the Paris Salon was *The Reception of Christopher Columbus by Ferdinand and Isabella* in 1861. Although Scottish newspapers reported that he died in Paris,⁴ Devéria actually died in Pau on February 3, 1865.

Although generally thought of as a painter of history and religious subjects, Devéria from his earliest years had revealed a talent for portraiture. He had painted a number of famous musicians and actors in Paris during the 1830s. Then in 1839 at Avignon, he painted a notable three quarter *Portrait of Comte Henri de Cambis d’Oran*.⁵ After he settled in Pau, Devéria specialized in portraiture, often of elegant ladies (fig. 2),⁶ and he continued this once he was established in Edinburgh at 22 Howe Street. The majority of the works he exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in the early 1850s were portraits. Most of the sitters were not identified, but this most impressive work sent to the exhibition in 1851, the year after it was painted, was listed as “Lawrence Davidson Esq. and Three Sons.” The painting was noted and praised in the local press as “very fine.”⁷

Lawrence Davidson was the youngest son of the Edinburgh solicitor Harry Davidson, and joined his father and brother James in a flourishing legal partnership at 1 North Charles Street. In addition Lawrence became Writer to the Signet in 1825 and was a member of the Royal Company of Archers. In 1830 Thomas Syme joined the law firm and it became known as Davidson and Syme at 3 North Charlotte Street. The firm was extremely successful representing the Bank of Scotland, the Union Canal Company, and many notable Scottish families. Davidson married in 1831 and in 1833 moved to 7 Rutland Square where he lived until his death in 1868. The portrait of him and his sons by Devéria stayed with his law practice, which in 1972 merged with the even larger firm of Dundas and Wilson which sold the painting at auction in 1992.

As Guillaume Ambrois has observed, the Davidson family portrait is one of Devéria’s “most accomplished chefs d’oeuvre.” He goes on to describe it thusly:

‘Masterfully composed, this canvas skillfully plays with the contrast between the vertical pyramidal plain formed by the Davidson family and the background closed off by the gothic ruins half buried under dense vegetation. One notes that the work presents a barely veiled pictorial metaphor of an art suspended between classicism and romanticism. The achievement of this large painting is in being able to impose, despite its careful elaboration, a distinction which remains natural. In effect one does not note any affectation, but on the contrary there is a real nonchalance which is revealed in the exchange of certain looks, the variety of poses, and their integration within the extensive landscape of ruins. In this regard it is possible, that having been painted in Edinburgh, the gothic ruins of the nearby Abbe of Holyrood served as the model. Finally one must emphasize the palette of the artist which is of an incomparable mastery and abetted by a touch which is sometimes precise and sometimes allusive.’⁸

With this portrait Devéria in fact shows how well he had adopted an English manner of portraiture, creating a familial warmth and gracious sensibility not usually found in French examples. He has carefully constructed the work so that the senior Mr. Davidson faces to the left; the two sons at the left seem to look up at him, while the one at the right, in his striking yellow trousers, looks out directly at the viewer. Devéria has expertly captured the details of dress and gesture. Mr. Davidson himself is the proper embodiment of a successful, well dressed barrister. Like many of the sitters in portraits by Raeburn, such as that of Lord Eldin (fig. 3),⁹ he is masterfully depicted holding his glasses extended in one hand. In the other, appropriately for the outdoor setting, he holds his hat and cane. The composition is unified not only by the white of the starched shirts but also by the play of hands across its breadth. Certainly the boys must have chosen their distinctive attributes to convey their chief interests – the one son at the left holds a fishing rod and the other at the right has a cricket bat and fish basket. Precedents for showing children in English portraiture with cricket or other sporting equipment had existed for some time, most notably in Joseph Wright's *The Wood Children* of 1789 (fig. 4).¹⁰

The cosmopolitan nature of the figures is nicely balanced by the slight bit of wild nature and abandoned ruins in the background, perhaps to suggest that this family will flourish for generations in contrast to the crumbling past. Again there was precedent for this type of setting to be found in the works of Henry Raeburn, the Scottish painter so admired by Devéria. His portrait of the quintessential Scotsman, Sir Walter Scott (fig. 5), for example places the seated author in front of some monumental stone ruins.¹¹

In the same year that he exhibited this portrait of the Davidson family in Edinburgh, Devéria also did his own pastel *Self Portrait* (fig. 6)¹² presenting himself as the highly individual and eccentric artist he had become.

¹ The watercolor version of this portrait is still at Brodick Castle. See Pau, 2005, p. 68, fig. 2.

² Ibid, pp. 68-69 and 90.

³ See "Fine Arts," *Glasgow Herald*, November 29, 1852.

⁴ *The Dundee Courier and Argus*, February 10, 1865.

⁵ Pau, 2005, p. 73. The painting is now in the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

⁶ Ibid., p. 143, cat. No. 158.

⁷ Quoted in Pau, 2005, p.71.

⁸ Ibid., p. 93.

⁹ See the exhib. cat *Raeburn: The Art of Sir Henry Raeburn*, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, 1997, no. 54.

¹⁰ At the Derby Museum and Art Gallery. See the exhib. cat. *Pictures of Innocence: Portraits of Children from Hogarth to Lawrence*, The Holburne Museum of Art, Bath, 2005, no. 26. Raeburn too had, as in his *The Elphinston Children*, shown children with diverse objects of play. See Edinburgh, 1994, no. 51.

¹¹ See Edinburgh, 1997, no. 38.

¹² Pau, 2005, pp. 94-95. Sold at the Palais Galliera, Paris, June 4, 1973, no. 7; and acquired by the Minneapolis Art Institute, 76.70.