

LIFE, LEGEND, LANDSCAPE
VICTORIAN DRAWINGS AND WATERCOLOURS
17 February to 15 May 2011

Lost from view for many years and recently presented to The Courtauld Gallery, *The Old Farm Garden* (fig. 1) by Frederick Walker (1840-1875), sets the scene for a wide-ranging exploration of Victorian drawings and watercolours. The exhibition will be the first devoted to this area of The Courtauld Gallery's collection and reflects the growing appreciation for Victorian draughtsmanship. The show includes numerous previously unseen works and ranges from informal preparatory drawings for paintings, sculptures and stained glass to highly finished exhibition watercolours. It includes life studies, landscapes, genre scenes and subjects from literature and legend. The exhibition features works by most of the major artists of the age, from the redoubtable Royal Academicians of the early years of Victoria's reign, such as J.M.W. Turner, William Etty and Edwin Landseer, to Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and works of the 1890s by Whistler and Aubrey Beardsley.

Frederick Walker began his career as an illustrator but his growing success as an ambitious painter in oils and watercolours was cut short by his early death, aged 35. Although he is now little-known outside a small circle of specialists, his work enjoyed a significant posthumous reputation, with artists as diverse as Vincent van Gogh and John Ruskin amongst his fervent admirers. *The Old Farm Garden* of 1871 shows a woman, modelled by the artist's sister Mary, knitting out of doors, with a cat about to spring on her ball of wool. Tulips, flowering shrubs and beehives adorn the garden. The influential critic John Ruskin described the flowers in this work as 'worth all the Dutch flower pieces in the world'. The exhibition also includes an earlier watercolour by Walker depicting boys playing piggyback in a village street, and it offers a rare opportunity to reconsider this outstanding artist.

William Etty's large watercolour of a female nude contrasted with a cast of the Venus de' Medici opens the exhibition's first section on the figure (fig. 2). As well as serving as an artistic exercise, Etty's image explores the real and the ideal in female beauty. This theme is raised in a different context by Dante Gabriel Rossetti's imposing Pre-Raphaelite portrait study for his celebrated painting *Venus Verticordia* (fig. 3). Rossetti is said to have used a cook whom he had encountered on the street as the model for this sensuous idealised image of 'Venus who turns hearts'. A more intimate aspect of female portraiture is developed in the exhibition by Rossetti's small pencil sketch of Elizabeth Siddal, his wife and muse, seated at her easel; Whistler's portrait of the young Elinor Leyland, daughter of one of his major patrons; and George Frederic Watt's sensitive depiction of Emily Tennyson, wife of the great poet.

The exhibition features a splendid selection of landscapes, produced both abroad and at home. They include John Frederick Lewis's watercolour of a Cairo silk bazaar, J.M.W. Turner's late Swiss view of Brunnen on Lake Lucerne (fig. 4) and *The Quarries of Syracuse* (Sicily) – Edward Lear's final design for one of the few oil paintings he exhibited at the Royal Academy. Lewis's portrait of a man in North African dress, possibly the artist himself, underscores Victorian taste for travel and the exotic. Also in this vein is David Wilkie's *Madame Giuseppina*, a depiction of a celebrated Greek beauty who was the landlady of an inn in Istanbul where Wilkie stayed in 1840 on his last trip abroad. By contrast, Samuel Palmer's naturalistic watercolour of the Surrey countryside near Dorking responds to the beauty of the English landscape. Views by Philip Wilson Steer and Whistler show the development of a more informal and Impressionistic approach to landscape painting around 1890.

The exhibition includes a diverse group of drawings of animals and natural history. An outstanding example is William Henry Hunt's minutely rendered *Chaffinch Nest and May Blossom* (fig. 5) which exemplifies the critic John Ruskin's ideal of 'truth to nature'. Despite its air of uncontrived simplicity, this superbly detailed arrangement with branches of flowering hawthorn was the result of painstaking work in the studio. Edwin Landseer's coloured sketch of a lion's head has a very different character and was produced in preparation for the monumental sculpted lions at the base of Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square (fig. 6). This drawing may have originated on one of Landseer's regular sketching trips to study the lions in London's Zoological Gardens.

Richard Doyle's strange *Moonlit Landscape with an Apparition* typifies the fantasy subjects so enjoyed by the Victorians. The world of medieval legend and literature exerted an even stronger pull on the Victorian imagination. Daniel Maclise's superb pen and ink drawing depicts a scene from Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (fig. 7), a cycle of poems set in the time of King Arthur. It depicts Enid kissing her husband Geraint as they prepare to ride away from the scene of the Welsh knight's victory over a wicked adversary.

Fuelled by the public demand for illustrated books and new popular magazines, many of the major Victorian artists, particularly the Pre-Raphaelite painters, tried their hand at illustration. John Everett Millais's jewel-like *The Parting of Ulysses* depicts a scene from Homer's *Odyssey* (fig. 8) and shows the sorceress Circe waving farewell to the Greek hero Ulysses. This is a copy by Millais of his own wood-engraved illustration from 1862 and appears to have been made in order to meet the art market's demand for fine small-scale watercolours. *Servant Carrying Slippers* (fig. 9) is one of two small works in the exhibition drawn by the young Aubrey Beardsley in the early 1890s as illustrations for *Bons Mots*, a series of pocket-size books of the sayings of English wits. Beardsley wrote of these delightful and irreverent inventions: 'The subjects were quite mad and a little indecent...a new world of my own creation.' The exhibition concludes with Charles Conder's *Les Incroyables* (The Incredibles). Painted on silk, this fine example of the Aesthetic style of the 1890s shows a ballroom with figures dressed in the decadent costume of Paris's gilded youth in the years after the French Revolution. Conder had been part of the painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's circle in Paris and this highly accomplished and previously unexhibited work typifies an exhibition which is full of surprises and unexpected pleasures.

Life, Legend, Landscape is the first exhibition to be organised as part of The Courtauld's IMAF Centre for the Study and Conservation of Drawings. The Centre was established in 2010 to promote research and conservation of The Courtauld's collection of over 7,000 drawings and watercolours. The Centre also supports partnerships and research nationally and internationally. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition has been developed by The Courtauld Gallery in collaboration with the University of Bristol. In addition to detailed entries on all the exhibited works, it includes short essays by PhD students and faculty from both institutions. The publication aims to support and encourage new scholarship in this rapidly developing field of art historical study.

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/Fact Sheet

FACT SHEET

- Exhibition:** *Life, Legend, Landscape: Victorian Drawings and Watercolours*
- Dates:** 17 February to 15 May 2011
- Supported by:** The International Music and Art Foundation
Additional support from The Finnis Scott Foundation
- Location:** The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2526, Fax. +44 (0)20 7848 2589. www.courtauld.ac.uk
- Opening hours:** Daily 10 am to 6 pm, last admission 5.30 pm
- Lates:** Until 9 pm on Thursday 10 March and Friday 13 May. The Lates events will include the exhibition and permanent collection, live music and gallery talks, drawing workshops and refreshments in The Courtauld Gallery Café. Supported by the Art Fund. Normal admission fees apply.
- Admission:** Includes admission to the permanent collection:
Adult: £6.00, concessions: £4.50. Free admission: Mondays 10 am to 2 pm, except public holidays, at all times for under 18s, full-time UK students and unwaged. On-line booking www.courtauld.ac.uk/tickets
- Catalogue:** The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue edited by Joanna Selborne and published by Paul Holberton in association with The Courtauld Gallery, 136 pages, 80 colour illustrations, 260 x 216 mm, paperback, ISBN 978 1 907372 20 9, price £20.
- Related Display:** An associated display in room 12 of The Courtauld Gallery celebrates the work of a group of Victorian illustrators who flourished in the 1880s. The display is organised around a series of beautiful watercolours executed by George Halkett as illustrations for the fairytale of *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. These watercolours will be shown alongside preparatory drawings for the series recently presented to the Gallery by the Art Fund. Other works featured in the display include Charles Keene's humorous caricature of a disappointed collector confronted by a small watercolour in an enormous white mount, and George du Maurier's delightful illustration for *Punch* entitled *The Child of the Period*. Here a precocious young girl is asked by her grandmother, 'Hark Dorothy, do you hear the Puff Puff?', to which Dorothy replies, 'The Locomotive, I suppose you mean, grandmamma'.
- Gallery Talks:** There will be a programme of talks by curators and Courtauld students. All talks are free with admission.
- Access:** The Gallery is wheelchair accessible with a lift to all floors.
- Shop:** The Courtauld Gallery Shop is open daily during Gallery hours offering catalogues, art books and prints, as well as gifts such as ceramics, textiles and jewellery, inspired by the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions. Online shop: www.courtauldshop.com
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2579, info@courtauldshop.com
- Café:** The Courtauld Gallery Café is open daily from 10 am to 5.30 pm, serving a selection of drinks, snacks and freshly prepared meals.
- How to get there:** The Courtauld Gallery is situated in the North Building of Somerset House, which has entrances from the Strand and the Victoria Embankment. Mainline trains to Charing Cross, Waterloo or Blackfriars; underground stations Temple (District and Circle lines), Covent Garden (Piccadilly line) and Charing Cross (Northern, Bakerloo and Jubilee lines); buses 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 23, 77a, 91 and 176 to Strand.