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VICTORIAN VISIONS

John William Waterhouse *Mariamne*, 1887, John Schaeffer Collection
Photo Dallan Wright © Eprep/FOV Editions

1.

RICHARD REDGRAVE
THE SEMPSTRESS 1846

Richard Redgrave's painting *The sempstress* shows a poor young woman sitting in a garret stitching men's shirts. It's miserably low-paid work and to make ends meet she has to work into the early hours of the morning. So as you can tell by the clock – the time is now 2.30 am. Through the window the sky is streaked with moonlight. And the lighted window of a neighbouring house suggests that the same scene is repeated on the other side of the street.

The sempstress' eyes are swollen and inflamed with all that close work she is having to do by the inadequate light of a candle. On the table you can find the instruments of her trade: her work basket, her needle case, her ball of thread. On the plate in front is what seems to be a knife with a morsel of food which, with a cup (or soup bowl) behind the basket, suggests she's been taking her meal while on the job.

On the mantelpiece to the right you can see medicine bottles. One of these contains a potion called simply 'The Mixture' supplied, as the label tells us, by Middlesex Hospital. The life of the sempstress is not a healthy one.

The room is not that of a destitute person, but its furnishings are minimal: a small hard bed, a table and chair, and a trunk on which stand a pitcher and broken basin. A few pots and pans arranged on the shelf above and on the window-sill, the sad relic of a once-cheerful plant.

This is a highly important painting because it's one of the very first works in which art is used as a medium of campaigning social commentary on behalf of the poor. The industrial revolution in Britain brought with it a goodly share of social problems and as the century progressed, these would frequently furnish painters with subject matter. But in the 1840s, when Redgrave painted this picture, the idea of an artist addressing himself to social questions was something completely new.

And it seems there was a personal dimension for the artist because Richard Redgrave didn't come from a rich family and his sister had been forced to leave home and find employment as a governess. And he became ill while she was in service – probably with typhoid, and so when she was finally reunited with her family it was only to be nursed to her death. The very first of Redgrave's social realist works was in fact a picture titled *The Poor Teacher* and it showed a lonely teacher, musing sadly over a letter, presumably received from her distant family.

That picture was painted in 1843 and later in the same year there appeared, in a relatively new journal called *Punch*, in the Christmas issue, a poem which suddenly struck a nerve in the social conscience of the age. It was by an author called Thomas Hood and it was called *The Song of the Shirt*.

There are eleven stanzas in the poem and it starts like this:

With fingers weary and worn
With eyelids heavy and red
A Woman sat, in unwomanly rags
Plying her needle and thread –
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the "Song of the Shirt"

1. *(CONTINUED)*

RICHARD REDGRAVE
THE SEMPSTRESS 1846

And this is the text which inspired Redgrave's picture and when he exhibited his first version of *The sempstress* at the Royal Academy in 1844 (just a few months after the poem appeared) he included in the catalogue a quotation which comes from the fourth stanza:

O! Men with Sisters dear!
O! Men, with Mothers and Wives!
It's not linen you're wearing out
But human creatures' lives

and then the refrain

Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger and dirt,
Sewing at once with a double thread,
A shroud as well as a shirt

The sempstress is sewing both a shirt and her own shroud, meaning of course that she is working herself into an early grave.

It's almost impossible nowadays to understand the impact which this poem had. Thackeray (the novelist and critic) described it as the 'most startling lyric in our language'. It was set to music, it was dramatized on stage, it was the subject of sermons, it was even printed, enterprisingly, on handkerchiefs. The reader would thus be automatically be prepared for the inevitable fit of sobbing.

But the issue was far from being a frivolous one. Hood was inspired to write the *Song of the Shirt* by a recent court case in which a sempstress similar to the one in Redgrave's painting had been accused of theft. It emerged from the hearing that she was working a 14-hour day for a maximum wage of 7 shillings a week, on which she had to support herself and two children.

You should remember that many sempstresses went blind and many if not most were therefore on their way to becoming blind. And the maximum wage was offered for faultless work. But employers almost invariably found a stitch or two out of place and the wages were docked accordingly.

A Parliamentary Commission reported in 1843 on this horrifying situation and at the same time hard-hitting articles started appearing in the press. In particular a series of articles appeared in a journal called the *Pictorial World* in 1843 with the title *Slaves of the needle*. It was particularly stinging to suggest that British citizens were being subjected to a form of slavery, as this was a period when feelings still ran high over the iniquities of the slave trade and its recent abolition.

It was at just this time also that a German intellectual living in England by the name of Friedrich Engels showed a study he had written on the English working classes to a friend of his then living in Paris …a man called Karl Marx.

Now, though Redgrave did not advocate Revolution, he was nevertheless doing something quite revolutionary, and that was to send to the hallowed halls of the Royal Academy a painting about human misery; a painting with a trenchant humanitarian message.

So how to embark on this entirely new category of subject matter? Redgrave did not do what, to us, might seem the obvious thing. There is no evidence that he actually went out into the London slums, to search out the real sweatshops in which the real slaves of the needle actually worked, in horribly cramped conditions.

1. *(CONTINUED)*

RICHARD REDGRAVE
THE SEMPSTRESS 1846

Redgrave in fact created an image which is not at all realistic. His picture is based not on real life, but on artistic traditions already in place. The interior scene of the solitary female worker is borrowed from 17th-century Dutch art and the moist-eyed heavenward gaze was a motif familiar from any number of Baroque images of swooning saints. The woman conjured by Redgrave from Hood's poem was a combination of these.

Originality is all very well, but Redgrave was wise enough to realise that his daring new subject matter would not be acceptable unless it appeared in a format which was in some way comfortingly familiar and which suggested respectability. He succeeded brilliantly. The image was taken up widely and became something of an emblem, not just of the unhappy sempstress's lot, but in general of the brutality of capitalist exploitation.

It stands at the founthead of a whole tradition of social realist painting in Victorian England.

2.

DANIEL MACLISE
SCENE – LAWN BEFORE THE DUKE'S PALACE: ORLANDO ABOUT TO ENGAGE WITH CHARLES, THE DUKE'S WRESTLER

1854, BACKGROUND REPAINTED c1855–56

Now I'm looking at a painting by Daniel Maclise. It's a Shakespearean scene. It was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1854, and the appropriately theatrical title is *Scene – lawn before the Duke's palace: Orlando about to engage with Charles, the Duke's wrestler*

There are two stories to this picture, one which you can see, and one which you probably won't be able to see – until I tell you what to look for.

The story you can see is a scene from Shakespeare's play *As you like it*.

In the centre you've got Duke Frederick, seated. As the title tells us, on the lawn in front of his palace. Just to the right of him are two girls. These are Rosalind, the Duke's niece, and his daughter, Celia.

The other most important figure is the youth on the right. This is a young gentleman by the name of Orlando, with behind him his old servant Adam.

Orlando has a wicked brother, Oliver, the man in a red hat on the left, also with his servant Dennis. This scheming brother Oliver has fixed things so that Orlando will be unable to resist challenging the Duke's wrestler to a fight.

Orlando is a slender young thing and it seems obvious to everyone that he's about to take a terrible beating. Rosalind and Celia try to dissuade him from fighting. But Orlando asks them to forgive him because he intends to ignore their pleas and go right ahead and fight the wrestler. And, of course, he goes on to win the contest.

At the moment represented in Maclise's painting Rosalind is gazing at Orlando and Orlando is gazing at Rosalind and the two are falling in love. Their love affair is the central theme of the rest of the play.

The court jester, Touchstone, is the only one who notices what is happening and he looks up at Rosalind and makes a knowing gesture with his thumb.

So there is the story you can easily read if you know who's who. This is one of the great early-Victorian Shakesperean paintings, by an artist who knew just how to do it. The scene is not represented as if it was taking place in real life, and it isn't represented as if it was being acted on stage. It's somewhere in between.

Maclise was the darling of the Royal Academy in the 1830s, 40s and 50s. It you went to one of the Royal Academy exhibitions and saw a crowd in front of a picture, that picture it was said, was sure to be by Maclise. That comment was made by Thackeray (the novelist and critic) and, as he went on to say 'no one could go away without a sort of wonder at the prodigious talent of this gentleman'.

The one critic who could never find a good word for Maclise was Ruskin. And it's not difficult to see why. Maclise paints with a clarity which reminds one in some respects of the pre-Raphaelites. But he doesn't adhere to their principle – and Ruskin's – of absolute truth to nature. So you'll find Maclise painting the leaves on a tree leaf by leaf, but the leaves look too leaf-like to be real. It's as if every leaf is being played by some notable leaf-actor who is playing the part for all its worth.

2. *(CONTINUED)*

DANIEL MACLISE
SCENE – LAWN BEFORE THE DUKE'S PALACE: ORLANDO ABOUT TO ENGAGE WITH CHARLES, THE DUKE'S WRESTLER

1854, BACKGROUND REPAINTED c1855–56

The whole of Maclise's approach to painting has this larger than life quality, which most people liked, but some didn't.

Now there is another story in this picture which I only discovered when I started working through the press reviews. And I found one or two which seemed to make no sense. Here's what we find for example in a copy of the *Spectator* for 25th of May 1855:

> *on the whole a better than average Maclise... blahblahblah ... Orlando [is] a figure of remarkable completeness and manly grace ... blahblahblah ... and then this the brand new Elizabethan mansion at the back is an eyesore and a solecism: indeed we have heard that it has been copied, at the request of the purchaser of the picture, from his own fresh-stuccoed country hall, conservatories and all.*

Well, to cut a long story short, it transpires that when the picture was first exhibited it did have a country house in the background. An illustration of the painting in the *Illustrated London News* published at the time shows it. And so what we're looking at is a picture in which the background has been repainted.

The painting in fact belonged to a one of the great railway contractors of the period, a man by the name of Edward Ladd Betts. And what we find is that the house in the background was indeed Betts's country house Preston Hall near Maidenhead in Kent (which still survives, though now a hospital). And with a gusto which you can only admire Betts had acquired an Elizabethan country house (a house which Shakespeare might have visited), had demolished it, and replaced it with a Victorian country house ... in Elizabethan style.

The idea of inserting this house into the background of a scene from Shakespeare seems to have struck everyone as just simply too ridiculous and so Betts almost immediately had the house painted out.

So, have another look at the painting. In the tree just above and slightly to the right of the head of the wrestler you can see a domed shape which you can pick out easily if you know it's there. That is the conservatory of Preston Hall.

And in the trees to the right of the heads of Rosalind and Celia you can pick out some roofs and a chimney. Actually that's as plain as day. The main part of the building is behind the landscape in the middle, but here the over-painting is thicker and denser and so you need to look a little harder.

But with good eyes and a bit of patience you can pick it out a great deal of it.

3.

EDWARD MATTHEW WARD
THE LAST PARTING OF MARIE ANTOINETTE AND HER SON
1856

Now I'd like to turn to a painting by Edward Matthew Ward. It represents the last parting of Marie Antoinette and her son.

This picture was a sensational success at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1856. It was singled out for lengthy comment by most of the journals. One critic claimed never to have seen a more deeply moving picture.

We don't always find it so easy nowadays to enter into the spirit of Victorian pictures like this which offer recreations of famous historical events. Of course, for the Victorian audience they had the same fascination as the carefully researched costume-drama would have for us now in the cinema.

But in the 19th century there was a tendency to envisage history not so much through the eye of a movie camera as we do now, but as if it was being acted on stage. This tends to make the pictures look to us more contrived than we're used to. But actually they're just using the convention of their time. Ward was no less concerned than would be a present-day movie director to present his scene convincingly. And he did his research.

So, as we know, he consulted a book by a French historian, Alcide de Beauchesne, which had just appeared in English translation in 1853 under the title: *Louis XVII: his life – his suffering – his death*. The books tells the tragic story of the boy, Marie-Antoinette's son, who would have been Louis XVII, but who disappeared in suspicious circumstances just two years after the events represented in Ward's painting.

During the French Revolution the Queen and the rest of the Royal family were imprisoned in the tower of the Temple in Paris. And it's in this dungeon-like room that we see them in the painting. The Queen is in black because in her husband, Louis XVI has been guillotined six months earlier. And we see her here on the worst day of her life so far, the day when her son was taken from her. The date is the 3rd of July, 1793.

It was late evening and at first the child was asleep. His bed is in the background and has a curtain which (as Beauchsne tells us) was ingeniously improvised by his mother, so the candlelight wouldn't disturb him. The Queen is accompanied by her sister-in-law Madame Elisabeth and her daughter Marie-Thérèse. She's been mending clothes (or making her best effort as a novice sempstress to mend clothes), while Marie-Thérèse read out articles from a big historical dictionary

> *Suddenly* (in Beauchesne's words) *the tread of many feet sounded on the staircase; the locks and bolts were moved, the door opened, and six municipals made their way into the room. 'We are come', said one of them, brutally, 'to acquaint you with an order from the committee ...'*

3. *(CONTINUED)*

EDWARD MATTHEW WARD
THE LAST PARTING OF MARIE ANTOINETTE AND HER SON
1856

So the 8year old uncrowned King, it seemed, was to be separated from his family. At first the women were utterly distraught and tried to prevent the officials getting to the bed. But force was used, and this explains the upturned chair in the foreground and eventually they capitulated. Then they dressed the child in clothes damp with tears, and so we come to the moment chosen by Ward:

> (Again in Beauchesne's words) *At length the Queen, concentrating all her remaining strength in her heart's core, sat down upon a chair, drew her son before her, laid her two hands on his little shoulders and calm, motionless, and composed in her distress, without shedding a tear, or heaving a sigh, said to him in a sad and solemn tone: 'My child, we are about to part. Remember your duty when I am no longer present to remind you of it. Never forget the good God who tries your faith, nor your mother who loves you. Be good, patient and straightforward and Your Father will bless you from Heaven above!' Saying these words, she kissed her son on the forehead, and gave him in charge to his jailers.*

Ward had first exhibited a painting of the French royal family imprisoned in the Temple in 1851. And of course this was only three years after a great wave of revolutions had swept Europe in 1848. And yet in spite of severe economic depression in the 1840s which brought with it great social unrest, England had somehow managed to escape a Revolution. The topic was obviously still a sensitive one, though, not least with the young Queen Victoria crowned in 1837 at the age of 18.

It can hardly have escaped the Queen's notice that Marie-Antoinette's fate was going to become even more gruesome. Not more than a month after the episode represented in Ward's painting she was transferred to the dungeons of the Conciergerie. On 14 October 1793 she was subjected to a mockery of a trial in which her own son testified, as he'd been coached to do, that she had sexually abused him. Two days later she was guillotined.

The critics were deeply impressed by Ward's painting. They liked particularly the group on the left: the 6 men who seemed to represent the full cross-section of revolutionary officialdom – variously officious, brutish, and in one case more humane.

There wasn't much negative criticism, but one point was made which amused me. This was that the Queen's spaniel would not have behaved in such a frivolous manner in the circumstances. He ought to have been shown either consoling his mistress or growling at the men!

But all this shows us is that the art critic of the *Examiner* knew nothing about the difference in moral fibre between French and English dogs!

4.

JAMES COLLINSON
FOR SALE c1857
TO LET c1857

Now I want to look at two small oval pictures which hang in the exhibition as a pair, not next to one another by symmetrically balancing one another. And they're both by an artist called James Collinson: on the left is *For sale*, on the right *To let.*

These paintings were among the most successful which Collinson ever painted and he repeated them a number of times. So there are about five known versions of *For sale* and three of *To let.* What we have here is a version of To let which has become separated from its original pair, and a smaller version of *For sale* which, since it is livelier in handling, is sometimes said to be a study for one of the larger versions.

James Collinson was one of the original founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The main brothers, of course, were Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais. Those were the three young men who in the period 1848–52 made a radical break with prevalent habits in British painting by applying themselves to serious subject matter and painting with a new technique which permitted them to capture the vibrancy of nature in an incredibly intense and convincing way.

Though a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Collinson was never a fully-fledged pre-Raphaelite painter. He often painted, like Hunt and Millais, in a high key and with an intense focus on detail, but he didn't attempt such high-minded subjects as the other Pre-Raphaelite Brothers. He was content to paint genre subjects of a more traditional kind, but giving these a new animation through a technique which is in some ways pre-Raphaelite.

For sale is the more striking of the two paintings in this respect. By setting his figure in the context of a church bazaar, Collinson sets himself the task of observing minutely the great variety of objects which have been offered for sale. So as you explore the painting, you find

- a doll in 18th–century dress
- a couple of bottles perhaps of perfume
- then a couple of prints, one a portrait , another a religious subject

And all these are all standing on top of a wooden box with a key in its lock.

And then as your eye moves to the right hand side you find

- more bottles
- possibly a pin-cushion
- a gaily patterned ball,
- a parasol,
- a wax plant under a glass dome
- a bonnet
- a pair of braces
- a feather duster
- and finally a wooden box labelled BRICKS which is presumably a child's toy.

4. *(CONTINUED)*

JAMES COLLINSON
FOR SALE c1857
TO LET c1857

Besides all these objects, the lady herself is holding a ring in one hand and a purse in the other. While next to her is a notice announcing the Bazaar which we thus learn is taking place in St Bride's church.

There is rather less detail to explore in the companion piece *To let*. There we have a lady dressed in black lifting the blind at a window. On the window sill are four plants in pots: a camellia, an arum lily, a hydrangea and a fuchsia. Everything, is again painted with close attention to detail, including a notice in the window which only appears in reverse, but which evidently reads: FURNISHED APARTMENT. So there are rooms to let and this is the point of the title of the painting

Nobody knows for sure whether these pictures have some sort of an underlying message to them. Should we just treat them simply as objective records of incidents in contemporary life with nothing more to it than that?

My opinion is that both pictures are intended to be suggestive in a humorous and mildly salacious way. In one we have a lady holding a ring in one hand and a purse in the other standing next to a notice which features the words Bride's and Bazaar. I think there is a bit of joke here at the lady's expense suggesting that she is on the marriage market and looking for a partner who can ensure that that purse will always be well replenished.

And *To let*? Well this is less immediately evident, but I think this picture is also meant to have a bit of a joke to it at the lady's expense. Only young girls wore their hair in ringlets at this date, and so this marks out our lady as eager to please in a rather ridiculous way. And it's also beyond imagining that any well bred lady would stare at you in this very confronting way and this really gives the impression of her being pretty vulgar. So, in a way it comes as no surprise to find that the engraving of this picture had a title which made the underlying joke a bit more evident: the title was *To le*t – a fine prospect, sir! Of course this is a double entendre because 'a fine prospect, Sir' could equally well be what the landlady is saying about her apartment as what the gentleman client is thinking about the landlady.

5.

JAMES ARCHER
THE PARTING OF BURNS AND HIGHLAND MARY
1858

The parting of *Burns and Highland Mary* by James Archer is the work of a Scottish artist and it treats a quintessentially Scottish subject. Born in 1759, almost exactly 100 years before this picture was painted, Robert Burns is both Scotland's greatest poet and an icon of Scottishness. In 2009 he was voted the greatest Scot of all time.

And if the Burns cult flourishes today, it was if anything even stronger in the mid 19th century. Images of the poet proliferated, especially as it happens in Australia and New Zealand. And so, even in approaching the Art Gallery assuming that you came along Art Gallery Road you will have passed a statue of Robbie Burns. And if you'd been a visitor to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the 19th century you would also have encountered, inside the gallery, a statue in marble of Highland Mary.

James Archer's painting shows an episode of Burns's life which took place in 1786 when he was 27-years-old, and this was a very complicated moment in his life. The family farm was in severe financial trouble. And Burns was being pursued in the courts by the father of a girl called Jean Armour whom, to the absolute horror of her family, he'd managed to get pregnant.

In the end Burns married Jean Armour, but at this time he seems to have given up hope of ever doing so and he let his eye wander, and it wasn't very long before his eye focussed on a beautiful young dairymaid working on a neighbouring estate, a girl by the name of Margaret Campbell, though in Burns's poetry she's generally called Highland Mary.

It seems that Highland Mary was a great beauty. Descriptions of her written by those who had some memory of her describe a girl with a slender graceful figure, blue eyes, a wealth of pale reddish hair, and a pale complexion, going about her business in her bare feet.

Archer can have had no visual record of Highland Mary's appearance, but it seems he knew the salient details, and in any case what he paints is really the idea of Highland Mary which as time went on, became more and more idealized. By the mid 19th century Highland Mary had acquired a status equivalent to sainthood in the Burns cult. She was known as a pure and innocent creature, the 'white rose', it was said, 'in the midst of the poet's passion flowers'.

5. *(CONTINUED)*

JAMES ARCHER
THE PARTING OF BURNS AND HIGHLAND MARY
1858

Besides one or two references in his poetry, the one substantial statement made by Burns himself about his relationship with Highland Mary is a manuscript note which reads as follows, and I will spare you an Englishman's attempt to imitate a Scots accent:

> *'My Highland lassie (by this he means Highland Mary) was as warm-hearted, and charming a young creature as ever blest a man with generous love. – After a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment, we met by appointment, on the second Sunday of May, in a sequestered spot by the banks of the Ayr, where we spent the day in taking a farewell, before she should embark for the Western Highlands to arrange matters among her friends for our projected change of life.*

This is the episode represented in Archer's painting, set as it is, among Spring-time pasturelands on the banks of the River Ayr. It appears that Burns was planning at this time to emigrate to Jamaica. And he wrote a song: *'Will ye go to the Indies my Mary?'* which seems irresistibly to imply that he intended to take Mary with him and to make her his wife. After parting on the banks of the Ayr Highland Mary was to return to her family and friends to make preparations to join him on the voyage.

The remainder of the story is tragic. Highland Mary very soon afterwards contracted typhoid and died. Burns was eventually permitted to marry Jean Armour. But his wife noted on occasion that he would become morose and seek solitude. And it was doubtless on one of these occasions that he wrote his poem *To Mary in heaven*, looking back again to the episode represented in Archer's painting:

> *That sacred hour can I forget,*
> *Can I forget the hallow'd grove,*
> *Where, by the winding Ayr, we met,*
> *To live one day of parting love!*
> *Eternity will not efface*
> *Those records dear of transports past,*
> *Thy image at our last embrace,*
> *Ah! little thought we 'twas our last!*

6.

HOLMAN HUNT
IL DOLCE FAR NIENTE

1859[?], 1860[?], 1865–66, retouched by the artist 1874–75

I am looking now at a painting by William Holman Hunt. The title is *Il dolce far niente*. It's an Italian expression which I think we could translate as 'the pleasure of indolence'. Literally it means 'Sweet do nothing', but in English we'd have to say 'the sweetness of doing nothing'.

In an era which idolised work, work was virtually a religion in Victorian England, it has been caculated that 'work' was the commonest word in the Victorian language after God – it takes one aback to find a painting which seems to be a celebration of lazing around. Nor is it what we expect from William Holman Hunt.

Hunt was one of the three founder members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, together with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais. He was the only one of the three who remained faithful to pre-Raphaelite principles throughout his life. As so he is really the most thoroughly pre-Raphaelite painter of them all.

The main founding principles of the pre-Raphaelites were to treat serious subjects and do it with an uncompromising truth to nature. ('The whole truth and nothing but the truth' as Dante's brother William Michael Rossetti put it.) Hunt was the most extreme and the most consistent in combining these principles and he produced work which was almost shocking in its naturalistic intensity, while being high-minded in its moral purpose.

But *Il dolce far niente* is different. We know this because Hunt tells us so in his own memoirs. 'I was glad' he says 'of the opportunity of exercising myself in work which had not any didactic purpose'. If Hunt had not said this, undoubtedly we would now be puzzling over all sorts of elaborate moralising interpretations put on the picture by later art historians. But he did say it, and so there really can be no reasonable doubt – he was applying himself for once to a painting which had no didactic purpose, nor really any subject at all.

In this, Hunt's picture is part of a tendency which affects several artists at just around this date. And so we find images of women who exist in paintings on their own terms, neither quite as portraits, nor as part of any historical or literary narrative. At the turn of the 1860s we find this tendency in Rossetti and Leighton, and as the decade progresses it comes up again in artists such as Watts, Whistler and Albert Moore. It's really the birth of what comes to be called the aesthetic movement and ultimately of that stylistic trend of the early 20th century called modernism.

Hunt may have been inspired to embark on this venture by Rossetti who produced his first work in this new mode in 1859. Or he may have been influenced by Leighton exhibited at the Royal Academy in the same year. But this was only one side to the matter since Hunt was undoubtedly also inspired by his infatuation with the model who sat for the painting, Annie Miller.

6. *(CONTINUED)*

HOLMAN HUNT
IL DOLCE FAR NIENTE

1859[?], 1860[?], 1865–66, retouched by the artist 1874–75

Hunt was going through a stormy relationship with Annie Miller whom he had discovered in a Chelsea slum and whom he had made it his business to educate and gentrify. At the back of his mind was the idea of marrying Annie Miller, but it seems he could never quite make his mind up to do it. Meanwhile Annie Miller had her own ideas of where her newly acquired education could lead her and the relationship with Hunt came to an end, probably sometime towards the end of 1859.

Il dolce far niente was originally begun with Annie Miller as model in 1859, but work was broken off and not finished until later. When Hunt returned to the picture, which was not until 1865, Annie Miller was long gone and he used as his new model his new fiancée Fanny Waugh. The picture must have had a very odd look to it from Hunt's point of view as the hair was painted from his former lover, Annie Miller, while the model for the face was his fiancée.

There is a strong tendency in pre-Raphaelite art for the lives of the artists, and of their models, to become enmeshed with the subject matter of their pictures. But we should not get too obsessed with this notion of a double-likeness – or rather of a sort of combined photofit likeness. A close comparison makes it clear that Hunt adapted Fanny's face, making it look more masculine, stronger in the brow and squarer around the jaw. He was not painting her portrait but creating his own visionary creature using her face as his starting point.

So that begs a question. What sort of image was he trying to create? It's a woman of very strong features, highly sensuous but not voluptuous. She's sitting on a chair of an exotic pattern, a chair which belonged to Hunt in fact and which had been made on his instruction in imitation of Egyptian furniture in the British Museum.

The woman wears voluminous and elaborate costume which is reminiscent of Renaissance portraiture. But, we're told in fact that it's contemporary Italian dress from the area around Rome. But that doesn't necessarily mean that Hunt wanted it to look like contemporary dress – he may have selected a piece of Italian costume which to him suggested an earlier period. Whatever the intended time frame, with the golden shawl and its blue embroidery, with the red azalea, the necklace of amethyst and the garnet earrings he produced a vision which is highly exotic, and far removed from the drawing rooms of Victorian London.

And yet, paradoxically, the whole image is brought back to home so to speak by the image in the convex circular mirror in the background. There we have the room in which the woman is seated with its fireplace and cheerful fire (the light of which is reflected in her jewellery), paintings on the wall, the window admitting natural light on one side and the richly coloured carpet.

And then also reflected in the mirror is the reverse side of a cabinet which stands in the background with its door suggestively ajar and a key in its lock. On top of this a small sculptural group under a glass dome, perhaps of lovers embracing.

In any other picture by Hunt we would expect all these details to tell a story, and for that story to have a moralising didactic purpose. But we have the artist's own authority that there never was a didactic purpose to this picture. So in a way the image is doubly enigmatic. If it does have a meaning it is not one put there by the artist, but does this mean it doesn't have one?

7.

THOMAS FAED
WORN OUT 1868

Now I'm looking at a painting by Thomas Faed with the title *Worn Out*. The picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1868 and It's been described as the artist's masterpiece. In fact it's been described as 'an epoch-making work' a painting which a contemporary spectator tells us was 'as well-known as any picture of the century'.

Faed is a Scottish artist. After training in Edinburgh he moved as a young man to London in 1852 and achieved a great success at the Royal Academy with a picture of a young orphan boy being taken in by a poor Scottish household. Faed liked to give Scottish titles to his paintings and the title of this one was *The mitherless bairn*, which means the motherless child. It was painted in 1855 and it's now in the National Gallery of Victoria.

To the exhibition of the Royal Academy in 1868 Faed sent *Worn Out* – this very moving and beautiful picture of a working man who has been looking after his sick child through the night. It's been a restless night and, eventually clutching the father's sleeve, the child has fallen asleep. Unable to move his arm the devoted parent himself falls asleep on the chair beside the bed. And no sooner has silence fallen than the dawn breaks and their little attic room is bathed in the cool and cleansing light of early morning.

At the exhibition this was a picture which, in the words of one reviewer, 'fixed the attention of every eye'. According to the Manchester Times it was 'one of the most popular pictures of the year', popular 'because it goes to people's hearts'. Indeed Faed had a remarkably sure touch in that delicate balancing act of painting a convincingly truthful and heart-rending subject without offending his audience through on the one hand excessive ugliness or on the other excessive sentimentality.

Contemporary spectators were of course well versed in the skills of 'reading' a picture and would have found little difficulty in teasing out the story of this one. To do so was indeed one of the great pleasures offered by narrative art.

And this means that you have to give the picture some time. After a little exploration you notice that the man on arriving home has left his work bag under the window, together with the tell-tale tools of his trade: a saw and a wood plane. So he's a carpenter. And there are no signs of a woman's touch around the room, and so it seems safe to assume that he's a widower

Then there are a number of delicate touches which give us a sense of the man's character. Most notable is the violin hanging by the window. So he's a musician and it can well can be imagined that music has played a part in whiling away some of those sleepless hours. Also in the man's hand is a pair of spectacles and so he's not uneducated, in fact he was clearly reading when the child fell asleep. And what he was reading is now on the floor. I'm not absolutely certain what it is, and possibly it's not something which we are supposed to be able to read, but it looks as if it could just be *The History of Bluebeard.*

7. *(CONTINUED)*

THOMAS FAED
WORN OUT 1868

Other points picked up by critics which are indicative of the tender consideration and solicitude of the carpenter towards his patient are the fact that he has thrown his coat over the bed, the fact also that a rug has been rucked up against the door to prevent draughts, and the nice idea of placing the candle behind the bed board at the foot of the bed such that its light would not get in the child's eyes.

Then there are other charming small details which are just waiting there for us to notice them. The mouse, for example, which has stolen into the now-silent room and which helps itself to a morsel of food. And on the window sill there's a bulb in a vase, the roots of the bulb hanging helplessly above the water. Evidently the plant has been neglected because of more pressing concerns. Behind this on the outer sill is a pair of sparrows, and behind them a church spire in the distance.

These are the types of details which were picked up by all attentive spectators and the point of the picture, and the pleasure in looking at it, was very much in reading them. But the picture goes a step further than mere entertainment. It evokes – or it evoked at least to a 19th-century spectator – an intense level of empathy. It's a picture with which it is easy to engage at an emotional level.

One of the reasons for this I think is the fact that the figures are asleep. In a way this makes the spectator's presence in the scene – our presence – more anonymous and therefore the level of engagement can be more intense. And that intensity also depends to some extent on the level of focus achieved by reducing the number of figures to just two. This was unusual in Faed's work and it gives *Worn out* a concentrated and arresting quality which is doubtless what drew people to it when it was first exhibited.

I'm sure there are people today who would dismiss a painting like this as 'sentimental'. Well, one interesting point to note, in that respect, is that one contemporary critic actually congratulated Faed specifically on producing a picture which was not sentimental. These things are all relative. And to appreciate a painting of 1868 you have to adjust your mindset to some extent to that of 1868.

But for those who feel that a painting of this kind is just too remote from the world in which we now live, let me end by making a point, which may well come as a surprise, that this was a painting especially admired by Vincent Van Gogh. So if you are inclined to dismiss it you are not necessarily in good company!

8.

FREDERIC LEIGHTON
ATHLETE STRUGGLING WITH A PYTHON
ORIGINAL 1874–77, MARBLE REPLICA 1888–91

There are some nice examples in the Schaeffer collection (as there are in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection) of a remarkable phenomenon which belongs mostly to the last quarter of the 19th century. It's known as the New Sculpture.

In both collections you find examples of three of the leading sculptors of the New Sculpture movement: Alfred Gilbert, Hamo Thornycroft and Edward Onslow Ford. But it would be impossible to find a more important example that Leighton's *Athlete struggling with a python.*

This is a truly seminal work. It's probably the most important piece of sculpture to come out of Victorian Britain. It was produced initially in bronze. And there are two full-scale versions in England: one is the plaster from which the bronze was originally cast, which is in the Royal Academy, and then there's the original bronze which is in the Tate.

But Leighton produced one more full-scale version, this one in marble, and this one is now in the Schaeffer Collection and is part of the exhibition *Victorian Visions.*

The only major difference between this version and the original, besides the change of material from bronze to marble, is the tree trunk which supports the athlete's right leg. This is required in the marble because the figure would otherwise be unstable. You can see the effect of the original bronze, without its tree stump, in a reduced version of the original bronze also in the exhibition.

It's almost impossible to overstate the importance of this figure which, though it was the first publicly exhibited sculpture of an artist known almost exclusively as a painter, nevertheless seemed superior to anything yet produced by a British sculptor.

To understand this you need to pay a visit to the Grand Courts of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and there you'll find a group of early 19th-century sculptures, all in white marble. These are examples of the neo-classicism which then completely dominated British sculpture.

The inspiration comes from the sculpture of classical antiquity, the sculpture of the Greeks and Romans. And the quality in such sculptures which is imitated is their idealization – the way that real people are turned into ideal specimens of womanhood or manhood free of any blemish or any hint of an existence in the real world. Such sculptures therefore represent dreams – very beautiful dreams they can be, especially in the hands of great sculptor like John Gibson – but they have nothing under the bonnet, as it were. They don't seem to have any internal energy driving them.

Here is where Leighton steps in. Initially he started modelling small figures in clay to help him work out the compositions of his paintings. Then, as he was doing this, the idea came to him of the single figure of a heroic male nude wresting a great python. He modelled it in clay, but never found use for it in a painting and so set it aside.

8. *(CONTINUED)*

FREDERIC LEIGHTON
ATHLETE STRUGGLING WITH A PYTHON
ORIGINAL 1874–77, MARBLE REPLICA 1888–91

Then a friend saw the sketch, was impressed by it, and persuaded Leighton to work it up into a life-size figure. The whole project took about three years. Having virtually no real experience as a sculptor, Leighton relied on the advice and assistance of a young sculptor called Thomas Brock. One of Leighton's favourite Italian models, a man called Angelo Colarossi, posed and so a life-size nude began to take shape in the clay.

Leighton brought to the task, on the one hand, a profound reverence for classical statuary but, on the other hand, a modern artist's interest in and knowledge of anatomy, that is to say not just the anatomy of bones and muscles, but the full mechanism of the human body including its sinews, its ligaments, its veins, its arteries, all in its envelope of skin.

He applied this knowledge not to a typically 'classical' figure, in a balanced languid pose showing the body entirely at rest, but to a man desperately fighting for his life with an enormous snake.

There was a classical precedent for this. It was the great Hellenistic masterpiece of *Laocoön* and his sons in the Vatican. Now, for the first time in the history of British sculpture Leighton produced a figure considered worthy of comparison with the *Laocoön*. And in some respects he went even further, because in his sculpture the sense of psychological engagement between man and beast is greater than in the classical work.

The result was electrifying. No sculptor could ignore this huge challenge thrown out to their profession by a painter. And the responses came swiftly from a highly talented and motivated younger generation who were now particularly interested in exploring the expressive possibilities of bronze sculpture as against marble.

So the New Sculpture movement was born. Leighton himself contributed little to it, preferring to return to his painting and to exercise his influence in the main by his encouragement of a younger generation. But he did produce one other full-scale statue the figure known as *The Sluggard* exhibited in 1886. And an edition of bronze statuettes cast from the sketch model for this figure was produced in 1889–90 and an example of this can also be seen in the *Victorian Visions* exhibition.

Speaking of the *Athlete struggling with a python*, here is what the writer and critic Edmund Gosse had to say in 1894:

> *In this admirable composition, now so familiar as to render all description needless, a wholly new force made itself felt. Here was something ... vital and nervous ... a series of surfaces, varied and appropriate, all closely studied from nature ... attitudes and expressions so fresh and picturesque.*
>
> *This in short was something wholly new propounded by a painter to the professional sculptors, and displaying a juster and livelier sense of what their art should be than they themselves had ever dreamed of.*
>
> *'The Athlete and the python' ... gave the start word to the new Sculpture in England.*

9.

EDMUND BLAIR LEIGHTON
TILL DEATH US DO PART
1878–79

Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1879, Edmund Blair Leighton's painting *Till death us do part* is a really wonderful example of Victorian narrative painting. And, though at one level a humorous work, it nevertheless has its serious side, as it treats a subject which touched the lives of many people in a profound way in the Victorian period and does still in many societies today.

What almost all spectators see when they first look at this painting is a bride on the arm of her father processing down the nave towards the altar, there to meet the bridegroom. But look again. No, the altar in fact is behind them. The congregation are not sitting expectantly waiting for a marriage ceremony. Actually they are getting up from their seats. A ceremony has already taken place. The white haired gentleman and the young lady on his arm these are the bride and groom.

In the words of the critic for the *The Times* writing about this picture in 1879, May has married December.

It is then that you begin to realise the significance of the young man in one of the pews on the left gazing in a sad and dejected fashion at the young lady and the fact that she is casting her eyes downwards to avoid his gaze.

But I think, let's just take up the description in the words of a contemporary. And this is from the pages of the *Liverpool Mercury* for 16th September 1879:

'The gentleman appears to be about twice the age of the lady, say 56, and by his countenance we should say that he is quite satisfied with himself and his pocket; and if we were asked his name we should say it was Squire Moneybags, who has bought his wife with the contents of the said bags;

... the real owner according to God's laws-on-this-earth, is a young gentleman standing up in a seat by the aisle where the couple must pass, and whose melancholy and touching expression, as he looks on the passing bride, is (alas, faithless woman!), "We loved each other as man and woman ought to love when nature brings them together; but money intervened and she was bought from me, and the world is lonesome and vacant to me now, and I have nothing left to live for or love in this strange world".'

'The young lady in this picture', the article goes on, 'has just seen the handsome young gentleman her heart was given to and whom she loved, and is closing her eyes, and with smothered emotion trying to pass her former lover without a scene, and her husband seems to be affected by a sort of electric passage, for he only looks like a gentleman poacher who has stolen other men's goods.

If we had advice to give to young ladies, it is – Take what God intended, and marry your first love, and you will bring about in time that wealth of position which at tremendous sacrifice of life's best affections your parents or ill advisers wish you to jump at without working for it.'

9. *(CONTINUED)*

EDMUND BLAIR LEIGHTON
TILL DEATH US DO PART
1878–79

It's a sentiment which we all now endorse without a second thought. But it's worth remembering that in Victorian Britain up to 1870, with the passing of the Married Women's Property Act, a woman who married became effectively her husband's property. Everything she owned and even, in the event of separation, everything she earned, was immediately and automatically the property of her husband. Once married, a woman's identity, legally speaking, was subsumed entirely into that of her husband. As a legal entity she ceased to exist.

The Married Women's Property act of 1870 made a start in rectifying this state of affairs. At least married women were now able to own what they earned. But the act didn't go nearly far enough and so the whole issue was still very live and a topical one when Blair Leighton was working on his painting. It was not until another Married Women's Property act passed in 1882 that married women were able to separate all their property from that of their husband.

So, though Blair Leighton's picture is not a political tract, it deals with a much more topical issue than we might at first realise. And there really was every reason to take very great care in selecting a husband. That is why so often in the 19th century you encountered young couples forced to wait years before they were judged sufficiently secure, financially, to marry.

Now, I'm not saying we're being invited to admire the young lady in *Till death us do part* for her prudence. All the same we should perhaps not be too hasty to condemn her.

10.

FRANK DICKSEE
CHIVALRY
1885

If you had to choose a single work to represent the Victorian obsession with the Middle Ages, Frank Dicksee's *Chivalry* would certainly be a good candidate. It's a picture which on one level is very easy to get into. But to really get to grips with what it would have meant to a Victorian audience, takes a bit of a leap of historical imagination.

What you see when you look at the painting is really very simple. A Good Knight in shining armour is sheathing his sword having vanquished a Wicked Knight.

The Wicked Knight is evidently the person who bound the damsel to the tree. Presumably he was about to have his wicked way with her when he was interrupted by the Good Knight.

Obviously he hadn't got at all far with this since, though the damsel's red cloak is at her feet and her blue dress is slightly awry revealing her shoulder, she is really still quite decorous – at least by modern standards – and not at all indecent even by Victorian ones.

The Good Knight, perhaps thinking of the splendid effect created by his silhouette against the setting sun, has thoughtfully removed his helmet and lain it down on the grass, before adopting his victor's pose.

His opponent, it's to be noted, is not actually dead. His right hand is raised to grasp the Good Knight's foot. Thus, since the Good Knight is sheathing his sword – his immensely long sword – the Wicked Knight's life is to be spared. The Good Knight is merciful in victory, just as a chivalrous knight should be.

And tied to the wrong side of her tree for spectator comfort, the damsel must have missed most of the fighting, but she strains over her shoulder and manages to catch a glimpse of the Good Knight. And the sight of his handsome features certainly seems to arouse appropriate feelings of gratitude in her bright eyes and parted lips.

If the picture is looked at in these terms, it comes across as something of a cliché. Whether the knight is Galahad, or Percival, or Lancelot, or whoever is he is, there is no real human interest because we don't know who he is, and we don't know who she is. The tradition of painting medieval subjects which had grown up in the 1850s, for example in the works of Rossetti and Burne-Jones, had generally been about particular knights and particular damsels. These were characters whose lives and personalities were known from literature and who appeared in paintings therefore with some credentials already established.

When Dicksee exhibited *Chivalry* at the Royal Academy in 1885, it wasn't a huge success and I guess the reason for this was the absence of any link to the familiar knights of Arthurian legend. Only a few critics picked up the fact that it was Dicksee's specific intention in fact to avoid telling the story of any particular knight. The point of this painting – as reflected in its single-word title – was to represent the concept of chivalry in the abstract.

10. *(CONTINUED)*

FRANK DICKSEE
CHIVALRY
1885

This is where it becomes more difficult to truly respond to the picture with a 19th-century mindset. Because for us it'ts almost impossible to grasp the sincerity and conviction with which the Victorian middle class believed in medieval chivalry as a plausible mode of behaviour for the modern man.

Thus it was that when, in the 1840s, the British Government saw to the decoration of its brand new Houses of Parliament (built of course in gothic style) one of the key images they wanted was *The spirit of chivalry.* That was not about the unrequited loves of Sir Lancelot, it was because *The spirit of chivalry*, along with its companion *The spirit of justice*, were the moral corner-stones of the Victorian state.

And it is this, not a narrative from the age of chivalry, but chivalry itself, that Dicksee is trying to portray and which in his spectators he is trying to inspire. To defend goodness, purity and innocence, while dealing manfully (but mercifully) with those who threaten goodness, purity and innocence, these were the rightful aspirations of the Victorian gentleman.

The code of chivalry, as resurrected in the 19th century, survived well into the 20th century of course and I have here a copy of Baden Powell's *Scouting for Boys*. This was originally published in 1908. The full title is *Scouting for boys: a handbook for instruction in good citizenship.*

And I'd like to read you just a few lines from the section: *Hints to Instructors*

The very first words are *How to practise Chivalry*

> *1. Make each scout tie a knot in his necktie every morning as a reminder to carry out his idea of doing a good turn every day*
>
> *2. Take your boys to an armoury, such as the Tower of London ..., and explain to them the armour and weapons of the knights*
>
> And then under the heading GAMES
>
> *Knight Errantry – Scouts go out singly, or in pairs, or as a patrol. ... to find women or children in want of help, and to return and report on their honour what they have done.*
>
> ... and so on

Of course many of the boys who received the instruction recommended in this book, became the soldiers who took these ideas with them to the trenches of the First World War and there the spirit of chivalry was finally and brutally blown apart by the advent of modern warfare.

It's difficult now to look back on real-life chivalry as anything more than an historical curiosity of a slightly ridiculous kind. So we will never again be able to feel the real significance of Dicksee's painting. It's actually a rallying call to the better side of your nature. It's a very large and splendid knot in your necktie, reminding you to do a good deed every day.

11.

JOHN WILLIAM WATERHOUSE
MARIAMNE
1887

John William Waterhouse's *Mariamne* has to be the most impressive painting in the Schaeffer Collection and it's a picture which would make its presence felt in any company. It's the largest painting which Waterhouse ever attempted. And I would't argue with anyone who wanted to call it his most imposing.

This is not the Waterhouse who will be familiar to many people, who know what we might call the neo-pre-Raphaelite painter. Waterhouse was an artist who at the end of the 19th century rediscovered a poetic, romantic vision which was in many ways outmoded, but into which he managed to breathe new life.

Mariamne belongs to the moment in Waterhouse's career just before he made that leap and it can be regarded as representing the climax of his early career. It shows a certain dependence on the example of Alma-Tadema, who was in effect Waterhouse's mentor. But whereas Alma-Tadema painted genre scenes of everyday life in the ancient world, Waterhouse here takes on a dramatic historical scene.

The story of Mariamne does not come from the Bible, but it is an episode from early Jewish history. The King seated on the throne on the right is Herod, not the Herod of the bible, but his father Herod the Great.

Mariamne was Herod's Queen, a haughty woman of high birth who considered herself much superior to Herod and his family. Herod loved Mariamne very deeply, but Herod's sister Salome despised her.

Events transpired to sour relations between Herod and Mariamne, and Salome never missed an opportunity to sour them still further, in particular with unfounded accusations of infidelity on Mariamne's part. But Herod loved Mariamne very deeply and the marriage remained viable – if stormy – until Salome discovered a way of implicating Mariamne in what appeared to be a plot to poison Herod. And so Mariamne was finally brought to trial.

Herod was furious. The judges knew better than to contradict a furious Herod. And so they condemned Mariamne to death. But still Herod loved Mariamne very deeply, and still he hesitated to order her death. As we can see in Waterhouse's picture it took Salome's physically standing at his side and placing her hand on his arm to stiffen his resolve so that the executioner (his sword half drawn at the ready) should receive the Royal command.

In the painting the innocent Mariamne is dressed in white and descends steps of white marble. She is isolated, dignified. The expression with which she looks back at her violent husband is one of disdain, but also one which reaches out to Herod's sympathy. She knows that if only the King would look her in the eye, he would be unable to give the order.

11. *(CONTINUED)*

JOHN WILLIAM WATERHOUSE
MARIAMNE
1887

The story of Mariamne had been portrayed a number of times on the stage and Waterhouse's picture has a theatrical quality, which some critics found a bit over-the-top. One critic called it a 'Sarah Bernhardt conception of the scene', objecting obviously to the prima donna-ish treatment of Mariamne. Though this of course was actually entirely plausible for a fatally haughty Queen at a moment when her life hung in the balance.

And of course no stage production could rival the painter in his reconstruction of the setting for the scene in Herod's palace. Waterhouse's interest in the archaeological side of things would have been stimulated by the activities of the Palestine Exploration Fund which was then trying to unearth many of the sites where the events of the Bible took place. There was even talk at around this time that Mariamne's tomb had been found, and Waterhouse would doubtless also have taken an interest in the recent unearthing of a site known as Herod's amphitheatre.

It was always a problem for Victorian artists dealing with subjects from Biblical times that so little had been revealed by excavation of ancient Jewish civilisation. And hence Waterhouse also used some details drawn from Assyrian remains, many remarkable examples of which had been brought back to the British Museum not long before. This is the case of the lion in the right foreground of the painting which was based on the same Assyrian prototypes as Poynter was using at the same time for his epic canvas of *The visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon* in the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Waterhouse's picture belongs in many ways in the same mould as Poynter's epic. But if you look closer its character is somewhat different. Waterhouse was 13 years younger than Poynter and he counted among his friends many of the younger and more progressive artists associated with the Newlyn School and the New English Art Club. That he was already interested in the fresher and more direct handling of paint adopted by these artists is apparent everywhere in *Mariamne.*

Thus, although it may appear at first glance a thoroughly Academic painting, *Mariamne* has some interesting hints of modernity about it too. Not only is the paint handled with a certain freedom but, as critics noted at the time, the artist has set himself the testing task of painting a picture largely in shades of white. Of course this applies only to the lower half of the painting. But it's a feature which links *Mariamne* in a surprising way with an artist like Whistler, and through him to the more purely aesthetic and formal concerns of so much of modern art.

12.

FREDERIC LEIGHTON
STUDY FOR 'FLAMING JUNE'
c1895

Well, this is a tiny work, but it's an example of how size does not always equate with importance, or indeed with quality. I am looking now at Leighton's original oil sketch for one of the most famous images of the 19th century – *Flaming June*.

The story of the finished painting reads like a fable of human folly. Not because of anything which Leighton did, but because of the vagaries of taste. One of the legacies of modernism was an incapacity to appreciate Victorian art so complete that by the 1960s, when *Flaming June* came on the market (originally at a price it's said of around £50), no museum director in England could be persuaded to purchase it. The picture was eventually acquired by the Governor of Puerto Rico and so ended up in the Museum of Ponce in Puerto Rico.

Nowadays, of course, *Flaming June* is recognised as one of the quintessential masterpieces of one of the greatest of British painters. It's one of the best-known of all Victorian paintings. And yet paradoxically very few people have seen the original and very few people could even tell you where it is.

It's a remarkable thing therefore to be able to stand here in front of the original oil sketch for the painting. Almost everyone will have seen a reproduction. But here we have the real thing, albeit on a small scale ... an intimate record of the artist's thoughts about the colour composition as he worked out this haunting image.

According to Leighton's own account the idea for *Flaming June* came to him when he saw a particularly supple model relaxing after a sitting. She coiled herself into this serpentine pose and the artist took up his chalk and sketched her. I say 'her' assuming that the original model in question was female, but that is actually a subject of dispute. There are various drawings for *Flaming June* and in some the model looks as if it could be a young man. However at quite an early stage (if not from the very beginning) it was decided she should be female.

When Leighton produced the oil sketch he would already have worked out his figure in drawings. The sketch now gives him the opportunity to test his plans for the light effect: the dazzle reflected off the Mediterranean ocean at midday contrasted with the shade of the foreground under its awning. In the sketch the fringe to this awning flutters in the breeze catching the light and adding an element of animation along the top edge. This gets toned down in the finished painting. There the awning becomes a simple horizontal line, animated only by a muted pattern on its inner side.

12. *(CONTINUED)*

FREDERIC LEIGHTON
STUDY FOR 'FLAMING JUNE'
c1895

But what it seems to me the oil sketch reveals so clearly is the very close attention paid by Leighton to the underlying formal structure of the image. The sketch is not about testing the effect of the composition in terms of its human drama. After all there is no human drama. The woman is totally anonymous – we have no idea who she is – and she's asleep. So Leighton's concern is almost exclusively with the abstract pattern described by the woman's body and its surrounding draperies and other props.

So in this Leighton is very much allied with what is known as the aesthetic movement the origins of which can be found in such works as Holman Hunt's *Il dolce far niente* also in this exhibition. For centuries the western tradition of painting had been primarily concerned with telling stories. Now the narrative element was removed. In Hunt's work there was still a wealth of incidental detail which invited us to construct our own narrative. But in *Flaming June* Leighton really cuts the incidental detail to a minimum too.

So what we are left with is a purified form of art, one distilled from a tradition of narrative painting, but in which almost the only elements left are the components of a beautifully crafted abstract pattern.

Of course in the finished painting it's much more evident that what we're looking at is a woman's body – alluring under its diaphanous draperies of indefinable colour. There you find there's a sexual energy to the painting which makes of the spectator not just an aesthete but also something of a voyeur. So more buttons are pressed than merely the aesthetic ones.

But this is much less the case of the sketch where it's the purely formal qualities of the composition which dominate – that matrix of horizontals and verticals, of squares and circles, of right-sloping and left-sloping diagonals, of hot against cold, dark against light.

And so the irony is that this image, so despised by the era of modernism that in the 1960s you could hardly give it away, actually comes close to testing the boundaries of abstraction. We can see this now, but I don't think it's ever been so clear as it is in looking at this wonderfully sophisticated little sketch.

13.

EDWARD ROBERT HUGHES
WINGS OF THE MORNING
1905

Wings of the Morning by Edward Robert Hughes is a painting which by a somewhat bizarre chain of events, used to belong to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but which hasn't done so since 1946.

The picture was painted initially for a Sydney collector, the industrialist Edward William Knox, who built a mansion on Bellevue Hill called 'Rona'. When Knox died in 1933 this picture was delivered by his executors to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, as a bequest.

But then 13 years later, someone stuck up their hand and suggested that this had all been a mistake. Knox's real intention, apparently, had been to leave the picture not to the New South Wales public, but to a gentleman's club. And so the lawyers were brought in, the picture was removed from the Art Gallery, and duly ended up in the Union Club. Until a few years ago, that is, when it was acquired for the Schaeffer Collection.

Hughes' most famous work is a watercolour in the Birmingham City Art Gallery called Night with her train of stars. The picture we have here is conceived in a very similar way. *Night with her train of stars* shows a cloaked, winged figure of Night accompanied by a flock of birds and by a mass of winged infants holding stars. *Wings of the morning* shows another winged female figure surrounded by flocks of birds. But now she's naked and the time has changed from dusk to dawn.

These two pictures are among Hughes' most spectacular and personal creations. And I think we would call them symbolist works. At least they are related to the movement in French and Belgian art which goes by the name of symbolism. And they belong in this company because they're images which use a visual language of their own invention, to communicate a concept which is totally personal to the artist and which has no exterior frame of reference.

There's no story here, no literary source, or even any allegorical meaning. The *Wings of the morning* is a vision of a nameless supernatural creature heading into the dawn accompanied by flocks of gaily coloured birds, while the winged creatures of the night – bats and owls – are flying back in the other direction. Hughes applied to this image by way of title a phrase from the Psalms, *Wings of the morning*, but this is retrospect. The title describes the picture, the picture does not illustrate the Psalm.

13. *(CONTINUED)*

EDWARD ROBERT HUGHES
WINGS OF THE MORNING
1905

An important aspect of symbolism is that it communicates visually. It communicates ideas which do not have any definite meaning, and which cannot be reduced to a sequence of words. An image such as this may inspire in us feelings for which we can search out words like joy, optimism, freedom, and so on. But it's not specifically expressing any of those ideas. It exists only on its own terms.

Historically speaking the image has to be understood, I think, as a reaction to that hugely important phenomenon of the whole Victorian period, loss of faith, or rather a loss of faith in the established church. Atheism is a 19th-century word. And the widespread loss of a sense of the Christian God's comforting presence was perhaps, of all disruptions of the industrial age, the one which left the biggest gap.

And this explains why the second half of the 19th century and particularly its closing decades, saw an intense interest in all forms of spiritualism. There was a strong desire – a need – to redefine the position of humankind in relation to the non-material world. And emphasis shifts from the ritual of organised religion to personal interactions with the spirit world.

And of course, when Hughes was painting this picture, Sigmund Freud, just a few years before, had published his ground-breaking work on the interpretation of dreams. This is not to say that Hughes is offering us his dream for our psycho-analysis. But it's part of the phenomenon by which a new importance is attached to what dreams can potentially communicate, and what is an artist's vision if not a sort of dream?

So here we are in 1905. Actually I believe this is the year in which Einstein discovered the principle of relativity. And with that the 20th century embarked on a path of immeasurably enhanced scientific understanding of our place in the physical universe. But there's always an undertow and that is generated by the instinct which tells us that even the most advanced science can't be in command of the whole story.

And that's the direction in which Hughes's image is leading us, and it's an image it's nice to note, which powerfully inspires a sense of optimism.