

Atkinson Grimshaw and the inspiration of nature

A talk by Megan Dobbyn, Visitor Assistant at Leeds Art Gallery

A flash of colour, yellow feathers against curling brown bracken. Painstaking detail draws the viewer in to this macabre, yet eerily beautiful scene. Dead Linnet, by Victorian painter John Atkinson Grimshaw.

Grimshaw was born on the 6th sept 1836 in a back to back tenement in Park Street Leeds. His father was a policeman, but found work with the Great Northern Railway Company in 1848. Grimshaw's parents were strict Baptists and his mother strongly disapproved of his interest in painting. On one occasion she allegedly destroyed all of his paints by throwing them into the fire. Grimshaw's father expected him to follow in his footsteps in the rail industry, but at the age of 24, Grimshaw decided to become a full-time painter and in 1861 he left his job with the Great Northern Railway.

Grimshaw was hugely inspired by nature, especially in his earlier work. Even whilst working as a railway clerk Grimshaw spent his free time drawing and painting from nature and reading widely about contemporary art developments, in particular the writings of John Ruskin. Ruskin's support of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood undoubtedly drew Grimshaw's attention to the work of painters like William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais, whose inspiration you can see in many of Grimshaw's early nature studies.

John Ruskin was a Victorian art critic and writer. He placed great emphasis on the importance of nature within art and life, believing the natural world to be the ultimate source of 'beauty inspiration and education'. Ruskin had a huge influence on the Victorian art world, the Pre-Raphaelites associated themselves with Ruskin's Christian principles and value in nature. He had great respect for artists like JMW Turner and often praised the Pre-Raphaelite art movement's dedicated observation on nature within their work. In 1851 Ruskin wrote a pamphlet, Pre-Raphaelitism, defending the movement against criticism at the time. In it he wrote "go to nature in all singleness of heart... rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth."

As Grimshaw started to become more commercially successful he moved his family out from central Leeds into the leafy suburbs of Headingley. Here Grimshaw and his wife Fanny enjoyed walks along the local wooded Ridge to the Meanwood valley and on to Adel woods, where they collected wild flowers, mosses and birds' eggs to bring home for Grimshaw to paint. This 7 mile stretch of woodland is now a protected area called the Meanwood Valley Trail and leads from Woodhouse in

Leeds to Golden Acre Park, passing through places such as Headingley, Meanwood and Adel. It is a much loved green space for the residents of Leeds, it is even said to have inspired J R R Tolkien in writing Lord of the Rings when he lived in Leeds for a short time, working as a lecturer at Leeds University.

Dead Linnet was painted in 1862, only a year after Grimshaw left his railway job, it is an example of his early work and studies, which were mainly composed of natural still lifes. Dead Linnet however seems to encompass a slightly more emotive and melancholy feeling. The delicate detail of the small dead bird against a dark background of dying leaves summarises the frailty of its existence and short delicate life, whilst also drawing attention to the beauty of nature even in death. The two peeking green ivy leaves suggest the continuation of life and nature juxtaposed with the rest of the composition.

It wasn't just the painting of nature that Grimshaw immersed himself in. He valued nature as both a source of inspiration and a means of painting itself. When living in Scarborough for a period of his life at 'the Castle by the Sea' he added embellishments to the building such as a glass conservatory in which he cultivated various local and exotic plants to be used in creating pigments for paintings. He also had a well-stocked greenhouse in Knostrop Hall, the residence in Leeds that he stayed at with his family until the end of his life. His daughter Elaine often described her father's love of outdoor gardening and interest in rare plants. A letter in Leeds City Library, from a family friend to Grimshaw's daughter Enid, recalls the garden saying 'It has brought back so clearly to mind one special Sunday, which you may or may not remember, when your father took me round the garden (that never to be forgotten garden) to find just the touch of colours needed for a pale grey dress I was wearing. At last his eye lighted on a bunch of cherries which he picked and asked me to wear.'

Grimshaw's love of nature shines on through his paintings left behind, from his early painstakingly detailed studies of natural ephemera to his paintings of leafy Leeds lanes and his ever popular dappled moonlight scenes. Inspiration from the colours, lighting and details of nature weave throughout his work.