

The Tree of Life with Fish (c.1950s) by Scottie Wilson

A talk by Jonny Kidd, Visitor Assistant at Leeds Art Gallery

Fish swim, swirl and fly around a white patterned tree. Some hang from the tree like fruit, others fall to the undergrowth beneath. The similar patterns of the tree and fish intermingle. There is a real feeling of movement in the painting. The whiteness of the tree and fish stand out against the black background, the only other colours being a swab of yellow on the fish and a glowing red eye for each of them. This is the Tree of Life with Fish by Scottie Wilson. The Tree of Life as referenced here appears in the Torah in The Garden of Eden and also appears in Rabbinic Judaism as 'The Tree of Souls'. In The Tree of Life with Fish it could be interpreted that these fish born of the tree could be new souls waiting to be picked and born.

Scottie Wilson, born Louis Freeman in Glasgow in 1882 was a Jewish, Scottish, self-taught Outsider artist. Born into extreme poverty, he left school at the age of 8 to sell newspapers to help the family income.

In his teens he served in the army in India and South Africa before buying himself out in 1911 and then re enlisting to fight on the Western Front in the First World War.

Scottie visited Canada in the 1920's and emigrated there in 1931, settling in Toronto where he opened a second hand shop. It was here in the 1930's at the age of 44 that Scottie started drawing. One day he began doodling with a fountain pen on a cardboard table top while listening to Mendelsshon and lost himself in his art.

He said, "In a couple of days the whole of the table top was covered in little faces and designs. The pen seemed to make me draw, and then images, the faces and designs just flowed out. I couldn't stop, I've never stopped since that day".

Some of the faces and the designs were what Scottie called "evils" and "greedies" and were often contrasted with naturalistic symbols of goodness, maybe showing his own personal morality or the eternal struggle between good and evil. He distrusted art dealers and didn't want to part with his work and so he would try to raise money by staging viewing only shows with modest entrance fees. He also would hang works in buses and empty shop fronts though he did have his first solo exhibition in Toronto in 1943. Later on in his career he would sell his work on the street for a fraction of the price gallery owners were asking. He said of the working class customers he would attract "They're the intellect you know".

Scottie preferred to use crayon, pen and ink as they allowed him to work quickly and complimented his detailed and decorative style. They would also be cheaper and easier to get hold of.

His work which has been described as Primitive Art as well as Outsider Art has many recurring motifs including, birds, fish, flowers, trees, self-portraits and totem pole style images. Much of his work, with the recurring motifs has a fantastical and hypnotic quality to it. He was much admired by the Surrealists and Pablo Picasso and the art collector Jean Dubuffet were fans of his work.

In 1945 he left Toronto and moved to Kilburn in London where he exhibited in the Arcadia gallery alongside Picasso, Joan Miro and Paul Klee amongst others.

In the early 1960s Scottie started to paint designs onto plates and was later commissioned by Royal Worcester to design a series of tableware. His designs were based on the totem pole images he'd seen on his travels in North America.

In 1970 Scottie's picture 'Bird Song' was chosen as a design for UNICEF's Christmas card of that year.

It's very difficult to form a timeline on his work because he failed to date most of them. The Tree of Life with Fish in the Natural Encounters exhibition is dated as circa 1950's and is one of several versions of The Tree of Life. His style rarely changed though some of his later work has less precise cross hatching and detail whereas others have more detail.

Scottie who died in London in 1972, left a legacy of innovative artwork, compelling and hypnotic. But he also left an attitude that whatever your age or background you can create art as you want. Whether on a cardboard table top or exhibiting your work on a bus. Scottie Wilson created the artwork he wanted, because he wanted to and was a success because of it.