

“The Artist” by John

I have pondered and projected many theories of what Phil May intended, thought, believed, and indeed sought to achieve, in the creation of his unnamed lightening sketch. Ultimately, I have arrived at the point where I believe I must be led by my emotions and the response that I felt, and indeed still feel as I look at this piece today. In the final analysis, an authentic response to Phil May as the artist must follow one's own true emotional response, whilst giving the piece due regard. So, when putting into words my reflections about the artist, I felt it necessary to place the piece right in front of me, almost permanently, as I put words to paper. I wanted to really connect with what was in front of me that he, as an artist, felt comfortable to create. I wanted to make a genuine attempt to arrive at a truly honest point of view, to give him due regard as an artist and form a view.

So how does Phil May speak to me, in the context of this piece?

He is first and foremost a caricaturist. That means his art comes with an embedded slant.

I therefore bear that in mind. After all, the aim of a caricaturist is to present a picture, description, or imitation of a person in which certain striking characteristics are exaggerated in order to create a comic or grotesque effect. The outcome that Phil May has achieved with the lighting sketch in question has certainly achieved that.

That said, the real and unavoidable question that keeps coming back to me time and time again is whether this goes beyond a Phil May caricature drawing.

I believe it does. This is beyond caricature in my view and does not even pretend to be otherwise. It is not even racism hiding in plain sight. It is not hiding at all.

Look to Phil May's 1893-1903 works, from street scenes, concerts, bras, dining out, showing many plump Victorians featured bedecked in top hats, tails, waistcoats, jewellery - a fascinating glimpse of Victorian society, some of which include people of colour.

This piece, of a lighting sketch stands out for me as quite an offensive sketch, amongst others. This is compounded by the irony that it may have been sketched in an event aimed to do good - to raise charitable funds. A cause that seemingly fails to recognise the very irony of the situation.

Therefore, where Phil May is concerned as an artist, I find that I cannot divorce the piece from the artist, the offensive racism from the man, whatever his intentions. My response looking at the piece dictates my response looking at the artist. In the final analysis, my overriding sense of the piece is quite negative, sad and a little emotional. It was impressing me for all the wrong reasons, in all manner of ways.

His intention I think, given the context of a fund raiser event at the invitation of the mayor, would have been, I surmise, to be a “good guest”; to meet the expectation of his crowd, to raise money. This to me, therefore, suggest that Phil May was playing to the prejudices of his audience, for the purposes of the event, although we know this wasn't the only demeaning piece he created. It was one of many. There are other examples linked to his work writing for a rag and as a caricaturist. Whilst accepting that the context is crucial in how this piece was created, Phil May as an artist is the perpetrator. He is orchestrating the deeply offensive “mood music” for his audience to “dance” to. This was at the expense of a whole people. Deeply offensive, dehumanising and playing to the tune of racist English culture of the times – that's my overriding summation of Phil May.

Others might say he succeeded in creating an artistic caricature, but the piece isn't being held up by any fine art curator or art house as a masterpiece, as far as I know.