

“The Artist” by Laura

Phil May was born in New Wortley, Leeds in 1864. By the time he made this portrait he was a successful artist and caricaturist at the peak of his career, although sadly he would only live two more years before dying at the age of 39.

May was famously generous, funny and kind to his many friends and acquaintances and moved comfortably within London’s bohemian circles. Whilst he hated making speeches, he could tell a story excellently in a quiet but humorous way and he was particularly keen to accompany his words with improvised drawings. There was indeed a very narrow line between the artist and the entertainer, and it is no surprise that he always wanted to pursue a career in acting.

His main source of income though would be drawing cartoons for a number of periodicals, including the famous *Punch* where he worked for 10 years, although he also published his own books including the excellent *Illustrated Annuals* which contained some of his best and most personal work.

He was a very prolific draughtsman. Thematically speaking, his work mainly deals with everyday scenes, largely from London, featuring types like his famous street sellers and scruffy children as well as other regular people at pubs, clubs or during bank holidays. However, he also made some brilliant caricatures of identifiable politicians, celebrities and performers.

In addition, he made drawings for advertisements, menu cards, and theatrical programmes and he was often called upon to do “lightning sketches” at after-dinner entertainments and concerts, which leads us to our mysterious portrait.

Originally undated, the drawing was traditionally believed to be a lecture sketch executed for an event to support the widows and orphans from the Boer War in South Africa which according to some publications it was held at Leeds Art Gallery and according to others at the Leeds Town Hall. However, after lots of digging in our own archives and other local archives and newspapers of the period, I have been able to establish that the drawing is actually a ‘lightening sketch’ made on the 16 April 1901 indeed at Leeds Town Hall as part of a fundraising event but for the police orphanage.

Phil May’s contribution to the event was entitled “Tale on Funny People” and during half an hour, as stated by the press at the time, he told jokes sharing some of the funniest incidents of his career and how he found subjects for his caricatures. And as one would expect, he illustrated his talk with sketches as he spoke, amusing and impressing his audiences with his quick hand and his ability to begin a drawing of a figure anywhere. Basically, he could start with an ear or the eyes, then clothing and return to the face as he was able to visualise the full drawing in his mind.

At the time, lightning sketches were becoming more and more popular and featured prominently as part of Music Hall and Blackface Minstrelsy shows. Bearing in mind the artist interests and circles, he would have been fully familiar with that type of entertainment, and considering his personality and skills it's not surprising that he decided to practice himself lightning sketches.

In fact, one can easily picture May in front of a blank large piece of paper pinned to a board (actually a close look at the edges of the work reveals the holes left by the pins on the paper) and we can imagine him chatting and making everyone laugh with every stroke of his chalk. But that light-hearted scenario gets more serious when we scratch the surface a little.

At first sight, the portrait seduces us because of the bold attire of the lady. A wide brim hat with a bow and a blue-and-white striped dress with a red ruff. The prominence of these features can be partly explained by May's longstanding interest in costume design and the fact that he worked himself as a theatre costume designer for a while. However, the exaggerated features are not naïve and link very closely to other drawings of black subjects he made like the one dated in 1898 currently held at the V&A. This drawing followed an American cartoon tradition that satirised how members of the black community adopted fashionable dress and manners soon after gaining freedom from enslavement in America, a country he had actually visited just a few years earlier. In other words, he was making fun of what he thought were black people's pretensions. And I think this is quite a plausible interpretation for our drawing too.

Equally, the facial features are stereotypical of popular representations of black people around this time, which makes this sketch an offensive caricature despite not having been grotesquely exaggerated.

In that sense, this drawing is not exceptional in his oeuvre and, although less common than the already mentioned street sellers and scruffy children, truth is that the presence of black subjects in his production is far from negligible. Further research on other black people in his work reveals that his approach to black subjects is wide ranging. Some (albeit a minority) are clearly stereotypical and would be viewed now as overtly racist whilst others are more nuanced and individualised. This could be perhaps explained by the fact that he was an observer of society and enjoyed drawing from life and particularly people he had seen even if they often appeared later as anonymous and generic types in his cartoons. Even one of his contemporaries highlighted in accounts of the period that and I'm quoting "when he was in Australia (...) he did draw carefully from the life that interested him. The blacks interested him particularly" end of quote.

Bearing this in mind, he could easily have met the sitter during one of his travels most likely in America, but we also know that in addition to Australia as just mentioned, he also made studies of other black people in Holland, France and, of course, London.

However, the drawing is quite rare not only in his production but generally in the art of the period in that it shows a black woman and on her own in a head and shoulders type of portrait, so quite close up and not as a secondary role in a bigger scene as was typical (usually as enslaved people or servants).

Despite the prominence of black subjects in his work, I find the fact that none of his critics and subsequent researchers and writers have devoted enough attention to the black characters in his cartoons quite telling too of the systemic racism and historic erasure black people are often subjected to, a topic which will also be explored in the next section on the Curator.