

Now and Then



Primrose Hill – Winter, Frank Auerbach, 1981/82, oil on board, 121.9 x 152.4 cm. Allocated to the Henry Barber Trust in lieu of inheritance tax by HM Government and allocated to the Henry Barber Trust in 2015.

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



Pastoral Landscape, Claude Lorrain, about 1645, oil on canvas, 101.5 x 134 cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



Landscape in Flanders, Peter Paul Rubens, about 1636, oil on panel, 89.8 x 133.8 cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



The River Dee near Eaton Hall, Richard Wilson, about 1759/60, oil on canvas, 54 x 88.6 cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to this online Tuesday Talk, part of a series presented by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, at the University of Birmingham. My name is Nicola Kalinsky and I'm the Director of the Barber. The Tuesday Talks series was launched back in April, when the country was firmly in lockdown and the Barber, like all museums and galleries, was closed. These short podcasts were one of the ways through which we tried to ensure continuing access to the cultural offer of the Barber, allowing us to speak to our audiences old and new.

Over these past six months, the Talks have ranged over all aspects of our collections and have proved a really effective vehicle for colleagues to speak to their specialist knowledge, share new research, and, on occasion, raise timely issues in a thoughtful and nuanced way. The Barber is now open again to the public, and we are welcoming back real people into actual galleries, which is fantastic, but we'll be continuing with these regular talks as part of our online programme.

I have certainly learned a great deal listening to my colleagues' contributions to the series over the weeks, and I know there is plenty more in the pipeline. Today's talk, however, is a little different. It's not a well-researched paper, indeed it's not written on the basis of research at all, and I confess to it being hastily prepared. I was asked to give my thoughts on our reopening, but that seemed too unfenced a field in which to stumble, and neither do I have to hand any original snippets of art historical knowledge to reveal. Instead, I'm going to focus on a specific

point in the galleries, where we find two landscape paintings hanging side by side: Frank Auerbach's *Primrose Hill – Winter*, 1981-82, and Claude Lorrain's *Pastoral Landscape* of about 1645. What follows is more of a short digression, short indeed on facts, and is drawn from the personal feelings and memories which these paintings have stirred within me since I've returned to work onsite.

Much as I admire them, it's not that these two works of art are my all-time Barber favourites, but they share the bay with the painting I love above all others in this collection, Peter Paul Rubens's *Landscape in Flanders* of about 1636, so this location, at the far end of our Red Gallery, is one where I invariably stop and pause. It's also about half way around the circuit of our displays which makes it a good place to be too – deeply embedded in the quadrangle of our elegant parquet-floored galleries, leading one to the next, but with the visit's end, and its connotations of returning to face undone actions on the to do list, and, these days, the deadening tyranny of Zoom meetings, still some way off.

I'm not the only person who takes a moment here. Visitors are often brought to a halt when they encounter the Auerbach and tend to be either delighted or a bit baffled. What is it doing here? Why, in a room with walls lined with works by the great artists of 1600s, be they Dutch, Italian, Flemish, Spanish or French, are we confronted, with no advance warning, by a scene of north London parkland painted in the early 1980s by a living British artist?

The reasons are various, not least that I like the way the juxtaposition operates as a visual prompt to think, look, readjust and react. The painting is, by its date, the most recent by several decades in the collection, and was acquired by the Henry Barber Trust in 2015 when it was allocated in lieu of inheritance tax by Her Majesty's Government from the estate of Auerbach's friend and fellow artist, Lucian Freud. The Barber collection provides a pretty comprehensive coverage of western art, but, if there is an area of weakness, it's the twentieth century, a legacy of Lady Barber's stipulation, made when she founded the Trust in 1932, that nothing created later than 1899 should be acquired. This was amended by the Trustees in 1967, so that more recent works could be added, providing they were at least thirty years old. But Barber Directors have been playing catch up ever since, as art works of appropriate quality are rarely available and prohibitively expensive. Before the Auerbach, the most 'modern' painting here was René Magritte's surrealist *Flavour of Tears* of 1948. So, this work of the early 1980s had no ready companions from its own time, or even near decades, by artists of any nationality.

But, there is a more positive logic to placing the Auerbach between the Rubens and the Claude. Frank Auerbach's own approach to landscape has been profoundly informed by his understanding and appreciation of the Old Masters. As long as he was still physically able, he would make the short bus trip from his home in Camden Town to visit the National Gallery, and there make drawings after works by Claude and Rubens among others, learning from them how to structure a landscape, create depth, organise space, convey a sense of air and atmosphere, lead the eye

in, and through such means, evoke emotion and connection. And, like Rubens's watery Flemish landscape, Auerbach has chosen a spot of this earth – Primrose Hill – that was his to know intimately, his own everyday surroundings just minutes from where he slept, ate and painted.

Primrose Hill has meaning for me too. Not, of course, as it does for Auerbach, with his obsessive and philosophically high-level interrogation of place as a great artist. It's more that this painting prompts me to remember a stage in my own journey through life, a memory heightened I'm sure by the unexceptional feelings of human mortality and time's passing which this pandemic has foregrounded. I lived just around the corner from Primrose Hill for a year in 1984, sharing a flat in Ainger Road and starting an MA at the Courtauld Institute of Art. I was new to this subject called the History of Art, and I couldn't believe my luck that something so enjoyable was also an academic discipline. These were the privileged days of student grants, albeit only for the very few who got to benefit from higher education, and, although I lived as frugally as a mouse, it was like being paid to eat ice cream. And yet. The backdrop to what was a happy time for me was highly troubled. These were the early, driven years of Margaret Thatcher's second term as Prime Minister, with society being recast or cast aside, depending upon your viewpoint. There was high unemployment, bombs went off in London, and Cruise missiles arrived at RAF Greenham Common. There was also the looming spectre of a frightening new disease then called AIDS, a cruel virus which one of my flatmates was researching as a bio-science post-grad.

I would have cycled up and down the zigzag pathways we see in Auerbach's Primrose Hill, every day on my way to and from the Courtauld, then at 20 Portman Square, just behind Oxford Street. Auerbach used to go out very early in the mornings to sketch his cityscape, returning to his studio-home to apply, scrape off, and re-apply endlessly reworked layers of oil on board. So, I was not in danger of running him over, and cycling has long since been banned on these paths. I didn't know then that I'd become a curator, and, one day, be the director of a museum which could make a case to be presented with this extraordinarily alive piece of painting. Reproduced on paper, it can look a bit muddy, and even viewed digitally its three-dimensionality is muted. But get into its physical presence and it is alive with vibrant slicks and dabs of colour as if it was painted yesterday and not nearly forty years ago. The surface looks fresh and immediate, showing the track and trace of Auerbach's hand, arm and mind, as if he had just stepped away for a moment.

Claude's serene landscape alongside was clearly painted long ago, although I think it speaks eloquently to the Auerbach and the two are holding a rich conversation despite the centuries which separate them. Acquired by the Henry Barber Trust in 1953, it's a typical but very fine example by this most influential of landscape painters. Auerbach is far from being the only later artist who has responded to and learned from Claude – check out Richard Wilson's *River Dee* of about 1760 in the next gallery for another example. I first discovered and loved the landscapes of Claude when I was a student at the Courtauld and looking down on the

panorama of London from Primrose Hill. My introduction to Claude was thanks to one of my tutors, the gentle, erudite, chain-smoking Professor Michael Kitson. Michael, who died in 1998, taught British eighteenth and nineteenth century art, but he was one of the great Claude scholars, and his distinctive approach to encountering and thinking about art was hugely appealing. Being reminded of him again, when I stand in front of the Barber Claude, I recall Michael's generosity to me when I began to take hesitant steps into this odd world of curators and museums. I'm belatedly aware of the debt of gratitude each generation owes to those who share their knowledge with enthusiasm and sincerity, and I hope that the new students beginning their time at this university, will have, despite an inauspicious start, as valuable a period in their lives as I had in the mid 1980s.

Claude was French, hence his being known as 'Claude Lorraine' after the Lorraine region in north-eastern France, but he spent his life in Rome and loved to sketch the beautiful hilly surrounding countryside. The mellow light effects for which he is renowned were surely embedded in actual experience and witness to nature. But, like Auerbach, Claude filters the real through his own sensibility and specific artistic intent, and here this means recasting the scene as a time that never was, Arcadia, when humankind lived in complete concord with nature. Three figures - two women and one man - barefoot and dressed in classical robes, idle the time away making music together whilst ostensibly keeping an eye on the tidy-looking beasts at pasture in the foreground meadow. These people are set against the expansive vista opening up behind them, and their

activities, like the tiny herdsmen crossing the bridge, only serve to indicate that this is an idyllic world where not much real work needs to be done. The picture is an assertion of the rightness of all things under the sun, an encompassing harmony underlined by the painting's visual perfection and compositional balance. If we can imagine and represent such a time, maybe it can come again? Who would not, at the moment, long for dawn to light up a new day in Arcadia?

Thank you very much for staying with me on this talk, and thanks, as ever, to Jack Davies for his music. Next week we promise to provide proper insights, information and purpose. Please do listen in. If you have any questions or would like to continue the conversation, please get in touch with the Barber (info@barber.org.uk) or use our social media platforms.