Friends of York Art Gallery

# e-Bulletin no. 4

December 2020

## Contents

# EDITORIAL

So that's 2020 nearly done with, and we find ourselves facing an uncertain 2021, with much depending on the availability of those vaccines on which we are counting for our return, probably a slow one and not without its difficulties, to something recognisable as normality.  At least York's return to Tier 2 means that we will be able to visit the Gallery again, albeit subject to restrictions and regulations adopted in response to the pandemic.

But leaving the future aside, for the present I am delighted to bring together the fourth of the Friends of York Art Gallery e-Bulletins. Once again, I am grateful to contributors for providing an interesting mix of items.

First, two new members of the Friends' community introduce themselves: Grace England, who is the incoming Friends-supported MA student in the University of York's Art History Department, who is developing what promises to be an exciting project on portraiture; and Kate West, a new FYAG Committee Member, who is bringing a wide range of experience and expertise to this role.

We also have three essays dealing with artists originating from York and Yorkshire.  Dorothy Nott writes on John Flaxman, who left his native York early, but who went on to acquire a considerable international reputation, and whose image, I would imagine for the large part unnoticed, gazes out from the front of York Art Gallery. Ann Petherick, owner of York's Kentmere House Gallery, writes engagingly and knowledgeably on the twentieth-century Yorkshire artist Jack Hellewell – I am sure cat-lovers among the Friends will be delighted by his *On the Prowl*, which is reproduced in Ann's article. And lastly, there is a wide-ranging contribution from John Roe, based around a close study of William Etty's *Candaules King of Lydia, Shews his Wife by Stealth to Gyges, One of his Ministers, as She goes to Bed*, a work owned by Tate Britain, but which I suspect many of my readers will recall from the 2011-12 *William Etty: Art & Controversy* Exhibition at York Art Gallery.

And finally, a seasonal note. Why not give somebody in your circle a gift membership to the FYAG as a Christmas present? – either go to the heading 'Join Us' on the Friends' website or contact – membership@friendsofyorkartgallery.co.uk

**Jim Sharpe** December 2020

## INTRODUCING THE MA SCHOLAR FOR 2020, GRACE ENGLAND

I am extremely grateful and excited to have been awarded the York Art Gallery MA Scholarship. As my interests lie in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century portraiture, particularly involving members of the nobility and high society, the York Art Gallery collection offers a wonderful array of opportunities for my research.

I graduated with a BA in History from the University of Cambridge in 2019. In my final year I chose to specialise in Early Modern European history, with a focus on material culture. My dissertation, 'Religious Material Culture at the Court of Charles I', explored how religious art and architecture at the English court (such as Van Dyck's portrait of Queen Henrietta Maria as Saint Catherine, and Inigo Jones' Somerset House Chapel) directly stoked politico-religious tensions in the immediate pre-Civil War period.

My main argument, and the area where I hope to continue research, is that art is not merely reflective of, or a commentary on, politics, but actually shapes and instigates political events and the fundamentals of society. The Early Modern era especially appeals in this respect, as I wish to understand how art contributed to the development of pivotal movements of this period, such as the Catholic Counter-Reformation, the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the rise of the European Constitutional Monarchy.

The intersection between art, society, and politics, particularly in relation to portraiture, is the area where I wish to specialise during my MA study and thesis. My York Art Gallery research project, *High Society: A Study of Society Women's Portraiture from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, is an examination of how contemporary changes in politics and social practices influenced the style and content of society portraits over the last five centuries. I will compare several portraits of society women, taken from the Gallery collection, roughly spaced a century apart, and interpret how these pivotal social and political changes of their respective periods influenced the style and content of their portraits.

For instance, if we compare the portraits of Mary Denton by George Gower (1573) and Jean Abercromby by Allan Ramsay (1767), we can explore how lace, a significant adornment in the two women's outfits, is a significant visual indicator of wealth and status in both periods and both portraits.

George Gower, *Mary Denton* (1573), oil on oak

Photo credit: York Museums Trust ©

Alan Ramsay, J*ean Abercromby, Mrs Morison of Haddo* (1767), oil on canvas
Photo credit: York Museums Trust ©

If we look at Mary Denton's portrait, we can see that the lace is not the most dominant aspect of her apparel. Whilst lace is largely concentrated at her ruff and sleeves, precious jewels and gold thread are the most prominent and visually important ornamentation.

In contrast, there is an emphasised presence of lace in Jean Abercromby's portrait, where her intricately woven lace shawl and abundant lace sleeves are clearly given the most attention and detail artistically. This accords with the greater production and diversity of lacemaking across Europe by the mid-eighteenth century, which made lace not only a more marketable and profitable trading product, but also gave it, by 1767, considerable symbolic importance as a visual demonstrator of one's economic and class status.

I bring some museum experience into my new role, having previously worked with the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge as President of the student-run Fitzwilliam Museum Society. In this role I organised a lecture and events programme, including a late-night museum event 'Art After Dark', where we provided art tours and talks centred around LGBT+ History Month. I have previously also worked in my home borough of Ealing with Pitzhanger Manor and Gallery (John Soane's historic summer house), and a contemporary art gallery, where I largely worked alongside the communications and development team in promotion and event-planning.

It will be a wonderful opportunity to work with the Curatorial Department of York Art Gallery, and to focus my attention on the collection and how I can contribute to research into it. I am hoping to work alongside the Curator of Fine Art, Becky Gee, in creating talks (in-person or digital, depending on Covid) centred around pivotal works and themes within the collection which I think will be of interest. One idea is a talk about the depiction of male beauty and homoeroticism within art, which would largely focus on the work of collection-staple William Etty. Any feedback on whether the Friends would be interested in this and any ideas for future talks would be greatly welcomed!

I am so looking forward the months ahead of research and to getting involved in the Friends' programme. Lockdown may currently prevent us entering the Gallery and seeing its works in person, but it certainly won't dampen our love of art and our ability to get involved in upcoming Gallery events! I do hope I will be able to meet some of you soon.

**Grace England** November 2020

## A NEWLY APPOINTED COMMITTEE MEMBER INTRODUCES HERSELF

### KATE WEST

I am a contemporary engagement curator and producer. I have worked in the arts since I was sixteen, employed as a museum attendant for East Riding Museums and Galleries. I studied Fine Art at Manchester School of Art, predominantly working across sculpture, photography, and light art. My art theory has always been rooted in social history, British taste, and aesthetics.  After graduation I worked in community arts in Hull for around seven years, on projects spanning multiple platforms with a variety of different community groups and partners. I was particularly drawn to arts and health, site-specific commissioning, and co-curation. I gained further experience in producing while working for the Arts Council Creative People and Places Programme and Hull multidisciplinary festival –

Freedom. In 2014 I and two other producers formed ‘Hack & Host’, a creative company with the aim of engaging hard-to-reach communities in arts and culture, and exploring specific ideas around access and inclusion. I joined Hull City of Culture team in January 2017 as the Assistant Curator of a new purpose-built contemporary art gallery. Working with some notable national artists was a particular highlight, and I enjoyed being part of such a momentous year. I have since taken up consultancy work with local charities, helping with funding and programming. I am developing my own curatorial practice through research and further training. I remain passionate about providing opportunities for people in low socio-economic areas, using innovative training techniques to inspire artists and explore arts and health (particularly mental health). I have two young girls whom I encourage to attend as many exhibitions and cultural events as possible. I became involved in maternity mental health, having experienced postnatal psychosis myself, and try to encourage more women to talk about this debilitating illness.

**Kate West** December 2020

*Dr Dorothy Nott, a Former Chair of the Friends, introduces the neo-classical work of the York-born John Flaxman, an artist famous throughout Europe in his own day*

Image of John Flaxman, front of York Art Gallery
Photo credit: Dorothy Nott

## JOHN FLAXMAN (1755-1826)

The Friends will already be familiar with William Etty, not least on account of the exhibition at York Art Gallery in 2011 and his statue in Exhibition Square; and, after a more recent exhibition, Albert Moore and his family will also be celebrated as York artists. But who among us has heard of John Flaxman, yet another York-born artist,[1] and one who rose to international fame? And this, in spite of his likeness on the face of the Gallery and the eponymous avenue in Tang Hall.

The son of a moulder and seller of plaster casts in London, to which the family soon returned to live, Flaxman showed early artistic promise, winning first prize at the Society of Arts for a medallion at the age of 12, followed by a silver medal from the Royal Academy, where he subsequently trained. London was a lively venue for a young man, and Flaxman met up with many young writers and artists, including Thomas Stothard[2] and William Blake, who became two of his closest friends, Blake sometimes collaborating with him in his work.

As early as 1770, Flaxman's father had started supplying the potter Josiah Wedgwood with plaster casts, and it was not long before John junior joined the firm at Etruria, where he stayed from 1775 to 1787, designing

[1] He lived in York for the first six months of his life.

[2] Thomas Stothard RA, painter. Illustrator, and engraver, also had York connections, attending school in Acomb and Tadcaster. One of his works featured the proclamation outside York Minster of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne in June 1837.

bas-reliefs and portrait medallions for Wedgwood's famous jasper ware. The timing was opportune as the production of jasper ware, a fine grade unglazed stoneware, had only been perfected the previous year, to be marketed from 1775 onwards. Flaxman joined a team of highly skilled artists, including George Stubbs, another artist with York connections.[3] Among Flaxman's best-known designs for Wedgwood were *The Dancing Hours* and *The Apotheosis of Homer.*

In 1787 Flaxman travelled to Rome with his wife, Anne Denman, on an extended seven-year study tour – partly funded by Wedgwood – during which he gained an international reputation for his drawings, illustrating the works of Dante, Homer, and Aeschylus, and gaining commissions from influential British patrons. At the same time, he continued to send designs back to Wedgwood as well as managing to supervise modellers in the factory.

Shortly after his return to Britain he was elected in 1797 an Associate of the Royal Academy, and he was made a full member in 1800. By now Flaxman was in demand as the leading neo-classical sculptor in Britain, engaged in large scale memorials, such as those of Lord Nelson and Sir Joshua Reynolds, both in St Paul's Cathedral. Such was his reputation that, in 1810, he accepted the post as the Royal Academy's first Professor of Sculpture, which post he retained until his death in 1826.

John Flaxman, Art Union of London, 1854.
Bronze medal by H.Weighall

[3] Stubbs was taught anatomy at York County Hospital by Dr James Atkinson, the same Dr Atkinson painted by Etty.

Following Flaxman's demise, there was a prolonged debate as to where the body of his work should be housed. Twenty years later, and with the financial and administrative assistance of Henry Crabb Robinson (lawyer, diarist, and one of the founders of University College, London), in collaboration with the Denman family, his drawings, prints and plaster cast models were moved to the College. Among the first visitors to the specially constructed gallery and oculus housing the works was Prince Albert, who headed the list of subscribers to the Flaxman Gallery Fund. Although more than 100 works were lost during the Second World War, the Gallery still presents a spectacular display around a large-scale cast of *St Michael Overcoming Satan*, the original of which can now be seen at Petworth House.

The Flaxman Gallery at University College London
Photo credit: Dorothy Nott

**Dorothy Nott** ©                December 2020

*Ann Petherick, a member of the Friends, writes about the Yorkshire artist Jack Hellewell (1920-2000), who described himself as 'a fanatical painter' and for the last 25 years of his life, after the death of his wife, painted all day and every day. His flat in Ilkley overlooked Ilkley Moor from one window, the town from another. and Wharfedale from another. Each view was constantly changing, and he made the most of them.*

## JACK HELLEWELL - 'A FANATICAL PAINTER'

Jack Hellewell, *Arcade*
Kentmere Gallery

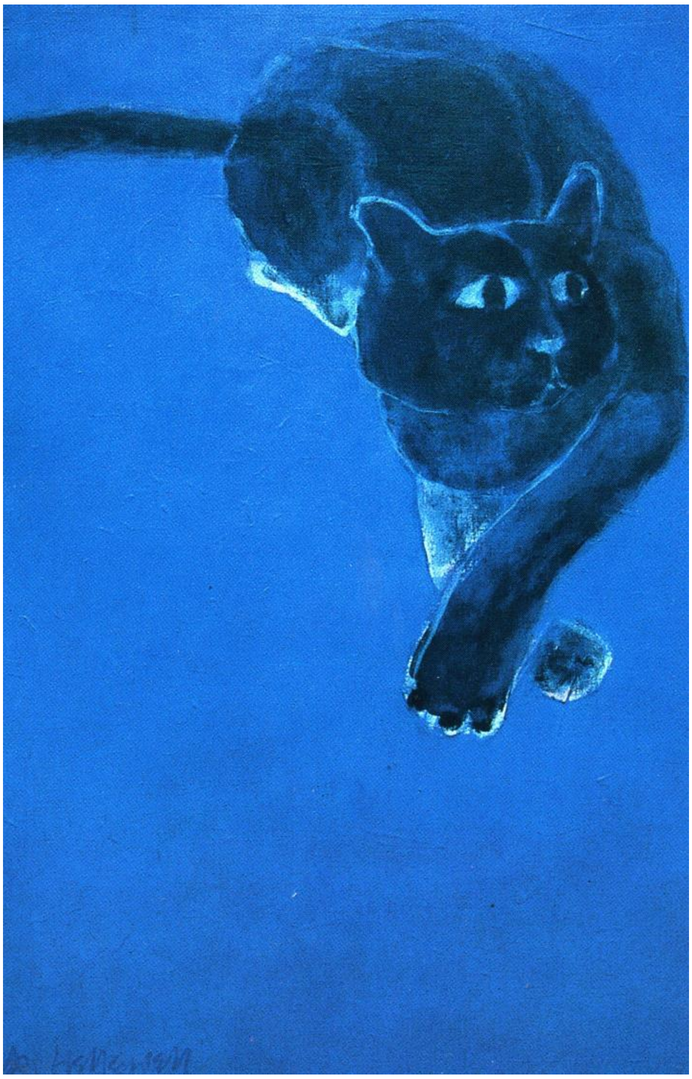
I discovered Jack Hellewell's work in the window of a framing shop in Ilkley in the early 1980s. A few years later, having got to know him, I suggested that perhaps this was not the most appropriate venue for work of his calibre, but such was the modesty of the man that I think he genuinely had no idea what I meant.

Jack was a lifelong painter who drew his inspiration from his surroundings and experiences, but always relied on his memory, rather than sketches or photographs. His travels and encounters had a dramatic impact on his painting, but he refused to sketch, believing that ‘it ties you down’, and rejected photography. He had an uncanny ability to retain the essence of a place, so that years, or even decades, later he could produce a painting and someone who had just visited would say ‘it looked just like that when I was there’.  In this way powerful works on North Africa would suddenly be produced forty years after his war service, or views of European cities from memories of visiting with his young family.

Jack was a Yorkshireman through and through – born in Bradford, trained as a painter at Bradford College of Art 1949-1952, and later living in Menston and Ilkley—but was also well-travelled, both with war service in Egypt, North Africa, and Italy, and later travels to countries such as Austria, New Zealand, the South Seas, and, frequently, Scotland. He also lived briefly in Australia.

For most of his life he worked as a graphic designer, but in 1976 he became a full-time painter. He exhibited at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and other London galleries on several occasions in the 1990s, and his work was featured in a Tyne-Tees Television arts programme. Work was purchased by a number of public galleries in the United Kingdom, by the University of York, and companies such as Barclay's Asset Management, British Rail and Provident Financial, and also the United Nations Building in Vienna. He is included in the definitive publication, *Artists in Britain since 1945* (David Buckman, 1998).

His principal subject matter was landscape, particularly of Yorkshire, approached in a distinctive semi-abstract style, and occasionally also still-life and portraits.  He also painted animals, often inspired by his daughter’s extensive collection, but these were never conventional or sentimental. His cats, for example, are instantly recognisable real cats, whether out on the prowl or curled up by the fire.

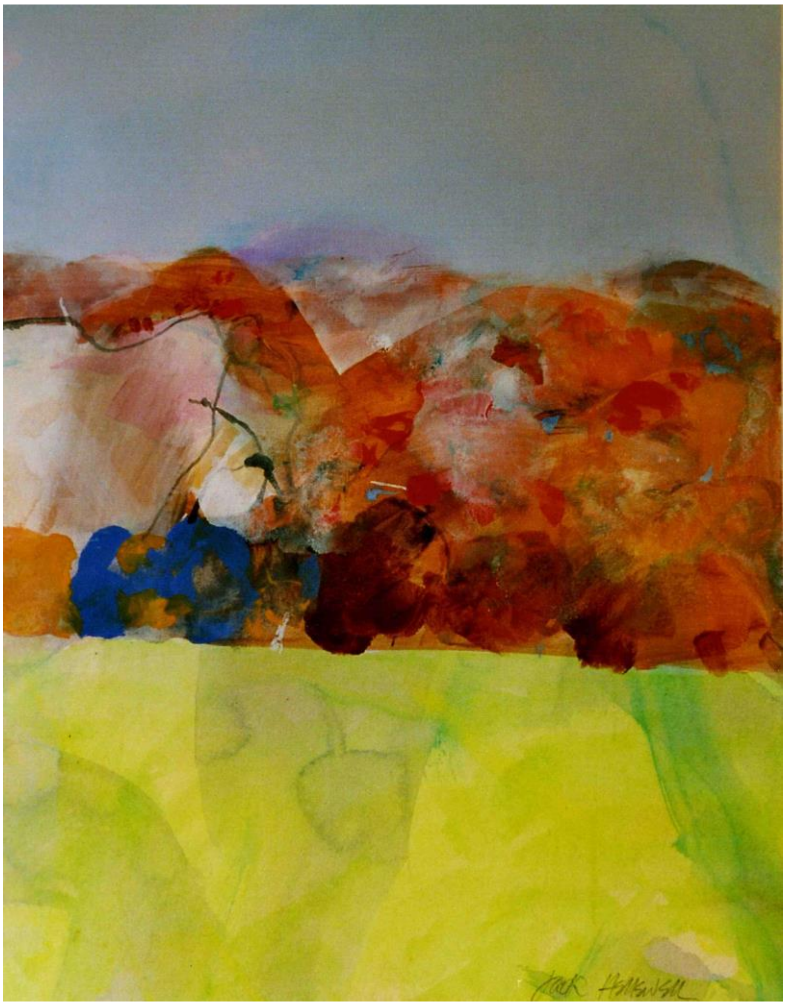


Jack Hellewell, *On the Prowl*
Private collection

He enjoyed the contrast of the intense light of warmer climates compared with the more subtle light found in Britain. He always worked in acrylic, generally now regarded as the amateur's medium, but he had the ability to use it either neat on canvas or diluted on paper, the latter giving the effect of the most delicate of watercolours. He also enjoyed the feeling of movement it conveys which is such a feature of his work, and the contrasts it offers between strong and subtle colours.

I have been showing Jack Hellewell's work in York since the Grape Lane Gallery days in the mid-eighties, and we knew Jack personally for almost twenty years. Visits to his studio were always a pleasure - and a surprise. Initially he would insist 'I haven't done much', but then the portfolios would be opened and, over coffee and chocolate biscuits (his staple diet), an array of stunning paintings would emerge. Like all the best painters, Jack was a quiet and unassuming man. He was always delighted to sell his work but hated having anything to do with the process, and private views were akin to purgatory. And his work is addictive: I have seldom known anyone buy just one of his paintings.

Jack Hellewell is deservedly recognised as one of the major Yorkshire landscape artists of the twentieth century. His family have asked Kentmere House Gallery to manage his artistic estate, ranging from searing wartime experiences and experiments with abstraction, to the landscapes for which he is now best known.



Jack Hellewell, *Bolton Abbey Environs*
Kentmere Gallery

His work was fresh, innovative and powerful in its use of colour, and even in the last few weeks of his life there was no loss of quality. His daughter said the only way she knew he was really ill was when he stopped painting.

**Ann Petherick ©** October 2020

*Candaules, King of Lydia is a painting by William Etty. The Gallery does not own it, but John Roe, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of York and a member of the Friends, makes a plea that Tate Britain, the owner, be approached and asked to lend it to us as a long-term loan.*

## CANDAULES by WILLIAM ETTY

### *WILLIAM ETTY, CANDAULES KING OF LYDIA, SHEWS HIS WIFE BY STEALTH TO GYGES, ONE OF HIS MINISTERS, AS SHE GOES TO BED*

William Etty's painting of Candaules (exhibited 1830), showing his wife to his general Gyges as she prepares for bed, is one of the painter's most enigmatic, controversial, and brilliant works. At the moment it is languishing in the basement of Tate Britain.

Visitors to York Art Gallery were allowed to see the painting back in 2011 during the superb Etty exhibition, mounted in collaboration with the Department of History of Art at the University of York, and curated by Sarah Burnage and others (exhibition catalogue, *William Etty, Art and Controversy*, ed. Sarah Burnage, Mark Hallett, and Laura Turner, Philip Wilson Publishers). The painting was in fact the first work that greeted visitors on entering the exhibition, a sure sign of its significance and importance. The story behind the painting is a strange one, and is told in Book One of Herodotus's *Histories*: the king of Lydia is so enchanted by his wife's beauty that he cannot resist showing her naked to another man, in this case his friend the general Gyges. The queen, a modest woman, would never consent to this, and so it has to be done by stealth. Gyges is hidden in the royal bedchamber, so that he may watch the queen undress for the night. She catches sight of Gyges and later summons him with an ultimatum: either he kills Candaules and marries her himself, or he dies. Not a difficult choice. And so Candaules pays for his foolishness with his life, and Gyges marries the queen and rules over the kingdom.

It was not a particularly well-known story, and scholars are at a loss as to how Etty came by it. Leonard Robinson in his thoroughly researched study (*Etty: The Life and Art*, *2007*) declares himself puzzled.  Etty did have quite a good classical library, and he may have found the story for himself. It is more likely, however, that another painter brought it to his attention. The Italian Renaissance, which was a great inspiration to him, throws up almost no examples. I have found one, Gyges and King Candaules, a tiny painting by Dosso Dossi, a Cinquecento work (around 1508-10), which hangs in the Galleria Borghese in Rome.

The Dossi painting is curious in that the three figures confront each other openly, and there is no suggestion of stealth. Candaules shows the largely exposed body of the queen to Gyges, who inspects her as if looking at a prospective purchase. She keeps her eyes modestly on the ground. The scene is outdoors, with no hint of a bedroom, against classical columns with a suggestion of a pastoral background. The art historian Judy Egerton observes that this is a unique portrayal of the subject, with no Peeping Tom element. Her assessment can be found in her unpublished correspondence (1975-87) with the novelist Anthony Powell, who gives the legend full treatment in *Temporary Kings* (1973), part of his cycle *A Dance to the Music of Time*. (Egerton's extensive collection of Candaules material is held uncatalogued by the Paul Mellon Centre, London).

We may look further north. Jacob Jordaens's famous study, King Candaules of Lydia Showing his Wife to Gyges (National Museum, Stockholm, 1646) surprises us principally because of the attitude of the queen, who, in a rear-view Venus-Callipygian pose, smiles back over her shoulder directly at the viewer, while ignoring Gyges and Candaules, who are tucked away to one side in the manner of the haunted voyeuristic onlookers that we find in depictions of the rival Biblical tradition of *Susannah and the Elders*. The chamber pot at the queen's foot introduces a cheerfully unregal, domestic note. Etty may have known this painting, or at least known of it, as he was a fervent admirer of Jordaens, and was immensely pleased when he obtained Jordaens's *Bacchanalian Revel* (see Richard Green's contribution to the 2011 exhibition catalogue). Jordaens's queen may have inspired Etty, who in turn inspired other painters of the subject, such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, whose painting of 1858, King Candaules is in the Museo de Arte de Ponce.

What then of Etty's interpretation of the subject? He too, like Jordaens, produces a radical departure from the conventional terms of the Candaules theme, but (the rear-view posture of the queen apart) he strikes a different tone and attitude from the Flemish artist. The principal innovation lies in Etty's extension of nudity to the two men. Although the king is sometimes painted as near-naked, in the bedroom, it is none the less the queen who remains the main focus of attention. Characteristic of this is Eustache le Sueur's portrayal, King Candaules shows Gyges his wife Queen Nyssia (c.1645, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida); this work is traditionally attributed to Jacques Stella, but Egerton makes a convincing case for le Sueur.


*The Imprudence of Candaules King of Lydia*
Print after Lesueur, 1787


In most portrayals Gyges remains clothed and quite hidden. He is certainly unobtrusive. In Etty's painting the queen occupies a central and dominant position, with the two men on either side. She stands with one leg on the floor and the other kneeling on the couch or bed; both arms are extended above her, emphasising the extent of her back. Candaules stretches out languorously on the same couch, and he is clearly naked, though we only see his head and torso and right hip. His face looks strangely mask-like. Is it perhaps over-painted? If so, one wonders why. His elbow discreetly covers the genital area. Gyges seems to be moving forward on the right side of the frame. His chest, shoulders, and right arm are all bare. He is covered by some garment from waist to thigh, but, beneath, his legs are revealed. Although he is often described by commentators as tiptoeing away, there is nothing fugitive about his movements. On the contrary he appears to burst in upon the scene.

All three figures are naked or partially so. This produces a special dynamic in the relationship between them. We frequently hear from art historians that Etty's figures are transposed from a life class, as if this made them invariably artificial. What matters is the situation in which they find themselves in the relationship that the artist has conceived for them. As we look at the three persons in the Candaules bedroom setting, different interpretative possibilities may occur to us. The queen appears to look down demurely, but her body half turns invitingly towards at Gyges. And what of the king? If we compare the two male bodies, we are struck by the difference between them. Whereas the general has a powerful masculine torso and shoulders, which are leaning forward in a commanding movement, the king lies almost in the traditionally female, yielding posture, his body much slighter, with the muscular tone of a youth instead of a man. He too seems to be looking at Gyges, ostensibly to gauge his reaction to the queen's beauty, but he may in truth be presenting his own body to Gyges's gaze. In short, is Gyges being presented with two competing objects of desire?

Curiously, this painting more than any other of Etty's has produced dismay, opprobrium, and confusion among both his critics and admirers. Leonard Robinson notably found the subject embarrassing and wondered why Etty did not explain his intentions more fully (p. 158). But if one is going to accuse the painting of voyeurism, as Robinson seems to do, that is a charge that could be levelled scattershot at Etty. Why object to this one? Yet Alexander Gilchrist, Etty's first biographer (1855), singled it out for special dispraise. Interestingly, he talks about the nude form, and does not limit this to the representation of the female. The curators of our 2011 exhibition also seem to be at a loss how to account for such a painting and attribute a cynical motive to Etty. They conclude, 'it is hard to see the painting as anything but a deliberate attempt by the artist to shock and scandalise' (exhibition catalogue, p. 127).

However, in my view, what Etty has done is to show heterosexual and homosexual desire together, either overlapping or undifferentiated, in a single scene. The grouping of the three figures, from a compositional point of view, gives frontal, rear, and lateral perspectives. Their proximity intensifies the sensation of desire like no other work of the artist, and the criss-cross effect of sexual attraction (not just female to male but also male to male) produces a compelling, if unsettling, narrative. Whether or not this has been previously recognised (so far I have found nothing), it is, I would argue, what has thrown viewers and commentators for generations.

I doubt whether the Tate will allow us to borrow the *Candaules* painting more or less permanently, as I am hoping, but surely it is worth asking.

We ourselves could take a step forward by being less reticent about our own Etty holdings. He is after all arguably the city's greatest painter, and we should not be bashful about it. Let us take him at his own word and show a little more of his tribute to 'God's most glorious work—woman'. Back in 1943 William Gaunt and F. Gordon Roe (no relation) made no bones about what constituted the essence of his art. Like Millais before them, and the art critic the late Tom Lubbock since, they saluted Etty as the one British nineteenth-century painter who understood the flesh. *Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball*, which hangs in the Burton Gallery, is an accomplished painting, but the two young women portrayed are wearing clothing. Kenneth Clark was once the possessor of *The Indian Girl*, a painting which Gaunt and Roe describe as 'of outstanding importance', yet in his book *The Nude* (1956) Clark is briefly and condescendingly dismissive of 'poor' Etty. One really does wonder at times. The Gallery now owns Etty's *The Indian Girl* (1840), about which Gaunt and Roe go on to say: 'The Indian Girl's litheness, her roundness, structure, appeal and strength, are stated to—even for Etty—an outstanding degree of conviction' (*Etty and the Nude*, p. 80). If we can't get *Candaules*—and even if we can—I think we should put the *Indian Girl* proudly on display.

**John Roe ©** December 2020