

Artwork of the Month June 2021

Richard Green, Curator of York Art Gallery from 1977 to 2003, explores the fascinating details of one of the collection's finest Victorian paintings of a modern-life subject and reveals how its true identity was belatedly rediscovered.

Belgravia: 'Refreshing the Weary' by Robert Hannah



Robert Hannah (1812–1909), *Refreshing the Weary*, exhibited 1847, oil on canvas, 134.5 x 113 cm, York Art Gallery, YORAG 1190

One of the strengths of York Art Gallery's collection lies in a sizeable group of early and mid-Victorian paintings of modern-life subjects deriving mostly from the collection of John Burton, bequeathed in 1882 to the Yorkshire Fine Art and Industrial Institution. Burton's pictures became the founding collection of what is now York Art Gallery when the Institution's building in Exhibition Square and its contents were purchased by the York Corporation in 1892. *Refreshing the Weary*, Robert Hannah's single exhibit at the Royal Academy, London, in 1847, was not part of the Burton collection, for it was bequeathed anonymously to the Gallery only in 1970. However, as a vivid presentation of contemporary life ten years into Queen Victoria's long reign, it aligns itself well with Burton's paintings while enhancing them by offering, in comparison, a distinctly metropolitan focus.¹

The scene is set in a street or small square in a fashionable part of London, which the *Art-Union* critic writing of the Academy exhibition was quick to liken to 'the far-famed Belgravia'.² In the distance a terrace of stucco-fronted houses rises high through perhaps six or seven storeys and in front of that stand two houses with projecting square entrance porches, their roofs supported by pairs of Doric columns. Research has failed to identify a specific location. However, the architectural character of the setting, even if imaginary, does indeed resemble that of Belgravia, a housing estate for the super-rich of the day developed in south-west London by the builder Thomas Cubitt to the commission of the Marquess of Westminster, the landowner, over the years 1825 to 1855.



Details from *Refreshing the Weary*

Against this background, in the middle distance, we see the bustle of delivery boys conveying bread, meat, and fruit and vegetables to the great houses, presumably early in the morning. On the left a kitchen maid receives a large loaf from a baker's boy at the tradesmen's gate to the side of the nearest house. On the far right a delivery boy carrying pails strung from his yoke returns to a van lettered with the name and address of the Wenham Lake Ice Company in The Strand. Astonishingly, this firm – in reality – shipped ice across the Atlantic from Wenham Lake in Massachusetts to London, starting in 1844. The ice was highly prized, it seems not least by the Queen, because of the purity of the lake's water, and it was clearly a luxury commodity. This particularly topical inclusion and the Cubitt-style architectural setting proclaim the modernity of the scene.

However, the main narrative, which underlies the painting's title, takes place in the foreground. A mother and three children, laden with baggage,

have come up to London and made a brief stop, needing directions to reach their final destination. Tired and thirsty, the mother, seen from the back although almost lost in shadow, and her young boy and girl have rested beside the pump on the left, only to find they cannot use it as the arm is padlocked. However, the man on the right, described by the critic of 1847 as a 'potbearer of some neighbouring public-house', and perhaps a former soldier making a frugal living from such a humble trade, takes pity on the little boy and quenches his thirst. The title of the picture would have been readily recognised as an allusion to a well-known verse in the Old Testament where God promises Jeremiah that He 'will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.'³

These are the facts of the foreground narrative provided by Hannah, but teasingly without elaboration of the story. As is so often the case with such paintings the viewer is left to speculate on the past and future of what is visibly enacted. We thus ponder the precise circumstances of this family group in the 1840s, a time of increasing migration from country to city, Could it be that the mother is a recent widow and she and her children have decamped to London to join relations or friends? Or perhaps she is not a widow and they are hoping to be reunited with the husband and father already working in London? Whatever the case, it seems likely that great houses of the kind seen in the picture will offer employment opportunities.

The two narratives intersect at the centre of the canvas. Here the elder daughter of the 'weary' family is seeking directions from a senior domestic servant, perhaps a housekeeper, who is making her way towards the foreground pump, an empty water jug and key to the padlock in her hand.



Detail from *Refreshing the Weary*

As the woman thoughtfully studies the address on a letter which is proffered to her, the sharp-witted delivery boy to the right is already ahead of the game, promptly pointing the way. Almost lost to sight between the foreground and middle-distance groups are two finely dressed girls, presumably sisters and residents of one of the grand houses nearby. The older girl carries a hoop over her shoulder while her younger companion has a toy horse in tow.

Surprisingly little is recorded about Robert Hannah (1812–1909). He was a Scot, born in Creetown, Kirkcudbrightshire, the fifth of nine children, the eldest of whom, John, is remembered as a poet. Perhaps encouraged by his brother, the younger Hannah left his home town to study art (but exactly where is uncertain) and worked successfully in London, exhibiting at the Royal Academy and elsewhere between 1842 and 1870. However, he was not known by the Gallery to be the author of the present painting until around 1990 since, at the time of acquisition in 1970, it had been identified as the work of John Faed and titled *The Thirsty Customer*. The rediscovery of the painting's true authorship and the artist's own title was made by Simon Taylor, then at Sotheby's Belgravia (coincidentally but appropriately), who was handling an oil sketch clearly produced in preparation for the York picture, the former of which had kept its identity.



Robert Hannah, *Study for 'Refreshing the Weary'*, 1846-47, oil on canvas, 61 x 52.1 cm, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund, B1993.8

The sketch, about a quarter of the size of the exhibited work, was subsequently sold at Phillips, London, in 1992 and acquired by the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.⁴ The identity of the York picture can be confirmed by its close correspondence to the description of Hannah's 1847 exhibit in the *Art-Union* review of that year's Academy show, referred to above and here quoted more fully:

In the foreground are 'the weary' – a boy and girl, the former benefiting by the offices of the potbearer of some neighbouring public-house. In the background, as well as can be seen, are a cookmaid receiving meat and other things from butchers, bakers, &c. The scene is closed in by houses, like those of the far-famed Belgravia.⁵

The Faed brothers, John and Thomas, were slightly younger fellow Scots from Kirkcudbrightshire, both better known artists than Robert Hannah, then and now.⁶ Curiously, the name 'J. Faed' appears in the York painting on the yoke borne by the ice delivery boy but this is probably a false signature applied later. Hannah's own initials appear on the basket of fruit and vegetables balanced on the head of the sharp-witted delivery boy near the centre.



Detail from *Refreshing the Weary*

The *Art-Union* critic's helpful description of the content of Hannah's painting is preceded and followed by sentences opening with glowing praise – for a 'work executed with much nerve, decision, and character' and displaying 'executive power, good colour, and arrangement'. However, this is abruptly qualified by regret at the choice of subject – as 'one of vulgar cast' and 'not a theme somewhat more aspiring'. A century and three-quarters later, though, it is precisely the subject matter of Hannah's painting that contributes so much to the work's richness of interest, combined of course with an extraordinary level of detail. We admire Hannah's ability to present a microcosm of London life of his own time in a robust, objective and largely unsentimental way, which parallels the literary approach of Charles Dickens, the artist's exact contemporary.⁷

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¹ This picture was on almost continuous display at York Art Gallery until 2003. So too were most of the items which have featured hitherto in the online Artwork of the Month series, including the paintings by Gilpin, Lely, Moore, Osborn, Parmigianino and Steer, the Netherlandish roundel portrait of a man and the marble copies of the Furietti Centaurs.

² 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Art-Union*, 9 (June 1847): 198.

³ *Jeremiah*, 31: 25.

⁴ Phillips, London, 23 June 1992, lot 128.

⁵ 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Art-Union*, 9 (June 1847): 198.

⁶ Thomas Faed contributed the figures to John Frederick Herring's painting *Barney, Leave the Girls Alone!* in the Burton Bequest.

⁷ Dickens purchased two paintings by Hannah, *The Novel* and *The Play*, from the Royal Academy exhibition of 1852. In 1858 Hannah produced two pictures of Dickens giving a public reading, both now in the Charles Dickens Museum, London.