

Artwork of the Month September 2025

William Etty: *The Indian Girl*

Professor John Roe, until recently Secretary of the Friends, writes about a favourite painting by York-Born artist William Etty, whose authenticity has been questioned and which, in a novel interpretation, he connects with John Keats' poem Endymion.



William Etty (1787-1849), *The Indian Girl*, 1840-1845, oil on millboard, 76cm x 56cm, YORAG : 577.
Image credit: York Museums Trust

This painting presents us with something of an enigma. It is oil on millboard (a favourite surface of Etty's), and measures 30"x 22" (or 76cm x 56cm). I discovered its existence when I was working on a piece on Etty's famous—'infamous'—painting *Candaules shows his wife by stealth to Gyges*.

I came across *The Indian Girl* online, and was surprised to find we had it here in York. I asked our Senior Curator Dr Beatrice Bertram to confirm this, and she did. I was given the opportunity of looking at the painting, and I was delighted by its beauty. My first thought when I saw the online

version was that it didn't look like one of the more characteristic Etty female nudes that I knew. But I had no reason to doubt its authenticity. The pose is not untypical. You get that with his painting *Musidora* (inspired by James Thomson's eighteenth-century poem *The Seasons*), a woman posing partly in water, showing off her limbs and torso. But the effects of light are different from those in a number of other of Etty's female depictions. A dark skin for one thing, and a special effect of light reflecting on the skin rather than seeming to emanate from it; a shadow of the girl is thrown on the wall behind her.

Like most if not all of Etty's depictions of a woman naked, the facial expression is modest and expresses no suspect or provocative emotion. She is not a sly creature. On the contrary she is quite unassuming. She does not look towards the viewer; neither is she bashfully turning her gaze away. She appears to be completely self-possessed, and she is looking at something that engages her full attention. What that something might be we will think about in a moment in relation to Keats. She is unselfconscious and in no way manipulating her beauty or using it for advantage. However, what the viewer makes of it is another matter. As we all know, Etty was attacked by some contemporaries for indecency, and more latterly as a soft-porn purveyor. But the flesh is alive in Etty. And that is not something you can say for many other nineteenth-century British artists. We have an example here in the Burton Gallery, *A Venus* by Albert Moore; this to my eye has a marbled lifelessness.

I will now say something about the provenance and history of acquisition of *The Indian Girl*. It was not recorded in any sale in Etty's lifetime or even some time afterward; nor was it presented to the Royal Academy for exhibition. It appears to have been commissioned privately, as were many of Etty's life studies, quite often by clergymen. Apparently. *The Indian Girl* only became known about in 1934, once it had come into the possession of the famous art historian Sir Kenneth Clark. It was exhibited at Burlington House that year, and received a mention in the Burlington Magazine. Clark himself was rather dismissive of Etty in his study *The Nude*, which I feel is a bit craven, seeing that he owned this painting, and it presumably had hung on his wall for a good many years. But Clark did concede that Etty 'was one of those who, in Diderot's words, *ont senti la chair* (Clark, p. 150), that is, 'he felt the flesh.'

The painting attracted the attention of two art historians, William Gaunt and F. Gordon Roe (no relation), in their study *Etty and the Nude* (1943), where they give it high praise:

In Sir Kenneth Clark's *Indian Girl*—a work of outstanding importance—we have the gleam of flesh, its texture and semi-transparency; but not flesh alone. The *Indian Girl*'s litheness, her roundness, her structure, appeal and strength are stated to—even for Etty—an outstanding degree of conviction.

(Gaunt and Roe, p. 80)

No wonder then that Hans Hess, the York Gallery's curator at the time, was delighted to acquire it from Christie's. He bought it for 189 guineas in 1951; interestingly, it appears to have come up for sale separately from other items in Clark's collection. So it went on display in York with 17 other Etty paintings in what was then the South Gallery. We did the old boy proud in those days.

Almost immediately it was tampered with. Someone, Hess thought probably a schoolboy, tried to write graffiti on the painting with a fountain pen, but it went through the paint and left only a half inch mark of ink. This was easily repaired; it's hard to see anywhere where the mark might have been. Hess was coy in his letter to the restorer about exactly where the vandalism occurred (the *Yorkshire Evening Press* likewise), leaving us to guess, if we feel so inclined.

All very good so far, but clouds of a different kind would threaten the painting, and these concern its authenticity. The next significant reference that I am aware of occurs seven years later in Dennis Farr's book of 1958. He points to alterations or over-painting and specifies the lips and the drapery—'colours not in Etty's palette' (Farr, p. 175)—but not the torso. He had a close look, obviously. Significantly, I think, he does not call the attribution of the painting into question. His book includes his own catalogue of essential works by Etty, necessarily selective, as so much is in existence, whether in public or private hands. He affirms that the selection he has made lists 'works only of the highest quality', meaning that he doesn't doubt the painting's *bona fides*. He refers to various exhibitions: it was shown in Oxford, Paris, and Hamburg, and then in Stockholm, Oslo, and Copenhagen on a British Council tour of Scandinavia in 1949-50.

In 1979, however, a picture researcher Linda Proud asked the Gallery for a transparency of the painting. The then curator Richard Green replied saying that the painting was of doubtful authenticity, had been repainted often in the twentieth century, and might even be a 'complete fake'. Mr Green's letter is in the Gallery archive on the painting. He is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Department of History of Art at the University of York,

so I wrote to him and he reaffirmed his conviction that it is not by Etty, giving me a detailed account of his doubts. He did not say if anyone had corroborated his views. What he does say is that the skin or flesh is 'hard and glossy' and does not reflect Etty's technique. He also says that throwing a shadow on the wall behind the figure depicted is not a practice of the painter. I am not an expert, and I do not have the grounds to challenge these views, but at the same time I find myself disagreeing with them. Perhaps because I am keen for the painting to be by Etty. Let me remind you of Gaunt's and Roe's words: 'the gleam of flesh, its texture and semi-transparency.'

As far as I know the painting was quietly withdrawn from display and has not been on show since. Sadly, in my view, it was not brought out for inclusion in the exhibition of 2011 devoted to Etty organised by Sarah Burnage and others. Had it been displayed, a wider public, including outside experts, would have had an opportunity to comment. I know that Beatrice Bertram has her doubts about it, but I believe they are not the same as Richard Green's. Beatrice is uncertain about the limbs of *The Indian Girl*. However, she tells me she is willing for the painting to go on display once more, with appropriate labelling expressing the discordant views that it inspires. If we do put it out it will need to be cleaned first, as time and whatever other circumstances have dulled its original glow (a project for the Friends of York Art Gallery?).

Now for the relation to John Keats. What part did Keats have in influencing the idea behind the painting? This might be something to argue even if a painter other than Etty did the work, but it would be more satisfying if it was Etty, especially given his strong penchant for mythology, which he introduced into many titles of paintings of women: Pandora, Venus, Iphigenia, Andromeda, Musidora, and so on. He shared his interest in the mythological with Keats; both of them looked back to the Renaissance for inspiration, and responded to the sensibility of the artists and poets of that period.

Keats wrote and published *Endymion* in 1818. *Endymion* tells the story of the moon goddess Cynthia falling in love with the mortal Endymion whom she sees sleeping naked on Mount Latmos. Endymion has requested the gift of sleep from Jupiter, which is why he nods off so easily. As the goddess of chastity, Cynthia is not supposed to indulge in sensual love. They meet under cover of night for their assignations. She is also known as Diana and more loosely Phoebe, all of them manifestations of chastity. Keats uses each of these names, and Endymion is confused by whichever goddess he next sees—as is the reader as often as not. The poem is

divided into four books and is 4,000 lines long. It is Keats's first attempt at an epic poem, imitating the Elizabethan and Renaissance poets: Spenser, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton. It is full of echoes of all of them. The language of the poem is sensuous and quite erotic in its description of Endymion's encounter with Cynthia. A lot in common with Etty, then. Etty would have been around thirty-one years old when *Endymion* was published, an impressionable age. In his autobiography Etty lists a number of pictures of which he is particularly proud to be the painter, including one entitled *Diana and Endymion*, then owned by a certain H. Monro (Etty, *Autobiography*, p. 40). Unfortunately, this painting has subsequently disappeared, and may hang unregarded on a wall or be hidden in an attic somewhere, waiting to re-emerge. By mentioning it Etty displays his knowledge of and interest in the myth.

Keats's poem is not altogether successful, and he was not happy with it; he probably would have worked on it, had he lived. But what matters is that the poem was by him. In 1819 Keats wrote and published the great odes, which made him immortal. Not only that but in 1821, following Keats's death, Shelley published his elegy *Adonais*, which brought Keats further into prominence. After that everyone was reading him. If, as I assume, Etty knew the poem, the sensuous language which always keeps an ideal vision in view would have appealed to him. Keats was keen to see a reunion of body and soul, which is true of certain Elizabethans like Spenser, and true of Etty, as revealed in his assertions that woman (naked and unadorned) is 'God's most glorious work' (Etty, *Autobiography*; in Gaunt and Roe, p. 17).

The mythological vision is everywhere in the poem. So where does *The Indian Girl* come in? Sceptics about the painting would make the obvious point that a dealer could easily have dreamed up the title, as we know nothing of its origins: 'She looks Indian enough, so let's call her that.' But in the fourth and final book of Keats's poem Endymion does in fact meet an Indian girl, a fugitive from her homeland, who longs to return. He has been fruitlessly pursuing Cynthia/Diana/Phoebe over three books in what seems an on-off love affair. He hears the Indian Girl singing a plaintive song regretting her leaving her home by the Ganges to follow the tribe of Bacchus, the god of wine and hedonism.

Several times Endymion makes a lover's address to her: he asks if she did not 'murmur about Indian streams' (IV. 143).

Each time he addresses her he uses the key word:

‘My sweetest Indian’ (648)

‘My Indian bliss’ (664)

‘Sweet Indian’ (910)

Endymion has decided that he has had enough of the elusive moon goddess. This girl is here and he will take and embrace her. He steps forward to do this—and behold a transformation. The Indian girl turns into Cynthia / Phoebe!

At which that dark-eyed stranger stood elate
And said, in a new voice, but sweet as love,
To Endymion's amaze: ‘By Cupid's dove,
And so thou shalt! [embrace me] and by the lily truth
Of my own breast thou shalt, beloved youth!’
And as she spake, into her face there came
Light, *as reflected from a silver flame* [my italics]:
Her long black hair swell'd ampler, in display
Full golden; in her eyes a brighter day
Dawn'd blue and full of love. Aye, he beheld
Phœbe, his passion! joyous she upheld
Her lucid bow, continuing thus: ‘Drear, drear
Has our delaying been; but foolish fear
Withheld me first; and then decrees of fate;
And then 'twas fit that from this mortal state
Thou shouldst, my love, by some unlook'd for change
Be spiritualiz'd.’

(*Endymion*, IV. 977-993)

The integration of spirit and body. That would make complete sense to William Etty.

We can now understand what the Indian Girl is looking at: she is looking at the moon. The light that illuminates her body is moonlight: ‘light, as reflected from a silver flame’. Moonlight casts the shadow on the wall behind her. That particular technique may be unusual for Etty, but it is perfectly intelligible here. She is about to be transformed.

A more than usually indirect and subtle way of referring to a myth, but one Etty was quite capable of in my view. Another dimension to a fascinating painting!

I would like to thank Dr Beatrice Bertram and her staff for kindly allowing us to view the actual painting of *The Indian Girl*, which is normally kept in store. I hope it will be possible to display it in the near future.

References

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