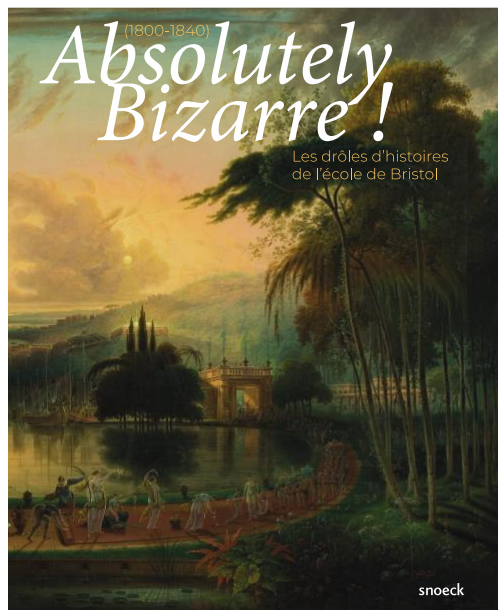


Absolutely Bizarre !

Les drôles d'histoires de l'école de Bristol



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A l'occasion de sa saison consacrée à l'art britannique, le musée des Beaux-Arts souhaite mettre en lumière cet aspect particulier de la peinture anglaise en présentant, du 28 mai au 20 septembre 2020 à la Galerie des Beaux-Arts, une exposition intitulée « Absolutely Bizarre. Les drôles d'histoires de l'École de Bristol » en collaboration avec le Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

Le musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux se distingue parmi les musées de région par la qualité de son fonds d'art britannique (peintures, dessins, estampes et sculptures). Ce corpus de diverses provenances (Musée Nationaux Récupération, legs ou achats), essentiellement composé de portraits et de tableaux d'Histoire, compte des œuvres de Sir Joshua Reynolds ou de Sir Thomas Lawrence, ainsi que d'artistes plus rares en France comme Benjamin West et Johan Zoffany. Le public n'a que rarement l'occasion d'admirer ces trésors dans leur ensemble. L'événement Une belle saison britannique organisé au musée des Beaux-Arts et à la galerie des beaux-arts de Bordeaux propose de remédier à cela au travers de deux expositions qui rythmeront simultanément le printemps et l'été 2020.

Les collections d'art britannique du musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux, l'un des rares musées de région riche de ce patrimoine, forment un corpus cohérent d'une trentaine de tableaux, dessins, estampes et sculptures. L'occasion de les découvrir au sein d'une exposition inédite, aux côtés d'œuvres prêtées exceptionnellement par le musée du Louvre, partenaire de notre belle saison britannique, constitue un événement majeur du printemps – été 2020.

Une part importante de cette exposition est consacrée à l'art du portrait, domaine dans lequel excellaient les peintres britanniques depuis le XVII^e siècle. Les maîtres du genre sont tous représentés, à commencer par Sir Anton van Dyck qui contribua au renouvellement des codes de l'art du portrait comme en atteste le modello de son Double portrait de Charles-Louis de Simmeren et du prince Rupert de Palatinat, neveu du roi (musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux). Suivent ensuite Sir Joshua Reynolds, représenté par

son célèbre Master Hare (musée du Louvre) et par plusieurs portraits saisissants (dont Richard Robinson, évêque d'Armagh, musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux), mais aussi Allan Ramsay et Gilbert Stuart, auteurs de merveilleux portraits féminins. Ce tour d'horizon du portrait britannique culmine avec celui de John Hunter, par Sir Thomas Lawrence (musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux). Dans le domaine de la peinture d'Histoire, l'exposition réserve une belle place à des artistes peu représentés en France : James Ward, avec un superbe Baptême du Christ (musée du Louvre), Benjamin West et Johan Zoffany, représentés par de grands tableaux à thématiques mythologiques. Notons également la représentation du genre typiquement anglo-saxon de la « conversation piece » (portrait narratif de groupe) ainsi que celle du paysage, incarné par des œuvres atypiques conçues en réaction au courant du Sublime (John Martin, Macbeth et les trois sorcières, musée des Beaux-Arts).

C'est donc un voyage captivant au gré d'œuvres novatrices et audacieuses qu'offre le musée des Beaux-Arts, avec la complicité du musée du Louvre, en guise de première partie de la Belle Saison britannique.

Bird had grown up in Wolverhampton, where in his early teens he had been apprenticed to a large firm of japanners – japanning being a technique of covering furniture and other household objects with black varnish in imitation of Oriental lacquer, which was then decorated with a mixture of gilding, oil painting or staid work. An example is a tray perpetually attributed to Bird (Fig. 2), bearing a winter scene freely copied from an engraving after George Morland (1796, 1804), one of the most popular painters in England during the 1790s and very early 1800s; the tray is most unlikely to have been decorated before 1803, the year when John Baptist Smith's print after Morland's 'Breaking the Ice' was published. If the copy is indeed by Bird – whose show continued to work as a japanner after moving to Bristol in 1794 – it links him to a genre tradition that extended back through Morland and other current practitioners such as Francis Wheatley (1747-1805) and Julius Caesar Ibbotson (1759-1817) to Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), and in turn from Gainsborough and the artists of the French 1800s to its origins in the seventeenth-century Netherlands.



Fig. 2
Edward Bird
The Old Adair's Boy
1804, oil on canvas, 10.5 x 15.5 cm, 1804
Wolverhampton Art Gallery

Fig. 3
After D. Edward Bird
Old Adair's Boy
1804, oil on canvas, 10.5 x 15.5 cm, 1804
Wolverhampton Art Gallery

Fig. 4
Although there were some fine examples of Dutch and Flemish genre painting in Bristol private collections, Bird's knowledge of such works is likely to have come mainly from engravings. The print after a collaboration between the Orleans collection (Fig. 3), for example, looks to have supplied him with the basic compositional idea for the Old Adair's Boy of 1804 (Fig. 4), which demonstrates an adequate command of the Flemish master's idiom, albeit less assured than Wilkie's. While competent enough, there is nothing in this little picture to indicate that Bird stood on the verge of bursting onto the national art scene as a major painter of genre subjects. But his situation was just about to change dramatically: an engraver-turned-auctioneer Robert Hartley Colman, who had come to Bristol on other business, stopped by Bird's studio, where one picture so impressed him that he persuaded the artist to allow him to take it back with him to the capital, for the purpose of submitting it to the next exhibition of the Royal Academy. The work in question was called Good News, and though the original has sadly been lost, what appears to be a faithful copy has recently come to light (Fig. 5).



Edward Bird and the Bristol school of genre painting 5



Cat. 15

Edward BIRD
 Worksheets, 171 – Book, 181
The Departure for London

185
 Oil on panel
 n. 142, W. 128cm
 Bristol, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery 40442

Since 1935 Bristol Museum & Art Gallery's collection of works by Edward Bird has included a preparatory sketch for his acclaimed painting *The Departure for London*, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1855 and included in this worksheet.

The image shows a family in their home preparing for their son's imminent departure. Such a scene was similar in sentiment to those often found in contemporary literature, and would become a staple of the Victorian novel. Two women are packing the young man's belongings while the elderly father bids farewell to his son, who is leaving to begin professional life in the Capital, and, with luck, to make his fortune. A young boy announces the arrival of the coach – seen through a window in the background – with eager gestures.

In 2015 the museum was able to acquire the finished painting, signed 'E. Bird R.A.' at the bottom left of centre, which in 1855 had been owned by the *New Monthly Magazine*. A happy expression of affectionate sentiment – of tender feeling and discriminatory observation – which cannot fail to appeal to the heart¹⁴.

The comparison with the sketch shows that in the finished painting Bird added the figure of another young woman and a small child to better balance his composition. Both figures emotionally intensify the picture's portrayal of loving family life – a recurring theme in Bird's oeuvre.

The painting shows Bird's awareness of the French artist Jean-Baptiste Greuze¹⁵, but also highlights the popularity of 17th-century Dutch genre painting in 19th-century Bristol, where the artist patron Daniel Wade Acraman had assembled a sizeable collection of Dutch and Flemish paintings.

Notes

¹⁴ London, *Chronicle*, 12 June 1855 no. 187; then London, *The Fine Art Society*, London, *Chronicle's*, 19 March 2005, url of the item: <http://www.britainonline.com/chronicle/19031905.html>

¹⁵ *New Monthly Magazine & Universal Register*, 1855, p. 103; Acraman's *Inventory of Arts*, 1855, p. 188; *Country Life*, March 1962, p. 80; *Picturehouse*, 1962, p. 25; *The Art*, 2005.

¹⁶ *Royal Academy*, 1855, no. 52; *Westminster & London*, 1962, no. 65.



28

LES PEINTRES DE GENÈVE ET LA CONNEXION SOCIALE 29