the Whitworth

Audio Descriptions transcript

April 2021

AUDIO DESCRIPTIONS

Audio descriptions of artworks from the collection of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION 1: Furness Abbey, Lancashire, from the North East, Edward Dayes (1763-1804). Pencil, Pen And Ink, Watercolour.

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Furness Abbey, Lancashire, from the North East, Edward Dayes (1763-1804)

This watercolour is of Furness Abbey in Lancashire. Furness Abbey is the principal monastic ruin of Cumbria, and has been visited by many tourists, antiquarians, scholars and artists. Comparison of Dayes' watercolour, which shows a view of the abbey from the south west looking over the ruins of the cloister, with modern photographs shows that the artist has taken considerable liberties with the foreground as well as having moved the Belfry Tower at the west end of the abbey (to the left in the watercolour) further to the east.

The painting is roughly forty by fifty centimetres and is composed mostly of different shades of green and grey illustrated with pencil and some light ink work. The Abbey stands in the centre of the painting in a valley, surrounded by a rural scene. We find ourselves looking down towards the Abbey from a higher vantage point, as if we were walking down a hill towards it.

In the immediate foreground of the painting it appears that we are standing on rocky ground with sandy-grey jagged boulders; jutting out from the corner of the painting to our right. On both sides we have dark green trees and foliage with inflections of yellow and brown climbing up both sides of the painting, ending on the left about two thirds of the way up, and on the right, the olive green leaves of a tree climb up the side of the painting and across the top so that only the top left corner of the scene is open sky. The whole of this immediate foreground appears to be in the cool shade of something behind us, perhaps a large cloud or hill as the colour shades are darker and the tones more muted.

However, as we begin to look down the hill before us, halfway between a small patch of woodland immediately in front of the Abbey, and our

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vantage point, the light changes. The muted pine green of the grass on the hill gives way to a pale-yellow light that seems wash the rest of the painting. This makes the whole scene before us seem to glow dimly with the warmth of a summer's evening. Sitting on the hill before us in the shade, just before the sunlight hits, a small figure of most likely a man, sits propped up by their left elbow facing away from us, towards the Abbey. The man is wearing a powder blue coat and has his right arm raised, possibly throwing a ball for the group of four large white dogs, perhaps a breed of hunting dog, playing in the sunlight on the hill. At the bottom of the hill lies a strip of woodland a similar olive green to the foliage bordering the painting, but brighter in the sunlight, lit up with yellows and oranges. This woodland stretches across the scene from left to right the tops of the trees obscure the bottom of the Abbey beyond.

The Abbey itself it quite literally the highlight of the painting. Placed in the middle distance at the bottom of the valley, the Abbey lies in a state of ruin, but not complete ruin. It is still a magnificent building rising as tall, if not taller than the trees around it, emerging from our woodland border on the left, a tall tower with a backwards sloping roof separated by a few feet to the main Abbey building which then continues unbroken to our border on the right. The Abbey seems to glow in the sunlight a bright sandy grey, if you were to touch it, your hand would most likely feel the warmth of the stone. We can make out some details on the Abbey from this distance illustrated with pencil, some light ink work and shaded with grey wash. The Abbey appears to be composed of three main levels. On its lowest level, three large entrance arch ways, tall thin arched windows along the middle level and five large arched windows on the top level of the main centre building of the Abbey. The whole Abbey is roofless, its topmost edge is crumbling rock. Behind the Abbey the hill begins to rise again. Woodland can be seen above the Abbey on the hill beyond. The far background of the painting is made up of hills rolling off into the horizon and almost merging with it as the colours become washed out in blueish

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green tones. The watercolours have been watered down here which gives the hills and sky a hazy effect. In the sky a swirling pinkish – yellow cloud floats above the hills hanging in the washed out artichoke green sky.

Edward Dayes is perhaps now best known as the teacher of Thomas Girtin. He produced many watercolours for antiquarian patrons and for engraving. Some of Dayes's finest topographical work derives from his tours of the Northern Counties, and this view of Furness Abbey, the principal monastic ruin in the Lake District, is no exception.

Founded in 1123 Furness Abbey became a rich and influential monastic site, having particularly strong influence on the Isle of Man, however, in 1537 the Abbey was disestablished and destroyed during the English Reformation under Henry VIII. The ruins of the Abbey are Located near Barrow in Furness in Cumbria, on the Cistercian Way, an ancient walk popular with tourists since the 18th century. The Abbey was a popular subject with watercolour artists, who were eager to satisfy the market for picturesque ruins. It was not unusual for them to take some liberties with the composition, which usually amounted to magnifying the scale of the building. Unusually in this watercolour Dayes ignores the fact that the Abbey is actually built of red sandstone. William Wordsworth visited Furness Abbey on a number of occasions and referred to it in his 1805 autobiographical poem The Prelude.