

the Whitworth

Audio Descriptions transcript

May 2022

AUDIO DESCRIPTIONS

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



AUDIO DESCRIPTION: A Girl by the Sea repelling the Spirit of Melancholy by Maria Louisa Catherine Cecilia Cosway (1759-1838)

All of the Audio Descriptions are available to listen to at:

<https://aplacebetweenthetrees.com/audio-description/>

Social tags:

Instagram – @whitworthart

Twitter – @whitworthart

Hashtag – #WhitworthAudioDescriptions #TheWhitworthAtHome
#GalleryInThePark

This drawing, drawn in faint brown ink and coloured with watercolour and oil paint, is displayed in our Still Parents exhibition, which explores life after baby loss. The piece resides in the 'Resilience & Strength' part of the exhibition, which consists of a stark white wall on which various framed pieces from our collection hang. The piece we are looking at hangs at about chest height on the wall, it is

the piece third from our left and the first of the landscape pieces displayed in this part of the exhibition.

The drawing is rather small; it is in a landscape format and only measures about 19cm in height and about 23cm in width. It is surrounded by a white card mount in a plain wooden frame, which is of a soft light brown oak colour. The plainness of the mount and frame mean that we are immediately drawn to the drawing, the plain surroundings emphasising the beautiful use of colour within the piece and the atmosphere the artist has created.

Starting from our left, an ethereal yet robust female figure casts an atmosphere of gloom across the page. She is draped in a blue Grecian-style robe. The colour of the robe is reminiscent of a blue sky which is starting to be blotted out by heavy rain clouds, or the dimming of the blue sky at twilight as darkness begins to descend. Her arms are raised in a throwing action; spread wide above her head, poised to cast a shroud over the centre of the drawing. This seems to be an attempt to ensnare a young girl, who looks to be in her late teens or early twenties, sitting against a rocky outcrop on a rough shore which occupies the foreground of the bottom of the drawing. This is no game; the figure in dim blue is very obviously a troubling entity. From her back emerge two bat-like wings, raised and spread out in a motion which almost makes them one with the dark shroud she aims to cast over the young girl sat on the shore.

We cannot see the feet of the winged figure, who appears to glide out of the edge of the page to our left. The legs are positioned almost as if this being is attempting to run or fly; her feet, which we cannot see, do not clearly make contact with the rocky shore in the foreground. The right leg is bent slightly at the knee, which is pointing to our right, with the calf of the right leg trailing off toward the edge of the page to our bottom left. The left leg is slightly raised and bent at the knee, almost like a crane or heron might hold one leg.

Her wings are reminiscent of the grotesques and demons depicted in Medieval and Neo-Gothic architecture, yet her face is not grotesque and nor is any other aspect of her body. Her face appears to be classically beautiful, with smooth skin and perfect symmetry. Her complexion appears to be rather healthy; her skin pale but not overly so, more of a healthier creamy tone. Her head is tilted slightly to her left, which is our right. Her hair is curly and appears to be blonde although the colour and exact shade is not abundantly clear as it merges into the murky darkness behind her, cast by her wings and the shroud she holds aloft. Her hair is done up, with most of it held away from her face except for one long ringlet which trails down the right side of her face and her neck, to our left.

The hands of the winged figure clad in dim blue are filled with a dark gauzy shroud, which appears to be an almost blackish shade at the centre and then dissolves into varying shades of grey. The greys of the shroud gradually get lighter as the shroud moves outwards in an attempt to engulf its intended target. Much of the upper part of the piece, occupied by a dark sky, is obscured by similar dark greyish tones, which also seem to threaten to engulf the figure of the seated girl were it not for the muted blues appearing behind her and the winged figure, as the seated girl gazes off out to the

sea just off to our right. The horizon which is about a third of the way up from the bottom of the picture. Above it, muted tones of soft, pale yellows and fiery reds light up the sky in thin streaks in the far distance, hinting at a dawning sunrise or dwindling sunset we cannot fully see.

Although the winged being is some sort of aggressor in this situation, her expression is one of despondency and distraction; she is not fully engaging with her surroundings. She is almost just as much a victim of the gloom she is aiming to cast over the figure of the girl she attempts to assail.

Dead centre, the figure of the young girl being troubled by the winged being sits reclining against a rocky outcrop. Her body is shifted toward her left side, so we see her in partial profile mostly on her right side, with her front turned slightly towards us. The rocky outcrop, which is tinted in dull greys and sandy beiges and rises to support much of her partially obscured left side like a chair fashioned from rough stone. The shore stretches unevenly down and off to our right and toward us in the foreground, lightening to more sandy shades as it reaches the bottom of the drawing.

Despite what would otherwise appear to be quite an uncomfortable choice of seat, the girl appears to be very much entranced by the sea she is gazing out on. Her head is propped up on her left hand. Her feet are bare and only her toes touch the ground; they appear to be partially supporting her weight as she reclines in her half twisted position, her knees slightly raised and pointing to our right. She is clad in a gauzy, muted peach toned Regency period style dress, with short puffy sleeves- although we can only really see her right sleeve. The dress has a v-neckline and an empire or high waist. Her hair is done up accordingly; in a Regency period style which seems to imitate the hairstyles seen on women on Greek pottery, with a small bun at the top and layers of loose curls framing the back of her head. A thick, short ringlet graces the right side of her face and obscures her ear; it stops at the corner of her jaw.

The material of her dress seems to flow across the rocky outcrop upon which she sits. She, too, carries a shroud but unlike the one carried by the winged figure hers is light in tone- silvery and almost transparent in appearance as it touches her hair but appearing more solid as it descends. It is draped across the crown of her head and down the left side of her face, which is obscured, as well as her left shoulder and sleeve. Her right arm is extended out to our left, the palm raised in a gesture intended to stop or repel the winged figure attempting to cast its shroud across her.

The girl, too, appears to be quite classically beautiful and her skin is also as smooth and unmarred as that of her assailant. Her skin tone is of a slightly lighter tone than that of the winged figure, partially illuminated as it is by the weak sunlight. The exact colour of her hair is hard to make out but she is obviously fair-haired. What little light there is cast upon her from the obscured sunrise or sunset to the back right, far off in the distance of this watercolour drawing, gives her hair a light silvery appearance. Its tone is similar to her shroud, with the hair nearer her face almost looking like the dim silvery light of a distant star. Her expression is wistful as she gazes out to sea, her eyes heavy

lidded as if she is weary and perhaps searching for some solace in the natural world around her, trying to drive away her troubles by spending time near the sea. Her attitude, expression and dress all give her an air of intelligence and sophistication.

The front of her dress is illuminated by the same weak silvery light shade of her shroud, giving the material a more ethereal and gauzy appearance. This hints at very fine and expensive fabric but also accentuates her figure whilst maintaining an air of modesty and still showing an abundance of fabric; this girl is very clearly not from a poor family, dressed as fashionably in fine fabric as she is. Her manner of dress hint that the drawing may have been produced in the early part of the nineteenth century.

The sea the reclining girl gazes out on to, to our right gently laps around the rocky outcrop upon which she is seated and at the rough shore at her feet. A thin, airy layer of white sea foam which graduates to a soft greenish blue, caresses the bottom of the rocky outcrop and the shore, which stretches off unevenly to our right. The greenish blue of the more shallow waves touching the shore gives way to deeper, moodier blues stretching off into the back right where the horizon is located, which is in line with the girl's knees, about a third of the way from the bottom of the drawing.

This beautiful, moody drawing is called 'A Girl by the Sea repelling the Spirit of Melancholy' and was produced by Maria Louisa Catherine Cecilia Cosway.