

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode 15

This is the
Night Mail

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the Gallery here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shapes the artworks.

My name is Jane Scarth, Curator of Public Programmes, introducing you to today's episode exploring a new exhibition drawn from the Christen Sveaas' Art Collection, selected by Norwegian painter Ida Ekblad. The display, titled This is the Night Mail, is inspired by the WH Auden poem of the same name and exposes us to the eeriness of night scenes, from moonlit landscapes to dreams, to nightmares.

Today we hear from specialist in Norwegian art history, MaryAnne Stevens, who is in conversation with Whitechapel Gallery director Iwona Blazwick about the works in the display. We also welcome poet Mark Ford, who provides insight to the poem that has inspired the exhibition. The exhibition is free to view in gallery seven and is on display from 28th August 2021 until 2nd January 2022.

MF: Night Mail by WH Auden.

This is the night mail crossing the border,
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,

Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
The shop at the corner, the girl next door.

Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb:

The gradient's against her, but she's on time.

Past cotton-grass and moorland boulder
Shovelling white steam over her shoulder,

Snorting noisily, she passes
Silent miles of wind-bent grasses.

Birds turn their heads as she approaches,
Stare from bushes at her blank-faced coaches.

Sheep-dogs cannot turn her course;
They slumber on with paws across.

In the farm she passes, no one wakes,
But a jug in a bedroom gently shakes.

Dawn freshens, her climb is done.
Down towards Glasgow she descends,
Towards the steam tugs yelping down a glade of cranes
Towards the fields of apparatus, the furnaces
Set on the dark plain like gigantic chessmen.
All Scotland waits for her:
In dark glens, beside pale-green lochs
Men long for news.

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
Letters of joy from girl and boy,
Receipted bills and invitations
To inspect new stock or to visit relations,
And applications for situations,
And timid lovers' declarations,
And gossip, gossip from all the nations,
News circumstantial, news financial,
Letters with holiday snaps to enlarge in,

Letters with faces scrawled on the margin,
Letters from uncles, cousins, and aunts,
Letters to Scotland from the South of France,
Letters of condolence to Highlands and Lowlands
Written on paper of every hue,
The pink, the violet, the white and the blue,
The chatty, the catty, the boring, the adoring,
The cold and official and the heart's outpouring,
Clever, stupid, short and long,
The typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong.

Thousands are still asleep,
Dreaming of terrifying monsters
Or of friendly tea beside the band in Cranston's or
Crawford's.

Asleep in working Glasgow, asleep in well-set Edinburgh,
Asleep in granite Aberdeen,
They continue their dreams,
But shall wake soon and hope for letters,
And none will hear the postman's knock
Without a quickening of the heart,
For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?

Night Mail is one of those wonderful occasional poems that Auden wrote in the 1930s. He was a great collaborator, he worked with kind of Benjamin Britten, and Benjamin Britten set the music for the GPO film, which this poem was written for. So the mid-30s saw this explosion of interest among those running things like the BBC or the GPO film unit, in the lives of the workers, and a kind of longing to document their lives. And Auden was very much in sympathy with that idea and he was very adept at producing poetry in collaboration with others.

And this poem has become incredibly popular. It was actually used on a Post Office advert not that long ago on TV. And the reason is obvious, because it mimics the rush of the train in a very effective way, the rush of those images in the first stanza and it gives you the sense of being on a train moving north. And Auden had taught in Scotland in the early 30s, so he was quite familiar with the train journey from London to Scotland. And in the mid-30s, he was obsessed with the notion of presenting the country as a whole, the whole country, somehow using poetry to capture the zeitgeist, but also the spirit of the times, but also to capture it geographically.

There was a kind of geographical strain in Auden's imagination which is present from the very first poems that he writes. And just after Night Mail in the autumn of '35, he wrote a poem called On This Island, which begins: 'Look stranger on this island now, the leaping light of your delight discovers'. And that sort of typifies what you get in Night Mail as well, which is a kind of hawk's eye view of the country. This idea that you could somehow observe the country as if in a balloon or as if travelling in it through a train and could note down all the interesting aspects and somehow give a collective poetic consciousness to the country as a whole.

What is it that is so hypnotic about this poem? I know a lot of people learn it at school and it sticks in the memory. I think it's a good example of the way poetry can be built up by cutting from vignette to vignette, from mini image to mini image, and that of course is really appropriate for a train where you're always on the move. 'Letters for the rich, letters for the poor, a shop at the corner, the girl next door'. I'm imitating the train tracks, as those of you who have...any of you who have seen the...which is available on YouTube, the three minute section of the GPO Night Mail film, know that it was actually John Grierson, the producer of the GPO films,

who read it out, half of it out. And the other actor as well. They imitate the way in which a train, the noise a train makes.

I think my favourite of the early images in the first section is the last one: 'In the farm she passes, no one wakes, but a jug in a bedroom gently shakes'. It's that sort of beautiful transition, and cinematic transition from the train steaming past a farm, not waking anyone up there, but the poetic imagination noticing, or imagining, rather, because he can't have seen it, a jug gently shaking as a train passes.

And then we move in the last section to this rather moving account of the people in Glasgow who are still asleep and they're going to wake up soon. They're dreaming, some are dreaming of monsters, and some are dreaming about having a friendly tea. Again, a typical sort of oscillation between the good and the bad, the not so nice and the nice. And the survey of the Scottish towns, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Granite Aberdeen, Auden loved to kind of hit off in epithets particular places. And he thinks of all this dreaming Scotland who awake soon and they will 'hope for letters, and none will hear the postman's knock without a quickening of the heart, for who can bear to feel himself forgotten?'

A terrific poem. I can understand why it inspired artists, and so many, indeed, and I hope you enjoy the exhibition. Thank you.

JS: We now hear from Iwona Blazwick in conversation with MaryAnne Stevens about highlights from the exhibition.

IB: My name is Iwona Blazwick, I'm director of the Whitechapel Gallery. And we're here today to talk about This is the Night Mail. It's one of four displays from a collection put together by Christen Sveaas in his native country of Norway. The

Whitechapel Gallery is a museum without a collection, so we've established a platform for guest collections from all over the world. And one of the things that that enables us to do is to take some curatorial adventures with presenting works that the public would never normally have access to.

We've discovered that the curators who really challenge the boundaries are inevitably artists. And the first artists to look at and display masterpieces from the Christen Sveaas Art Collection is a painter from Norway called Ida Ekblad. And she leapt at the chance to get involved, to really immerse herself in this very remarkable collection and its premier in Britain. And every work of art that she selected is in some way on the topic of the night. And it might be as a portal to the cosmic sublime, it could be as the space of transgression. It could be of the night of insomnia, of nightmares and dreams, or of the supernatural.

And I'm delighted that MaryAnne Stevens is here to talk with us about the meaning, the nature and the origin of some of these great painters. And I wondered first of all if you could tell us what interested you in this very little known region of art?

MS: I think one of the things that certainly galvanised my interest in this region, as far as its art, and more widely, its culture is concerned, is that it was so little known. And I've always been intrigued by the question or the question mark that hangs over these things: why not? And the more I got to know the work, particularly in the visual field, but also the literary and musical world, the more I was aware that the work that was being produced was of incredibly high quality, equally demanding of our attention. And very capable of expressing the wide range of concerns which Nordic countries in general,

but Norway in particular, had really from the latter part of the 18th century onwards.

So you're tracking issues of national identity, and I don't mean that in a patriotic flag-waving sense, this we have to put into its historical context. This is much more individual Nordic countries finding their own voices. And that in itself is a fascinating cultural history and it comes out very well expressed in the visual arts, particularly, for example, in Norway.

IB: So there are two main aspects to that. One is a deep connection to the landscape, and then the other is a kind of picturing of society, sort of genres, or aspects of society that are also in danger of disappearing because of industrialisation.

But if we go to perhaps the earliest artists in the show, Johan Christian Dahl, we have two beautiful paintings, one of a 'Waterfall near Tinn', which is a forest scene, and the other is a very calm picture actually of 'Dresden in the Moonlight'. These works were made in 1831 and 1823 respectively. So that I think is probably the earliest painting in the show.

And his contemporary, Adolph Tidemand, he complements those scenes with scenes of typical activities. We have a beautiful painting of night fishing where a group of fishers will go out lit by the moon and burn a lantern and bring the fish to the surface. And there's a fantastic quote, he laments: 'Many a custom gone from daily life, many beautiful national costumes exchanged with ridiculous, ugly new fashions'. So there seems to be a kind of nostalgia or a fear about these ways of life disappearing.

MS: Oh, I think absolutely, and it's found not only in Tidemand's paintings, and of course Tidemand is a fascinating artist because he was primarily a genre painter, a painter of everyday life. People being buried, people being carted across – coffins – being carted across lakes, and things like that. But he also collaborated with the next generation of landscape, great Norwegian landscape, and marine painter [Hans] Gude. And the two of them produced these, probably one of the best known paintings in Norwegian 19th Century art, which is the 'Bridal Procession', where Tidemand does all the figures in the boat and the mountainous landscape behind is Gude.

IB: Oh, really?

MS: But Tidemand's concern for the loss of tradition and local custom is paralleled in, for example, the move as early as the first publication in 1841 of Norwegian Folk Tales, which was brought together by Asbjornsen and Moe, who travelled around Norway during the 1830s to collect Norwegian folk tales, which they then published. And that of course triggered a whole interest in folklore as subject matter for paintings, folkloric painting subject matter, and so on. There was really a move.

I would say in terms of the threat of industrialisation, there was a sort of tentative modernisation, but industrialisation per se comes a bit later to Norway, even though it had huge wealth coming from fishing, from timber, and from shipping. But when you get into the 1880s and 1890s, then it becomes absolutely critical. And what I find so interesting about Christen Sveaas' collection is that he should have bought this Dahl painting, I'm going back to that, of the waterfalls, because it has got a wood pump mill perched above the waterfall. Using the foot of the water, of course, to drive it.

And that is exactly where his grandfather established his fortune, so that is a lovely link.

IB: [Nikolai] Astrup says also: 'Through memory, landscape, everyday activity is imbued with mysticism'. So could you say something about that? What did they mean by that?

MS: I think for the generation which precedes Astrup, which is this new romantic, there is a certain element of mysticism, in so far as several of the artists, particularly Harriet Backer and Eilif Peterssen, were absolutely...and Skredsvig, actually, were captivated by the quality and almost the emotional sentiment which twilight, the wonderful northern summer light of the nights, imbue in the landscape. And so it does take on a poetic component.

IB: And I think that connection with a kind of existential relationship with the natural world of course manifests itself most famously and most powerfully in Edvard Munch, the artist that we haven't spoken about yet. There are three paintings in our display by Munch and they show him both as a fantastic...his ability to capture landscape, but also to capture the human figure.

And they come together in a very beautiful painting called Autumn Rain, of 1892. And you can really see here the relationship both with, I think, impressionism, and then the expressionism that was to come. That to me he's someone who bridges those two centuries. And also connects the state of the human condition with his ability to capture the effects of light and the wet street at night, or the forest at dusk. And there you've got a much more relationship with states of being, I think.

MS: Yes, Munch, particularly in that painting, of course, it comes shortly after he'd been in Paris and had been aware of Impressionism and Post Impressionism, both of which have a major impact on him. And there is a very wonderful moment where towards the end of his stay in Paris, I think it's in 1890, he travels down to the south coast of France, and rather than painting the south coast a la Monet at Antibes, or something like that, with brilliant colours, he actually paints the city at night. And you really do get the sense of his interest in what effect does light have on how we perceive the urban... urban world, I think I'd call it, because it has to do with both its inhabitants and its physical structure. And that's very much what you have in that painting.

Although I'm interested equally in the portrait which Christen Sveaas bought, the 'Portrait of a Boy', which is really fascinating because that comes at a time when he was up at Warnemünde and also staying just outside Lübeck and having a friendship established with a wonderful dentist called Doctor Linder. And Doctor Linder not only patronised him and commissioned a decorative cycle from him, but also commissioned a portrait of his sons. And this picture very much, it seems to me, relates that.

So what it is basically saying is: these paintings very much demonstrate the international nature of Munch, that he bestrides the two... to the two centuries, but at the same time is acutely aware that life is bigger than just art in Norway. And he made that conscious decision. And just as Astrup decides to go back to Jølster, Munch decides to go to Berlin and he establishes his international reputation on the platform of Berlin in 1892.

IB: I'm going to turn now to two storytellers. Andreas Bloch, who's again really a 19th century painter, and we've got a

very mysterious painting of a young boy being scooped up by a man with a helmet as he escapes ghosts. There are these spirits which are raising themselves out of a moonlit forest to apparently kind of kidnap this boy.

And also Theodore Kittelsen, one of the great stars of this exhibition, who really goes into the supernatural, and we see trolls and fairies and these wonderful beings, a sort of Cyclopes figure with one bright red eye looming out of the canvass. And then he also does this very wonderful series of lithographs. 'Do animals have souls?'

MS: Yes.

IB: So that's a whole other section of the show I think which is really fascinating, these wonderful narratives.

MS: Well, it takes one to the world of narratives which crossover into myth and fairy-tale and remind one that it's in the dark that you tend to tell these tales around a fire at night, and that these are the images that can be conjured up. And so I think in the case of the Bloch, it's an extraordinary work because it was unknown to me, and when I first looked at it, I thought, gosh, this reminds me of sort LaQuan/Mazepa, or somebody like that. What is it? And then I saw it was a helmeted figure on horseback with a boy and wondered, is this some Viking tale, or what's going on here, or medieval saga?

It has got this wonderful sense of mystery, where has the child come from, where is the child going? Where are they going together? Is the child going to survive or is it like the Elfin King, the child is being ridden to his death? That has that very particular quality to it.

As far as Kittelsen is concerned, he is one of those other really important figures. Much admired by artists of his own generation, and of the junior generation. I mean, Nikolai Astrup, huge admiration for Kittelsen. And I think what you find is that you're dealing with an artist who absolutely had his finger on the pulse of that mythic world. And had this amazing ability to be able to conjure it up, often in a very, very limited palette: watercolour, pen and ink drawing, watercolour wash, often nearly monochrome, but with this sense of foreboding and looming.

The image of the Wood Troll, for example, and Kittelsen is great on trolls, reminds one that the troll, of course, runs absolutely all the way through Norwegian mythology, from medieval times right the way through to the present day. The troll is still returned to on a regular basis, both in the arts and also in popular form. But in terms of Kittelsen, I think also we are dealing here with an artist who understood how you could evoke, how you could make the landscape transform into either a human figure or a mythic figure, like a troll. And this symbiosis between nature, landscape and the human being is really again part and parcel of the Nordic mentality.

And actually, I find it very interesting that whereas Kittelsen is quite overt, if you like, in his commitment to the troll, if I could put it that way, going back to Astrup, it's really interesting that he doesn't paint trolls but he paints intimations of trolls. So for him, as the next generation, he's moving one step further along the route that Kittelsen had taken, which is that when he, for example, in a marvellous bonfire painting of 1916, has a figure of a man standing, caught in the flames, in the light of the flames, with his shadow cast onto a large rock behind a huge boulder, he changes from being a human being into a troll. And it's that

sort of connection, if you like, which you find so often in these artists.

IB: We're going to finish with a contemporary Norwegian painter called Gardar Eide Einarsson. And, interestingly, he left Norway, he lives between Tokyo and New York, and he is also an abstract painter. He presents one black monochrome, it's very shiny, it looks very plastic. It's reflective, it's folded into a grid, and there is paint dripping from it. It looks abstract but actually what we see here, the title is 'Tarp', we see something which really relates to politics, to street culture.

The paint is clearly using a spray can, so it relates, I think, to graffiti. And the surface is actually a store bought piece of tarpaulin, which has been folded in its packet and he's undone it to create this kind of almost another take on Malevich's Black Square. But it's full of cultural resonance. Were you aware of this artist's work?

MS: No, to be honest, I wasn't. And it now absolutely made me think I've got to go and learn more and see more. And for me, I thought what was fascinating was not just the reference to the world at the street and the social charge of the world of the street, but also the fact that if it's tarp, it's tarpaulin, it's a cover. It takes us back to the title of the exhibition because it suggests that what dark does is it covers up, it obscures. And if you have a piece of tarpaulin, the question is, if you lift the corner, what lies behind? What is going to be revealed? And of course, in a sense, that's exactly the notion of night and what night holds across the board.

And I think that actually what's fascinating, both in the selection that's been made from Christen Sveaas' collection, but also what he tells us about Norwegian collecting. And I was meditating on other key collections that have been made

in Norway in the past few decades and it is absolutely fascinating that Christen Sveaas has started from what was quite a conventional starting point of wonderful historical silver and gold glass. And then moved into the world of 19th century and early 20th century Norwegian art, which was being collected back at the time of Rasmus Meyer in 1908 just as much as it has been more recently.

But then what he sees, as have a few of his fellow Norwegian contemporary collectors, that there really is a need to underpin or underscore the connection that lies between that older art and what is happening in Norway today. Which is a very exciting and fascinating scene from an artistic point of view. Obviously now cast within the broad international context, which is how, why, with somebody like Einarsson, he's working in the States and yet he still somehow can resonate within the context of an exhibition and a collection which is first and foremost rooted in Norway.

IB: We can see all of these extraordinary masterpieces in dialogue with contemporary art from around the world. There are some 30 or 40 different artists all presented together as if in three train carriages. And I think it's an amazing way of opening the door to a really quite under-researched and under-exposed but absolutely vital part of our recent art history.

This display will be followed by three further displays. The second will be selected by the Polish artist, Paulina Olowska. In the summer, we'll have British artist Hurvin Anderson. And then finally Donna Huanca, who hails from Mexico. So we'll have three new perspectives on what is a really astonishing, I think, body of work.

Thank you so much for sharing your extraordinary expertise with us on this little journey through Norwegian masterpieces. Thank you.

MS: Thank you very much for inviting me.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org, on the Bloomberg Connects app, as well as iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher and SoundCloud. Don't forget to visit the exhibition, This is the Night Mail, on display from 28th August 2021 until 2nd January 2022. Bye for now.

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