Exhibition

Richard Dadd—painting from his mind’s eye

In Charles Dickens’ 1860 essay, Night Walks, he describes taking a diversion to see the Bethlem Royal Hospital during one of his nocturnal rambles around London. “I had a night fancy in my head which could be best pursued within sight of its walls and dome. And the fancy was this: Are not the sane and the insane equal at night as the sane lie a dreaming?”

That night, one of those inside the “walls and dome” of the Bethlem was the artist Richard Dadd (1817–86). He had been a patient there since 1844; the year before his admission, he had developed a complex set of religious delusions and killed his father believing him to be the devil. It seems the years at Bethlem did little to alter Dadd’s beliefs. Records indicate he continued to argue that he was the descendant of the Egyptian god Osiris, whose purpose was to fight the devil. When he was transferred to Broadmoor secure hospital in 1864, he maintained he had acted “in justification of the Deity”.

Dadd remained in hospital for the rest of his life; however, his artistic development continued despite his physical confinement. Painting scenes from his mind’s eye, and using his attendants and fellow patients as models, Dadd created an enduring legacy. The Tate Gallery staged the first major exhibition of his paintings in 1974; Angela Carter penned a radio play about him; Queen recorded a song inspired by one of his most famous creations, The Fairy Feller’s Master Stroke; and author Neil Gaiman has written of the compulsive emotional intensity of Dadd’s work. It is this intensity that is explored in The Passions of Richard Dadd at the Bethlem Gallery.

Its focus is a series of watercolours Dadd painted in the mid-1850s. The paintings, each illustrating a different “passion”, cover a range of subjects and are executed in a variety of styles. If a common theme exists, it is one of loss. Hatred (1853) depicts the immediate aftermath of Richard of Gloucester’s murder of Henry VI. Dadd has added a quotation from Shakespeare’s Henry VI Part III: “See how my sword weeps for the poor king’s death.” Richard ignores the body at his feet to concentrate on the oversized drops of blood running down his blade: his face is not one of hatred, but a more alienated expression, as if in this act of violence he glimpses his own future. It is an image echoed in Dadd’s Murder (1854), with the stroke of his club completed, and his brother Abel dead, Cain gazes distractedly out of the frame. Even in his portrayal of Agony—Raving Madness (1854), the wide-eyed figure chained to the wall conveys a sense of bewilderment rather than anger.

Brutality (1854) portrays a more mundane scene of domestic misery but a closer examination reveals that even here, Dadd places a touch of otherworldliness. Look at the female onlooker framed in the doorway: the silhouette of her elbow continues behind the boundary of the wall. This technique, subtly suggesting a blurring of the internal and external, is also visible in Dadd’s Sketch for an Idea for Crazy Jane (1855), which can be seen in the nearby Bethlem Museum. The character in the painting dances before a ruined castle and forest, the skyline continuing along the hem of her dress.

The Museum is also exhibiting other artworks, letters, sketchbooks, and notebooks of Dadd’s; one of the most interesting is undoubtedly the notebook in which he wrote a complex poem—Elimination of a Picture, its Subject the Fairy Feller’s Master Stroke. The dense and involved text points us to another important feature of Dadd’s work: a minute and painstaking attention to detail that creates a sense of tension when juxtaposed with the emotionalism of his subjects.

Dadd doesn’t fit comfortably into any category: he shared certain common ground stylistically and thematically with the Romantics, but was not part of their movement. Equally, his formal training meant that he was hardly an “outsider artist”. Perhaps it is Dadd’s idiosyncratic individualism that so attracts his admirers. This is work that demands an intense emotional and intellectual response.

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Richard Dadd, The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stoke (1855–64)