

# The Painting

by Stephen Murphy

I arrived at the Raby estate in good time, determined to explore the grounds before enjoying my picnic lunch and a tour of the castle. I had been walking about an hour, having headed away from the castle, before turning right, edging past the lakes and following the line of a copse. It was as I headed back that I first noticed her, a hundred yards away, sat on a small stool, next to a folly or deer shelter. And I could see that she was an artist, for she had an easel, a palette, and was painting.

I approached quietly until some twenty feet behind her. She was dressed in somewhat quaint clothing, but probably all the fashion now, and painting the view of the castle. Her back was towards me and I could only glimpse the side of her face. The lady was, maybe, late thirties. She sat very still and was focussed on her work. Much clearer, however, was her painting – it looked finished to me although she still appeared to be adding final touches and it was vibrant with colour. Almost shimmering.

I said nothing; as someone who likes to paint myself, I know how irritating it can be when a complete stranger comes up to you whilst painting and makes some observation or even criticism of your work. No, the woman was lost in her art, and it wasn't my place to interrupt. But what I did do, was take out my mobile phone, zoom in on the picture and take a photo. I made not a sound, and decided to back track so to not disturb her. So doing, I went back around the lake and walked towards the castle. Glancing over to the deer shelter, I noticed that the artist was no longer there.

After my lunch I sauntered through the castle gates, into the courtyard and began my tour. I was taking it all in – and there was indeed much to take in – when, along one of the corridors off the great hall, I noticed a small watercolour. It was of the same view, and looked very similar to the painting being completed by the woman at the deer shelter. I knew, of course, that such a popular angle would have been painted many times through the years. But there was something about it – I think the word 'vibrant' again sprang to mind – just as I had described the artist's work. As the tourists walked on, I quickly took out my mobile, moved in closer, and took a photograph of the painting. Whether this was allowed, I might add, I do not know. But that is what I did, just out of curiosities sake.

I enjoyed the tour, left the estate about mid afternoon, and decided to finish my day out with a look around Barnard Castle, a town linked to the Raby estate and only a few miles away. Once there, and replenished with a cup of tea, I wandered up some stairs to a place called The Hayloft, a curious mixture of antique and bric-a-brac. And the first thing to catch my eye was a watercolour of Raby Castle – the same scene as both the artist's and the one in the castle. I am not a superstitious person, but even I could not get over the coincidence. Moreover, I had been looking for a small picture to fill an alcove in my house and, as this view was rapidly becoming 'my view' I resolved to buy it. It had a faded, hand written sign, saying 'An original painting by...' but from there on it was illegible. But as it appeared to be an original, and not a copy, it seemed a good buy. I parted with forty pounds and headed for home.

That evening, I hung my new picture in the alcove – it fitted perfectly – and decided to upload my phone photographs to my laptop. I had hundreds of photos – probably thousands – safely stored on line. It was one of my hobbies. Expanding the two photographs of the painting – the one I took from behind the artist, and the one from inside the castle, I was immediately taken by how very similar they were. But it was only when I looked at them in detail that it became clear that they were, in fact, identical. Let me say outright, that I knew this was not possible. But, seemingly, they were. I zoomed in and out, printed them both off, looked at them under different lights, and did everything I could to spot the slightest difference. I even magnified the brush strokes. But there was no variation. I shifted uncomfortably before going into the hall, taking my new picture down from the alcove, and putting it side-by-side with the two prints. They were all identical.

‘There are more things in heaven and earth,’ said Hamlet to Horatio, ‘than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’ And whatever philosophy I had was now being severely tested. Nothing made sense, but I rehung the painting and retired to bed.

I resolved to put the conundrum behind me, treat it as one of life’s unsolved mysteries and get on with life. And all was well until my birthday, a week later. I had no family and few friends, but what friendships I had were loyal. I expected some cards and even a present or two and I was not disappointed. Two cards arrived a day early, and four on the day itself, plus a parcel. Sitting in bed, nursing a cup of tea and humming ‘Happy Birthday’ to myself, I opened my cards and gift. All six cards were identical – all had ‘my picture’ on the front. And the parcel – an ‘original watercolour...’ of Raby. Yes, ‘my picture’ of Raby again. Yet, my friends lived miles away from both me and each other; one even resided down in Devon. And the painting came from a dear friend in Scotland. I decided to phone each one of them and enquire, casually, what made them choose the card, and when they had bought it. I did so – and the answer was, almost parrot fashion; “Well, I saw the card and you instantly came to mind. Do you like it?”

They had all purchased the card on the same day as I had visited Raby. And Dorothy, my friend in Scotland, had bought the painting she sent me at about the time that I bought mine in The Hayloft. She seemed delighted to have found both a card and picture of the same view.

I was far from delighted and would confess to be in something of a state. I had even removed the painting from the alcove, only to find it replaced the next day. Had I rehung it in my sleep? Had my subconscious taken over? I could find no answers to anything. The picture was taking over my life. I resolved to return to Raby as soon as possible.

A week later found me, once again, purchasing an admission ticket to Raby Castle. I decided against walking the grounds – I lived in fear of seeing the artist again. Instead I went straight into the castle, managed to dodge the tour guide, and headed for the corridor leading off from the great hall. I wanted to confront ‘my’ painting again.

I found it, as before, hanging nonchalantly, as if the personification of innocence. But I knew otherwise. I had within my bag a small penknife and had decided, beforehand, to destroy it. With that in mind, I waited for the few visitors around to walk on and then moved closer to the picture. Suddenly something caught my eye, something I had not noticed on any of the reproductions at home. I looked closer, and in the bottom left hand corner, it was unmistakable; my own signature.

All this happened nearly forty years ago and I am old now, but I wanted to tell you my tale, to put into writing how it all started. It is now 2050, and although much has changed in the world, Raby Castle has not changed at all, and still stands, solid and indomitable. My home, too, is the same house I have lived in all my life, and I still have the painting of Raby in the alcove. But if you look around my home you will see that every inch of the walls, the shelves, beneath the furniture, enamelled on the side of the bath, on window curtains and shower curtains, printed on dinner plates, cups and lampshades, is 'my picture,' the picture of Raby. For the truth is, from soon after my birthday those many years ago, wherever I looked I saw 'my picture', whether shopping on Amazon or strolling through a town, browsing for gifts or searching for food, always 'my picture.' And it became so ingrained on my mind that I too began to paint the scene and sign it neatly in the bottom left hand corner. I painted it always in watercolour, always the same, always the original size, always vibrant. And no sooner did I finish one and tape it to the wall than I began another. And so it has been for forty years.

If you visit Raby and you see a woman sat by the deer shelter, painting, for my sake, go up to her and introduce yourself. I can tell you her name; it is also my name, Cecily Neville.

And if you do, please tell her she need paint no more.