

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Hill and Adamson | People

2017

[6:36]

Narrator:

Edinburgh in the 1840s was home to an active artistic, literary and scientific community and the portraits that Hill and Adamson made at Rock House present a roll call of many of the influential figures of the day. Among those photographed on the Rock House terrace were Dr Robert Knox, the anatomist whose fame now rests more on his involvement with Burke and Hare than his brilliant medical career; Sir James Young Simpson, discoverer of chloroform; and James Nasmyth, inventor of the steam hammer and pile driver, which revolutionised industry and engineering across the world.

The props seen in many of these photographs served multiple purposes. For example, books were frequently employed to suggest a learned sitter but also for the very practical reason that they kept fidgeting hands still during long exposures.

Annie Lyden:

The props weren't just limited to weighty tomes and big books, they actually got quite inventive and creative, but there usually was always a connection back to the sitter and the person's occupation. So, we have James Spence who was professor of surgery at Edinburgh University, and he's shown next to a skull, or you have a watchmaker, and he's maybe shown with a pocket watch in his waist coat. There are various fun accoutrements and objects that are brought in, and oftentimes it's very subtle- that is part of the success of their photographs. It actually is quite evocative of the sitter and their personality, so it was quite well chosen.

Narrator:

Hill's connections at the Royal Scottish Academy meant that there was no shortage of artists climbing the narrow steps to Rock House, among them Sir William Allen, Thomas Duncan, William Etty, Sir George Harvey, Horatio McCulloch, David Roberts, William Bell Scott and his brother David Scott. And, of course, Hill himself.

Annie Lyden:

It is actually quite funny when you look at the hundreds and thousands of photographs that Hill and Adamson made. The most popular sitter by far is actually Hill himself. I think there is actually a really good reason for this and it's not necessarily an unbridled ego. I think it's just the practicality, that he was there, he and Adamson were working together, and in many ways it was easier for him just to pop in front of the camera and try an idea, or to think through a potential scenario for another sitter, and in many ways then save the sitter some time and having to go through these machinations.

What's fun is that they are definitely, in many cases, quite playful, and you see him dressed up in costume, or you see him with friends, often joking around. Hill was such a congenial character, by all accounts. People talk about how he liked a good party and really enjoyed the company of people in general. And I think that comes across in some of the photographs. Many of the sitters were actually his friends and acquaintances and it would be natural for them to sit before the camera, but oftentimes you see Hill in the mix with them.

One of my favourites is a photograph that's known as "Edinburgh Ale", and you see Hill along with two of his friends and on the table in front of them are these ornate glasses of beer, and they seem to be having a very good time. The counter to that is another photograph, which is titled "The Morning After", and it again features Hill, this time looking a little bit worse for wear. His pulse is being checked by a friend and there's a glass of seltzer on the table beside him, presumably to help with his state. And so, Hill is having fun with the viewer here, both through the titling, but also through the symbolism of the photograph itself.

Narrator:

Edinburgh's literary scene was reflected in Hill and Adamson's work with portraits of important figures such as Christopher North, the charismatic editor of Blackwood's magazine. Their most frequent female sitter, appearing in over

20 photographs, was Lady Elizabeth Eastlake. A respected writer and art critic, Lady Eastlake was the first woman to write regularly for the Quarterly Review. She was also a champion of Hill and Adamson's work.

One of their most striking portraits is that of Mrs Isabella Begg, the youngest sister of Robert Burns. Although her brother died before photography was invented, the image of Isabella provides a direct link to the Scottish Bard. There is a family resemblance: the eyes that stare out from this calotype, meeting our gaze, have also looked directly upon those of Scotland's most celebrated poet.

Hill and Adamson also recreated scenes from the literary works of Sir Walter Scott, tapping into the Scott mania of the time and using artists and friends as models. Borthwick Johnstone, William Leighton Leitch and David Scott feature as *The Monks of Kennaquair*.

These and other costumed portraits provide a contrast to the sober images of ministers that took up much of the partnership's early work.

End.