

Audio transcript

In the Mind's Eye | Peter Graham's *Wandering Shadows*

2020

[13:04]

Juliana Capes:

Description is an artistic process; it is drawing in the mind. Painting pictures in our minds to help us travel when we can't, to help us see when we are unable to and to help us visit places that are off reach to us. Together we can slow down the process of looking and take small quiet steps together, through a painting, through a country and through history to where we are now. So, lets travel from where you are, with a stravaiging eye and mind instead of our feet. And let's walk into a landscape, a high and craggy land of greens and greys. Of tiny zigzagging winding paths. Of water travelling down hillsides. Of heavy lacy clouds casting wandering shadows.

Inside the National Gallery of Scotland, in storage, waiting to be displayed again, there is a painting called *Wandering Shadows*. About the size of a double bed, this huge brightly coloured, expressive, colourful oil painting, in its simplest sense, is a painting of the Scottish Highlands. A realistic painting, that makes most of the title of the idea of the shadows wandering over the mountainous Highland landscape. It strikes you as soon as looking at it, the skill of the artist in depicting a landscape that looks so realistic that we could almost jump into it, as it is today.

The painting is by the Victorian artist, Peter Graham, who was born in 1836 in Edinburgh. He was a student of Robert Scott Lauder alongside the celebrated artist MacTaggart who was also know for painting Scottish landscapes in the Victorian period. They were both successful in exporting the romance of the Scottish Highlands to London and featured heavily in Royal Academy shows in the mid-1800s. Graham had been inspired to paint landscapes after a visit and a holiday to the eastern Highlands and the Cairngorms National Park. *Wandering Shadows* was painted in 1878 and could be a landscape from the Cairngorms, we could be looking at Glencova, Glen Doll, Glenshee or Glenmuick, but its location isn't noted in the title.

The eastern Highlands were a well kempt place. 1878 was also the year that the Tay Rail Bridge was build. An engineering feat that linked Queen Victoria's Highland estate at Balmoral in the Cairngorms with London. So, this maybe would have been a view on the route that many a southerner would have taken north. And Graham's painting scene in the Royal Academy, would be an enticing advert for an increasingly accessible wilderness.

This painting, six feet wide and four feet high, with expressive brush marks and vivid colour pallet, emphasises the awe-inspiring magnificence of the scenery. His response to the landscape was also influenced by the paintings of Horatio McCulloch and the poetry of Sir Walter Scott, who had done so much to build romance around this region.

The painting compositionally is a landscape rectangle, the proportions of a garage door. It shows a mountainous, summer landscape of water, glen and cloud. Our viewpoint is from a piece of high

ground above the river at the bottom of a valley in the dead centre of the composition. And our eye follows a zig zagging path, diagonal water, craggy glen sides and mottled green illumination. Before reaching a high horizon that's breached by heavy white cloud.

So, subdivide this rectangle in your mind into three sections. The foreground at the bottom, the middle ground in the centre, and the background at the top.

The bottom third shows the foreground. There is a river flowing from the bottom left, over some rocks and into the centre of the image. Here, it hairpins behind its right-hand bank with a mountain path hugging its diagonal into the bottom right. The beginnings of a hill rise above on the right. Because this bottom third is not bounded by a horizontal divide, it is a diagonal from the water at the bottom left, rising up the riverbanks, across the path and up the hill to the centre right of the rectangle. The path follows the opposite diagonal from bottom right into the centre. Cutting the foreground triangle into two and forming the bottom section of a letter Z.

The Z continues its middle slash, its diagonal drawing a boundary with the midground, a great green and granite slide of the rise of the mountain on the opposite bank of the river. This takes up the main central expanse of the composition. And forms a kind of muscular folded arm, elbowing into the composition from the left. The folded arm of mountain has its shoulder top left, its elbow centre right and then diagonally back along the fore line to wrist in the bottom left of the river. This muscular, sinewy, granite slope is stretched over with a green so intensely lit it would be garish anywhere else. This looks like a living mountain made of rock and growth and light.

Drawing the third slash of the top of the Z, we find an angle of the rise of the mountain along the tricep. 30 degrees up to top left from centre right, elbow to shoulder. This top triangle is the expanse of top right, half filled with a distant mountain in the next glen and half filled with cloud. It's a dark dreaming distance, weather receding, its breached by a high horizon line and low heavy white cloud.

The brushwork in the painting is somewhat loose and expressive. If not completely foreshadowing the Impressionists of the beginning of the next century, it is certainly showing an interest in Constable and Turner's approach to the impression of landscape.

The colours are warm and earthy, browns and greys and greens in the main with intense patches of light and shade, that make the painting a masterclass in contrast. There are contrasts of light and dark most obviously, but also a complimentary contrast between the almost lurid bright lime green of the sun hitting the hill next to plumy mauve browns of the shadows in the gullies nearby. There is also the contrast between the warmth of the midground and foreground with the coolness of the shadow in the background, making the painting recede.

Looking closer, even though the painting is obviously very striking for this portrayal of light and shade, there is also much that rewards a detailed look. So, in the midground there is a stream flowing fast down the mountain side making a crease down the hill that lines up with the diagonal line of the pathway on the other side of the water. This diagonal line criss-crosses the diagonal line of the riverbank on the opposite side of the valley, making a cross in the middle of the painting, where we can see the beginning of the pathway and a small group of eight sheep. We first encounter three of them on the path and then a further four hiding underneath and around a pair of large granite boulders that sit right in the foreground.

Next to these granite boulders we can see the only man, the only person in the painting, which is a figure standing on the banks of the river holding a large fishing rod, that he has cast into the white foam where the river breaks over a cluster of rocks and boulders. Looking at him there, he kind of breaks the spell, for me at least, of this landscape that looks almost contemporary. Here is a man who is obviously in period dress. On his head, he has the blue bunnet that Burns made so popular in his Tam O' Shanter poem. A big floppy woollen blue beret with a bright red pompom or toorie on top. He has a matching woollen waistcoat of the same indigo dye and a massive red bowtie that matches the little pompom on top of his hat. He looks almost chocolate boxy in his crofter's costume, with this red and blue. And also, the arms of his sleeves and his trousers are lighter in colour, almost looking white, and they match the whiteness of his hair and his beard. Whether this man is a shepherd stopping to fish or whether he is a tourist fishing in the river, hard to tell.

Perhaps he's a symbol of the smallness of man, of humanity, in the face of this sublime, this huge majestic landscape. It also feels as though he has something of a symbolism of a sanitised version of the Highlands and the history of the Highlands and the people of the Highlands. Being that this was painted in 1878 at the end of the period known as the Highland Clearances, when crofters such as himself would have been cleared from this landscape for the coming of the sheep farms and vast county estates.