

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

In the Mind's Eye | William Bell Scott's Sunset with a Rainbow on the Calton Hill
2020
[17:10]

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Description is an artistic process; it's drawing with the mind. It's putting pictures in our minds to help us travel when we can't, to help us see what we are unable to, to help us visit places which are out of reach to us. So, together, let's slow down the process of looking and take small, quiet steps together through a drawing, through a city, and through history to where we are now.

Let's travel from where you are to Edinburgh, home of the National Galleries of Scotland. A city of seven hills that rise above cobbled streets, tall closes and narrow wynds illuminated by the kind of bright light that warms the sandstone in contrast with the dark skies behind.

Let's go inside the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and find, in storage, there is a small quiet drawing in the drawer. As you take it out, it's a sketch, it's about the size of your hand. It is like it has come out of a notebook. It is devoid of any colour or contrast. It is drawn really lightly with soft pencil. It has been faded by about 200 years. It barely looks as though there is anything there.

This drawing is titled at the bottom. It is called *Rainbow at Sunset, 1833*. Written in pencil handwriting, in a looping italic script. 1833. In Scotland, the year that slavery was abolished. In Edinburgh, the year after Walter Scott's death. The artist who wrote these words is William Bell Scott, a young man who had been born in 1811 amidst the Napoleonic wars. He was a Scottish artist and poet, latterly part of the Pre-Raphaelite set. This is his sketch, to preserve a memory and record a special even, this rainbow, at sunset. Its full title is *Rainbow at Sunset on the Calton Hill* and the scene that the sketch shows is a view of Calton Hill from the east end of Princes Street in Edinburgh city centre.

If you were to arrive in Edinburgh now, and get off the train at Waverley Station, right in the heart of the city, come out of the main doors on to Princes Street and turn to your right, this would be the view that you would see. It is Calton Hill, almost close enough to touch, rising right above the city centre. On the top of the hill is the strewn collection of landmarks. Buildings almost sprinkled like ornaments on top of a wedding cake. In this sketch, two of the buildings are visible: The Nelson Monument on the right-hand side and the National Monument of Scotland on the left-hand side of the drawing.

Let's sketch out in our mind, this drawing. It is on a rectangular piece of paper, a portrait rectangle, one that is higher than it is wide. Sub-divide this portrait rectangle into horizontal quarters in your mind: fold it in half and then in half again. And unfold it. Along the top

quarter line lies the rainbow. Drawn in soft, arching pencil lines. It arches from top left in the curve down to centre right. And it finds at centre right a sketch of the Nelson Monument. The Nelson Monument is a building that looks like an upended telescope with its eyepiece extended above the four segments of body. A flagpole on top of the building is almost like a knitting needle inside the eyepiece. This long, thin column of a building forms a framing device on the right-hand side of this portrait rectangle. And where it meets the line of the hill we find ourselves on the bottom quarter line.

This framing device of the rainbow joined to the column [the Nelson Monument], joined to the hill, draws an inner frame within the portrait rectangle. Open to the left-hand side, but yet the second building visible peeping out from the brow of the hill forms the bottom left corner of the inner frame. You can just see, peeping out, the lintel and column of one of the corners of the National Monument of Scotland, a building that looks like an unfinished half-Acropolis.

This is a very soft pencil sketch, in likelihood a quick sketch. It looks like it was made in minutes, rather than hours. It's possibly torn from a sketchbook and it is a line drawing, a line drawing filled in with tones made by quickly hatched pencil lines. These lines are stacked horizontally, and diagonally, like ordered pins, needles or pine needles. These show the tones and the direction of light hitting the scene from the right-hand side.

As well as the details drawn in of the rainbow and of the Nelson Monument, of the National Monument of Scotland, and the curve and brow of the hill, you can also see some curving, looping lines of clouds. And curving, looping handwritten words. The words fill in for the lack of colour in this black and white pencil sketch.

Colours are not tangible in this sketch. They are just described by the words written by the artist in his looping, sprawling italic script. You can feel his excitement at what he is seeing in the way he has notated the colours. There is movement in his notation, from top left to bottom right, starting at the top left of the rectangle we see he has written 'indigo coloured clouds'. Half the sky is still dark with these draining clouds and below them he has written above the rainbow, 'rainbow'. A multicoloured arc in the sky, a celestial decoration. Bunting, the flag, seven ribbons of different hues, each made of light and reminiscent of luminous mist.

The colours in the rainbow are not tangible either, the seven of them blending into each other like the slide along a musical scale or a movement of your hand through cold to warm to hot. It is a ghost smile that warms the spirit. The briefest bird song in our city centre. Below the rainbow, diagonal lines reach down into the centre of the drawing, following them. The writing has been turned 180 degrees to the side. Falling down, following almost vertical diagonal lines from the underside of the rainbow, Bell Scott's looping script has been turned 90 degrees and it is almost indecipherable. What does it say? We can make out the word 'rain' but next to it does it say 'rain tumbled colour' or 'rain haunted colours' or 'rain wintered colours' or 'rain limited colour'?

Falling from indigo coloured clouds beneath the rainbow, falling down through the centre of the drawing to where it says 'blue sky'. Blue sky beneath looping cloud lines, blue sky

underneath the rainbow. And notated on the clouds around the blue sky, white reddish red. White reddish red. The warmth of the white and the red contrasting with the blue of the blue sky beneath the rainbow and the darkness of the indigo clouds. And then beneath, as we reach the brow of the hill, I can almost feel his excitement as he wrote: 'sunlight on mount'. Pure yellow green, pure yellow green. The light of the sunset behind him in the west, hitting the hill in the east, lighting up this great green grassy mount in the centre of Edinburgh, contrasting the reddish pink clouds above, framed by this extraordinary rainbow, next to the indigo clouds and the rain tumbled colours.

Can you almost feel Bell Scott's excitement as he saw these beautiful colours, this scene unfolding in front of him, and can you almost feel his urgency, his desire to record it? He didn't have an iPhone to pull out of his pocket, to click the scene, to filter it, to upload it to Instagram. He had a pencil and he had a notebook and he had words to describe the colours. What must he have been feeling, looking at this rainbow, the sunset at his back at the west looking at the east to Calton Hill? Calton Hill, this great green grassy mound rising over the centre of his city, with these newly built monuments to the Napoleonic war of his childhood extending on top of it. The National Monument of Scotland was only four years old, well, four years since it wasn't finished. Nicknamed 'Edinburgh's disgrace,' the monument to the Napoleonic War that was never finished. They ran out of money before they could build the rest of it. In 1833, Edinburgh was recovering from the cholera epidemic of 1832. Over 1,000 people died in Edinburgh from this disease that had spread from India in a decade-long crawl along trade routes through Asia and Europe and into the UK the previous year. This rainbow rising above the ravaged city, this rainbow, an age-old symbol of hope, and age-old symbol of promise, a symbol that is so familiar to us in April 2020 the driest, rain-free month that Scotland has experienced in the last 200 years. No rainbows in our skies, but plenty on our windows and our pavements, drawn by our children, isolated in their homes in the latest pandemic.

In 1833, Dr Thomas Latta of Edinburgh hit upon the idea of salient solution or an intravenous drip as a method of treating cholera patients. Latta correctly identified that a solution of salty liquids could substitute for the blood lost, and a greatly reduced number of patients died from the disease from then on. I wonder if Bell Scott knew this when he looked at the rainbow. I wonder if he knew this when he stood as a young man on the cusp of his life, wars and pandemics behind him, but looking away up to the skies and the colours and the clouds and the rainbow.