

The Painting Detective

It was leaning against the store room wall where it had gathered dust for over 25 years. Vanessa Mitchell lifted a corner of the sheet that covered it to reveal the back of a rather large painting, obviously in poor condition. She tilted the panel away from the wall and saw a group of military gentlemen assembled outside a chateau.

'It's Zidane' said her colleague.

Further research into portraits of Premier League footballers showed that she had slightly misheard. The untitled painting in fact shows the aftermath of the battle of Sedan in 1870 and was signed by Thomas Barker. It had been given to the Museum by the old Blackburn Royal Infirmary for safe storage (and because the Infirmary did not want it). If anyone knows why the Infirmary had such a painting in the first place, please let me know.

Vanessa found the picture's full title in the Dictionary of National Biography for 1885 where it is listed in the article on Thomas Barker as 'The Surrender of Napoleon the Third at Sedan'. The pages of the Illustrated London News reporting on the Franco-Prussian war showed that Barker had given true likenesses to the main characters in his painting; the diaries of the Emperor Frederick provided the exact location of the scene and more details of those present.

Frederick writes of the act of surrender '(I) advised against the meeting on the heights, in the presence of the troops, as humiliating; suggested that the King should ride to Bellevue to the Emperor. Conference with Bismarck, Roon and Moltke ...'. The painting shows the Chateau of Bellevue with French officers lurking in the conservatory while Napoleon meets the Prussians.

Thomas Barker (1813 – 1882) made a good living from producing portraits and historical scenes. He was often present at the scenes he depicted, making his preliminary sketches while battles for example were still in progress.

His 'The Secret of England's Greatness' (National Portrait Gallery) showing Queen Victoria presenting a Bible to an unknown African is much reproduced even if not always for artistic reasons. Galleries around the country contain examples of his work but he, like many of the Victorian genre painters, fell out of favour and many of his paintings were lost in the years around the First World War. Did Blackburn Royal pick up a bargain at this time?



The Surrender of Napoleon the Third at Sedan

Restoration

The picture is damaged and dirty, but is an interesting example of the work of a prominent Victorian artist. It was recently displayed in the Museum as part of an exhibition on restoration and conservation and aroused great interest.

The Friends of the Museum agreed to pay for a condition report from the National Conservation Centre in Liverpool which showed that even though the overall condition is reasonable, there are major splits in the canvas, several smaller tears, missing flakes of paint and other minor blemishes. The cost of remedial treatment was estimated at over £10,000, though this could be divided into smaller, hence cheaper, units of work. The restored painting would then need to be framed to make it fit for display. Where does such money come from? No official funds exist, Lottery money cannot be used and a small museum has very little chance of raising such an amount on top of all its other expenses and priorities. Any ideas?

Woodmansterne Publications, who produce greetings cards amongst other items, offer art conservation awards which are much in demand. Bids must be made and unfortunately on this occasion the museum's bid was unsuccessful. In the foyer of the museum you can see the result of a previous bid in the restored painting of ptarmigans.



The Museum has an extensive collection of watercolours both of local interest and national importance. Look out for a special exhibition later this year.

This work is entitled 'Blackburn from Livesey' by John Yates. It was spotted for sale on **Ebay** for £150 and purchased with help from the Friends.

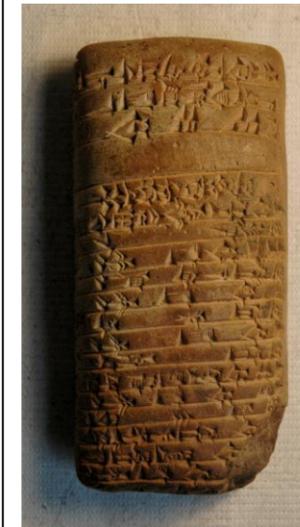
The wonders of the Internet!



Do you know where these are?



A what? An UBI BIRD!!



The Hart Gallery has a most wonderful display of early printed books, manuscripts, Japanese prints (one of the best in the country), icons and less spectacular objects like this clay tablet small enough to hold in the palm of your hand.

This cuneiform tablet from the Hart collection, is one of many thousands of such tablets found at Dreheim in present day Iraq. As the summary in the museum tells us the tablet records the numbers of bulls (305) sent for sacrifice to the god Elil in one year. How do we find more information about this tablet?

Elil, more commonly known as Enlil, is widely referenced as he was one of the chief Sumerian gods, one of his epithets being 'wild bull'. He is the prime mover of their flood myth in that he planned to destroy mankind to be rid of their noise – too many people, too much clamour. Having sent the great deluge, he remembered too late that the gods depended utterly on mankind for their food. But there was a survivor and the starving gods 'fell like flies' on his first sacrifice.

Information on Dreheim is scarce. None of the reference books I searched had any mention of it though perhaps I was just unlucky. I did find from the Internet that Dreheim was a distribution centre for livestock, hence the vast numbers of tablets found there, and that it was almost a suburb of Nippur. I could now return to my books to find that Nippur was a great religious centre where Enlil was worshipped.

What truly intrigued me on the tablet was the name of the month when the greatest number of sacrifices was made 'the month of the eating of the ubi bird' What was an ubi bird? I was driven back to the internet as I could find no printed material. This is when I came up against the iniquitous system of charging for knowledge, as one of the few references was to an academic journal which demanded a subscription for access. Having tried the free sites and only found the ubi bird mentioned in what appears to be a hymn, I had to ask a colleague to use their institutional membership to do the research for me. The article she found, for which I could have paid several hundred pounds, quoted a list of birds, one of which is the ubi, from what appears to be a hymn....! I am sure this knowledge is worth hiding behind a financial barrier, think how it could be exploited.

The Hart collection of printed material is, to my mind, the chief asset of the museum, a source of endless pleasure and fascination. How much more interesting it would all be with a little more information about the background of these texts. I have found out a little with the expenditure of much time, which of course the museum staff do not have. But there is so much else which could be asked. Who wrote them? Who read them? What do they actually say?

Manv thanks to Nick for taking and supplying the photograph.