



Still Life with wine glass with “Green Woodpecker IV (in flight)” on reverse

Isabel Rawsthorne

Not on display

Title/Description: Still Life with wine glass with “Green Woodpecker IV (in flight)” on reverse

Artist/Maker: Isabel Rawsthorne

Born: 1946 c. - 1947 c.

Measurements: 520 mm x 720 mm (framed h. 650 x w. 840 mm)

Accession Number: 50698

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On both sides of *Still Life with Wine Glass with "Green Woodpecker IV (in flight)" on reverse* (c.1946-7) are works from amongst the earliest surviving paintings by Isabel Rawsthorne (1912-92). Both paintings are executed in gouache on board, so the layers of paint are opaque but thin, giving the surfaces a flat, smooth texture. *Green Woodpecker IV (in flight)* appears unfinished: the bird itself has been painted with close attention to detail: individual feathers of the wings are delineated, and the body features various tones of green and yellow, as well as the white and blue details in the bird's plumage. The areas of unpainted board, however, and the visible, sketchy outlines in brown paint indicate that this may have been a compositional study for another painting rather than a finished work.

The still life, on the other hand, appears to be complete and is one of two compositions in the Sainsbury Centre Collection of bread, oysters and snails arranged on a table (the other being 50698). By painting a display of culinary objects, Rawsthorne situates the work in the 17th century tradition of Dutch still life painting. Whereas displays of food in this 'Golden Age' of the genre may have indicated wealth and abundance, Rawsthorne's composition of a few, well-spaced objects with an empty glass and a sparse colour palette, infusing pale pinks with cool blues and icy whites, adapts the genre to feel appropriate to the scarcity of war-ravaged Europe and the bitterly cold winter of 1946-47.

Rawsthorne is known for her bohemian life in the epicentre of the Parisian and London art scenes, but this work was painted at a time of personal sadness and relative solitude, during a six-month stay in Indre in rural France. This time was, however, a period of intense productivity and artistic experimentation. [1] Her correspondence with the artist Peter Rose Pulham at this time reveals a shared interest in the poetry of Francis Ponge. [2] Ponge was a writer best known for his poems about everyday phenomena, in which he would compare his subjects to other animals and objects so as to get to the true nature of the things we encounter in everyday life. Snails and oysters were both subjects of Ponge's poetry, which may explain their presence in this painting. [3] Rawsthorne's decision to repeatedly paint the same subjects suggests similar careful, contemplative study of objects, as well as a consideration of the nature of those objects depicted. For example, by painting only the shell of the snail but leaving the gooey, living interior conspicuously absent, it is left to the viewer, to decide if the shell is a sign of life or death: inanimate remains of a meal, vermin about to consume the bread, or a spark of being amongst the inanimate objects. We may see Rawsthorne as revealing the different ways we define her subject, as well as referencing the still life tradition with the inclusion of a *momento mori*.

Georgia Kelly, February 2023

[1] Carol Jacobi, *Out of the Cage: the Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), p. 177.

[2] Letter from Peter Rose Pulham to Isabel Rawsthorne, 1948 (Tate Archive: London: Tate Britain) TGA 9612.1.1.18.

[3] Francis Ponge, *Le Parti Pris des Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

Further Reading

Suzanne Doyle, Isabel Rawsthorne 1912-1992: Paintings, Drawings and Designs (Harrogate: Mercer Art Gallery, 1997).

Carol Jacobi, Out of the Cage: the Art of Isabel Rawsthorne (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021).

Calvin Winner, 'Alberto Giacometti in Britain' in Alberto Giacometti: A Line through Time ed. by Claudia Milburn and Calvin Winner (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp.54-81.
