

Caitlin Doley, Associate Collections Curator at York Art Gallery, writes about a painting by Wynford Dewhurst, 'Manchester's Monet', included in the exhibition 'National Treasures: Monet in York, "The Water-Lily Pond"', based on a talk she gave in August

Artwork of the Month, August 2024

Wynford Dewhurst (1864-1941), *An Ancient Stronghold in France*



An Ancient Stronghold in France, Cartwright Hall Gallery, Bradford, oil on canvas, 81-100 cm, gifted 1927

Introduction

In this essay I shall be discussing the life of the painter and art theorist Wynford Dewhurst, and considering how he championed Impressionism in Britain. Dewhurst was profoundly influenced by the art of Claude Monet (1840–1926) and declared him to be his principal mentor, dedicating his pioneering account of French Impressionism, *Impressionist Painting: Its*

Genesis and Development (1904), to him. In this book, Dewhurst claimed that the French Impressionists owed a debt to British artists, namely John Constable (1776–1837) and J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851). Dewhurst asserted that the Impressionists simply developed these artists' painterly techniques, a claim that, as I shall go on to discuss, did not sit well at all with certain French artists and critics.

Biography

I shall begin by giving a brief overview of Dewhurst's life. Dewhurst was born Thomas Edward Smith to an affluent family in Manchester in 1864. He was the third of seven children. He was educated at home by a private tutor, and later at Mintholme College, a private school near Preston. Although he originally trained to enter the legal profession, he also showed artistic skill, sketching and painting in watercolour and submitting his work to local magazines and journals. After some of his drawings were published in the more widely read national journals, Dewhurst decided to pursue a career as a painter. Following a short spell at the Manchester School of Art he took a bold decision, and in 1891, at the relatively advanced age of 27, he went to Paris to train at the *École des Beaux-Arts*.

At the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Dewhurst was a pupil of the renowned French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904). Gérôme was a firm teacher and harshly critical of the radical Impressionist movement, continuing to favour a highly finished 'academic' style. But Dewhurst was instantly attracted to Impressionism. Impressionist landscape paintings particularly appealed to him, and he made frequent trips to paint in the French countryside. Perhaps his contrasting boyhood in industrial Manchester played a role in this choice, for he later wrote:

My predilections led me to choose landscape painting as the best means of expressing my pent-up aesthetic emotions. I loved the open air and countryside. With equal intensity I abhorred city life and its concomitants. I must also have been born with an irrepressible love for brilliant colours, which has certainly moulded my style.

In 1894, at the start of his final year of training in Paris, Thomas William Smith, then aged 30, changed his name by deed poll to Wynford Dewhurst. One can only presume that he did so in order to make himself stand out more in the competitive art scene that was Paris in the nineteenth century. In 1895 soon after completing his formal art training Dewhurst married the German aristocrat Antonia von Bulow, a fellow art student twelve years his junior. After initially living in an apartment in Paris, the couple moved close to Dieppe where Wynford found inspiration in the Normandy countryside and the nearby Seine valley. The first three of the couple's six children were born in France, but by 1900 the family had settled back in England, living in some comfort near Leighton Buzzard on the Bedfordshire-Buckinghamshire border. Although Wynford thereafter considered England his primary base, he would return regularly to France to paint. In fact, it has been suggested that 80 per cent of Dewhurst's artistic output was produced in France.

Helped by his wife's considerable means the couple initially prospered, but in 1917 Dewhurst lost a fortune when his Russian railway bonds crashed during the Bolshevik Revolution. This put the artist under increased financial pressure. Luckily, Dewhurst's work was generally well received. Although his achieved prices remained quite modest throughout his life, he exhibited regularly at London galleries, and between 1914 and 1926 his work was shown at the Royal Academy of Arts. By and large he

painted 'happy', colourful, unstuffy pictures that made him popular beyond the confines of academia. In 1908 he won a gold medal for the best landscape in oil at the first 'Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition' in London. Two years later the *Daily Express* added to the plaudits, claiming that 'Nothing could be more delightful on a cold, dreary day than Mr Wynford Dewhurst's landscapes imbued with sunlight [...] he paints with rare distinction in the manner of the French impressionists.'

Yet in personality he spurned the Bohemian lifestyle pursued by many of his contemporaries, especially those seduced by the hedonistic offerings of Paris. For this he was sometimes labelled puritanical and prudish. One art critic referred to his 'dominating personality' and 'vehement individuality'. But it is possible to argue that Dewhurst was simply his own man - perversely 'rebellious' for being conventional. In a lecture entitled 'Student Days in Paris' given in Manchester in 1908 he elucidated his values without holding back:

Long hair, big hats, greasy garments, and dirty morals count for nothing in art. Avoid the pitfalls of shameful and ridiculous escapades which sap and hamper one's energies. Be clean in mind, body and attire.

Clearly Dewhurst was no fence sitter, a trait further borne out in his extensive writings on art which he commenced around 1900. His forthright articles sometimes provoked outrage. In 1903, shortly before his death, the Danish-French impressionist Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) wrote: 'This Mr Dewhurst knows nothing of the Impressionist movement [...] Mr Dewhurst has his nerve.' Dewhurst's lasting reputation as a notable art theorist was cemented by the publication in 1904 of his seminal volume *Impressionist Painting: Its Genesis and Development*. It was the first English language book to address Impressionism in detail. In it, Dewhurst

made many claims, the most controversial being that essentially it was British artists such as J. M. W. Turner and John Constable who had 'invented' Impressionism in its embryo form, and that the French masters 'merely followed'.

Dewhurst proclaimed that, 'Those Englishmen who are taunted with following the methods of the French Impressionists, sneered at for imitating a foreign style, are in reality but practising their own, for the French artists simply developed a style which was British in its conception.'¹ He went on to argue that French painters in the nineteenth century

sought fresh inspiration in the works of an Englishman. Indirectly, Impressionism owes its birth to Constable; and its ultimate glory, the works of Claude Monet, is profoundly inspired by the genius of Turner. When the principles which animated these epoch-making English artists are contrasted with those which ruled the Impressionists, their resemblance is found to be strong. [...] It cannot be too clearly understood that the Impressionistic idea is of English birth. Originated by Constable, Turner, [Richard Parkes] Bonington, and some members of the Norwich School, like most innovators they found their practice to be in advance of the age. British artists did not fully grasp the significance of their work, and failed to profit by their valuable discoveries. It was not the first brilliant idea which, evolved in England, has had to cross the Channel for due appreciation, for appreciated it certainly was not in the country of its origin. As the genius of the dying Turner flickered out, English art reached its deepest degradation. [...] Rejuvenescence came from France in the

¹ Ibid., 4–5.

shape of Impressionism, and English art received back an idea she had, as it proved, but lent.'²

The history of any art movement is inherently complex with multiple crossovers and visual references made, but Dewhurst's fundamental assertion was bound to make waves. A number of critics in both England and France subsequently accused him of 'disliking the French', but this simply was not true. Dewhurst was evidently an ardent Francophile who loved both the country and its culture. His numerous return visits and written testimony clearly bear this out. This sentiment was generally reciprocal - Dewhurst received a number of prestigious honours from the French government, and was even once asked by the civic fathers of a village where he often painted to become its mayor, an honour which he declined.

Throughout his book, Dewhurst called for people in Britain to open both their hearts and their purses to the French impressionists, stating that

The English nation will have to pay dearly in the future for its present neglect of modern French art. At the present moment there is not a single specimen of the work of Monet on exhibition in any English public art gallery.'³

In Dewhurst's mind, Monet outshone all other French artists. The chapter devoted to him in *Impressionist Painting* is a prime example of hagiography, declaring the artist to be 'in the possession of undiminished vigour [...] [a] true and inspired genius'.⁴ Dewhurst's admiration for Monet even resulted in him naming one of his sons

² Ibid., 4.

³ Ibid., 37.

⁴ Ibid., 48.

Claude. But Monet does not appear to have reciprocated this unwavering admiration, and took such offence to the *Daily Mail* referring, somewhat misleadingly, to Dewhurst as his 'pupil' that he wrote to Dewhurst to complain. He had not *actually* taught Dewhurst, the Frenchman pointedly noted.

By the 1920s Dewhurst and his family had moved to Hampstead, London, and they would spend their remaining years in the capital. As Wynford grew older he painted less, and, it has been suggested, with diminished talent. His reputation gradually faded in sharp contrast to Monet whose celebrity only mounted with age.

Afterlife

Since his death in 1941, Dewhurst has been largely overlooked by galleries and researchers alike. Searching Art UK suggests that only 9 artworks by Dewhurst are owned by public British galleries. In 1995, some of Dewhurst's art was included in an important exhibition called *Impressionism in Britain* at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, which demonstrated that the proliferation of Impressionism was not, contrary to popular belief, exclusive to France, but flourished in Britain as well where Dewhurst played an important role.

The first major retrospective of Dewhurst was *Wynford Dewhurst: Manchester's Monet*, an exhibition organised by Manchester Art Gallery that ran from 9 December 2016 to 23 April 2017. I for one would certainly like more people to become aware of this talented painter and thought-

provoking writer. If you would like to learn more about Dewhurst, his book is available to read for free online at archive.org.

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NOTE: *An Ancient Stronghold in France* shows the ruined chateau of Crozant overlooking the valley of the Creuse in the Limousin region of France.

Link to Dewhurst's book on archive.org:

[Impressionist painting : its genesis and development : Dewhurst, Wynford, 1864- : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

Interesting quotations from the book:

By thus working in the open both Constable and Turner, together with their French followers, were able to realise upon canvas a closer verisimilitude to the varying moods of nature than had been attempted before. By avoiding artificially darkened studios they were able to study the problems of light with an actuality impossible under a glass roof. They were in fact children of the sun, and through its worship they evolved an entirely new school of picture making. The Modern Impressionist, too, is a worshipper of light, and is never happier than when attempting to fix upon his canvas some beautiful effect of sunshine, some exquisite gradation of atmosphere. Who better than Turner can teach the use and practice of value and tone? In triumph he fixed those fleeting mists upon his immortal canvases, immortal unhappily only so long as bitumen, mummy, and other pigment abominations will allow.⁵

The technical methods of the French Impressionists and of the early English group vary but little. The modern method of placing side by side upon the canvas spots, streaks, or dabs of more or less pure colour, following certain defined scientific principles, was made habitual use of by Turner. Both Constable and Turner worked pure white in impasto throughout their canvases, high light and shadow equally, long before the advent of the Frenchmen.⁶

Is it not strange that the birth of new methods, rather than the death of old ones, should be heralded with melancholy head-shakings, with frequent and wrathful imprecations upon the impious intruders! Time rights all things. The new to-day is old to-morrow, the exotic becomes classic, and one more page is added to the history of the evolution of art.⁷

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Ibid., 101.