

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



John Linnell

The potato field - Isle of Wight

28 x 35.7 cm (11 x 14 inches)

Signed and dated J. Linnell f./1829 at the lower right), further signed and indistinctly inscribed The Potato field J Linnell/***** of *** on an old label attached to the reverse, and further inscribed, numbered and dated No 2 The Potato Field/1832 on the artist's card attached to the reverse

Signed and dated 1829 The Potato Field - Isle of Wight by John Linnell shows the sun as it starts to set across the rolling fields of the Isle of Wight. Small clouds pepper the sky and crows fly home to roost. The dark trees to the left begin to cast shadows and suggest the enveloping night which will soon follow. In the middle ground we see figures returning home and a man still industriously working the land. In the foreground, bent double on their knees, we see a group (possibly a family), of two young boys, two men, and a woman. One of the boys appears apart and alone - maybe too young to understand the importance of his endeavours - whilst the others gather intently around a sack; absorbed in amassing and accounting the fruit of their day's labour. Before them, the simple tools and accoutrements of work are scattered alongside the bountiful harvest of potatoes. To the extreme right, two figures are cropped closely to the edge of the panel, giving an immediacy one associates with natural observation. Deep in conversation, one has their back to the viewer, whilst the ruddy face of the other, which we see over the shoulder of the first, is illuminated orange by the light of the setting sun.

The scene, the golden glow of last light across an English landscape with farmhands working the land, is indeed bucolic. Such imagery would have had seemed significant and very relevant to anyone viewing this work at the British Institution in London (where it was exhibited in 1830) given that the city, evermore industrialised, had become in the 1820s the largest city in Europe. However, Linnell is at pains not to diminish the intense labour of the potato pickers' work - the long hours and the physicality of which is conveyed by the time of day and their close proximity to the ground itself. Arguably therefore, it

is less a simple romantic image of a 'better time' but more a moralistic and poetic paen to the virtuous relationship between man and land; man and nature.

Linnell was one of a minority who realised the artistic genius of William Blake's art during his lifetime, and in fact he even supported the visionary in his old age. Along with Samuel Palmer, Linnell was one of a group of artists known as The Ancients who espoused an appreciation for archaic art and who particularly admired the creative (and often religious) vision of Blake. Their subject matter was often drawn from the Bible, or as here, from a vision of a golden age of pastoral innocence and abundance that had both Vergilian and Christian overtones.

Like his contemporary and rival Constable, Linnell admired the naturalism and realism of Northern European Masters. No doubt he would have been particularly familiar with Rubens' masterpiece, *An Autumn Landscape with a View of Het Steen*, formerly part of the collection of Sir George Beaumont and then only recently acquired by the National gallery in 1823. Like Ruben's Linnell here uses panel as the support, which gives an intensity and verism to the colouring - but also in Linnell's instance, his panel's small size made it highly transportable and thus useful when on painting trips. Inspired by artists such as Rubens, John Linnell was one of a growing number of British artists in the 19th century interested in naturalism and making oil sketches and watercolour paintings of humble landscapes - often depicting labourers working the land like the present work and also such as *Kensington Gravel Pits*, Tate, 1812. Under his master John Varley and with contemporaries William Mulready and William Henry Hunt, Linnell would make trips, often along the Thames River, to sketch from nature. The present panel made upon one such trip this time to the Isle of Wight is at once a snapshot into a bygone world but also a wonderfully skilled impression of space, distance, light and air. Masterfully combined, Linnell has elevated the English landscape, like Rubens had done for Flanders before, to the same cultural status as that of the classical idyll of Roman Italy and Ancient Greece championed by Horace and Virgil.

The *Potato Field- Isle of Wight* is a replica of a picture first painted in 1816. Linnell's handling of light and shadow gives an indication of the poetic landscapes that were yet to come. The present painting was one of seven works that the artist sent to the British Institution in 1830. At that time Samuel Palmer was often giving him advice and encouragement, and he copied Old Masters in the National Gallery.

The painting is included in a sketchbook recording Linnell's output and now in the British Museum: *Landscapes and other pictures not Portraits / Painted by John Linnell Senr / From 1807. The first Exhibited / To - / For My Son James Thos Linnell / October 1879 / John Linnell Senr*". In this album Linnell drew a sketch of each of his paintings, arranged by their year of exhibition and included details such as the title, date, measurements of the paintings, sales, prices, and other notes. The present painting is the first to be recorded for 1830, the year it was shown at the exhibition at the British Gallery. The artist also noted that it was sold to Mr Thomas in 1846 and that it was his second picture on this subject (fig.1).

Linnell played an important part in the last years of William Blake's life, commissioning the engravings for the *Book of Job* (1826) in 1823 and the watercolours for *Dante's Divine Comedy* in 1824, and giving Blake a regular income in his old age. Linnell and Samuel Palmer became close friends, and Linnell made several visits to Palmer's house in Shoreham, Kent. The two men shared many of the same ideals, including a belief that landscape painting could be a form of religious art.

Exhibitions

Exhibited

London, British Institution, 1830, n. 37 (30 gns)

Glasgow, Glasgow Dilettanti Society, 1830, no. 40 (£37 10s)

London, Royal Academy, Exhibition of works by the Old Masters and by deceased masters of the British School including a special selection from the works of John Linnell and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Winter 1883, no. 108 (lent by James Orrock)

Edinburgh, International Exhibition of Industry, Science & Art, 1886, n. 1453 (lent by James Orrock)

Probably, Glasgow, Kelvingrove Park, International Exhibition of Science, Art and Industry, 1888, n. 47 as The Potato Harvest (lent by James Orrock)

London, New Gallery, 1898, n. 204 (lent by A.T. Hollingsworth)

London, Royal Academy, 1903, n. 104 (lent by A.T. Hollingsworth)

Literature:

Literature

G. Crayon, Jun., A Glance at the Exhibitions of the works of Living Artists: Under the Patronage of the Glasgow Dilettanti Society, Glasgow, 1830, p. 54

D. Linnell, Blake, Palmer, Linnell & Co., The life of John Linnell, Sussex, 1994, p.133 & 357, no. 48(b)