



Robert Braithwaite Martineau, *The Last Day in the Old Home* (1862). Oil paint on canvas. Tate Gallery, London; 107.3x 144.8 cms. Image released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported)

UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara*

Like an unfinished sentence at the end of a book, this snapshot depiction of a particular moment in time seems to close down the past but leave the future open to imagination. Its title – *The Last Day in the Old Home* – reveals that a familiar way of life is about to end, but gives no hint of why that should be or what lies ahead. In contrast, the canvas is deliberately packed with visual clues that Victorian viewers loved deciphering.

Appreciating its complexities demands suspending modern anxieties about wasting time. Horologists celebrate the increasing accuracy of clocks, but the consequent changes to everyday life have not always been welcomed. At the end of the seventeenth century, Madame de Sévigné refused to let any of those new-fangled clocks into her home

because she objected to measuring her days out in seconds; fifty years later, Lord Chesterfield was gloomily warning his son not to squander ‘one single minute of that small portion of time which is allotted to us.’ Unpicking this narrative entails escaping the pressures imposed by split-second digitization, and instead entering an isolated, neutral zone in which your eyes can travel round the canvas, repeatedly picking out details that you had previously ignored (this is technically known as ‘reception time’).

About to relinquish their ancestral home, the members of this wealthy family display contrasting emotional states. Prostrate on the sofa, the elegantly dressed wife – the Angel of the House – stretches out her left hand as if seeking to rescue her son from her husband’s grasp. These two males, the only cheerful participants in the scene, are toasting the future in champagne while bidding farewell to an ancestor hanging on the wall. Apparently carefree, the father casually rests his foot on

an antique chair, choosing to ignore the emblems of decay and disintegration around him – the autumnal scene beyond the windows, the fire dying in the grate, the auctioneer's numbers on the portraits. In contrast, the couple's small daughter is clutching her doll, her treasured possession and comfort; ignored by the adults, she stares forlornly into the middle distance.

Sitting at the table, an older woman – the matriarch of the household – discreetly slides a five pound note towards a rumpled outsider who is bowing obsequiously but holding the keys to the house. On the newspaper half-hidden by the blotter beside her, the word 'Apartments' is visible: some serious downsizing is evidently in progress. The cause of this collapse is made apparent by the racing notebook in the father's hand and the sporting picture lying on its side against the chest of drawers to the left: gambling on horses is an expensive pursuit, although the male perpetrators show no signs of regret. In the opposite corner lies a Christie's catalogue listing the items that will shortly be up for sale, while nearby – concealed at the foot of the stairs – an auction house employee is continuing his appraisal.

The catalogue identifies this disaster's author as the fictional Sir Charles Pulleyne, perhaps recalling the real-life second duke of Buckingham, who fifteen years earlier had suffered a similar fate after running up a million pound debt. The Pulleyne family's antiquity is underlined by the suits of armour, the coat of arms in the window, and the elaborate carved mantel, which is based on one in the Great Chamber of Godinton Park at Ashford, Kent. The temptation of Eve figures just above the wife's head, although as a dependent wife, she is powerless to prevent her husband's profligacy. The picture's wooden frame is decorated with a victor's laurel wreath as well as a fool's cap and bells, together with the dates of the family's reign: 1523 to 1860.

When *The Last Day* went on display at the Great Exhibition of 1862, it was one of the two top favourites out of many thousands; the other was Ford Madox Brown's *The Last of England*, which posed equally emotional yet unanswerable questions about the destiny of a young couple with a baby apprehensively

setting off from Dover for a new life in Australia. Such narrative or poetic paintings were seen as being quintessentially British, because – one chauvinistic art critic explained – 'unlike the nations enjoying long-standing stagnation, Britain is a land of action...we act heroically, suffer manfully, and do those deeds which, in pictures and by poems, deserve to be recorded.' Like *The Last Day*, narrative pictures often preached sermons about the appropriate way to behave and the sad consequences of sinful behaviour. One artist condescendingly wondered 'whether a man is not better employed on a Sunday in looking at works of art than in lounging against the door of a public house, with a wistful eye on the Church clock, or in poring over sensational literature at home.'

Robert Martineau's most successful picture acquired its own trajectory in time. In 1951, less than a century after touring the country to great acclaim, *The Last Day* was dismissed 'as no more than a painstaking inventory of a Victorian drawing room.' That fate could only have been foreseen by a very pessimistic narrator, but at least for now, the story has a happier ending: interest in Martineau revived in the 1990s, and this picture has regained its popularity.

Main Sources

Gurland, Penelope. 'Martineau, Robert Braithwaite' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online entry of 25 May 2006).

Thomas, Julia. *Victorian Narrative Painting* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000)

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