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EVERY WEEK | JANUARY 22, 2020



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Earthbound magic

The creations of Merlin are recalled, as the art of London prepares to flood the Mall Galleries

JOHN JOSEPH MERLIN (1735–1803) was not only a goldsmith, jeweller, watchmaker, harpsichord and musical instrument maker and general mechanic, but an adept self-publicist and the inventor of ‘a Machine which enables a blind Person to play at Cards’ and an early form of in-line roller skates. His father was a blacksmith and he was born at Huy in the Prince-Bishopric of Liège, where he demonstrated the skates (while playing a violin) shortly before arriving in London in 1760 in the suite of the Spanish ambassador. They failed in their principal mission—to buy John Harrison’s chronometer—but Merlin helped build a large barrel organ for the Princess of Wales.

He then worked for James Cox creating elaborate clocks and automata, principally for the Oriental market, and was respon-

sible for the silver-swan automaton that is the pride of the Bowes Museum in Co Durham. Like Cox, he set up his own Mechanical Museum, which was effectively a showroom with such modern extras as a coffee shop. The harpsichord was giving way to the piano, so he invented a hybrid.

Among his other inventions and patents were a mobile ‘gouty’ chair, a multi-purpose Dutch oven, a gambling machine and a pocket steelyard balance for weighing coins—perhaps when gambling. When Merlin’s collections were sold in 1834, Charles Babbage bought an automaton, which he kept near his computer. I wonder whether the makers of the current *Doctor Who* series knew this.

Another violin-playing demonstration to publicise the roller

Fig 1 above left: *Low Water by Cheyne Walk* by Ian Houston. With Panter & Hall. Fig 2 above: *River and Wheel II* by Daniel Preece. With Robert Eagle. Fig 3 right: *Portrait of a Gentleman (John Joseph Merlin)* by Gainsborough. At Kenwood house

skates ended badly at a reception in Mrs Cornelys’s Soho rooms, when ‘not having provided the means of retarding his velocity... he impelled himself against a mirror of more than £500 value, dashed it to atoms, broke his instrument to pieces and wounded himself most severely’.

Dr Johnson owned a steelyard, Constable one of his watches, the Burneys were admirers and he moved in a musical circle that included Carl Abel, J. C. Bach and J. C. Fischer. Gainsborough was a friend, owning a Merlin piano and painting his portrait in 1781, now at Kenwood House. At the Royal Academy the following year, it was hung as *Portrait of a Gentleman (Fig 3)*, but, in ungentlemanly fashion, it advertises the pocket steelyard, discreetly offered to our view. In his Kenwood essay on the painting, Julius Bryant explains that the fashionable pose with right hand tucked into the waistcoat was ‘to signify the swordhand at rest, as with the handshake today’.

In one of the first antiques auctions of the year, at Swords of Stansted Mountfitchet, there was one of Merlin’s pocket



balances with a graduated beam and calibrated counterpoise for adjustment to various coin denominations (Fig 4). It was a rare example with a silver pan, one of four known, was in the original shaped green-stained and silver-mounted shagreen case and still had its now faded green silk tasselled ribbon. Could it have been the one in the portrait?

The little balance was a star among the 271-lot collection assembled by John Barnett, whose career began early: ‘I have always been a collector at heart. At the age of six I used to help my Mother carry the weekly shopping home from the local corner shop. I received a couple of pence for my efforts and as soon as I had a shilling in my pocket I walked up the Edgware Road where we were living to an outdoor arcade



Fig 4: Pocket balance for weighing coins, one of four known with a silver pan, by John Joseph Merlin. £8,710

on a bombed building site where an old man had a stall selling stamps of the world. He encouraged my interest by giving me an empty album in which to keep my purchases. The year was 1949 and I was already hooked.'

Scales, measures and balances caught his interest in 1995, when he had returned to Britain after some years as an antiques dealer in Paris. He says that if he were tempted to keep only one, it would be the Merlin. Others agreed, as it far outran everything else, selling for £8,710. I do not know the buyer, but it would be fitting if it were to go to Kenwood.

Last year's first outing for Connect—The Independent Art Fair (independent because it is run by the exhibitors)—was a distinct success and it will return to the Mall Galleries, SW1, from January 30 to February 2, with most of the same dealers and a few additions. Although many of them come from further afield, this year, they have chosen London and the London river as a theme.



Fig 5 above: *La Terrazza*, etching by Canaletto. With Elizabeth Harvey-Lee. Fig 6 right: *Tower Bridge*, etching by Julian Trevelyan. With Fifties Art



Pick of the week

Until February 15, Messums's London gallery in Cork Street, W1, is showing 'Images of the North', etchings and aquatints by Norman Ackroyd, together with 'Doncaster Heads: Portraits of a Mining Community' by Laurence Edwards. Modelled in wax and cast in bronze, the powerful heads (above) were for a 2018 commission to commemorate Doncaster miners and their history. Sculpted from life in two-hour sittings, the 40 heads 'are as much a product of the conversations and relationship between Laurence and his sitters as pure observation. The final work will be installed in the summer of 2020 and set within small niches in a section of local rock'.

This column's discussion of balances, although not exactly a theme, prompts me to note that the reputations of the husband-and-wife painters Mary Fedden and Julian Trevelyan tend to rise and fall as if on a pair of scales. At the moment, Trevelyan seems to be on the up and Fifties Art, which specialises in John Piper and other artists of that and neighbouring decades, has examples of the three etchings he made of Tower Bridge between 1962 and 1969 (Fig 6).

Other London Thames subjects will include Barnes views by Dick Lee, again from the 1960s, with Gwen Hughes; *Greenwich* by Rex Vicat Cole (Sarah Colegrave); *River and Wheel II*

(Fig 2) by Daniel Preece (Robert Eagle); and *Docklands* by Jean Noble (Amanda Aldous). Another poet of the Thames is Ian Houston whose *Low Water by Chertsey Walk* (Panter & Hall) makes me wonder when the other two chimneys of Chelsea Power Station were removed (Fig 1).

Not everything will be 20th or 21st century; Kaye Michie and Sarah Colegrave and others show 19th-century and Modern British works and Elizabeth Harvey-Lee will have an impressive selection of Old Master prints including examples by Delacroix and Canaletto (Fig 5).

Next week Chasing the high again

Country Life, January 22, 2020