Studded With Christmas Flies

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Studded With Christmas Flies
A sketched memoir

Phil Sawdon

‘Did I offer you enough wrapping paper?’

We were sunburnt, scalded red and we each bore a felt hat with yellow fly-paper worn as a band all thickly studded with Christmas flies. I pencilled several versions, indifferent to representing them alive. No draughtsmen I knew relished endorsing Christmas flies whilst they bite the eyes of drawings’ carcass.

The mourners were beginning to assemble together with the Members of the Society, recalcitrant Annual Subscribers and various displaced Honorary Fellows.

When we saw them they all appeared alike … equally disingenuous and confused as to which was left and right. Aware that we were handling four readings at a time, we took a piece of chalk and marked each appropriately on any available limb whilst simultaneously adapting the language of drawing.

Mrs. T. Chilton and Mr. J. Gillott offered them either the parlour to the left or the other to the right. Each was on the ground-floor, opulently appointed and in the centre two expansive circular tables leaving very little space for the words to move through. Each table was littered with innumerable refreshments together with an assortment of stylus, nibs, and bottles of dried ink, vellum fragments and donations presented to the Fictional Museum of Drawing since the previous demise. Capt. Dixon’s mutilated antique marble statue from the island of Agiad, Mr. Gordon’s part of a tree planted by Linnaeus and Miss Terry’s preserved chameleon to name but a few. A rudimentary termite infested cabinet sustained a row of Hector’s sketches of the earliest remains of the first configuration of The Fictional Museum of Drawing. The works were balanced on their edges together with a bell jar of malignant penguins, and a curious pair of shoes worn by an English Lady in 1770-1780. We all assumed each was probably meant for ornament alone, as neither could have been put to use in the absence of any instructions.

A squat sideboard in an alcove was surmounted by a frosted sugar model of an artists’ studio under a glass dome, behind which loitered The Uncanny whose attire included a sisal belt inset with watercolour shrews. Over the fireplace mantel was an ornate mirror, its gilded frame swathed in coarse cotton linters; the mantel itself bore a plethora of what appeared to be mining lamps. On each side of the fireplace hung a framed silhouette, each a plumbago portrait of an erstwhile keeper of the museum. In and on the walls were many other works, the most imposing of which the vellum swelled from the uncharacteristically crude frame; the subject appeared to be a copy of an engraving; we could partially discern an armoured figure on horseback, an hourglass, a skull balanced on a tree trunk and to the right a lizard. Some drawings conveyed instructions and one in particular declared the byelaws of a local burial board. Along a window sill were several collections each displaying some evidence of having being condemned to the floor by the heavy curtains.

Each guest having taken advantage of the refreshments was then led down into the kitchen at the very rear of the museum to view the corpse. Upon the profoundly bandaged cadaver perched scores of small brown birds which we later acknowledged as Rufous Mourners, adept flycatchers from the background. Amidst the prattle all the intimate detail of the causes were theorised and critiqued. ‘A lovely corpse, considering the years …’ we started to proceed upstairs. The museum smelt like a charity shop … I ran out of ink.