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The Three Dimensional Bicycle.

‘The bicycle...is the antithesis of what the painter usually looks for in his subject matter, having neither mass nor surface.... The bicycle is the ideal subject for the draughtsman, a construction of circles and lines.’(1)

The problem of depicting the linearity of the bicycle is exacerbated where the artist wishes to represent the machine and its rider in three-dimensional form, either by sculpture or by metal casting (the bronze). As a result, the majority of sculptural works of cycling are in bas-relief or occasionally in semi-abstract constructed form. The thorough and excellent work on cataloguing the sculptural representations of the bicycle in Belgium, carried out by V-C.C. member Eric de Langhe (and which is given a passing acknowledgement in David Bouillon’s article in TB160)(2) exemplifies this.

It is therefore of the greatest interest to find an English sculptural representation of cyclists and more so when it is in the form of images from the nineteenth rather than the twentieth century.

In an article in *Country Life* of December 1992 on silver gifts, recently brought to my notice by Nick Clayton, mention was made of a ‘silver bicycle’ bought by Sir Weetman Pearson from Tiffany’s in New York in 1894 as a present for his wife. The bicycle is still in existence at Dunecht Castle near Aberdeen where Nicholas Oddy is hoping to see it and write it up for *The Boneshaker*.

Weetman Pearson, the first Viscount Cowdray, was a successful northern builder/engineer who bought Paddockhurst House in Sussex in the 1890s and made extensive alterations and additions to the house and grounds. It is now a Benedictine monastery called ‘Worth Abbey’, that runs a catholic boys’ school and a Centre for Spirituality.(3) In a room with a superb view over the northern slope of the Sussex South Downs, decorated in the highest of high Victorian style, there is a bas-relief frieze some 60cm deep running right round the room below the ceiling, depicting a history of human transport, ranging from pedestrians of classical and Biblical literature and horsemen copied from the Elgin marbles, through to steamships, railway trains and even a primitive motor car.

The frieze appears at first sight to be of light coloured stone, possibly even of alabaster but, during recent repair and restoration, was shown to be in plaster which was then coated with honey which dries and darkens to give a remarkably effective three dimensional tinting of the surface. The work is by the Victorian artist Walter Crane (1845-1915), more widely known for his paintings of languid maidens and epicene knights illustrating Victorian romances.

The frieze runs round the room above head height and, adjacent to a south facing window are two panels showing cyclists. The larger of these shows Lady Cowdray on her bicycle with an accompanying gentleman, presumably Lord Cowdray himself.

The image is remarkable in its detail, all modelled and carved in plaster. Lady Cowdray wears the costume of the time, from a ‘sporting’ feathered hat to leggings or spats which demurely hide her ankles beneath the hem of her voluminous skirt as she pedals. Every detail of the bicycle is well defined. A classic drop-framed, pneumatic tyred machine of the period with a

single spoon brake acting on the front tyre, bell and lamp. The front forks have foot rests and therefore we may expect that the machine has a fixed wheel which is to be expected in a bicycle up to the mid-1890s. But what is most interesting is that all the depicted main tubes, forks, etc. are covered in an elaborate decoration of curlicues and scrolls, presumably as engraved into the silver of the original machine. It is very much to be hoped that Nicholas Oddy will be able to photograph the Dunecht machine and we can then compare the decoration and details of this and the machine in the Worth Abbey frieze. Tiffany did not, of course, make bicycles and we must assume that the Cowdray machine is a standard make of American machine which was then 'plated' by Tiffany craftsmen, that is covered with a layer of sheet silver, soldered into position over the steel underneath. The layer of silver would have had to be of sufficient thickness to allow subsequent engraving *in situ*.

Both bicycles in the main panel are shown left-side-on which, from the standpoint of the cycling historian is the less interesting side, since one cannot readily see the details of the chainwheel and transmission. On the second panel, however, we have some further details of note. While the lady's machine in this panel is also left-side-on, the full chain guard is shown on the left side. Was this indeed the case or was Crane simply having trouble depicting that complex area of the bicycle? If so, he was not alone in this. At about the same time as Crane was working at Paddockhurst, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was making his 'Simpson Chain' drawings at the Catford track in London.(4) The first draft for the poster, for which Jimmy Michael was the model, was rejected by Simpson because Lautrec had quite simply 'got it wrong' as far as the bottom bracket, chainwheel and transmission layout in his drawing was concerned.

This smaller panel has some further points of interest. The lady rider is in rational dress with belted britches or knickerbockers. Like Lady Cowdray, she wears leggings over shoes with a strap passing under the instep. She wears that type of preposterous hat described by the nineteenth century art history specialist, T. J. Clark, as 'tilted forward, tied up behind, real pieces of fashionable engineering.'(5) Another lady can be seen beyond, pedalling away vigorously into the distance toward a small motor car, partly hidden over the window embrasure. That detail has a prophetic resonance for the future of the bicycle in high society.

The frieze is also unusual in that the image of Lady Cowdray is an identifiable cyclist – a three dimensional 'portrait with bicycle.' We have the fortunate freezing of a moment in time when for a brief period the bicycle was the plaything of the rich and fashionable. The bicycle was 'born to an epoch of transition between the era of the train and the era of the motor car.'(6) This is the period between Flora Thompson being over-awed by the daring young men who passed through her village on their ordinaries and of every cottage of that same village a few years later having 'the old bike' as its basic form of transport (7). Luckily for us that moment was modelled by Walter Crane in honey tinted plaster and is preserved in the Worth Abbey frieze.

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Notes

- 1) Scotford Lawrence. *The Art of the Cycle. An Examination of the Pictorial Image of the Cycle and Cycling in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Unpublished M.Phil. thesis. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts. Birmingham 2002. p.78.
- 2) David Bouillon. *Cycle Monuments in Flanders, Belgium. The Boneshaker*. No.160. Vol. 17. 2002. p.18.
- 3) I am indebted to Father Patrick Fludder, O.S.B. of the Centre for Spirituality, Worth Abbey for showing me the frieze and providing images for this article. March 2004.
- 4) Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec made his only visit to England to the Catford track in south London in June 1896 for the Simpson Chain Company to draw the track match between cyclists from France and England.
- 5) T.J. Clark. *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his followers*. London. Thames and Hudson. 1985. p.165.
- 6) Edward Nye. *A Bicyclette*. Paris. Sortilèges. 2000. Introduction. 'La gratte-ciel rêvant de la caverne.' P.VIII. (in French in the original.) Author's translation.
- 7) Flora Thompson. *Lark Rise to Candleford*. Harmondsworth. Penguin Modern Classics edition. 1973. p.255.