

Thomas Bewick

Tale-pieces

8 April – 25 May 2009, First Floor Galleries

Thomas Bewick's (1753–1828) vignettes, dating back 200 years, are rare guests in a modern art gallery. The present exhibition is a contemporary look into history, building a bridge between image making techniques and endeavours of different eras.

The vignettes were not originally made to be hung on gallery walls, but published in books about natural history. Bewick, with his workshop partner in Newcastle, Ralph Beilby, produced three volumes. The first was the *General History of Quadrupeds* (1790), "four-legged" animals, followed by two volumes of *British Birds: Land Birds* (1797) and *Water Birds* (1804). They presented each specimen by describing it in words and illustrating it with a printed image. In the time before photography such hand-made pictures served as scientific evidence.

Where there was empty space at the end of a paragraph or the bottom of a page, it was customary to fill it with some ornamental figure, a tailpiece. The ornament, or vignette, as it was called, could also be placed in the beginning of the paragraph, as a headpiece. These would often depict leaves and foliage, from which the word 'vignette' (French "vigne", vine) is derived, or small decorative objects like oil lamps.

Bewick recast the art of the tailpiece through his depictions of everyday life in his native Tyne valley. Each represents a part of the world on paper in miniature: it can be a whole landscape with the horizon in the distance, a group of people or a lonely figure in a story. The image is not bound by a frame but integrates with the space of the page.

The precision and detail with which Bewick renders his subjects was made possible by the technique of using very hard wood of box tree and cutting the wood across the grain to make the printing block. The wood surface can then be worked with the metal engraver's tools allowing more detailed effects than the woodcutter's knife or chisel used for a woodcut. In the final image, the engraved lines print white while the surface left untouched carries the ink.

Bewick drew and engraved his vignettes initially for his own pleasure, after a busy day carrying out orders from merchants and other customers. Most jobs in the workshop involved metal engraving, but for his own projects Bewick preferred wood engraving. He considered himself a craftsman, not an artist, and he never saw his vignettes as independent works of art.

Bewick's tailpieces were thus marginal in a number of ways: they were executed as an alternative to the day job, and in his books they were fitted around the main content. In contrast to the more systematic, encyclopedic natural histories, with vignettes Bewick was free to develop his own tales the way he wanted them.

To underline the didactic nature of his tailpieces Bewick called them tale-pieces. With a wry sense of humour his depicted events intended to provide moral instruction and social critique. He observed his fellow humans with the accuracy that he applied to the natural world as a whole. Co-existing with the birds and "quadrupeds" these "bipeds" are subject to Bewick's more psychological and sociological scrutiny.

Bewick was himself from a humble background, a son of a tenant farmer and a collier, and preferred country life to the city. The grand idea of publishing the *Quadrupeds and Birds* was to give common people access to information, which until then was confined to the "libraries of the wealthy". Bewick's sympathy was on the side of the underprivileged. Many vignettes depict people coping with different situations, often travelling, working, crossing rivers and other obstacles on their way. Bewick's resentment of human cruelty towards animals and people is clear, signified by the many hanged figures in his works.

Death is a recurrent theme, both as an individual destiny but, through motifs such as military uniforms and memorials, also making wider connections with the restless times of the Napoleonic wars. One of his last wood engravings, this time on a larger scale, executed in the last year of Bewick's life, was entitled *Waiting for Death*; Bewick depicts an old horse, weary and exhausted from past labour, standing motionless against the familiar landscape, resigned to its fate in the natural order of things.

