

# Out of Hours

## Art

### LIGHT AND MAGIC

#### The Art of Bedlam: Richard Dadd

Watts Gallery Artists' Village, Guildford, Surrey, 16 June 2015 – 1 November 2015

Richard Dadd (1817–1886) spent the last 42 years of his life as a patient in Bethlem (Bedlam) and then Broadmoor Hospitals, being a 'criminal lunatic' after developing the illness that led to his killing his father. Already a gifted artist, before his confinement, having toured the Middle East and produced some fine watercolours (for example, *Artist's Halt in the Desert by Moonlight*, c.1845), his inpatient work developed in a haunting and magical way, with themes from Shakespeare and the world of fairies. He was described in the hospital casebooks as talking 'in a mysterious way about the myths of a past age'; while also noted to be 'for some years after his admission [...] a violent and dangerous patient'. He seems to have been especially admired by the Physician Superintendent Dr William Hood (1824–1870) who was appointed at the age of 28 and who is generally deemed to be the sitter in Dadd's *Portrait of a Young Man* (1853).

This compact exhibition (taking up two rooms of the delightful Watts Gallery) is informative, with casebook notes from Bethlem, and contains about 30 of Dadd's paintings and sketches, including the mysteriously complex *Contradiction: Oberon and Titania*, c.1854–1858, and extra material, highlights and a lighted illustration, of *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke* (1855–1864). For the budding psychopathologists there are several of Dadd's *Sketches to Illustrate*

*the Passions* (1850s) including *Hatred; Agony — Raving Madness; Insignificance or Self-Contempt; Deceit or Duplicity; Patriotism; Anger; and Grief or Sorrow*. These are by turn fearful, quite funny, nicely unique and embellished to varying degrees. Dadd's version of *Patriotism* includes a whole map around a mythical world that includes the *Sea of Trouble*.

As an introduction to Dadd and his strikingly-detailed fantasy paintings and the almost pre-cartoon imagery of his partly psychotic world, it is a refreshing and easily managed exhibition. The contrast between 'those disgusting points in his conduct' and his being also 'a very sensible and agreeable companion' illustrates psychiatry's long-standing dilemma; having to acknowledge that extraordinary beauty and creativity can emerge from the most disordered of minds. Dadd's subjects were not, of course, mentally ill (although physiognomy was a Victorian offshoot of phrenology, portrait illustrations of specific diagnoses being used in several textbooks), so there is nothing like the pathology outlined, for example, in Hogarth's painting of *Christ at the Pool of Bethesda* in the staircase to the great hall at Barts.

Those wishing to pursue Dadd's work can also visit the Bethlem Museum of the Mind, or buy the handsome hardback catalogue, which is beautifully produced. However, of postcards and smaller material reproductions, there was nothing [sadly], but



Richard Dadd. *The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke* (c. 1855–1864). Oil on canvas. Tate.

Dadd's place as a leading British Victorian artist feels quite appropriate, within the broader, and rather darker, permanent collection of GF Watts. There is light and magic here, and much to contemplate.

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*This exhibition can also be seen at Bethlem, Museum Of The Mind, Beckenham, Kent, Until 6 February 2016, with free entry.*

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