

COAL MINING HAS been in existence in the Barnsley area since the 14th century, where there is evidence of medieval mining and shallow shafts near Elsecar. The coal mined in South Yorkshire was a bituminous coal that was generally used for coal gas and coke. But it was in the 18th century when the Industrial Revolution developed that the need for large amounts of coal was implemented in order to power steam engines and furnaces. The popularity for coal resulted in pits being sunk in areas where coal seams were abundant, which areas in Yorkshire were, and places such as Barnsley therefore became populated with coal mining collieries. The coal industry provided new employment and the influx of men and their families populated towns and villages which were built around the collieries. Coal mining became popular, essential, and a way of life for many and had an enormous impact on their lives.

Surprisingly, there is a long tradition associated with coal mining and art. Mining art tends to focus on the controversial aspect of this industry and has allowed the artist to explore a route to creativity and express their feelings towards coal mining. The history of mining art dates back to the early 19th century where trained artists sometimes used mining as their main source for ideas and themes. Works of portraiture were often commissioned by colliery owners or managers to implement their status and ownership, as well as their authority and influence. Artists in the 19th century used coal mining as a strong theme in their art, focusing on the emotive and sensitive subjects associated with mining such as death. Historically, coal mining has been a very dangerous activity with a long list of mining disasters. The aftermath of a disaster was often a subject chosen by artists who illustrated pathos through the anguish and despair felt by families who have lost men in an accident, or the impact and effect an accident had on mining communities.

The earliest painting which is regarded as the first true mining painting is Henry Perlee Parker's 'Pitmen at Play', painted in 1833, which belongs to the art collection of the National Coal Mining Museum for England. This painting is significant in the history of mining art because it is credited as the first painting of a mining subject that was shown at the Royal Academy of Arts, crediting Perlee Parker as the first artist to submit a mining-themed painting to a prestigious art institute.



'Pitmen at Play' by Henry Perlee Parker  
 Courtesy of the National Coal Mining  
 Museum for England

Many works of mining art in Britain are by amateur artists who worked across the English coalfields as miners. Art allowed miners the independence to express their own feelings and experiences working underground or their views on the industry. Miners were not all formally trained as artists and some were self-taught and so the portrayal of mining through the eyes of the miner gives a powerful insight into the working world of the miner, a medium which manages to communicate a powerful visual message.

During the early 20th century, before nationalisation, miners were encouraged to become artists and became confident producing art in order to communicate their feelings towards their work. Although not formally trained, miners developed their own independent style which may not be deemed as tasteful as fine art and appear to be naive in nature, but the body of work can be considered as unique and expressive. Art was advocated by the Workers' Educational Association; the first art course began in 1934 following a request from two miners, one working in the Ashington coalfield, County Durham. This request then spiralled into the Ashington Group forming, which was then followed by similar groups including the Spennymoor Settlement. Both these organisations have played a significant role in giving mining art a legitimate place in 20th-century art and much of the Ashington Group Collection belongs to Woodhorn Museum in Northumberland.

Following nationalisation in 1947, the National Coal Board (NCB) along with the Arts Council of Great Britain, encouraged miners to record their experiences by producing art and exhibiting their works in national art and handicraft competitions held annually, which awarded creativity. The NCB built

their own extensive art collection and so encouraged miners to exhibit their work in order to bring mining art and artists to the public's attention.

The work as a coal miner was gruelling and had a physical and emotional impact on the men who worked in cramped and dangerous conditions underground. Paintings showing miners working underground represent the physicality of the work involved and the effect it has on the miners' bodies – the stresses and strains developed during the labour-intensive work are often evident in the exaggerated unnatural bodily positions of the miners depicted in some works of art, which is often reflected through the physical environment of the underground roadways. Look at Gilbert Daykin's 'Markham's Ponies' for how he illustrates two young miners pushing a large loaded coal tub along the Underground Railroad. The representation of the two miners reflect the work usually carried out by horses and ponies underground, who were used for their strength and durability to transport loaded tubs of coal. Daykin demonstrates to the viewer that this is backbreaking work. The mundane and strained expression on the miner's faces clearly shows that this is a gruelling task; the pressure enforced is shown through the physical aspect of the miner's bodies and that the force is demanding and requires concentration. The strength and durability of the miners pushing the tub is reflected with the wooden props which can be considered as frail but are taking on the pressure of the ground above; the anticipation that the wood could break at any point could be a reference towards the bodies of the miners. This painting also indicates how Daykin felt about the work miners had to endure, that the environment was uncomfortably hot, the atmosphere claustrophobic and closed in, whilst also predicting the future that these young miners have in front of them, which is not a pleasant one.



Underground scene by George William Bissill. Courtesy of the National Coal Mining Museum for England

The theme of claustrophobia is quite often represented underground where miners are shown working in the cramped and closed-in environments of the mines, promoting the thought of suffocation which expresses an emotive response towards mining. There is the sense of danger and panic often represented in many paintings, which again focuses on the impact of working underground and what miners had to endure during their shift. This is illustrated in miner-artist George William Bissill's works of coal miners underground where his miners are represented as large bulky figures working in small cramped spaces.

Bissill is acknowledged as one of the country's most important miner-artists and was producing his paintings of miners during the same period as Gilbert Daykin. The fear of being trapped underground was always felt by Bissill from when he was buried for three hours in an underground trench during the First World War, when he served as a soldier, having left coal mining through anxiety over being underground. This uneasy feeling of confined spaces and the feeling of suffocation is a theme which Bissill carries throughout his coal mining works and has a strong impact on the artist's feelings and his association with working underground as a coal miner.

Daykin also uses similar representations depicted by Bissill by illustrating feelings of entrapment and imprisonment which he expresses in his painting 'Symbolic: The Miner Enslaved'. In this painting, the miner appears to be held captive underground by chains and appears to be too restless to try and break free. The perspective chosen by Daykin enforces the claustrophobic atmosphere where the space is closed in around the miner, heightening the sense of anxiety and alarm. Here, Daykin is using the chains as a visual symbol of entrapment but will be using this imagery to express his own personal feelings about coal mining, perhaps suggesting that there is no escape because once you become a coal miner there is no breaking free. Coal mining has always been a way of life for those who were associated with the industry; families lived in close-knit communities and leisurely pursuits often reflected the pastimes of coal miners who were considered as comrades during and out of work.

Miner-artists not only produced art from an underground perspective, they also painted views above ground to show the impact of the industry on the landscape which was overrun by colliery buildings and the landmark headgear constructions. Where there was a colliery, there was a village, where communities thrived, giving miner-artists an alternative theme to pursue. They explored the impact of communities, kinship and people socialising who all have something in common – the colliery. Miner-artists such as the Ashington Group paid attention to the theme of community, often depicting camaraderie and friendship, and on the other hand, the drudgery and monotonous lives they led, with the colliery towering above the village as a constant reminder of its existence.

Works produced by coal miners portray the coal mining industry in many aspects, from the coalface through to miners' home lives and also document the changing landscape of the English coalfields. There is a huge body of mining art produced by the amateur and self-taught mining artist which deserves acknowledgement and recognition; they have created their work to explore the



physical nature of their work and the relationship with their environment, an experience which we can only reflect on and visualise through the eyes of the miner-artist.

Images of paintings by Gilbert Daykin can be seen on the BBC 'Your Paintings' website: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/artists/daykin-gilbert-18861939>

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