

The Royal Collection: Picture in Focus

William Powell Frith

Ramsgate Sands (Life at the Seaside), 1852-4



Oil on canvas

77cm x 155cm

Bought by Queen Victoria in 1854

The Royal Collection RCIN 405068

What can we see?

Objects

An obelisk

A clock tower

Terraced houses

Wagons, or 'bathing machines'

A Punch and Judy theatre

Parasols, bonnets and hats

Shadows and reflections

People

A man reading a newspaper

A boy pulling a donkey

A child floating a boat

A girl with a telescope

Children digging with spades

A baby sucking its thumb

Musicians with a tambourine

What is happening?

People have gathered together on this popular beach to enjoy the sunshine, play games, splash in the water, build sand castles and relax.

Who painted it?

William Powell Frith was a successful Victorian painter. He lived from 1819 to 1909. He was one of the first artists to paint scenes like this of modern life. 20 years later, the Impressionists became famous for painting similar subjects in France. When Queen Victoria saw the painting on display at the Royal Academy in 1854, she asked if she could buy it. Unfortunately, it had already been sold to someone else, but the buyer later agreed to sell it to Victoria.

Frith visited Ramsgate in the summer of 1851. He made some sketches of the beach in oil paint, to record his ideas for this picture.

Where is Ramsgate?

It is a seaside resort in Kent, in the south east of England.

When the first railways were built in the 1840s, people could travel quickly and easily to Ramsgate for the first time. This painting was painted a few years after trains had been introduced, when beaches like this had become fashionable, bustling resorts.

Where do you think the artist was standing?

You can see the edge of the sea at the bottom of the painting. The artist must have been standing in the shallow water to get this view.

The artist's daughter?

Look at this detail from the painting. Some say that this girl with her toes in the water is Frith's own daughter. She looks out of the picture – who do you think she's staring at?

Frith couldn't have painted everyone and everything on this beach at the same time. He sketched his ideas quickly, then worked on the painting back in his studio. He asked different people to pose for him; they had to keep very still, so he could draw them in detail.



A hidden self portrait

After Frith had been working on this picture for a while, he made an important change: he added his own self portrait into the crowd. Can you find him?
(Look as far as possible to the right, just above the old woman in black).

Queen Victoria's childhood memories

Why do you think Queen Victoria liked this picture so much?

Victoria had been on holiday to Ramsgate herself, when she was younger.

She stayed with her mother, the Duchess of Kent, in Albion House - you can see Albion House in the painting: it's the highest building overlooking the sea.

This is what Victoria wrote about her memories of Ramsgate:

'drove down to the beach with my maid & went into the bathing machines, where I undressed & bathed in the sea (for the 1st time in my life), a very nice bathing woman attended me. I thought it delightful till I put my head under water, when I thought I should be stifled'

Queen Victoria's Journal, 30 July 1847