

Claude Duval by William Powell Frith: painted 1860

Welcome to this guide in which I'll be inviting you to explore this painting, which is really packed with interest and stories.

At first glance we may think this is a merry sort of a painting. There are two finely dressed people posed ready to dance, on a country road. But then we notice that all around them is chaos, movement, destruction and mayhem. What is going on?

We're at the scene of a crime. The figure in red is the notorious highwayman Claude Duval, who operated around Holloway in London, during the 1660s, holding up carriages and demanding money from the gentlemen and, as legend goes, also demanding dances from the ladies in return for which he allowed his victims to keep some of their possessions.

Duval stands confidently, his poise proud and elegant, perhaps gallant, perhaps mocking. His clothes are well-cut and expensive-looking – it seems he makes quite a good living at his job...He's wearing a face mask, as are many of the robbers.

Meanwhile the young woman seems to be facing him bravely, head up and standing tall. But when you look at her face, how do you think she's really feeling? Her face seems a mix of emotions – do you detect fear or courage, perhaps defiance. Do you think there's any admiration there too?

We are told by historians that this carriage belongs to Lady Aurora Sydney. Which one is she? It isn't clear as there's several ladies in the picture, but certainly there's also a gentleman hostage in the scene. To find him, look to the left. A hunched figure, this man has bound wrists, and is seen here glowering at the dancing unfolding before him. He looks filled with impotent rage. Do you think he might also be feeling a touch of guilt? It may be that he's been offered the option of saving his money if his wife dances with Duval, and he's given his permission, even perhaps persuaded her. But looking over to the bottom right of the picture, we notice the shattered sword cast aside on the ground. It looks like there's been some resistance at least. So maybe the woman has volunteered for the job, or has Duval simply seized her and made her dance? What do *you* think?

What else is going on? Staying with the figures on the left, we can see there's a man playing the pipe, as an accompaniment to the dancing. We can guess that only the highwaymen are enjoying that particular entertainment. Further over, we can see two members of the looting gang, one busily prising open a small case with a knife and the other spilling out the victims' possessions onto the ground. Both are caught staring at their ringleader's antics. What do you think they're thinking? Are they amused, bemused, annoyed that part of the loot might not be paid over due to the dance taking place?

On now to the carriage and here there's pandemonium. Click on the close up to take a better look. An elderly woman is pleading piteously with a rather politely posed highwayman, as a pretty young woman slumps dramatically in a faint. Do you believe the highwayman to be truly polite, or is his gesture another piece of mockery?

A far more aggressive scene is taking place on the driver's platform, where a terrified driver is being held at pistol point whilst his horses are being cut away from their harnesses to be stolen. The pistol-toting highwayman is thuggish-looking, and through his mask we can see his angry eyes gleaming, and his mouth set in a ruthless line.

Finally we can notice the two servant boys – the one on the extreme right, who's taking his chances and running away, is probably an enslaved African boy. The other, on the left near the elderly hostage, is dressed in matching orange livery and looks green with fear.

Where is this scene? It's taking place on what seems to be a remote piece of heathland under a slightly stormy looking sky where birds wheel and dramatic splashes of light illuminate the canvas. Do you think the painter is effectively enhancing the fearfulness of the situation by isolating the scene in this way?

It's interesting to reflect on how different the 17th century London area was from today's metropolis. Duval is supposed to have worked the roads in Highgate, Holloway and Islington. Wide open areas of countryside separated the distinct villages at this time, making travelers vulnerable to this sort of attack.

All seems to be going in favour of the band of highwaymen, but far, far away in the distance is a dark hint of the future. Click on the detail to see it – at the end of the road, as it fades into the horizon, is a gibbet. This is a foreshadow of Duval's fate. Despite his popularity as a romantic rogue, he didn't manage to evade the law, and was caught in 1670, convicted of six robberies (others couldn't be proved) and sentenced to be hanged. Frantic efforts to save him were made by many members of the public, courtiers, and even Charles II himself, but to no avail. Aged just 27 Duval was hanged. When cut down, his body was displayed to view and attracted vast crowds, before being accorded a grand funeral in St Paul's Cathedral and being buried, it's claimed, in its central aisle.

Still, it is at his height of fame and success that we see him here, plying his trade on London's country roads. Who do you find your sympathy lies with in this painting? The highwayman, the young lady, the elderly lady in the carriage, one of the servant boys perhaps? If you could give that one person a piece of advice, what would it be? We've come to the end of this audio guide now, although you're welcome to spend more time looking at the painting on your own.

Next, you might like reflecting on what you most enjoyed about this brief activity so scroll down to **Wrap up your painting** to have a go at this.