

VICTORIA CROWE

In association with Scottish National Portrait Gallery

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An extraordinary series of paintings beautifully chronicling the harsh, self-sufficient world of one of Britain's few female shepherds and with it a way of life that has now vanished is on show at The Fleming Collection. A Shepherd's Life includes over 40 paintings of Jenny Armstrong and the bleak Pentland Hills in the south of Scotland, where she spent her whole life, by the acclaimed artist Victoria Crowe, OBE, RSA, RSW. Victoria Crowe studied at Kingston School of Art and the Royal College of Art, London, before being invited to join Edinburgh College of Art in 1968, where she taught drawing and painting until 1998.

The paintings in A Shepherd's Life are the result of an unlikely collaboration which lasted for 15 years between Victoria Crowe, an English-born artist who grew up in suburban Surrey, and Jenny Armstrong, a physically tough, fiercely independent Scotswoman who lived a rural way of life that had remained unchanged for generations. The two met when Victoria Crowe and her husband Michael Walton went to live in the hamlet of Kittleyknowe, 1,000 ft up in the Pentland Hills, south of Edinburgh, in 1970.

In the years that followed Victoria Crowe drew and painted the elderly shepherd as she fed her flock, carried bales of hay, walked her dogs and collected fuel. The winter snows and long soft summer evenings in the hills provided a constantly changing backdrop and as Jenny became more infirm the artist portrayed her inside the primitive cottage where she had lived for most of her life. The only time that Jenny might have moved away was when she met and fell in love with a cousin during a rare trip to Ireland. She remained in Monks Cottage, which only belatedly acquired a telephone and mains water and electricity, until her death aged 82 in 1985. An entire way of life, utterly different from the complexities of the modern world, died with her.

A Shepherd's Life was first shown at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in 2000 as part of its Millennium exhibition series celebrating the unsung heroism of everyday lives. The exhibition at The Fleming Collection includes a remarkable new tapestry of one of Victoria Crowe's paintings Two Views, which has been commissioned by the Duke of Buccleuch, a longstanding admirer and collector of her work, and woven by Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh. The tapestry, measuring 4ft x 8ft, took weavers Douglas Grierson, Naomi Robertson and David Cochrane more than seven months to make.

Victoria Crowe came originally from Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey and studied at Kingston School of Art and the Royal College of Art in London, before being invited by Robin Philipson to teach drawing and painting at Edinburgh College of Art in 1968, where she subsequently remained for 30 years. So although English-born she has lived north of the border for decades and has established herself as one of the best-known artists working in Scotland. She has had regular solo exhibitions in Edinburgh, London and elsewhere from 1970 up to the present day. She is renowned for her portraits as well as for her landscapes.

Over the last 35 years Victoria Crowe, one of Scotland's leading painters, has established herself as a painter whose work is instantly recognisable. She has been described as 'one of the most vital and original figurative painters currently at work in Scotland.'

A Shepherd's Life focuses on Jenny Armstrong, born in 1903 at the farm in Fairliehope, who spent her life working as a shepherd in the Pentland Hills. In a series of remarkable paintings made over 20 years and based on close observation, Victoria Crowe pays tribute to the life and work of an exceptional woman. In spite of their different ages and backgrounds, the two women came to value each other's company and it was through the shepherd that the artist learned how to interpret the surrounding landscape. At the same time, the paintings depict an ancient way of living that has been long in decline.