



John Atherton - artist, fisherman and fly-tyer.

The dry-flies of John Atherton

Rob Smith in praise of an American artist whose deadly dry-flies were inspired by the Impressionist Movement

IT MIGHT SEEM strange to begin an article on fly-tying with a discourse on the merits of modern art and the Impressionist Movement. However, the fly patterns designed by John Atherton owe their very existence to the impressionist's palette and the aesthetics of his art, so his life as a painter requires our attention.

Born on June 7, 1900 in Brainard, Minnesota, Atherton moved to San Francisco in 1920, to study at the College of the Pacific and the California School of Fine Art. After graduating, he sharpened his artistic skills in various West Coast art studios of the time, and exhibited numerous paintings.

In 1929 during the annual exhibition at the Bohemian Club he won the \$500 fourth prize, a win that part financed his move to New York, a move which would become the turning point of his flourishing artistic career. Arriving during a period of boom in the advertising industry, Atherton started to undertake commissions for companies such as General Motors and Shell Oil, and illustrated covers for several magazines.

In 1938 he went on to hold his first one-man exhibition at the Julian Levy Gallery in Manhattan; and later, in 1943, at the "Artist for Victory" show, his painting *The Black Horse* won fourth prize and now hangs in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Now a successful commercial and fine-art painter,



Rob Smith has been a fly-fisher and fly-dresser for over 40 years, and likes to combine his love of angling history with the pursuit of wild brown trout in his native Yorkshire Dales.

Atherton moved to Arlington, Vermont, where beside the Battenkill River he would increasingly focus his artist's eye on the subject of fly-tying, a hobby that would fulfil his creative urge.

"For me, the change of pace from the picture, which is two dimensional, to the fly of three dimensions offers the variety of a great hobby. Tying flies, like painting, is a constant series of experiments. It has been fascinating, over the years, to apply the creative urge to an object which may catch a trout as well as afford the satisfaction of invention."

Rather than seeing insects in the form of solid shapes and colours, Atherton took this lead from the impressionist painters, and broke down the image of a natural fly into small spots of pure tones, in order to effectively replicate the effects of light on and through the body of the natural insect. These thoughts and distillations led him to design and dress wonderfully creative fly patterns and to set down his rationale in his classic work *The Fly and the Fish*, published in 1951.

"If you will look closely at a live dun (not one in a specimen bottle) you will observe that his coloring is 'impressionistic'. It is built up of many tiny variations of tone such as we find in the paintings of Renoir, Monet and others of the impressionistic school of art."

No. 1

Tail Pale Dun barbules **Body** Very pale cream fox-belly fur, ribbed with narrow oval tinsel **Wings** Hackle points from a light, glassy natural dun **Hackle** Very light cree, or a pale ginger and one light grizzly hackle wound so as to mix the colors **Hook sizes** 16, 14, 12

No. 2

Tail Light brassy or rusty dun hackle barbules or a mixture of light ginger and light dun **Body** Light buff or pale tan fox-belly fur mixed with natural seal's fur and a small amount of hare's ear, ribbed with narrow oval gold tinsel **Wings** Wood duck, light **Hackle** One light cree and one medium dun hackle **Hook sizes** 16, 14, 12

No. 4

Tail Cree hackle barbules, or a mixture of ginger and grizzly **Body** Naturally seal's fur mixed with dyed red seal, a little hare's ear and a little muskrat fur. The color should be a grayed, mixed pink. Ribbed with narrow oval gold tinsel **Wings** Wood duck preferably, or light-colored mandarin speckled side feathers **Hackle** A mixture of one cree hackle and one medium natural dun **Hook sizes** 16, 14, 12
This fly will approximate to certain pink-bodied naturals, and is even useful for some of the spinners with pink or reddish bodies

No. 3

Tail Medium cree hackle barbules or a mixture of ginger and grizzly **Body** Natural seal's fur mixed with bright yellow seal's fur, fox belly fur dyed yellow or dyed mohair. The color should be a light yellow but not too strong and should have a mixed look **Wings** Wood duck. I originally tied this wing with medium dun hackle points but recently changed to wood duck. Both materials are good, however, and the dressing can be adapted to local requirements **Hackle** Light rusty dun, or one ginger and one medium dun hackle **Hook sizes** 16, 14, 12

No. 5

Tail Dark cree, or a mixture of red brown and grizzly
Body Hare's ear, using the short speckled hairs on the ear and the pinkish tan hair at the base of the ears. It should have a decided mixed "buggy" look. Ribbed with fine narrow oval tinsel **Wings** Mandarin or wood duck **Hackle** Dark cree or a mixture of red-brown and grizzly **Hooks sizes** 18, 16, 14, 12, 10
This fly is the most generally useful of the group.

No. 6

Tail dark rusty dun hackle barbules **Body** A mixture of dark muskrat or mole and some red-brown fur such as dyed seal's fur, to get a body of a brownish grey color, rather dark. Ribbed with narrow oval gold tinsel **Wings** This wing can be varied somewhat but my preference is for Bali duck side feathers. I also use bronze mallard and dark mandarin **Hackle** A natural rusty dun, or one fairly dark natural dun and one red brown hackle mixed together **Hooks sizes** 18, 16, 14, 12

"He famously exchanged one of his paintings worth thousands of dollars for a cock cape in order to dress some flies"

No. 7

Body Very dark. I frequently use black tying silk, making a very short body **Tail (optional)** Black cock hackle points **Wings** None **Hackle** Black cock **Hook sizes** 18, 20, 22
This fly is designed for use when trout are feeding on midges or very small flies, as so often occurs on the "flats".

As an artist, Atherton knew instinctively how the intelligent use of colour could give life to a painting, and likewise to the body of a fly. He selected and used his dubbings with the same discriminating manner that he chose and used his paints, blending various tones and shades of fur to form an overall impression of life within the fly-dressing. He particularly liked the use of seal's fur due to its soft silhouette and translucent sheen, often mixing it with other softer furs such as fox belly to aid its dubbing quality. He knew instinctively that his choice of underlying tying silks must complement and harmonise with the construction of his fur bodies, stating this in a passage reminiscent of the words of Yorkshire's Edmonds and Lee:

"Lightly spun dubbing is translucent and frequently the silk will show through. Impressionistic color effects can be achieved by combining analogues or complementary colors together, depending on the desired effect. An interesting combination using complementary colors together is to spin light blue gray dubbing on primrose yellow tying silk. Particularly when wet, this results in a lovely, elusive olive tint, reminiscent of natural insect coloration."

His patterns were ribbed with gold oval tinsel instead of fine wire, which he found became lost within the mixed loose hairs of his fly's dubbings. Likewise, he took the same care in the choice and use of winging materials, favouring hackle points or bali, wood and mandarin duck flank feathers tied in the "Catskill" style for wings - a style of winging that he purposely chose in order to break up the outline of the fly and achieve a more lifelike appearance than the often-used heavy, lifeless wing-slips of the period. Like all fly-tyers of that period, Atherton found it particularly difficult to acquire suitable hackles of the right quality, requiring not just the right coloration but more importantly stiffness. He famously exchanged one of his own paintings worth thousands of dollars for a cock cape in order to dress some flies.

"To obtain the proper color is one thing, but to find both color and quality - stiffness - is rare indeed. We all live in hope that by some strange turn of fortune we shall become the possessor of the ideal neck, the color neither too light nor too dark, the suggestion of red in the dun of the exact proportion, and the stiffness dangerous to our fingers. It is something we can dream of to the end of our lives as it will undoubtedly be still a dream even then."

To hackle his impressionist patterns Atherton favoured cross-breed or variegated barred hackles, which allowed him instantly to achieve subtle variations of shade with just the wrap of a single hackle, thus achieving the right multi-shade appearance of the wing's silhouette. When this was not possible, Atherton followed the Catskill method of wrapping two shades of hackle together to achieve his aim of an impressionistic look to the hackle.

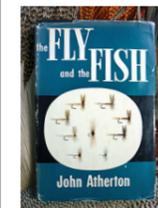


ABOVE
"The Beagle",
 painted by John
 Atherton in
 1944.

"We can also obtain good color combinations by using two hackles of different colors in order to get a mixed look. When, for example, one cannot obtain good cree hackle, which is grizzly or Plymouth rock hackle with considerable buff, ginger or red in it, a good approximation can be made using one grizzly hackle and one ginger or red hackle wound together. Badger combines well with ginger, red or dun and furnace or coch-y-bondhu mixes well with dun or grizzly. Once the angler sees how much more "buggy" his flies look with these mixed materials I am sure he will tie his new patterns and fish with considerably more confidence."

In creating his own series of dry-flies Atherton took a profound shift away from the accepted norm of trying to imitate a specific species of insect with each individual pattern, and instead developed his own validation towards the dressing of trout flies. Atherton's own dry-fly patterns listed in his book are not assembled in order of species imitated, but grouped in order of a colour graduation from light to dark. To my mind this marks out John Atherton as a true visionary. Rather than loading his fly-box with numerous different patterns, he created a series of flies that in reality almost blended into one. These seven dry-fly patterns were designed to imitate a wide variety of upwinged flies, from sub-imago to spinner. The vagaries of different insect hatches on different rivers held no terrors, as he had created a small series of dry patterns that covered a multitude of possibilities, and all brought to life through the medium of his art. A testament to the effectiveness of his patterns can be seen in his remarks about pattern No 5.

"No. 5 is the best fly in the group. It has stood up over many years as the best 'general' fly I have used. It is good in all kinds of water, and in all sizes. It killed extremely well on landlocked salmon in Maine and on all varieties of trout in the West as well as in the East. If I could have only one fly of conventional design it would be this fly. It is really astonishing how many hatches can be imitated by this fly, even though to the eye it seems to be too dark for some. But the trout take it well, so I will not question why and only conjecture that it may be because of its slightly greater 'solidity', a sort of 'accent' among real duns."



ABOVE
 Atherton's
 book was
 published in
 1951, a year
 before his
 death.

Atherton's goal was to create flies that exhibited the appearance of life, and in this quest he called upon his painter's knowledge of the interaction between light and colour to create seven stunning dry-flies. His influence on fly-tying was sadly diminished by his untimely death in 1952. His wife remarked that Atherton had said he hoped his final day would be spent in his waders, and on September 15, while on a salmon fishing trip to New Brunswick, John Atherton drowned. His ashes were buried by his wife Maxine and friends Walter Squires and Lee Wulff under a small maple tree overlooking his favourite pool on his beloved Battenkill River. **T&S**

FLY PHOTOGRAPHS: ROB DENSON FLYES TIED BY: ROB SMITH FROM JOHN ATHERTON'S DRESSINGS