

Centenary Celebrations

When Pete Lawrence and Nigel Hamway approached me, over three years ago, to ask me if I'd consider curating the SWE's centenary exhibition at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, my initial instinct was to say 'no'! At that time, I was tackling a huge editing and writing job for the *Print REbels* catalogue for the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers (RE). That, like this, was to be a similarly ambitious touring exhibition, with catalogue, to mark 200 years (in 2018) since the birth of the RE's founder and first president. The producing of lavish catalogues for such events do have a way of occupying all one's waking hours for months at a time, so I was not eager to commit myself to another such enterprise chasing so swiftly on the heels of the RE one! Also, while I have been an SWE member for some 30 years, I wondered if I was the right person to take on this task as I can't claim to have the deep historical knowledge of the medium of, say, Simon Brett, and various other SWE members. On the other hand, I am intensely drawn to the immense versatility of the medium and feel strongly that its potential is far broader than the cheerful bucolic imagery (however fine much of that is) by which it is so often stereotyped. So, while somewhat daunted, I was also immediately tempted by the challenge of presenting both an overview of the medium and a personal selection of works by those who are, in my view, amongst its strongest exponents past and present. The potential research delights of trawling the Ashmolean's collection and various other private collections to put together a handsome show and catalogue also appealed. So of course, without too much hesitation, I said 'yes' and that decision has taken over my life since then!

In curating the show, my 20th- and 21st-century selections were primarily determined by what moved me: engravings that drew me in, demanded attention and lingered in the mind. I spent a good many days in 2017 (until major surgery on my leg set me back a bit) trawling through the engraving delights in the Ashmolean's Western Art Print Room. I resumed my research early in 2018 and later set about organising my 150-odd choices into themes that the thousands of engravings I studied seemed to embrace, namely: commercial uses in advertising, public art, fine lettering design and the ex libris; the theatre of human life; storytelling – usually in book illustrations; the natural world; the built environment; and abstraction, often allied with keenly observed detail – and the sometimes-surprising relationships between those apparent antitheses.

I sought to tell, through those images, the story of wood engraving in Britain over the last 100 years, while also including outstanding artist-engravers from all over the world whose work interacts with British wood engraving over the 20th century and into the 21st. The works I selected come mainly from the Ashmolean's collection. I have also drawn from private collections, notably that of Nigel Hamway – that wonderful supporter of wood engravers and of the Ashmolean over many years. There are also selections from the collection of Stuart Southall, a generous sponsor of the exhibition's catalogue and tour, as well as engravings that I and my husband, Roy Willingham, have amassed over 30-odd years, both through buying from galleries and swapping prints with fellow-engravers. There are also lovely loans from individual artists – you all know who you are!

The exhibition will open with a section about the beginnings of the medium and its diverse usage, so its first image will be a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) – whose technical bravura influenced many 20th century wood engravers. There will be engravings by Thomas Bewick, William Blake (1757–1827), Edward Calvert (1799–1883) and Samuel Palmer (1805–81) – the earliest independent artists to experiment with the medium. A *Harper's Weekly* newspaper illustration (from 1871 – a glorious image from a paper I picked up on Ebay) will be included to demonstrate wood engraving's widespread commercial usage until it was superseded, in the early 20th century, by technological advances in photography. Engravings produced by private presses, including Eric Gill's St Dominic's Press (1916), which arose to produce beautiful, hand-crafted books, will be shown along with fine examples of engraved lettering, ex libris designs and commercial engravings including a wonderful original block and print and related photograph of David Gentleman's completed Charing Cross tube station mural.

A large section of the exhibition, which I have titled 'The Theatre of Life', plays out in images of exuberant fantasy, work and play, war and peace. Edward Wadsworth ARA's First World War dazzle-ship woodcuts influenced many engravers, so I have included a fine example, while Gertrude Hermes RA RE's Second World War engraving *The Warrior's Tomb* (1941) is perhaps her *tour de force*. Edward Gordon Craig (son of the

famous actress Dame Ellen Terry and one of the earliest founders of the SWE along with Pissarro, Gill and others) used engraving to design sets for stage plays, suggesting epic spaces on tiny woodblocks. The exhibition includes one such tiny engraving for *King Lear* (1908). Sir Peter Blake's theatrical, *Side-Show* series is an outstanding yet relatively little known 1970s' foray into engraving for this esteemed Pop Artist which deserved inclusion. From the 1920s, artists experimented with wood engraving as a new, exhilarating medium, creating images in light out of the wood's darkness. Whether darkly dramatic or flooded with sunshine, their subject matter was as animated and diverse as their technical ingenuity. From Gwen Raverat's *Bowls players in Sunlight* (1922) to Clare Leighton RE's grimly dramatic queue of the hungry: *Bread Line, New York* (1932), all human life is here.

Private Presses such as Pissarro's *Eragny* (1894) created hand-crafted books influenced by medieval manuscripts while modernist Presses, including Gregynog (1922), employed new artist-engravers including Agnes Miller Parker and Blair Hughes-Stanton. Wordless wood engraved novels by Belgian artist Frans Masereel (1889–1972) inspired later artists including American Lynd Ward (1905–85) whose fantastic *Madman's Drum* (1930) was my first ever art purchase, made from a second-hand bookshop in c.1984, while I was a student at Oxford's Ruskin School of Art. Wood engraving's renewed popularity in mainstream publishing coincided with the 1929 stock market crash and John Farleigh RE's illustrated version of George Bernard Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God* (1932) was particularly successful, selling numerous editions. Today, wood engraving's ongoing popular appeal is clear in J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* boxed set (2013) illustrated by Andrew Davidson, and Chris Wormell's illustrations to Philip Pullman's *The Book of Dust* (2017). These examples all feature in a 'Storytelling' section of the show.

Since the 18th century and well into the 20th, landscape was the dominant subject of British painting. Wood engraving's parallel history enriches that tradition. The dead trees of Monica Poole RE have all the monumentality of Paul Nash's landscapes. Her works, like those of George Mackley RE and Geoffrey Wales RE – all working in the Cold War era – share a mood of apprehensive melancholy. Bewick's wildlife engravings too remain influential, such as in contemporary works by Colin See-Paynton RE and Gu Xiuhua. Works by all these fine artists will feature in the show.

It seems to me that, over the last century, cityscapes have provided three persistent strands of inspiration for engravers. One is a latter day 'Grand Tour', with keenly observed images of Rome by Sydney Lee RA and others, Petra by Geri Waddington, Calvi by Iain Macnab, and other sun-drenched destinations by these and other artists. Another relates to more everyday experience such as: Edward Wadsworth's polluted *Yorkshire* (1920); Clifford Webb RE's darkly dramatic *Blast Furnaces* (1924–8); and Edwina Ellis RE's vibrant, colour engravings (1996) of London. The third strand involves transformation and a dash of surrealism exemplified by Jim Westergard RE's *Trespass* and Peter Lazarov's *Footprint* (both 1989). My own architectural collage *Babel Tower Revisited* (2018) will also feature in this part of the exhibition titled: 'The built environment'.

The last but by no means least aspect of the show concerns works involved with abstraction and/or hyperreal levels of *trompe l'oeil* detail. Paul Nash's *Design of Arches* (1926) reads as a semi-abstract play of shapes. Russian Constructivist Naum Gabo's engravings recall his earlier kinetic constructions. Albert Garrett's, with their Muybridge-esque filmic motion, reflect scientific interests in optics. Blair Hughes-Stanton's abstract *Composition* (1936) has close parallels with Henry Moore's two known wood engravings and will hang alongside one of them. The complex metamorphoses of M C Escher's woodcuts (a fine example will feature in the show) infiltrates Peter Lawrence RE's *Time and Space* (2009), to hang alongside it. Parallels with Escher are evident in other works including Edwina Ellis's *Pride* (1986), my own *Progress/Progression?* (1989–90) and Paul Kershaw RE's illusionistic *Urchin* (2007).

In a still (in my opinion) heavily male-dominated art world – certainly in the commercial gallery sector – there have been notable female stars within wood engraving. Gertrude Hermes was the first woman wood engraver elected a Royal Academician and arguably the greatest talent the medium has yet produced. Her notable success was achieved despite early years as an impecunious single parent, bringing up small children following her failed marriage to fellow-engraver Blair Hughes-Stanton. Despite being the subject of several retrospective exhibitions, she has yet to achieve the widespread renown her work deserves so I make no apology for including a fair sprinkling of her incredible engravings in this exhibition. Monica Poole, a polio survivor, was widowed without children. She devoted her attentions to engravings of Kent's chalk landscape, where she lived – working in solitude, relatively unremarked for decades during wood engraving's 'lean' years, until taken

on by Duncan Campbell Fine Art in South Kensington in the 1980s. Her public profile then rose and has continued to grow following her death in 2003 though, like Hermes, she deserves to be better known. Other fine engravers, female and male, are represented by more than one work because the exhibition and its catalogue seemed the stronger for being composed that way. Some of its stars will be Geoffrey Wales – an innovator in abstract engravings and contemporary of Poole; Clare Leighton whose startlingly dark engravings of impoverished labourers in the USA's farming belt of the 1930s have such gravitas; Edwina Ellis, another from Duncan Campbell's stable, who made huge innovations in colour and monochrome tonal engraving; Simon Brett – arguably the greatest living technical engraver of us all; Hilary Paynter and George Tute, both key figures in the SWE's 1984 revival and its ongoing success; and other wonderful artists, past and present, including Eric Ravilious, Paul Nash, Eric Wadsworth, Blair Hughes-Stanton, Agnes Miller Parker, Colin See-Paynton and Peter Lawrence.

Writing this – a few days after Christmas 2019 – reminds me that this time last year I had just embarked on writing the coming exhibition's substantial 256-page catalogue (the Ashmolean's beautifully designed pages of which, I'm currently proofreading). I was also in the midst of assiduously reading, for the first time from cover to cover, over many months, every wood engraving book and article that Roy and I have amassed over 30-odd years. Every time I thought I'd read everything I possibly could on the subject, something new arose! A visit to Pallant House in Chichester, for instance, early in the New Year, revealed for me the glories of its bookshop and I came home with some more excellent yet hefty tomes to feed my research. I composed short biographical accounts for every artist featured in the exhibition's catalogue. These details were all culled from the pages of the books and journals I read as well as (where available) the artists' own websites. The catalogue biographies do not aim to be fully comprehensive but I hope each one is a good read and fittingly promotes each individual. If you are amongst those included, I hope you will be happy with what I've written. I tried to fact-check each biography by cross-checking where identical details appear in more than one published book – as one hopes that earlier publications have been fact-checked in their turn but, inevitably, I have found anomalies along the way and hope you will therefore forgive any unintended errors.

I am most grateful to Xa Sturgis, the Director of the Ashmolean, for appointing me to curate *Scene through Wood* and of course I very much hope to see you all at its Private View on the evening of 27th March! I am especially grateful to Peter Lawrence for being a behind-the-scenes rock during these last three years of curating this show; Katherine Wodehouse in the Ashmolean Print Room for huge amounts of invaluable information and assistance; and Simon Brett for a beautifully insightful catalogue essay. There are very many others deserving thanks here – alas too many to mention – so do please buy a copy of the lovely catalogue, when it's published, in which you'll find all those wonderful supporters given their due thanks!

The culmination of this project is now in sight: the exhibition is already 'virtually' designed (by the Museum's in-house designer using computer imaging software); its storyboards are written; its catalogue will be sent to press soon; various related commissioned articles are written and awaiting publication; a second small book of highlights of the Ashmolean Museum's wood engraving collection, as selected by me, will also go to press soon; and a series of educational events are programmed for the duration of the show; one tour venue seems to have been firmed up – it would be nice to acquire one or two more... It's been a really long haul but I'm now really excited for the 27th March – a significant moment, being the SWE's actual centenary date and also the exhibition's big reveal! I really hope you'll be there that night for its Private View and I hope you will be pleased with my efforts. I have been mindful, throughout the entire curatorial process, of the honour and responsibility you have invested in me and I thank you wholeheartedly for your trust. To those artists who are not included either in the exhibition or catalogue I can only say that, in an exhibition of 150 works and a catalogue of about 200, it was inevitable that some truly excellent artists wouldn't be included and I'm sorry for that – but it is surely testament to the strength of wood engraving as a vibrant artist's medium in the 21st century that the pool of wonderful engravings was simply too full for everyone to be included in this centenary exhibition. Looking back to the SWE's catalogue for its inaugural exhibition in London in 1920, Campbell Dodgson (1867–1948) wrote: 'The woodcut has an illustrious past, an exciting, enquiring present, and, let us hope, a brilliant and prosperous future'. One hundred years on, I can safely say that it has had and continues to have just that!

Scene through Wood: A Century of Modern Wood Engraving is on show at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, from 28 March – 12 July 2020 before touring other UK museums. <https://www.ashmolean.org>

Curator's Tour with Anne Desmet RA
Thursday 23 April
11 – 12noon
Gallery 8
FREE, no booking required

Study Day
30 May
10.30 – 4pm
Ashmolean Museum Lecture Theatre
With Anne Desmet RA,
Colin Harrison, Senior Curator of European Art
Simon Lawrence of the Fleece Press
This study day explores the history of the Society and provides background to the exhibition *Scene through Wood*.
£50/£45/£40 Full/Member/Concessions