

Derek Setford

Artist and craftsman

Mary Gavagan, owner and curator of Gavagan Art, interviewed Derek Setford prior to the opening of Inspired By Nature, a comprehensive exhibition of his wood engravings, drawings, watercolour and oil paintings, in March 2016.

MG Can you remember when you first began to be interested in drawing and painting? Were you encouraged by your parents to pursue an interest in art and did they themselves paint?

DS I think I already enjoyed using paint before we left Liverpool when I was eight. I had colouring books and can remember putting gloss paints on toy aeroplanes. My parents were not involved with art in any way but always gave me every encouragement and assistance.

MG I note that you moved from Liverpool to South Lakeland. That was obviously a dramatic change of environment; could you tell me about that time of your life?

DS The move to Grasmere was obviously a very big change. There was haymaking in the field behind the house, when everyone assisted in gathering the crop. It was still taken to be stored in the barns by horse and cart. In the winter there would be skating on White Moss Tarn and sometimes Rydal Water.

After a term at Grasmere Primary school I attended King's School Ambleside for two years. As there were boarders (I was a day boy) it was lessons in the morning, sport every afternoon, tea at school and then a couple more lessons. I moved on to Windermere Grammar School and my interest in art grew.



MG How did you find Leeds College of Art? Were there any tutors who influenced you?

DS My art teacher at school had been a student at Leeds College of Art and in due course he advised me to apply there. I was interviewed by Mr Pullee the Principal (who looked a lot like Walt Disney!) and offered a place on the intermediate course. It was a very enjoyable experience to be doing art full-time. We were introduced to a wide range of media and activities: sculpture, printmaking, museum study, plant drawing etc. I was not at Leeds long enough to be much influenced by any particular tutor as during my first term I learnt that I had been awarded a state scholarship. This required me to find a course which offered a degree equivalent qualification.

MG Could you tell me about your student days at the Slade in the 1950s?

DS For this reason I applied to and was offered a place at the Slade School. I specialised in drawing, paintings and printmaking (at this stage etching, any engraving, done was on copper). It was a stimulating environment. My time coincided with that of E H Gombrich, author of 'The Story of Art', who was lecturing on art history. Mr Lucas, then chief restorer at the National Gallery, talked about materials and methods. Visiting tutors came - I had tutorials with John Piper and LS Lowry. For much of my time in London I lodged in Bermondsey, right on the banks of the Thames where at high tide you could almost touch the water from the lowest window.

MG Were you ever associated with any artistic group?

DS I never belonged to any artistic group until becoming elected member of the Society of Wood Engravers in 2002.



Heron wood engraving

MG Birds, flowers and the northern landscape are recurring themes in your work. Could you tell me about your interest in these subjects?

DS My interest in landscape inevitably grew as a result of living in Grasmere - not just the changing seasons and light and weather but the annual exhibitions of the Lake Artists at what was known in those days as the 'New Hall' and the Heaton Cooper Studio in the centre of the village. I always liked to draw animals and birds, having worked at Regent's Park in my student days and at Belle Vue and Chester Zoos when I moved back to the North. The opportunity to draw at the Three Owls Bird Sanctuary came when I worked in Rochdale. Here I could observe birds at close quarters, in relatively quiet conditions. Plant drawing was something I enjoyed as a first year student in Leeds but to a large extent, did not pursue it further until I took early retirement.

MG A large percentage of your work is wood engraving. Could you explain what aspects of this technique appeals to you? Are there wood engravers whose work you admire, for example Agnes Miller Parker?

DS I was first made aware of wood engraving as a schoolboy when my art teacher showed me his copy of 'Bewick's Birds', but I did not attempt it myself until teaching in Rochdale many years later. I am 'self taught' in this medium. It is a very 'graphic' method, quite challenging, but capable of a wide range of approaches and, in the hands of many engravers, fresh and interesting designs. I found acceptance in my early submissions to the Society of Wood Engravers (not always the case with other exhibitions!) and with it, some sales. This was a definite encouragement. I think the standard of work in the SWE shows is high and while most members are from Britain, others come from America, Russia, Japan and elsewhere.

MG For many years you taught art at Rochdale College of Art, ending your career there as Acting Principal. Was teaching something you enjoyed?

DS My teaching experiences were sharply contrasting. My first job after qualifying was in a new secondary modern school in Welwyn Garden City. This was largely a difficult and unrewarding time. By contrast, Rochdale was a far more pleasant job, the facilities were excellent, including a new building from 1970.

MG I wondered if during your teaching career you have written about your methods of working or about artists you have admired or who have influenced you?

DS I have not written anything about my methods of working or the artists I admire. I say now that there are legions of artists I admire and that for me, at least, my working methods tend to be very slow. Thorough preparatory work has led to more satisfactory results.

MG Are there any specific projects which you are working on at present?

DS I am working on an engraving of flowers: parrot tulips, perennial cornflowers etc but it is not far advanced. I have ideas in the pipeline and hope my eyes and hands will allow some of them to come to fruition.

March 2016