

Unknown when he died just four years ago, a sale of Stanley Dyson's naïve artwork is finally set to give him the recognition he deserves. So who was this reclusive talent? WORDS: MARTHA ALEXANDER

> nen antiques dealer Robert Young went to a private estate auction in the Suffolk town of Beccles four years ago, it was business as usual . - he and his wife Josvane were on the hunt for naive art and furniture.

What they didn't bank on was unearthing a portfolio of hundreds of paintings by an unknown and intensely private artist and art teacher, Stanley Dyson, whose works were such a closely guarded secret that his own family were almost totally unaware of them when he died in 2007. "We went because we heard from trade papers there would be naïve animal portraits, which is our normal run of stuff," explains Robert from his Battersea gallery, Robert Young Antiques. "At that time, we were furnishing a house where the client wanted to have a whole wall of not very important still life pictures of food from all periods. I saw a painting of eggs in this pile at the auction and so I started going through them.

"Personal items were found and string and dusty, but a fragmented picture of this shy, obsessive artist began to emerge"

They were tied up in old I thought they were amazing.'

Robert decided to buy the whole lot, even though

at that stage he had no idea what they were or who had painted them. "It was one of those epiphanic moments where you just have a feeling," he says. He wasn't the only one with his eye on them and so there was competitive bidding and the lot was expensive, even though no one knew exactly what was in it.

When Robert started to go through his purchase a few weeks after it arrived at the gallery, he soon realised that Stanley's work was just the kind of naïve, outsider style that would suit his gallery. Flowers in vases, ferryboats, ornaments, terrace housing - the subject matter was so normal and yet so close to the hinterland of extraordinary, thanks to his experimental compositions and flitting between different mediums.

A good handful of the 500 or so paintings were created by the children that Stanley had taught. Robert also found personal items like Stanley's war record and a photo of his first marriage. A fragmented picture of this shy, obsessive artist began to emerge.

Robert immediately rang the auctioneers and asked for more information. Eventually Robert and Josyane made contact with Stanley's daughter. "She was initially upset, because she didn't really know him as a painter," explains Robert, who is now restoring and framing some of Stanley's works for her. "She was, however, very warm to us. I think she was pleased we had it all together."

With the help of Stanley's daughter, Robert and Josyane started to fit pieces of his puzzle together. They hired BBC archaeologist David Drew to research the artist's history. It emerged that he had left school at 16 and became a clerk at the local steelworks before joining the Navy and going to war. Upon his return in 1946, he qualified for an assisted place at the Liverpool City Art School. He went on to teach in his hometown of Chesterfield before moving to Norfolk in 1966 and giving up painting altogether.

The archaeologist travelled back to Chesterfield in a bid to find the former pupils who had painted the pictures that Stanley had kept. However, despite an exhibition at Chesterfield Museum and Art Gallery and publicity in four local papers, no one has come forward so far. "These are masterworks," explains Robert. "We want to find out who these kids are. They will be 70-ish now. Their art master kept their works but they will be unaware of them."

This month will see Robert Young Antiques exhibit the late artist's complete portfolio of works - priced between £100 and £7,500. The exhibition continues the dealer's interest in avoiding the work of already famous artists. "Largely, our principle is to have work made by anonymous people who have never been celebrated made by individuals for individuals," he says. "They were never done as art."

The attraction for Robert isn't just monetary and reflects his love of similar work. Stanley's paintings appear naïve yet demonstrate a wide variety of ideas and methods, ranging from thick impasto work to translucent glazes. "Stanley was inspired by what was going on around him, but he's done it privately; it's not cerebral. he did it for himself," says Robert, who acknowledges that the work nods to Ben Nicholson and the St Ives School. "It wasn't [created] to sell or show – it was his human expression, much like the kids he taught. To me that's what makes it so special. This was something he did that he derived huge pleasure from, but he was shy about it and felt it was not something to be looked at and judged. When they are in the flesh, you feel it."

The works are all unsigned and Stanley had told his daughter that all of his paintings were unfinished: "Obviously each one didn't live up to his expectations."

The theme that runs through all of the pieces that Young sells – and Dyson's work is no exception – is the sense of 'potluck survival'. "The things that we have survived by chance, rather than because they have value," says Young. "They didn't cost money when they were made, but the fact they are still here makes them special."

Rather than making money, the venture has been wildly expensive for Robert, who has restored and framed each picture, as well as paying David Drew for two years' worth of research. "It may be that we won't make any money out of it, and I'm not being grand because we are in business to make money, but this tells so much of a story about what we want to do, that it is

Aside from being an apt advertisement for Robert Young Antiques, Stanley Dyson is also a poster boy for anyone who works for love but not glory. "This is not a Picasso," says Robert, pointing to one of the paintings. "This is a man who just likes painting."

The Art Master - Stanley Dyson and his School runs 18 March to 23 April at Robert Young Antiques, London SW11, www.robertyoungantiques.com



OPPOSITIE PAGE The late Stanley Dyson: Vase of Tall Dried Flowers on the Round Table THIS PAGE FROM TOP La Carte "Tablescape"; Seaside Village with Lighthouse and Roate: Urhan Landscape Beyond the Brick Wall





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