

Art sales

Secrets of the attic revealed

Auction discovery

Colin Gleadell

A chance discovery at a house clearance sale in the country has uncovered a trove of highly decorative paintings by a hitherto unknown artist and the children he taught half a century ago.

Robert Young, who is a well known figure in the antiques world, specialising in country furniture and folk art, was viewing the auction at Beccles in Suffolk to look for furniture when he spied two very large folders on the floor beneath a table. The folders were dusty and unremarkable, but when he opened them, he saw several beautifully designed portfolios containing stacks of drawings and paintings – about 500 of them – all carefully presented and neatly tied with string.

There was no clue as to the identity of the artist or artists who made them in the catalogue, but the quality of the work was such, he says, that “I knew straight away they were for us.” Young’s eye is tutored to look at the works of unknown, self-taught artists of the past – the “primitive”, “naïve” or “outsider” artists of the 18th and 19th centuries. What he saw in Beccles was more modern, but perfectly compatible with the fine rustic aesthetic with which he is associated.

As he leafed through the portfolios he found meticulously crafted paintings of still lifes, landscapes, harbour and industrial street scenes, some in the style of recognised 20th century masters – Ben Nicholson, Alfred Wallis, William Scott or John Piper. Though unsigned and embracing a variety of styles, all had the textural assuredness, colour sensitivity and

Lost and found: one of Stanley Dyson’s still lifes, discovered after a house clearance

compositional balance to be indisputably by the same hand. Others were clearly by children, lovingly preserved and occasionally inscribed – “Norah Scragg 2A”, for instance, or “Jennifer Borrington 2B”.

Divided into seven or eight lots, each was estimated at £50-£80. Young bought the first three, then decided to buy them all. Running into some competition, he had to pay up to £1,000 for a single lot. Curious to find out more, he learned that they had come from a local house clearance, and was given the name of the deceased owner’s daughter. This all happened in 2007, and it has taken Young since then to research the work and present it for exhibition.

The mysterious artist turned out to be one Stanley Dyson, and the child-like works by pupils he had taught. Dyson was born in 1920, the son of a labourer, and served in the Navy during the war. In 1949 he spent two terms at Liverpool School of Art, enough to qualify for a job as an art teacher, and went to work at a secondary school in Whittington on the outskirts of Chesterfield, Derbyshire. With the aid of art magazines and books, he made paintings both for his own pleasure and for his pupils, placing them on a chair in the classroom for them to interpret in their own way. He never exhibited or sold any of his paintings, but kept them in private, together with those of his students.

In 1966, when he had remarried, Dyson moved to a remote 17th-century house in Norfolk called Coldham Hall. Although he

continued to teach, he apparently stopped painting, diverting his energies into restoring the house. The art work from his teaching days in Whittington was kept in the attic, in the same folders that were presented at the auction, and never shown to anyone, not even his daughter. Why, we will never know.

Young has managed to establish a chronology of the works, from the representational to the more stylised and abstract. The earliest are dated architectural drawings made, he believes, to present for admission to art school.

The paintings are to be revealed in an exhibition, *Stanley Dyson: The Art Master and his School*, which opens at Young’s shop on the south side of Battersea Bridge, London, on March 18. Prices will range from £100 for unframed drawings to £7,500 for the largest painting, and all of Dyson’s works will bear studio stamps and certificates of authenticity. So far, only one of the children has been identified, but Young is hoping more will come forward, not only with their memories of Dyson, but if their childhood art is sold, to claim the re-sale royalties that rightfully await them.

Young is not making any claims to greatness for Dyson; there will be no re-writing of the history books. But the discovery is one of a human achievement that deserves to be recognised. The Chesterfield Museum and Art Gallery has acquired some choice examples for its collection, including *The Paddle Steamer Leaving Harbour*. Most importantly, the art which was locked away for so long now deserves simply to be enjoyed.



HUGH GILBERT