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CACHE IN THE ATTIC

Many artists are their own harshest critic, but Derbyshire-born Stanley Dyson took this to extremes, storing his paintings out of sight, up in the loft. Only after his death in 2007, with the sale of his Norfolk home, did this embarrassment of riches come to light, as Charlotte Edwards reports >

Above: a still-life composition by Stanley Dyson. Opposite: the artist's dapper appearance hints at his near-obsessive attention to detail

CACHE IN THE ATTIC



STANLEY DYSON, a fastidious man, could not abide a rolled-up magazine. When his local newsagents thus desecrated *The World of Interiors* in order to post it through his letterbox, Dyson returned it to the shop, insisting that he would collect it from them himself in future. The following month, he found they'd scrawled 'DYSON' on the cover. Horrified, he cancelled his order. If he couldn't have it the way he wanted it, he said, he'd rather not have it at all.

Dyson's perfectionism meant that his work – some 400 oils and watercolours, of which only a few are dated and none is signed – remained hidden until now, four years after his death. Stored since the mid-1960s in the large attic of his remote 17th-century house near Beccles in Norfolk, the paintings seem to have been, if not quite an embarrassment to their creator, then certainly a source of little pride. He valued them enough to keep them for 40 years – and in lovingly handmade, potato-printed cardboard folders, too – but hated the thought of other people finding them wanting, as he did. He had studied art at the Liverpool City School of Art for two terms in 1949–50, and he taught it for the rest of his life, first in his home town of Chesterfield in Derbyshire and then in Bowthorpe on the outskirts of Norwich. To his critical eye, his industrial and rural landscapes and still-life arrangements were pale imitations of the work of the British artists – Ben Nicholson, William Scott, Graham Sutherland, Kyffin Williams, John Piper – that he pored over in art journals and books. This was a man who couldn't bring himself to reveal his first name to a local antique dealer he'd known for years; it's not surprising he was reluctant to share his work. He even refused his daughter's request for a painting to put in her flat when she left home.

His art was his private record of other times and places. The earliest pieces date from around 1948, when Dyson had returned from serving in the navy in Jamaica. Travelling by bicycle and train around Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, to the south Yorkshire coast and even down to Dorset, he amassed more than 50 pen and watercolour drawings of houses, churches, shopfronts, harbours and countryside, most likely to prepare a portfolio for art school. He continued to paint throughout his first marriage and was most prolific in the first years of his second, to Mary Covell – a teaching colleague with whom he'd begun a scandalous affair while both were still married. Although some pictures are less successful than others – figure painting, for instance, was not Dyson's forte – his compositions are far from amateur, and

Clockwise from top left: many of Dyson's paintings depict the industrial landscape around Chesterfield. The trees recall the early work of his greatest influence, Ben Nicholson; at 48 x 58cm, this delicately coloured still life on board is one of Dyson's larger paintings – like most of his work, it is undated and unsigned; Dyson has scratched detail into the hedgerow in this

This portrait (top left), paper collage (top right) and Chesterfield landscape (above right) are among the pictures by Dyson's pupils that he kept in cardboard folders along with his own work. The entire collection was discovered, tied in bundles and wrapped in black bin liners, at the 2007 auction of the Dysons' Norfolk

and hardboard, occasionally on used canvases, sometimes mixing sand with the oils to lend texture, and scratching the surface to capture the effect of driving snow or shafts of brightness in a leaden sky. Small brooding landscapes are held together by odd central lattices of green and brown fields criss-crossed by dry-stone walls. Still-life studies are framed in windows or on table tops, with flattened grey triangles representing the shadows cast by the cups, jugs and vases (Dyson was interested in ceramics, and taught pottery as well as art). His largest picture is also his most abstracted and surprising: a composition of three tall vessels and a cup, in a muted palette, that recalls both William Scott and Giorgio Morandi.

When he moved with Mary and their two-year-old daughter to Norfolk in 1966, Dyson stopped painting. When he wasn't teaching, his time was almost entirely devoted to the upkeep of the house and garden, both of which required a great deal of work to meet his exacting standards. He also began collecting and restoring antique furniture. He continued to add to his considerable library of books on contemporary art, and made frequent visits to the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge and museums and galleries in London; his daughter remembers him writing impassioned letters to V&A curators complaining about changes to the displays. But his own pictures were consigned to the cardboard folders, alongside work by his pupils that he'd chosen to keep; perhaps he considered the two collections similarly naive.

Labelled on the reverse with pupils' names and form numbers – Nora Scragg, 2C; Norman Hilman, 2A – these perspective-defying Chesterfield landscapes, paper collages, charmingly wonky portraits and still-life studies show that Dyson was not so private that he could not share his personal enthusiasm for Klee and Picasso, Piper and Nicholson. What's more, some startling similarities between their pictures and Dyson's – such as a St Ives-inspired scene of a paddle steamer painted by both master and pupil – even suggest that the children were occasionally afforded a privileged view of his work. If Dyson would have been mortified at the thought of his art finding a far wider audience than this, he could perhaps have recalled his own words, from a notice pinned up in the classroom alongside his pupils' attempts at 'abstract art and basic design': 'The art of this Century is... at its best a true expression of man's feelings, and not a weak copy of earlier styles... If some of the objects seem strange, try to accept them for what they are' ■ *The Art Master: Stanley Dyson and His School* is at Robert Young Antiques, 68 Battersea Bridge Rd, London SW11