

Rex Whistler (1905-1944)

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It was an afternoon back in 1985. The doorbell rang, and we answered to find a man standing on the doorstep, slightly agitated and clutching a book. He introduced himself as a near- neighbour, and explained that he was trying to identify a house in Abbots Langley referred to as "The Knoll" in the book he was clutching. "I'm pretty sure it's your house" he declared. This was the late Bill Good, and the book which had so excited him was "The Laughter and the Urn", Laurence Whistler's newly published biography of his brother Rex.

We couldn't confirm this link until November 2002 when we were extensively redecorating the living room, and I levered all of the skirting boards from the walls. Clearly pencilled on the back of one of these pieces of wood was "The Knoll". We had evidence to back up Bill's speculation!¹ So this very house in Abbots Road was, between 1914 and 1923, the home of the Whistler Family, and particularly of Rex, in his formative years between the ages of 9 and 18.

Not surprisingly we were intrigued to learn who Rex and Laurence Whistler were, and why Bill was so excited. We quickly learned that Rex was a somewhat enigmatic character, with an uncanny ability to accurately draw complex images both from memory and from his imagination. Indeed, reading Laurence's biography there are many clues leading to an impression that Rex might have been diagnosed today as an autistic savant. Not least that his preferred approach was to examine his subject carefully, then dedicate his entire attention to the drawing, without referring again to the subject, yet producing in this way an uncannily accurate reproduction. Thus there are instances quoted when the subject that he was drawing had been removed, yet he had carried on drawing it without noticing until his attention was drawn to this fact!

Rex's skill as a draughtsman was recognised and encouraged from an early age, and it seemed inevitable that he would follow a career in art. Having been expelled after one year from the Royal Academy by the eccentric Charles Sims, who failed to recognise his brilliance, but rather saw Rex's reluctance to follow his production-line approach to art education as incompetence, if not insubordination, he was then happily enrolled at the Slade by the equally eccentric, but far more enlightened Professor Tonks. Tonks was happy to nurture Rex, and even encouraged his rather unorthodox approaches to his art, by making special concessions to allow Rex to deviate substantially from their normal educational methods.

From an early age Rex seemed incapable of drawing anything without adding some of his own quirky embellishments. For example, when assigned to sketch from the plaster casts of ancient statues at the Slade, he was unable to resist adding his own touches by replacing missing limbs and heads, without somehow corrupting his very accurate reproduction of the original subject.

It was Tonks who used a small existing fund for the promotion of mural painting, and persuaded Charles Aitken, the director of the Tate Gallery to find a suitable site where some of his students

¹ Relatively recently we have taken ownership of the deeds of the property, (extended and converted into two semi's c 1960) which confirm that it was once named "The Knoll", although when first built in 1904 it was named "Rose Cottage". Numbering of the houses in Abbots Road came much later. We have added a name plaque to restore it as The Knoll.

could paint a mural, and Rex was one of those selected to work in a room of the memorial club in Shadwell. This demonstration of Rex's skill in trompe l'oeil work led a couple of years later to Rex being commissioned to paint the restaurant of the Tate Gallery itself (now Tate Britain) . The result 'The Pursuit of Rare Meats' was the first of Rex's commissions to paint large scale murals. This might have not been so influential on the rest of his life if Rex had not been introduced, through his friendship at the Slade with fellow student Stephen Tennant, to a social circle which included Lord and Lady Grey, Osbert , Sacheverell and Edith Sitwell, Edith Olivier (the latter taking Rex under her wing, which probably served to protect him from abuse or bullying by those around him) the young and upcoming Cecil Beaton, Siegfried Sassoon and several other luminaries of the day. It seems Rex was happy to associate, but perhaps was never wholly integrated, with this set - "...strange creatures - with just a few feathers where their brains ought to be...", as Rex described to his brother.

This combination of an astonishing talent, and an introduction to the upper classes led to a series of commissions for Rex over his short lifetime to paint trompe l'oeil murals in a number of noted houses around the country. Over the years we have taken opportunities when visiting nearby to seek out these examples of his work, visiting not only the Tate Britain restaurant , but also the tented room in Port Lympne in Kent, and the amazing harbour scene in Plas Newydd on Anglesey. Mottisfont Abbey in Hampshire and Dorneywood in Buckinghamshire remain on our wish-list!

These murals only represent a small part of Rex's output, for as well as these, Rex produced a copious body of other work, comprising book illustrations (notably for Gulliver's Travels and Hans Andersen's fairy tales), set and costume designs for the theatre, sketches and portraits, many of which display not only his prodigious drawing talents, but also his quirky sense of humour.

Sadly, having joined the Welsh Guards in 1940 as a subaltern, and having spent 4 years mostly in the north of England in training and preparation for the D-Day landings Rex, was killed leading his troop of tanks into action in Normandy in 1944. Laurence, his biographer, six years younger, himself a noted artist, poet, author and glass engraver, died in 2000 aged 88.



"The Knoll" inscribed on back of skirting



Detail from Whistler mural in Tate Britain. Note this is one of the four corners of the room!



This detail in a corner of the mural at Plas Newydd is supposedly a self-portrait.