

BEAUTY IN A MINOR KEY

Wakefield Art Collection Arrives

SOMETIMES we are in no condition to receive the great booming masterpieces of the world. We want something in a minor key, done with such excellent skill that we enjoy it too much to ask carping questions as to what it amounts to. This is the mood that calls not for Bach or Beethoven, but for Arne or Boyce. This is when you take down not your Shakespeare but your Housman, not *War and Peace* but *Pride and Prejudice*. I think it could be maintained that it is in this department of the Arts that the English excel and always have excelled. You will see them at it again in the Wakefield Collection.

This collection was made possible by a gift of £3,000 to the British Council from the late Lord Wakefield. Its purpose was the purchase of drawings and prints by contemporary British artists which could go on tour as worthy representatives of the graphic arts in Britain. Mr. Campbell Dodgson was given this delightful job of shopping to do, and he came back with a basket of beauties. More than two hundred of them. The over-all and unavoidable impression left upon you by these pictures is one of superb craftsmanship. These are the works of men (and a few women) who know exactly what watercolour, or the drypoint needle, or the graver can do, and who can make them do it. It is in this aspect that the exhibition is so salutary for a generation which has almost persuaded itself that the vision is everything and that no technique of communication is required.

Written for "The Listener" by
HOWARD WADMAN

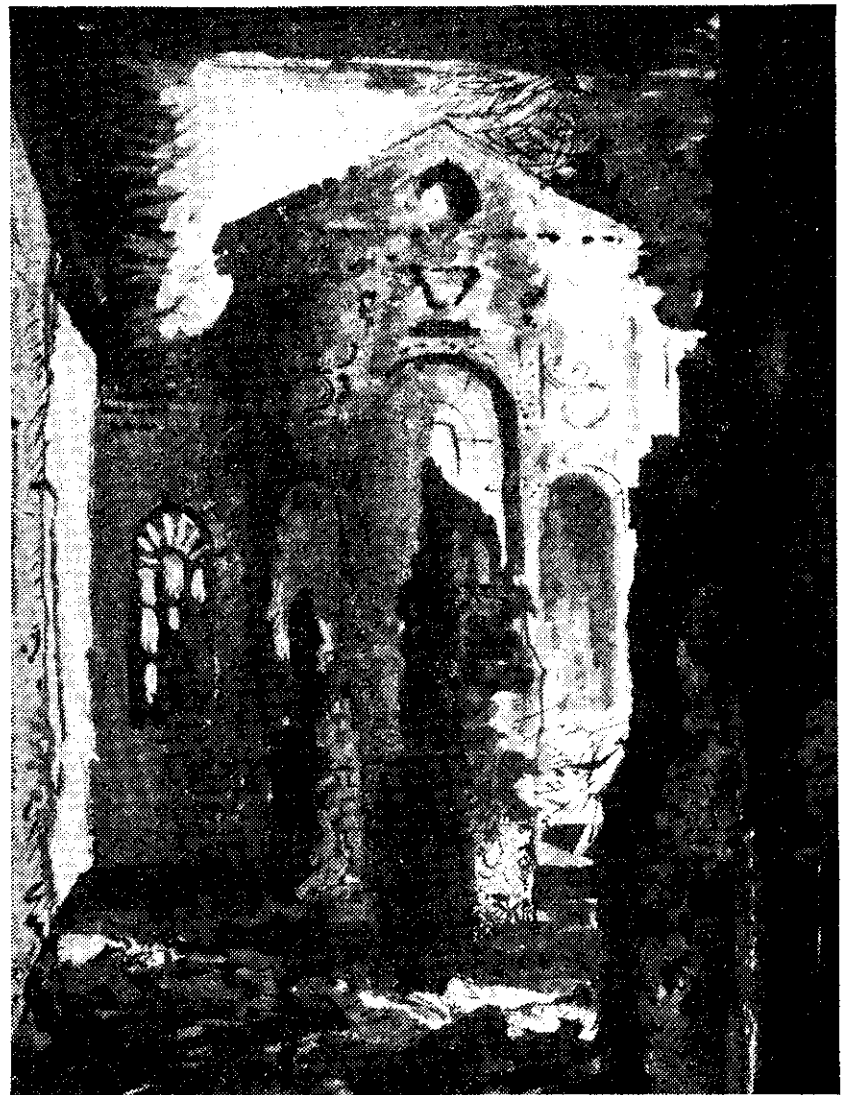
There is, however, a world of difference between mastering your medium, and sticking to the academic rules until you are well and truly stuck. Not all Art Schools seem to understand the distinction. The grammar must be learnt, certainly. The hard discipline of drawing, the grind of learning how paint or ink, how wood, stone, or copper behaves, all this must be embraced and loved, and after that comes freedom—for the few who want it.

This is what happened to Frances Hodgkins. She succeeded as an academic painter and teacher of watercolour, and then threw out the rules and started again. By a significant irony it has been left to the British Council to bring us (for a few weeks) one of the late, mature works of this New Zealander. But what a refined pleasure it is to see one here at last. Fish on a plate (No. 29) with their vertebrae answering the pattern of the bracken and the whole thing swimming in that characteristic colour which is not quite like anybody else's.

John Piper is another law to himself; an austere romantic who scumbles and scratches and scribbles on his paintings, who rubs crayon over his colour washes, and who out of all these ungodly tricks produces lyrical beauty from the bombed and timeworn buildings of Britain (No. 47).

Deviations

And were you not told in drawing at school never to rule a line as this was a short-cut no well-conducted artist would take? I am sure you were. Now look at the sketch by Lord Methuen of a corner at Rouen (No. 39). All the



"CHRISTCHURCH, Newgate Street"—watercolour by John Piper

main structural lines are ruled, are they not? Look closely and you will see that the charm of this little architectural gem lies precisely in the contrast between the firm clarity of the ruled lines and the nervous liberty of the freehand detail.

Observe No. 64, John Tunnard's strange and dreamlike watercolour *The Terminus*. (Some ladies asked me what the picture was supposed to be, as though a verbal inventory could evoke more than the picture does already.) The thing that struck me about it was that Mr. Tunnard has superimposed on a translucent watercolour some signal shapes which appear to be painted in opaque body colour—a device enough to make the pundits turn in their grooves.

The point is that all these deviations from the book of rules justify themselves completely because the artists responsible for them know the rules so well and have in their day served a rigorous apprenticeship to them. Perhaps what I am trying to say is that in service and discipline is perfect freedom, if the prayer book will excuse me.

It is fascinating to see how wide is the liberty within the boundaries of a medium, and how different is the character that different artists extract from its limitations. To Wilson Steer and H. B. Brabazon, painting 40 years ago, watercolour was essentially wet, and pools of colour seem to linger undried

on the paper. To Eric Ravilious and Edward Bawden (who is unfortunately not represented in the show), watercolour is dry. Their delightful effects are obtained by dragging a drying brush over the uneven paper, and breaking down pure colour with thin cross-hatches like an engraver. For me, at any rate, the Ravilious drawing of the *Carnation House* (No. 48) is the most delicious item of all.

Enjoyment

Enjoyment—that is the word I wanted. It is a pity to analyse enjoyment too closely, but there are at least two elements in the enjoyment of pictures—the enjoyment of what the artist reveals to you, and the enjoyment of the means he has employed to reveal it. The second, which is admittedly the lesser of the two, is likely to remain the uppermost impression of this show.

But even in this enjoyment of the artist's means, there is a distinction to be drawn between craftsmanship and virtuosity. Perhaps an example will explain it best. Compare the etching by Gerald Brockhurst called "Adolescence" (No. 85) with the drypoint by C. R. W. Nevinson of a window in Paris (No. 170). It seems to me that the Brockhurst takes your breath away with its skill, but that the subtle gradation he has achieved by an infinitely fine stipple does not belong *uniquely* to the medium of etching. The effect could have been

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"WEST OF IRELAND" (etching)—a child study by Gerald Brockhurst