



RBA Newsletter September 2013

President's Letter

This year has been, in a variety of ways, one of the best ever for the RBA. In what must be one of the worst recessions for decades, the society managed to achieve record sales at our annual exhibition this year in March.

This is something that warrants considerable celebration, not least because any institution needs adequate income to remain solvent and this year's figures make the future look bright. However, this said, I feel the real celebration should be for the quality, variation and highest possible standards of work by both members and non-members. Of course the two factors are directly linked and I feel it must be the greatest reassurance to us all that the public will respond positively and want to purchase and own the artwork they see and admire.

In recent times the council has been working hard to extend our exhibitions profile by arranging shows of members work in commercial galleries around the country. This is a vital aspect of the society's work as a professional group of artists and one that raises the profile of the RBA and its individual members. Forthcoming exhibitions will be at the Rye Gallery this October and the Russell Gallery in London in May & June 2014.

Our relationship with NADFAS and The Dover Federation for the Arts goes from strength to strength in promoting and supporting the work of young artists. The standards achieved by these young people is in many cases quite breath taking and by encouraging involvement with a professional society such as ours, ensures that not only are we securing our own future, but also making sure that young artists are taken seriously and supported by society in general. This, I think everyone will agree, has been one of the most exciting aspects of recent RBA activities.

The Rome Scholarship continues to flourish and the beautiful and sensitive work of this year's winner, Naomi Grant, was well received by everyone. Finally I would like to thank not just the Council and officers for all their valued work but each and every individual member who responded with the best work for our show seen for a long time. Please keep it up – this year's show has shown what can be achieved and I am convinced that greater things are on the horizon.

With all best wishes

James Horton

Members' News

Julia Sorrell writes

' As I am a member of the RBA, RI and the new Chairman of the Norwich 20 Group, I decided it might be a good opportunity this year to run Big Draw events for all three societies at the Mall Galleries (2nd Oct 11am-3pm for the RI & 3rd October 11am-3pm for the RBA) and at the Forum in Norwich (7th October, 10am-4pm). The Big Draw is run by the Campaign for Drawing and occurs in 15 different countries with about 200,000 people taking part each year. I am using the same models Beth Reeks and Chris Barber for each event, and they will be doing dramatic poses in costume for up to 30 minutes, and on each day members of the societies have volunteered to assist the public to take part and perhaps take up a pencil and draw for the first time since they were a child. This is the first time each of these societies have been involved in the Big Draw, and the first time it has occurred at the Mall Galleries, and it is being held in the Main Gallery during the Threadneedle exhibition. The events are free to anyone entering the Mall Galleries, and I am very grateful to my sponsors Hahnemühle Fine Art and Jacksons who have made these London events possible. I would also like to thank Anne Bone for designing the leaflets and posters and the Mall Galleries for hosting this event.

It is particularly apt that these events are occurring in the same month that a major exhibition of my father Alan Sorrell RBA (1904-74) is opening at the John Soane Museum (25th October – 25th January) since he was also passionate about drawing and I know that some RBA members remember him and his work fondly. To coincide with this exhibition I have two articles coming out in October/November issues of Minerva Magazine and The Artist, as well as giving my talk: *Alan Sorrell: The Man Who Created Roman Britain.* (see article below)

Romeo Di Girolamo was recently invited by an international Organisation to deliver a lecture at the House of Lords. The lecture was on the importance of creativity as a means of helping to establish harmony and understanding amongst different nationalities and cultures. During his lecture Romeo launched an attack on the Government's Education policy describing it as 'bordering on insanity'. He urged the representatives of Governments from all over the world to use their influence to persuade the government to have a rethink on The Arts Educational policy. Romeo has just completed a series of paintings for a collector in Dubai.

Megan Di Girolamo writes:

'On the 22nd September Megan's life size sculpture of Selina Di Girolamo is to be unveiled at Clayton Wood Natural Burial Ground. The sculpture is sited on an island in the centre of a small lake. The company that owns the Clayton Wood after researching Selina's remarkable life have decided to call the island "Selina's Island".

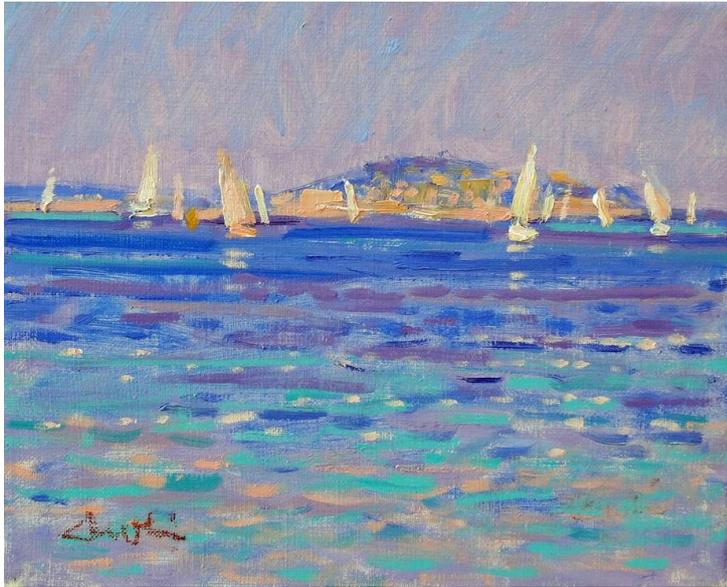
The setting is a newly planted woodland which is gradually maturing overlooked by the beautiful Sussex Downs which were such an inspiration for Selina's haunting paintings.

The family is overwhelmed particularly as the burial ground does not allow monuments other than the planting of trees and small oak benches and plaques.

The sculpture is ceramic glazed stoneware with a butterfly, titled the 'Resurrection' it encapsulates the ethos of Clayton Wood representing all who rest there.'

George Devlin writes:

'I am quite busy on the exhibition front starting with being part of the Everard Read (Johannesburg) Centenary Celebrations Exhibition. Closer to home I will be showing watercolours in the RWS exhibition in Valletta in November whilst participating in a joint show with Andrew Marcara at Island Fine Art (Isle of Wight) also in November. In May my large solo show takes place at the Portland Gallery in St James's.'



George Devlin : Basin de Thau, Languedoc

Austin Cole has three prints in the forthcoming annual exhibition of the Royal Society of Marine Artists at the mall Galleries from 16th to 27th October. They are: 'Blustery Day Stackpole Head', 'North Pembrokeshire Headland' and 'North Pembrokeshire'. He is also taking part in a group show at the gallery of Naomi Tydeman RI in Tenby in September. Her website is at www.naomitydeman.co.uk

No less than 6 members of the RBA are taking part in 'Still Alive' and exhibition of contemporary still life at the mall galleries 16th to 21st September. They are: **Chris Aggs, Jeremy Galton, Ann Heat, Barbara Richardson, Nick Tidnam and Annie Williams.**

Jeremy Galton writes:

'I am showing four paintings in the "Still Alive: Contemporary Still Life Painting" exhibition 16-21 September (private view 17th Sept, 6-8pm) at the Mall Galleries. A few other RBA members are also showing. BBC4 have filmed me painting a still life and this will contribute 5 or 6 minutes towards a 90 minute documentary "A History of Still Life Painting" to be screened early next year, (programmes not scheduled yet).'

Sue Champion is having a solo show coming up on October 18th at Twenty Twenty Gallery in Much Wenlock, (<http://www.twenty-twenty.co.uk>)

Bridget Moore, Mel Petterson, Austin Cole, Martin Leman and Mick Davies all had works in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and all sold.

Jill Leman writes:

'Martin organised an exhibition at 54 The Gallery, Shepherd Market in July. Several members of the RBA were among the exhibitors. Martin and Jill Leman were amongst the artists showing at The Russell Gallery's Summer Exhibition. Jill Leman's self - portrait was among the selected paintings for the Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Exhibition at Kings Place Gallery.'



Jill Leman : Self Portrait with Cat

Cinzia Bonada had a painting accepted for the MOMA Tabernacle exhibition which ran during August and September. The theme of the exhibition was 'Gardens' and Cinzia painting 'Overgrown' was Highly Commended.

Julian Halsby recently exhibited with Denise Yapp Contemporary Art in a show entitled 'New to You'.

Miranda Halsby is showing prints at Moors Valley Country Park near Bournemouth from 7th September to 6th October

Geedon Gallery Autumn Exhibition

5th-20th October 2013

Daily 11am-5.30pm and thereafter by appointment until 15th December

Geedon Gallery, Jagers, Fingringhoe, Colchester Essex CO5 7DN

Tel 01206 728 587 07901918046 www.geedongallery.co.uk

Among the artists exhibiting from RBA are:

David Sawyer

Jacqueline Taber

Nick Tidnam

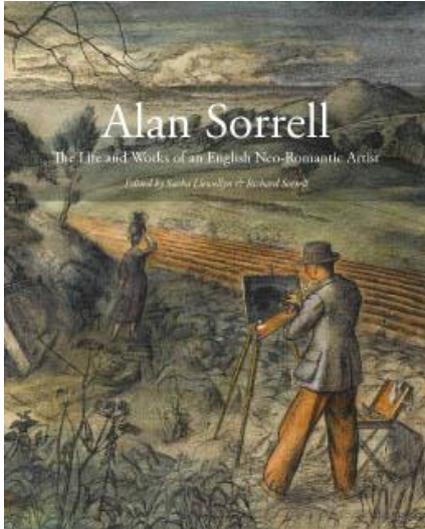
Robert Wells

Alan Sorrell RBA 1904 - 1974

Alan Sorrell was a painter of imaginative narrative pictures, and he gained a reputation in his life time for his remarkable 'reconstruction' drawings and paintings of ancient sites shown as they would have appeared in their heyday. He became particularly well known for his depictions of Roman Britain, but he was able to project himself, as it were, into any past time from distant prehistory to the recent past. The pictures that he produced came about from the combining of his great interest in history, exhaustive research with archaeologists and historians and from his vivid imagination and ability as a draughtsman and painter. Remarkable as these 'reconstruction' drawings are, they form only a part of Alan Sorrell's work, and it is the aim of the exhibition at the Sir John Soane Museum and of the book 'Alan Sorrell: The Life and Works of an English Neo-Romantic Artist' to bring to the attention of the public the diversity and quality of his oeuvre.

My father was born in 1904, on 11th February in Tooting Bec in south London, and died 70 years later. His early ambition was to be a painter of imaginative narrative pictures, often in the form of mural

decorations. In this he was successful, and many of the drawings and paintings displayed in the exhibition are the work of a fine and powerful young artist, influenced by much that he has seen of Italian Renaissance painting, but filtered through his version of a vigorous northern European, English tradition. It is an important aim of this exhibition to demonstrate that the archaeological and historical 'reconstruction' drawings and paintings of the later part of his life are also important works of art which, if they were magically stripped of their association with archaeology, would still stand as wonderful realisations of an interior world of the imagination.



Soon after his birth, his family moved to south east Essex, and it was there that he attended school, Junior Art Department and Southend Art School. There was a brief period when he worked in a commercial art studio, and then he gained a scholarship to the Royal College of Art, where he was quickly noticed by the principal, Sir William Rothenstein. From the RCA he won the coveted Rome Scholarship, and he spent the years 1928 -30 in Italy where he was able to study the great Renaissance masters, especially Piero della Francesca, Pisanello, Pinturiccio and Raphael. At the British School at Rome Alan met people who were to become close friends for the rest of his life. He met Colin Hardie, later to become professor of Latin literature at Magdalen College in Oxford; Aileen Henderson, the archaeologist who with her husband Sir Cyril Fox was to be a most important figure in promoting Alan as a painter of archaeological reconstructions; Reginald Brill the printmaker and draughtsman (later the principal of Kingston College of Art); Robert Austin, later president of the Royal Watercolour Society and a renowned printmaker; Richard Carrington the future head of St Olave's School and Thomas Monnington later President of the Royal Academy. At the BSR Alan worked in his studio on pictures that were a continuation of his mural design work at the RCA. At the same time the less pressurised atmosphere allowed him to paint more introspective and experimental pictures. He made a return to still life painting with references to Cezanne. There is a wonderfully observed self portrait in which he is ruthlessly honest about himself.

He became fascinated with Roman history. The Romans' efficient, practical empire building he saw as a great achievement. The decay of Rome, the collapse of the great empire became something that he identified with emotionally to such an extent that I really think he believed that he was living in a closely parallel period. This feeling was to dominate much of his later work. 'The Artist in the Campagna' is a fine work, which encapsulates perfectly Alan Sorrell's view of himself as a young artist in the long continuum of Roman history: the pile of broken Classical fragments becoming overgrown with wild plants; the long rolling country that leads the eye right to the distant horizon and in the middle of it all the figure of the artist – a participator in and observer of the scene.



Alan Sorrell : The Artist in the Campagna

When he returned from Italy, Rothenstein appointed him as a tutor in the Drawing School of the RCA. Here he was in frequent touch with many influential artists including Bawden, Barnett Freedman, Charles Mahoney, Gilbert Spencer and John and Paul Nash and later on Carel Weight and Ruskin Spear. He also taught a huge number of students (including my mother), and when I went to art school in the late 60's I found, somewhat to my dismay that almost all of my teachers had been his students.

In 1930 he proposed a series of mural decorations for the upper gallery of the Library in the middle of Southend – the town where he had grown up, and near where his mother lived. He suggested a scheme of modern scenes in continuation of the kind of work he had been doing at the RCA and the BSR, but a set of historical subjects was considered more suitable, and four large pictures. One of these paintings, for instance, shows the fitting out of Admiral Blake's fleet at Leigh in 1653. Alan went to great lengths to research the vessels, their rigging, the appearance of the sea and the land in that period, and the costumes of the seamen. It is a fine picture, full of activity and of beautiful design. Alan took an assistant to help him with this commission this was Ernest Greenwood, who was one of Alan's students at the RCA, who later became President of the Royal Watercolour Society. The paintings were cleaned and conserved and moved to Prittlewell Priory in 2000, as part of Southend's Millennium celebrations.

In 1935 He made a journey to Iceland and he made thirty finished watercolour paintings from his experiences, which were exhibited at Walker's Galleries in Bond Street in London in his first one-man exhibition in 1935. In 1937 he was elected to the Royal Watercolour Society. His candidature had been enthusiastically supported by Arthur Rackham, who clearly liked Alan, wrote to him with advice about colour, and at the end of his life he left him pieces of studio furniture: I now have his grand studio easel.

In 1936 my father made a drawing of an archaeological excavation in Leicester. He showed the picture to the connoisseur and editor of the Illustrated London News, Sir Bruce Ingram, who decided to publish it and suggested that Alan should make a reconstruction of the scene as it appeared in Roman times. Both were published in the paper, and attracted the attention of his colleague from the British School at Rome, the archaeologist Aileen Fox, now working with her husband Sir Cyril Fox at the National Museum of Wales. They commissioned him to do some 'reconstruction' drawings of Caerwent and other Roman sites. In 1939 the War changed everything. My father spent the War first as an air raid officer, then in the Air Ministry making models of ships and land-based targets for briefing bombing raids. He did a considerable amount of camouflage work, but he felt that he would like to make visual records of the desperate times.

Alan approached the War Artist Commission, who decided that they would not take him on as an official War Artist, but they needed a pictorial record of everyday life in the RAF. One condition was that Alan would have to join the ranks, and this he did.

The RAF drawings have a wonderful quality of fascination with the abrupt difference of things in wartime. His fascination with collapse and decay, that had been expressed in 'The Artist in the Campagna' and many other works, found ample subjects around him. During the war Alan met my mother, Elizabeth, who had been one of his students at the RCA. They met by chance in Blackpool where she was teaching and he was stationed with the RAF. Alan flew in Wellington bombers from which he was able to observe the airfields (which he had been commissioned to paint), and landscape in general from a visually thrilling new perspective. He made many paintings of aerial views of wartime aerodromes, and this new-found viewpoint became a much used tool in his later reconstruction drawings.

After the war, my father found a disused chapel in not far from Southend and quite close to where his aging mother lived. The traditional Essex clapboard building at Dawes Heath in Thundersley had been unused for some time; my father saw it and immediately thought that it would make a fine studio and home. He managed to buy it and set about having it converted. In 1947 he and Elizabeth were married, and settled in their new home – named after much thought 'Thor's Mead' – 'the upland meadows of Thor' my father used to say. Thor, the Saxon god of thunder was believed to have been buried in Thundersley churchyard, where a large chalk skull could be seen as proof. From this base Alan thought that he could resume where he had left off before the war. He took up again his teaching at the Royal College of Art and the work for the National Museum of Wales.

In 1950 he was approached to do some work for the Festival of Britain. This came from two directions: he was asked to paint a mural for the Nelson Bar of the 'Campania', an aircraft carrier that the Admiralty had offered the FOB organisers as a floating exhibition hall. This jolly painting of coastal fishing vessels is one of my father's most light hearted pictures. It was painted at a happy time of his life. He had escaped a stifling first marriage and survived the grey misery of the War. He had started of on a new and idyllic family life in quite remote rural Essex. His first child (myself) had been born in 1948, and my mother's love and care helped him to regain his health, which had suffered from very poor nutrition. Two more children were to follow: Mark in 1952, and Julia in 1955.

Alan continued teaching at the RCA until 1952, and at this time Alfred Daniels was amongst his pupils. He later taught at Brighton where Vincent Lines was Principal. This was his last teaching job. I remember speaking with Michael Reynolds the portrait painter who was a student there, who remembered him with affection, but said '...he was one of the most difficult, intellectual *bastards*. I was working on a drawing and carried on over the lunch hour, and I was pleased with it, and showed it to him. He looked at it for a long time, then turned to me and said "I th-think you'd have done better to have some l-lunch!"'

Whilst in the 30's when he returned from Rome, offers of work came so readily that he had to turn most of them down, now twenty years later, the tide had definitely changed. Alan Sorrell was no longer fashionable. My mother was concerned of course: she encouraged him to try and give up his teaching and make a living from his work. There now began a struggle to live as an artist, obtaining commissions, trying to find galleries, suggesting new ideas for series of drawings, taking on commercial work, book jackets and posters for use in schools. This is the Alan Sorrell that I remember, whom I grew up with and perhaps tried to challenge when I grew to young adulthood.

We lived in the Chapel surrounded mostly by woods and fields. Although it was only about 30 miles from London, it felt much further. The winters were cold – there was not much insulation in the wooden clapboard house. The summers were filled with interest – drawing, searching for insects and worked flint tools, which my brother Mark and I found in the ploughed fields. There was no television

or even radio, but it was an intense and vivid childhood. My parents were always there, working in the studio, my mother painting one of her elaborate large watercolours perhaps of garden plants, or perhaps of my sister Julia, who was persuaded to sit still for hours on end. My father would be working on the other side of the studio at his very untidy trestle table, covered with sheets of tracing paper - tracings of a reconstruction drawing that had been sent off to an archaeologist to answer questions written on it.

Alan went away on long painting trips from time to time, to Istanbul and Greece, to Egypt and Nubia. He would also go to visit the sites of ancient monuments that he had been commissioned to paint. Sometimes he took me as a child, for instance to Stonehenge when I was ten years old, where I met Professors Richard Atkinson and Stuart Piggott. At other times he would discover a particularly wonderful place and we would all go on holiday there, and he would be able to do some work at the same time. In this way we all went off to Wales, where he did work on Harlech Castle and Castell y Bere, and to Mawgan Porth in Cornwall where there was a fascinating Dark Age settlement. So he worked away from year to year. Almost every year his pictures and my mother's would be shown at the Royal Academy, and I sometimes joined them at the Private View, or perhaps at the Varnishing Day, when I would meet his old friends, Gilbert Spencer, Charles Mahoney, William Russell Flint. Twice a year they exhibited at the Royal Watercolour Society, and occasionally there would be an exhibition, generally outside London, perhaps in Lavenham at the Phoenix Gallery.

My father worked until the end of his life, aged 70, when towards Christmas time he and my mother were involved in a car accident. I went to see him in hospital where despite his pain he joked about the stainless steel splint they had put in his leg, 'all my life I have hated stainless steel' he said. When I think of my father's work and his career I wonder why he was not more recognised, more successful in a worldly sense. The quality of his work remained very high. I don't think that he was 'satisfied with the second best' as William Rothenstein had observed. There was a time when a museum wanted to buy one of his paintings, and the debate was – should this go into the Art or Archaeology section? The museum couldn't resolve the question, and the sale was lost. It is time to put such absurdity away, and to see the remarkable quality of Alan Sorrell's drawing and painting for what it is, regardless of the subject matter, and rejoice in its quality.

Richard Sorrell RBA NEAC

Some Thoughts in Trafalgar Square

Last weekend I went to the National Portrait Gallery to see the exhibition of portraits by Dame Laura Knight, about whom I know comparatively little. Over the summer I read 'Summer in February' a novel by Jonathan Smith based on the events in Newlyn in the early 20th Century when the young Alfred Munnings arrived and started a romantic affair with Florence Carter-Wood who was studying painting with Stanhope Forbes. They married, but Florence committed suicide shortly afterwards. It was an episode which Munnings never referred to in his later life. The story features the young Laura Knight and her husband Harold who were both working in Cornwall at the time. (The novel was made into a film which came out earlier this year to fairly dismal reviews). My interest in Dame Laura Knight was stimulated by the book and I thought the exhibition at the NPG was excellent. Her portraits of gypsies are really outstanding, as are her pictures of ballerinas. Her large portrait of the painter Lamorna Birch and his daughters is a masterpiece of the Newlyn period.

I then went on to see the BP Portrait Award exhibition which was on in a nearby gallery, and found it very difficult to see anything as the gallery was packed with young people admiring the work. I returned on Sunday morning to see the exhibition in relative peace. The quality of much of the work is outstanding, showing great observational skills and incredible technique. It was very encouraging to see so many young people admiring the paintings, often standing really close to examine the

brushwork and technique. Round the corner at the National Gallery there is a mindless exhibition by Michael Landy entitled 'Saints Alive' which consists of a series of mechanical statues (if you can call them that) of saints enduring various forms of torture. Around the walls are a series of collages which reveal zero drawing skill. It is an extraordinarily silly exhibition and should never have been staged at the National Gallery. Hampstead Heath Fairground would have been a better venue, because the whole exhibition suggests fairground entertainment.

What struck me is the contrast between the extraordinary technique of Laura Knight and many of the BP exhibitors as opposed to the mindless and unintellectual approach of Michael Landy. Yet there were many more people looking seriously at the BP Portrait exhibition than enduring 'Saints Alive'. It is very encouraging to think that although the art establishment continues its obsession with the ridiculous, young people are seriously fascinated by traditional good painting.

Julian Halsby

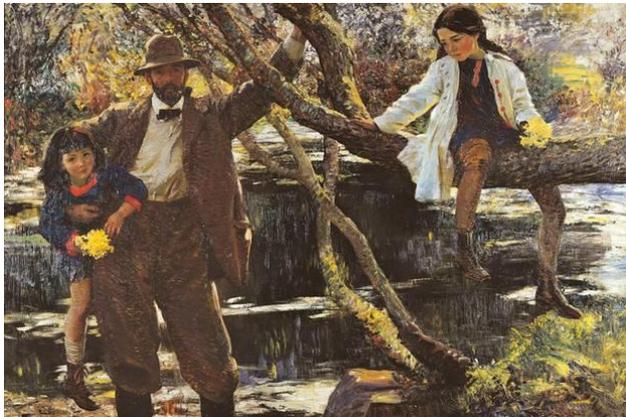
Saints Alive – National Gallery, Sunley Room

23rd May – 24th November Free Admission

Dame Laura Knight Portraits

National Portrait Gallery 11th July to 13th October

BP Portrait Awards 20th June to 15th September



Dates of the 2014 RBA Exhibition

Digital submission opens: Thursday 3 October, 12pm

Digital submission closes: Thursday 2 January, 12pm

Digital submission notification: Thursday 9 January, 12pm

Receiving Days: Friday 24 & Saturday 25 January, 10am - 5pm

Selection: Monday 27 January

Final notification: Thursday 30 January, 12pm

Collection of unaccepted work: Saturday 1 February, 10am - 5pm

Hanging: Sunday 2 March

Buyers' PV: Monday 3 March, 6 - 8pm

Private View: Tuesday 4 March, 2 - 8pm

Open to the public: Wednesday 5 March, 10am - 5pm

Closes: Saturday 15 March, 4pm

Collection of unsold work: Thursday 20 March, 10am - 5pm

