Lithographic Fever: Britain's Mid-Century Print-Boom

Fry Art Gallery 2021

Extended Catalogue

Introduction

In 1950, the artist Michael Rothenstein wrote to the Arts Council from his home in Great Bardfield, Essex. He wanted money to help publish prints celebrating the Festival of Britain, in 1951, by himself and his near neighbours John Aldridge, Edward Bawden and Kenneth Rowntree. However, Philip James at the Arts Council refused. James told Rothenstein that he feared there were too many prints being published and the country was suffering an outbreak of 'lithograph fever'.

The fifteen years after 1945 are often seen as a lean time for British printmaking (typical is Andrea Rose's description in the catalogue for the British Council's *Out of Print: British Printmaking 1946 – 1976*: '1945-60, the years of post-war austerity, when the print publishing industry in Britain had all but disappeared'). Yet contemporaries such as James saw the reverse. In particular, colour lithography became a fashionable and respected medium.

Frequently, lithographs were characterised as a way to bring art to the people, given their potential for large, cheap editions. For example, Pierre Rouve called them 'the Labour Party of the world of art' pointing to 'that Great Day when the beautiful will not be by definition unobtainable' (*Art News and Review*, 1957). Others, though, felt lithography was simply well suited to modern tastes for colour and bold technique, the *Times* noting in 1956 that modern English prints were often more colourful than equivalent paintings.

This exhibition recaptures something of the excitement of lithography in those years, and shows the artists of North West Essex as central to this national phenomenon.

What is a Lithograph?

A lithograph is a type of print. The artist draws on a plate made of stone or metal using a greasy chalk or crayon. The plate is then washed with water, making the parts without the drawing damp. Next, greasy ink is rolled onto the plate. This sticks to the drawing, but is repelled by the damp elsewhere. The inked plate can then go into a press, where the picture is transferred to paper. For multi-coloured prints a different plate is made for each colour (a 'colour separation') and printed in turn onto the same paper. Printing can be on a hand-pulled press or a mechanised 'off-set' press.

Beginnings

Two exhibitions in 1948 gave a boost to lithography. One was organised by the Circulation Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum and started in South Kensington before travelling on to cities including Leeds and Birmingham, lithographs having the attraction of being relatively cheap and easy to transport. The exhibition celebrated 150 years since lithography's invention and comprised a mix of British and French works, both historical and contemporary. French colour lithography by artists working at the end of the nineteenth century (such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Pierre Bonnard) had a high reputation and its inclusion helped lift the status of the accompanying British work.

Selected modern British artists were commissioned to make new works for the show, including John Aldridge, John Minton, Claude Rogers, William Scott and John Piper. Comparison of John Aldridge's final print with

a preparatory watercolour sketch shows why contemporaries often referred to lithography as a 'painterly' form of printmaking – a point made by Minton in a BBC Third Programme interview given alongside the Victoria and Albert exhibition. This had some truth (with the artist freely applying materials without the heavy-duty cutting required in other print techniques) but also belied how preparing colour separations required careful planning and calculation.

1. **John Aldridge, *An Essex Farmyard*, 1948** (*150 Years of Lithography*, VAM, 1948, cat. no. 112; also shown at *Colour Prints by the Society of London Painter Printers, Redfern Gallery*, 1948, cat. no. 27).
2. **John Aldridge, *An Essex Farmyard*, 1948** (a preparatory watercolour used to plan the print).
3. **John Aldridge, *An Essex Farmyard*, 1948** (printed in black from the works' blue plate, with Aldridge's annotations). The inclusion of this working print echoes the 1948 exhibition, where colour

separations were shown to explain the process of lithography. In 1948, this 'Demonstration Exhibit' was made by Edwin La Dell, whose work appears later in *Lithographic Fever*.

It might be expected that this image would be reversed relative to the preparatory study (as the final print is). Why this isn't the case is a mystery.

The second big exhibition of 1948 was at the Redfern Gallery, a commercial dealer in London's West End. It used the title *Colour-Prints by the Society of London Painter-Printers*, though the implication that organiser was an artist-led society was misleading. Most of the works shown were published by Miller's Press, a recent venture run by two eccentric sisters in Lewes, Sussex.

The sisters' innovation was to use transfer paper, a technique invented in the nineteenth century but which had never before been so central to a publisher's strategy. Transfer

paper allowed an artist to make a design at home and then post it back to the sisters who had it transferred to the printing plate – potentially engaging artists with existing reputations who might otherwise be put off by the effort involved. Works at the 1948 exhibition included Michael Rothenstein's first lithograph.

4. **Michael Rothenstein, *Cockerel in a Landscape*, 1948** (*Colour-Prints by the Society of London Painter-Printers*, Redfern *Gallery*, 1948, cat. no. 10).

5. **Robert MacBryde, *Woman at Table*, 1948** (*Colour-Prints by the Society of London Painter-Printers*, Redfern *Gallery*, 1948, cat. no. 7). The original exhibition catalogue with an illustration of this work is shown in the nearby display cabinet.

Miller's Press continued to exhibit through the Redfern Gallery in the early 1950s (though only using the 'London Painter-Printers' title

once more, in 1950-51) until the sisters' increasing age diminished their energy. These examples of their later publications have the sense of mystery associated with the Neo-Romantic movement.

6. **Keith Vaughan, *The Walled Garden*, 1951** (*French and English Original Colour Lithographs*, Redfern Gallery, 1951, cat. no. 213; *Contemporary British Lithographs: Second Series*, Arts Council, 1952, cat. no. 30.) The evidence that this work was published by Miller's is indirect: first, three other lithographs by Vaughan featured in *Les Peintres-Graveurs* (Redfern Gallery, 1949) and were ascribed to Miller's in the catalogue 'Foreword'; second, the English component of the 1951 Redfern exhibition in which *The Walled Garden* was first shown comprised mostly, but not exclusively, Miller's works.

The image is convincingly linked to a number of gouaches made in 1946, themselves based on wartime studies from Vaughan's time with the Non-Combatant Corps at Ashton Gifford in Wiltshire (Robert Meyrick and Harry Heuser, '"…poised on the edge" Vaughan as Printmaker' in Colin Cruise (ed.), *Figure and Ground: Drawings, Prints and Photographs 1935 – 62*, Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2013; Malcolm Yorke, *Keith Vaughan: His life and work*, London: Constable, 1990).

7. **Robert Colquhoun, *Seated Woman*, 1949** (*Les Peintres-Graveurs*, Redfern Gallery, 1949, cat. no. 181). The work was also shown at the British Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1954, where it was dated to 1952

Lithographs were also being made at art schools. Bernard Cheese's *Standing Room Only* is marked on the back of the frame as an

entry to the *Young* Contemporaries exhibition while he was at the Royal College of Art.

8. **Bernard Cheese, *Standing Room Only*, undated**.

Miller's pitched their prints at the fine art market, but colour lithographs could equally be printed cheaply and in large editions. Several post-war projects published lithographs at an affordable price, chiming with post-war ambitions to bring art within people's reach and hasten the 'evolution of a people … more rich in culture' as *Labour Believes in Britain*, a Labour Party document from 1949, put it. School Prints Ltd sold prints at just under £1 (£0/19/6d in pre-decimal coinage), about the same price as a hardback and less than a bottle of good whisky. Their advertising targeted Education Authorities but also private householders. Works in their first series included:

10. **Kenneth Rowntree, *Tractor*, 1946**.

11. **Michael Rothenstein, *Timber Felling in Essex*, 1946**.

J. Lyons and Co. used lithographs to brighten their war-weary restaurants but also sold them to the public, again for less than £1 (£0/15/9d). Some artists, such as Edward Bawden, transferred their design to the printing plate themselves, others handed this job to experts at Lyons' printers, Chromoworks Ltd.

12. **Edward Bawden, *The Dolls at Home*, 1947**. The Fry also holds a collage created as a preparatory study for this lithograph.

Guinness later published lithographs as a tie-in to their successful *Book of Records*, though these were distributed almost exclusively to pubs rather than sold to the public.

13. **Bernard Cheese, *A Fisherman's Story*, 1956**.

The Festival of Britain and the Coronation

When the Arts Council refused to help Michael Rothenstein and his Bardfield colleagues publish Festival of Britain prints, they were urged to join a parallel project, the *Artists' International Association (AIA) 1951 Lithographs*, to which the Arts Council had made a loan. The AIA had itself been founded in 1933 to organise left-wing artists and put art before a popular audience. It had previously published the *Everyman Prints*, in 1940, an early attempt at a popular lithograph series though with mostly black and white images. The *1951 Lithographs* marked the AIA's return to print publishing.

Two versions of its Festival of Britain prints were planned: a limited edition and a low-cost run. However, in the end just six out of eighteen lithographs went into a cheaper, machine-printed run produced by School Prints. The limited edition (from which the works shown here are taken) went on sale at Four Guineas (just over £4) in the Festival Hall

in the summer of 1951. A sales brochure for the series was produced by the AIA prematurely and contains errors in the contents; the titles used here are taken from a (more accurate) typescript advert in the AIA archive at Tate (TGA 7043/3/60).

Among artists with a North West Essex association, several were AIA members at some time: Edward Bawden was active in the AIA in the 1930s, but not after the war; both John Aldridge and Bernard Cheese were members from 1950 to (at least) 1960, and Michael Ayrton, Kenneth Rowntree and Michael Rothenstein from (at a minimum) 1948 to 1960. Rothenstein and Aldridge both joined the AIA's Festival of Britain scheme. Aldridge's work expressing the idea of a nation on display for the Festival year.

14. **Michael Rothenstein, *Cockerel*, 1951**.

15. **John Aldridge, *Great Bardfield*, 1950** (the work was exhibited ahead of the Festival as *Four View of Great Bardfield* at *Recent*

Colour Prints by the Society of London Painter-Printers, 1950-51, Redfern Gallery, cat. no. 112). The Fry also holds a gouache created as a preparatory study for this work.

Several other artists taking part had an Essex connection at some point in their career.

16. **Sheila Robinson, *Fun Fair*, 1951** (courtesy Arts Council Collection). Robinson moved with her husband Bernard Cheese to Bardfield End Green in 1954; Cheese contributed *Wads and Tea* to the *1951 Lithographs*.

17. **Keith Vaughan, *Dancers*, 1951** (courtesy Arts Council Collection). From 1964, Vaughan kept a studio and weekend cottage at Toppesfield. Vaughan also completed a large mural for the Festival's Dome of Discovery. The raised arm gesture appears in a number of Vaughan's works in different media at this time.

18. **Laurence Scarfe, *The Bird Boy*, 1951**
(courtesy Arts Council Collection). Scarfe was a guest at the Great Bardfield Open House exhibition in 1958.

19. **Fred Uhlman, *North Wales*, 1951**
(courtesy Arts Council Collection). Uhlman was a German-Jewish exile who lived in Bambers Green during the early 1940s, following internment as an enemy alien. His harbour scene echoes the sense of security he had found in Britain. In 1946 he had published a book of sketches, An Artist in North Wales, with a commentary by Clough Williams-Ellis, the creator of Portmeirion and scourge of suburban sprawl.

The series also included young artists, such as James Sellars, and stars of the day, notably John Minton. Minton had just returned from a trip to Jamaica – still a British colony – that inspired a further mural for the Festival's Dome of Discovery as well as this print.

20. **James Sellars, *Sheffield Steel*, 1951** (courtesy Arts Council Collection). Signing and numbering of the *1951 Lithographs* was somewhat erratic. Other examples here are signed, but Sellars is not.

21. **John Minton, *Jamaica*, 1951** (courtesy Arts Council Collection). The intention was for all the *1951 Lithographs* to be in an edition of fifty, however most did not get beyond an initial print run of twenty-five; Minton's design was delivered slightly late and went straight into the full edition of fifty.

Organising the *AIA 1951 Lithographs* was Edwin La Dell, a tutor at the Royal College of Art. Two years later he put together a further series, this time marking the Queen's Coronation and published by the College itself. La Dell's own prints in the series were typical of his colourful, bravura technique. The contents and titling for the series used here are taken from Michael Clegg 'The Royal

College of Art's Coronation Lithographs', *Print Quarterly*, 36:4, December 2019.

22. **Kenneth Rowntree, *Country Preparations*, 1953**.

23. **Michael Rothenstein, *Fireworks*, 1953**.

24. **Edwin La Dell, *Horse Guards Parade*, 1953** (courtesy UK Government Art Collection).

Outside such series artists continued to experiment with personal images.

25. **Michael Rothenstein, *Signals*, 1952-53** (*Contemporary French and English Lithographs*, Redfern Gallery, 1952, cat. no. 157).

26. **Robert Colquhoun, *Masked Figures and Horse, c.1950*** (*Recent Colour Prints by the Society of London Painter-Printers*, 1950-51, Redfern Gallery, cat. no. 31).

Date, style and colour link the work to paintings produced following Colquhoun's six-month trip to Italy in 1949, with is partner MacBryde. The work was shown at the British Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1954, where it was dated to 1953.

St George's Gallery Prints and an Evolving Scene

In 1954, Robert Erskine opened St George's Gallery Prints at the back of Agatha Sadler's art bookshop in Cork Street, Mayfair. It was the first dedicated print seller in London since the war. Erskine demanded a new professionalism in production and he helped found the Curwen Studio as a facility dedicated to making artists' lithographs (the Curwen Studio was wholly owned by the Curwen Press but Erskine offered advice and, crucially, recruited Stanley Jones to be its manager).

Erskine also introduced the 'suite', a set of prints by an artist on one theme. Michael Ayrton (who lived in Toppesfield, Essex later in his life) produced his *Greek Suite*, La Dell made *The Oxford and Cambridge Eight*. Other artists with a North West Essex connection published by Erskine were Michael Rothenstein (the *Sailing Boat Suite* of

linocuts, 1958) and George Chapman (the *Rhondda Suite* of etchings, 1960).

27. **Michael Ayrton, *Eagle Landscape: Delphi*, 1958**.

28. **Michael Ayrton, *Goat Carrier, Crete*, 1958**.

29. **Edwin La Dell, *Kings Parade*, 1959** (courtesy UK Government Art Collection).

Erskine's efforts encouraged others. Michael Rothenstein helped organise the artist-led *New Editions Group* which exhibited regularly at the Zwemmer Gallery from 1956 to 1963 (an article on the state of printmaking in 1956 by Rothenstein is shown in the display cases). The 1960s saw a new fashion for screenprinting, but many artists continued to practice lithography, in particular at the Curwen Studio where Stanley Jones was manager, appreciating its potential for representation, expression and experiment.

30. **Allin Braund, *Riverside, Winter*, 1957** (courtesy University of Warwick Art Collection). Shown at the *New Editions Group*, Zwemmer Gallery, 1957, cat. no. 6.

31. **Bernard Cheese, *Salmon Nets Drying*, 1959**.

32. **Bernard Cheese, *Unloading the Net*, 1959**. Shown at the *New Editions Group*, Zwemmer Gallery, 1959, cat. no. 16.

33. **Stanley Jones, *Essex Landscape*, 1963** (private collection). Published by Editions Alecto.

Credits

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Curator and catalogue author: Michael Clegg

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