

EYE WITNESS

by edith simon

I joined the AI at the very meeting which decided on the name of Artists International, and which formed the first Committee. The committee consisted of everybody present except me, who knew nothing about politics or procedures. But I'd just begun to teach myself to use a typewriter. Nobody else could; so then and there I became the AI typist.

Cliff Rowe and Misha Black were the prime movers, together with Pearl Binder, who had also been to Russia.

The titular secretary was Ann Meblin, Cliff Rowe's wife – not herself an artist. They had come together in Russia and had arrived from Moscow only a week or two before: living in a sort of outhouse in Old Gloucester Street, Bloomsbury, which belonged to a friend. Other friends were helping them with clothes and pots and pans and groceries – bacon and eggs, said Rowe, was the one thing he'd missed in Russia, where everything was in equally short supply, with the exception of enthusiasm.

He had lived there for 18 months, that means since 1931, when the pioneering atmosphere of the idealistic 20s still flourished in Russia, where foreign visitors were welcomed with open arms and allowed to roam free.

It is important to understand the heady impact abroad of the young Russian Revolution as a constructive liberating force – much like what happened at the beginning of the French Revolution. Also, the Soviet Union then was all geared to internationalism. It stood for world socialism, without any nationalistic pretensions.

Well; Ann not longer after returned to her native America and Rowe became the secretary. He and Misha Black remained the leading spirits for the next few years.



I continued to do the typing – minutes, correspondence, manifestos and leaflets, articles, stencils, the lot – so was closely involved in everything, from the shaping of aims and policy to practical day-to-day activities.

I don't know what the left-wing movement had done without us! We painted banners, often through the night, and monumental heads of Marx and Lenin for demos in which we also marched. We designed and printed posters, made scenery for Unity Theatre. We made murals. We drew portraits, one shilling, and caricatures, sixpence, at Daily Worker bazaars, in relays, by the hour. A liberal education in every respect.

I remember some painting expeditions and informal life classes, also a camping holiday by a lonely beach in Essex: about a dozen adults, two babies, and fluctuating visitors.¹ We had a marquee to work in and a gramophone to dance to, and ping pong; Misha was altogether a great organiser and he knew a sympathetic lorry driver. You don't imagine any of us had cars ...

In the open air or out of it, discussion never ceased, about Marxism and culture, form and content, art and propaganda; about techniques of painting and the use of new materials for sculpture; about the capitalist crisis. People talked and argued as they worked together, amid endless cups of tea and yards of banner linen and gallons of red paint and printing ink. There wasn't any special workshop – one used the floors and walls of Rowe's and Misha's flats. In fact Misha's girlfriend left him, saying she could no longer bear the blood of Lenin running down the wall. (It's all right: they got married in the end.)

¹ Edith Tudor Hart, John Heartfield, Francis Klingender among them.



At Home 1930s scraperboard 6 x 5ins

There was constant need of banners – for hunger marches, anti-war and anti-fascist protests, to express indignation at diverse costly royal pageantry, and for standard rallies like May Day, with redoubled output when the Spanish Civil War broke out, which united all the causes of the Left and all its factions, most acutely.

You don't think one got paid. Much of the time we were lucky to get the money for materials out of the various organisations. The gibe then often levelled at such bodies, that they were subsidised by Moscow gold, drew wistful smiles.

Book-keeping was cursory. Whoever had cash handy, forked it out. Better-off friends were coaxed or blackmailed to help finance exhibitions. Now and then donations came in kind, for the Bulletin and such like. Duplicating and distribution were by voluntary labour too – the silver lining of Unemployment!

Familiar as all this may sound, it isn't true that the more things change, the more they are the same. The crucial difference between then and now was twofold: there was no social security, but on the other hand there was strong, positive, confident hope.

Most artists were poorer than anybody young today can easily understand, with not even the dole to fall back on. But we knew that a millennium was attainable. Progress had not yet become a bad word, history was still seen in an ascending line.

For fascism was as yet only getting into its stride – a vicious reflex of capitalism in its death throes and thus kind of a



The bare table ink 4 x 6ins

Politics 1930s scraperboard 15 x 7ins

heartening symptom really; we would stop it. As for the threat of war, the 1914–18 carnage was still so vivid in the public consciousness that given enough reasoned propaganda the old conspiracy of the capitalist armaments ring should be foiled.

The word totalitarian, even had it been current which it wasn't, would not have applied to Soviet Russia, where it seemed social justice reigned, hand in hand with the maximum advancement of human potential and resources.

The contrary implications of Stalinist policy had not begun to filter through. Indeed it wasn't till after the Kirov assassination in 1934 that the Terror was systematically developed.

There was no unemployment in the Soviet Union, rather the reverse. It was the only country where foreigners of any trade didn't need work permits. And art was respected as a vital organic part of society so that artists were in huge demand.



Shoeshop 1930s ink 8 x 6ins



Self Portrait 1934 lithograph 14 x 12ins

Not so in Britain. A contemporary survey tells us that the great majority of artists was unemployed. Lucky were those that found teaching posts or managed to live hand to mouth on free-lance piecework like book covers and illustrations, not to mention temporary jobs making drawings of jewellery at 30 shillings for a 56-hour week or painting lampshades or colouring cartoon films for a weekly wage of 25 shillings. I had done both the latter, and being way under age received 10 shillings and sixpence. I can tell you that was next to nothing then too. But the alternative was nothing at all.

People painted barber poles, tried to sell vacuum cleaners, or did copytyping (me again) at the rate of threepence per 1000 words, top and 2 carbons ...

At least this state of affairs helped to erode the old internecine snobberies as between easel painting and commercial art.

Getting on with one's work betweenwhiles wasn't easy either; since materials cost money. I recall paintings done with shoe polish on newspaper – good discipline in its way no doubt but poor practice in the long run. That was where the celebrated lithography class which Jim Fitton ran at the Central School was a great stand-by besides serving us as a crypto discussion club: for 10/6 a term you got the use of materials and equipment thrown in. In my case, I gratefully remember, the then principal even waived the fee.

Private patronage, never ample, had dried up with the Depression. State patronage there was none. Commercial artists with 'real' jobs were considered well-off on £3 and £6 a week and were jolly well expected to share their cigarettes with the rest of us and stand us the odd meal. At that, the quality of the work required of them was most often abysmal and thus a terrible grind. But for the great and good Shell Oil company and London Passenger Transport Board, enlightened sponsors who offered a magnificent £100 for a poster and encouraged enterprising design, there prevailed an all-time low, by and large.

A lot of indigent artists lived around the back waters of Soho and especially Bloomsbury with its Georgian architecture in sub-standard slum condition – since razed by bombs and replaced with office blocks, alas. During the war



Camden Town became popular. At one time Peri, Priscilla Thorneycroft, Carel Weight, Cliff Rowe, Alex Koolman, me, and a non-engaged sculptor, one-time winner of the Prix de Rome who modelled for the Royal Mint, occupied a cosy ramshackle enclave called Camden Studios, with one small Anderson shelter planted in the middle of the yard. It's the scene of my little picture of the Blitz. – Hampstead was for the more affluent. – If furniture consisted largely of packing cases, that made it easier to flit when the rent fell too far into arrears.

In James Fitton's words, 'Everyone was to the left then. What else was there?'

Can you imagine the upsurge of energy and will from the news that art could actually help to revolutionise society; that art and the values it embodies are a fundamental part of society; that the thorough integration of art into everyday life must enhance the quality of both and improve the artist's livelihood and status. Clearly artists formed the natural vanguard in the fight for peace, freedom and full employment. The AI among its other functions would become the artists' trade union.

The vested trade unions wouldn't have anything to do with us, though. The Left spectrum had many shades, ranging from the Marxist intellectuals to the plain humanitarian sympathisers. The Labour Party of that time was considerably to the right of centre; it saw red everywhere, out of all proportion to the then quite negligible numbers and influence of the communists.

While certainly the AI had derived much of its impetus and strategy from Marxist inspiration, it maintained the broadest possible platform. It had to, so as to allow the broadest affiliations. Otherwise there was the frankly communist Hogarth Group. The only CP member on the AI committee was Cliff Rowe – and the Party directed him to shave off his



William Treton, carpenter 1930s
gouache 15 x 12ins

minimal beard, because the workers wouldn't like it. That was in England, not in Russia – a sacrifice to the Popular Front. To the same end, the Artists International became the Artists International Association. The revolutionist noun turned into an innocuous adjective.

Actual links with artists' groups abroad were mostly by way of mutual contributions to exhibitions. Except for the concrete help extended to refugees from Nazi Germany and later Spain and Czechoslovakia – but that's in a different category of action.

There was never any question of the AIA as a stylistic movement. True, the idea of Socialist Realism or Proletarian Art, as formulated by the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934, did spark off a notable stimulus. Remember nobody knew then what it was to lead to, in the line of heroic kitsch, nor in the way of wholesale anti-modernism. Logical for us to assume that it had to do with subject matter primarily, with the proviso that as regards treatment, representation should be recognisable by the proletariat.

We didn't in fact make much headway with the proletariat, as witness the failure of the Everyman Prints scheme. Still the innate virtue and wisdom of the working class remained axiomatic. We made much of being workers too and sought to play down any bourgeois antecedents of our own – those that were so burdened. We believed that salvation lay in levelling down and that environment not heredity determined intelligence and aptitudes entirely. Individualists in the way we lived, we condemned individualism as a reactionary heresy. But nobody had the slightest wish to control other people's manner of working. Realism was the chief objective – but realism is a protean term. After all, the

AIA supported the surrealists and didn't turn down Barbara Hepworth or Picasso. The very diversity of works brought together for a common purpose in the AIA's big partisan exhibition was what made them so effective.

I'd say that the only AIA activists who really made the grade under the head of political art were the 3 Jameses (Boswell, Fitton, Holland), Cliff Rowe, and Peri. I was amazed when I first saw *The Story of the AIA Exhibition* in Oxford last year, how much livelier and more original than most people's I now found Peri's work. I'm sorry to say that many of us didn't think much of it at the time. Maybe his slightly difficult personality had something to do with it –? A chastening thought – but then, who can claim absolute judgment? Lest we forget – there are always personality clashes and power struggles in even the most high-minded groups.

Having got this off my chest and made my apologies to Peri's shade, I find this a good moment to pause. I've tried to evoke the feel of those early days, rather than recite a blow-by-blow synopsis. The exhibition does give a pretty comprehensive outline of the story, filled in by Lynda Morris and Robert Radford in their book which is a model of research, analysis and presentation. Read it!

I'm merely concerned with the beginning and the end – the periods of birth and growth and of decline.

You will have gathered that the political clause was erased from the AIA Constitution in 1953. It went as follows: 'To take part in political activity, to organise or collaborate in any meeting or demonstration in sympathy with the aims of the Association where action seems desirable or justifiable.' After this had been expunged, the AIA turned out to be effectively dead, though it wouldn't finally lie down till 1971. With the clause intact, it had lasted longer than any other artists' group I know of.

So what do we make of that?

Once again, Soviet Russia was the key. From being a land of radiant promise, Russia had changed into a repressive menace in the eyes of her former disciples. The fear of being tainted by association was as strong as the fear of Russian aggressiveness itself. Dissociation was the answer. Well and good – but was it necessary to abnegate political



commitment altogether? Talk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Political commitment had been the whole essence of the AIA, its *raison d'être*. There is a quotation, He that saveth his life shall lose it. Cutting loose doesn't have to entail cutting your throat, does it.

To be fair, wisdom is cheap after the event, of course. I wasn't in on any of that, either way. Though I never left the AIA, I'd just faded away, well before 1953. Partly because I had turned to writing, came to live in Edinburgh, and didn't go back to practising art until the 70s. But partly, too, because for me the old sense of urgency, of being in the thick of things, had passed, as with the wider expansion of the AIA it had acquired a sort of Establishment look of its own. It happens ... 'Pity they have to grow up,' as the saying goes.

If in the Exhibition one saw few if any great works, it goes to illustrate the perennial dilemma as between creation and promotion. Time and energy are elastic – but not infinitely so. There comes a point where the artist has to choose which to give most of himself to – the work as such or the

endeavour to build optimal conditions for it. We should perhaps salute those AIA pioneers whose names and works have failed to leave a mark, as willing martyrs to the artist's cause as large. We should not be here, now, ² but for their dedicated effort.

How much of the art of any given age is "great"? Considering the vast increase of populations and their life span, the percentage cannot but diminish sharply as the numbers grow to whom art becomes an accessible occupation. Does that matter?

Since the beginning of recorded art, from Lascaux to Guernica, the majority of great works has sprung from ideological sources and has striven to improve the quality of life – implicitly, for you don't have to spell everything out. I believe the moral of this story is that the totally uncommitted practitioners of art abdicate their right and their duty of social participation and true creativity. At best that's self-castration. It can seriously damage your health.

² Footnote: this talk was given at the Arts Council's Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh.



Domestic Bliss 1930s
pen and gouache 12 x 10ins



Dentist 1930s
poster colour 18 x 10ins