

Reflections on the life of Artist Roy Ralph (1931 – 2005)

Post-War optimism to 21st century innovation



Narcissus 1996 acrylic on board 91.5cm x 122cm

Roy Ralph's highly individual style skilfully combines design with spontaneity and a passion for colour. He approached painting and drawing with an intellectual playfulness and much of his hugely varied subject matter carried a deeper narrative. Some of his work could be described as visionary in contrast to other pieces which are humorous and quirky. Subject matter includes landscapes, figures, social comment, politics, family life and cats.

His diverse body of work cannot easily be categorised according to any single artistic movement. From Realism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art to Post Modernism it is evident that Roy Ralph embraced changes and moved with the times. As both artist and art historian his art continued to be fuelled by inspiration from many sources. Within his range there is a nod towards Baroque with the beauty and ideas of Classicism. Cubism and Surrealism are evident in some works but his ideas were generally explored with freedom, using strong linear design and colour to create his own unmistakable style.

Roy Ralph trained at Epsom School of Art, the Royal College of Art and further studied with the Open University. He worked for the British Museum in the departments of Prints and Drawings and Oriental Antiquities and taught and lectured extensively.

"I continue to create pictures in all mediums and consider that an artist working with a computer today is just as innovative as Rembrandt operating an etching press in the 17th century." Roy Ralph 1999.

"I hope people will look deeper. I hope people will detect the quiet confidence I have about the future of mankind. I admit to a naive optimism." Self-confession Roy Ralph 1975.



Early Self-Portrait 1946 pen on paper 10cm x 13cm

Early Years

Roy was born in West Ewell, Surrey in January 1931. His father, Tom, worked as a milkman although never fully recovered from T.B. having served in India in the Second World War and his mother, Vera (Harden), later became a house keeper after having two sons, Eric and Roy. It was a relatively simple and happy childhood despite the war but one of Roy's memories as a young boy taken from later writing stated; *"Collecting dandelions for the rabbits and waiting for the Nazis Doodlebugs to kill me after the engines cut out."*



*Listening to the Results 1947 watercolour
21cm x 30cm*

Artists note: Listening to the Results - Dad is listening to the football results on a Saturday afternoon, desperately hoping to free himself from proletarian misery. The radio set was rented by the week. That armchair was part of my childhood."



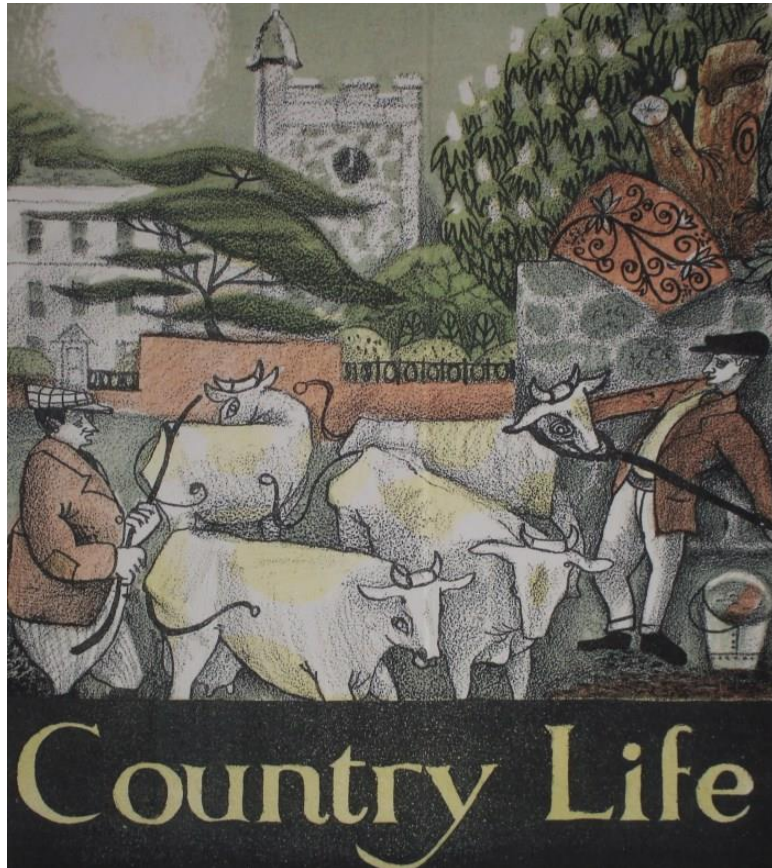
The Telegram 1952 lithograph 27.5cm x 38 1cm

After proving artistic talent from an early age, Roy left mainstream school at the age of 14 to attend Epsom & Ewell School of Arts and Crafts full time (1945 – 1949) where he continued with academic lessons alongside his art training. Here he flourished and showed great promise and subsequently gained a place at the Royal College of Art Painting School by the age of 17 (although this had to be postponed until 1951 due to National Service). He avidly worked in different styles alongside his tutors David Birch at Epsom and John Minton, Ruskin Spear and Carel Weight at the Royal College. There are paintings, prints and many drawings from this period where students were encouraged to be free and experimental within the more traditional training of art school education in the 1940's and 50's.

"To me drawing is all important and I consider myself fortunate to have had teachers who encouraged it." Roy Ralph.



Luke 1952 conte crayon 30cm x 42cm



Country Life 1948 Lithograph 23cm x 29cm



Woodbridge, Suffolk 1948 watercolour 30cm x 21cm



The Lovers (detail) 1947 watercolour 47cm x 27cm

Roy was called for National Service in the Royal Engineers (1949 – 1951) and for most of the time spent in the army he hated it. Besides delaying and cutting short his attendance at the Royal College of Art (1951 – 1952) thinking the army had ruined his career as a young artist with a bright future, he missed home and Sylvia dreadfully. Sylvia Breden (1928 -) was a fellow art student at Epsom who became his wife in 1953. This period is documented in a wonderful sketchbook of that time. Any scraps of paper he could find whilst in the army were utilised fully with tiny drawings and writings, literally counting the days to get back home.

"Military conscription pretty well shattered my art career. It certainly shattered one of my ears. I helped put a Bailey bridge up at Lymington following the awful flood there." Roy Ralph.



Newspaper illustration c.1950s

Family Life

An income had to be made and relying on selling art was far too romantic and unrealistic at this time. Roy worked in a glass blowing factory for a short while followed by a stint of working for the Post Office at Mount Gould in central London. Sylvia was teaching in primary education. Projects together included writing and illustrating children's books, but they had to be shelved after twins, a girl and a boy, (Nicola and Trevor) were born in 1955 when Roy was 24 years old. Two more sons followed in 1958 (Timothy) and in 1964 (Peter). Family life and domesticity increased in subject matter for art work.

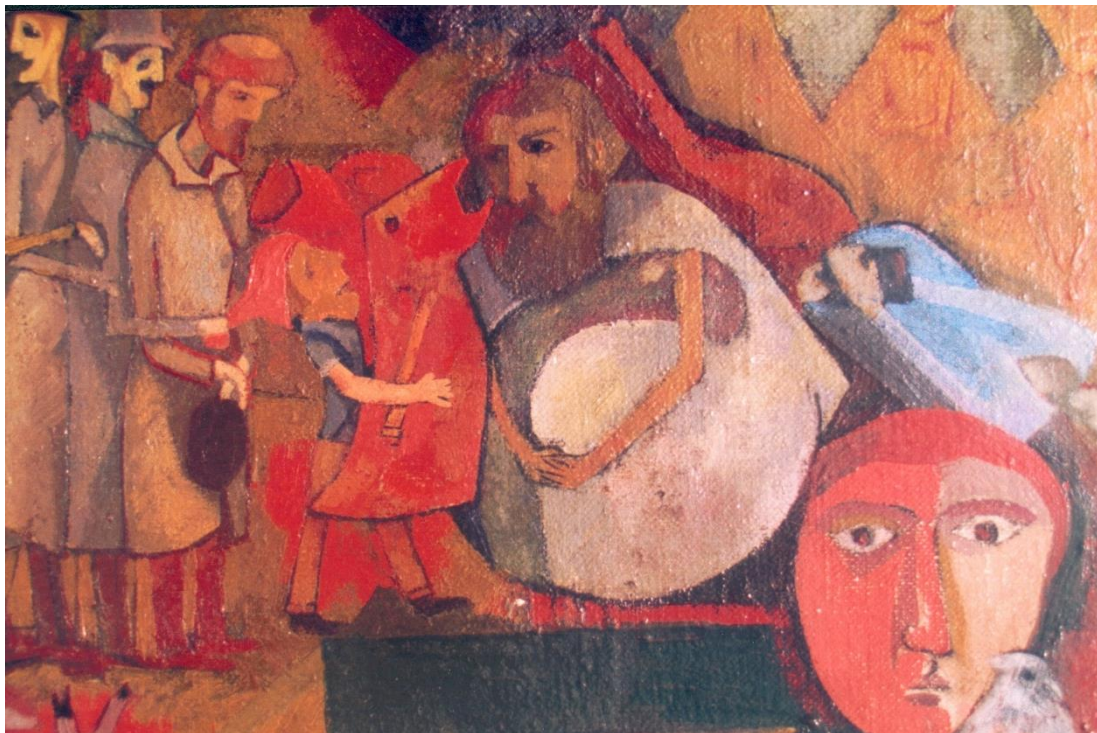


Illustration for newspaper c.1960

Religion, Politics & Philosophy

Religion, politics and social issues are often disguised in Roy's work but portrayed with sensitivity and subtle symbolism as well as a sense of humour.

Along with fellow artists and writers at that time Roy gained a political awareness and developed views on socialism. Hundreds of small pen and ink drawings were published throughout the 1950's, 60's and 70's under various pseudo names in periodicals and newspapers including 'The Daily Worker' which later became 'The Morning Star'. Roy's contribution was a regular feature with cartoons, illustrations and written articles. He also developed 'The Children's Corner'.



Joseph's Coat (detail) 1949 oil on canvas - An allegory upon international diplomacy 32cm x 23cm

Artists Note: "Painted in 1949 as an Art School Project. The idea was to create a picture for the United Nations. Joseph's Coat was meant as a symbol of truth presented by the Nations (the brothers) to the people of the world (Jacob). Reuben, who tried to save Joseph by having him thrown into the pit, looks out with a dove. Corn sheaves from Joseph's dream are represented. The slaughtered goat is in the left-hand corner. The work was a summation of the artistic influences upon me at the time - Picasso, Chagall, Cezanne, Klee, El Greco, Samuel Palmer and William Blake. It was never submitted to the United Nations but it was exhibited for several weeks in London in 1952."



Banner for Peace 1958 oil on linen 182cm x 159cm

Roy had an open-minded outlook and believed in a world of fairness. *"I like the world of art when it is related to human life" / "I don't care for snobbery and the way paintings and objects are treated as investments by people who have more money and a constant fear of poverty and little to no creative sensibility of their own."/ "I like the colour red because it is positive and is the colour of revolt of the under privileged."*

The British Museum, Teaching & Lecturing

Roy started work at the British Museum (1960 – 1986) in the department of Prints and Drawings and later moved across to Oriental Antiquities, further developing his interests in Western and Eastern art. He helped many scholars with research and spent much of his time in The Reading Room. The stimulation of this environment, as well as studying and handling original master prints and drawings and oriental works of art, was especially rewarding for widening his expertise as artist and art historian.



The City of London 1963 auto Lithograph 38cm x 28cm

Artists note: "I have many memories of London and once worked as a postman in the city. I delivered letters to the Stock Exchange. That could be me next to the policeman on the left. (In my lithograph auto means that I did everything myself from grinding stone to the final printing.) I have used a cubist style composition."



Building Centrepont 1962 watercolour 67cm x 51cm

It was here that he created the book 'Japanese Netsuke' depicting netsuke from the museum's collection. This was published posthumously in 2008 of which three illustrations are shown below. (Also, the publication titled 'Turner in the Tamar Valley' 2009 came to fruition resulting from Roy's knowledge.)



Whilst at the British Museum Roy conducted evening classes at the Stanhope and Central Art Education Institute as tutor in Art Appreciation, Drawing and Painting and as tutor in charge at Queens Square, Bloomsbury. He also tutored at various other establishments including the Edward James Foundation, West Dean for several weekend courses. His lectures would be illustrated with slides and film (at this time photographic slides had to be borrowed from The British Library or made up himself) and he would always incorporate music.

"I love Rubens and the first public art talk I gave was entitled 'Rubens, Renoir and Matisse'."

Music was important to Roy. From the age of 15 he would take himself off to opera, ballet, theatre and concerts and this appreciation continued throughout his life. He especially loved orchestral concerts but he had a natural ear for a wide range of musical genres from classical to experimental. Whether it be Beethoven, Mahler, Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Philip Glass, Hendrix, Pink Floyd, Bowie, Ian Drury, Tonto's Expanding Head Band to name but a few. Besides music, he had the ability to connect history, politics and literature in context with the particular artist or movement making him a generous and natural educator.



Space Builders 1968 acrylic on board 150cm x 149cm



Winter Landscape 1967 acrylic on board 125cm x 93cm



Flaming Nun (detail) 1968 acrylic on board 125cm x 185.5cm

Artist's note: Buddhists burnt themselves to draw attention to the war in Vietnam.



Brave little bird 1968 silk screen 33cm x 25.5cm

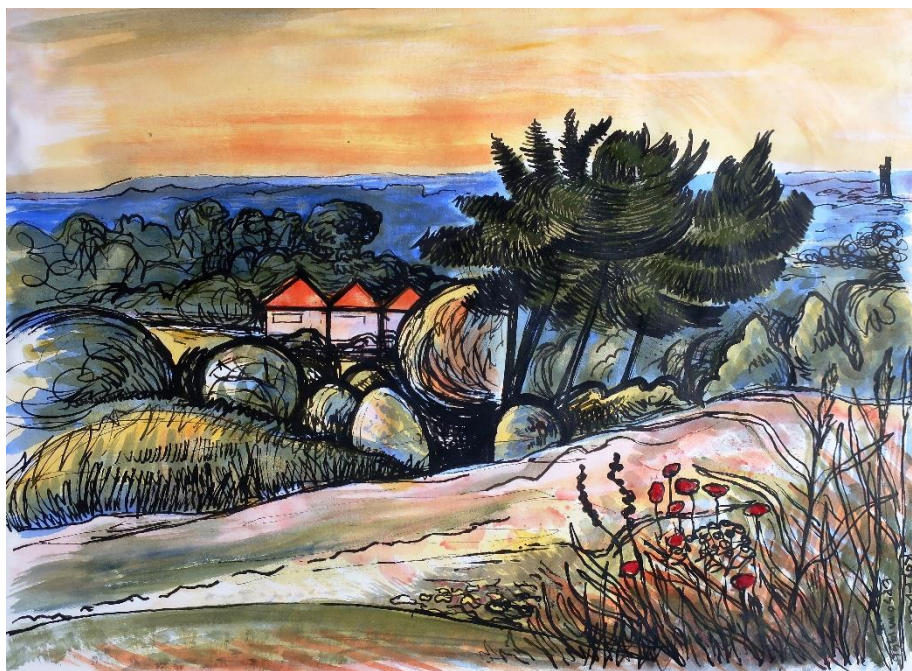


Five Ducks 1998 Acrylic on board 30cm x 20cm

Artist's note: "My concept here is about the way birds fly huge distances to find lands that suit them at different times of the year - distances that cover raging seas. That can have a message for people as well. As individuals it is only by persistence and belief in personal destiny that we get anywhere. Colour wise I am using complimentary colour to achieve pictorial effect. Here it is the variations of green with the one small contrast of red for the bird. This 'complimentarism' is also at work in the duck painting (Five Ducks) but the whole colour orchestra is playing - Rimsky-Korsakov - probably!"



Trevor & Timothy at Epsom Stew Pond 1964 watercolour 75cm x 56cm



Epsom Downs 1966 watercolour 75cm x 56cm

He organised art trips around the U.K. and abroad and arranged staff exhibitions at the British Museum. Despite juggling work and family Roy produced a substantial body of work which included photography, writing, printing, paintings and numerous drawings. In 1986 Roy graduated with a BA Honours degree from the Open University which he somehow managed to fit into an already busy life. It was in this same year that Roy left the Museum after twenty-six years. He and Sylvia sold the family home in Sutton, Surrey for a move to Lydford on the edge of Dartmoor to start a new chapter and with the intention of focussing more time on creating art.

Devon and later years



Riders on the Moor c.1988 watercolour 30cm x 20cm

Roy soon set up an Art & Design business from his home at Sedgeford House and continued to expand his creativity. Inspiration from exploring new surroundings resulted in a series of Devon landscapes and he revisited the theme of cats which included some large acrylic paintings. In 1993 he designed and opened a studio where he conducted art classes and seminars from home as he had done in Surrey. He continued working until the end of his life in October 2005. He believed art is indispensable to society. If his art can play a role in our ever-changing world he will be forever smiling.

Artists note: "The landscape of Dartmoor has much to offer in the way of variety and interest – the geology, the weather and the human history. Lydford Gorge is dark and exciting as the River Lyd gushes through century old fissures in the rocks. What I have aimed to capture is the exhilaration of being within the landscape as well as creating pictures that are personal to me in feeling and technique."



Dartmoor Skies c.1988 watercolour 30cm x 20cm



Solitude c.1991 ink, watercolour on paper 20cm x 28cm



Homage to Matisse c.1980's watercolour 28cm x 20cm



Cats c.1990's computer graphics 17.5cm x 13cm

Artists note: Cats – “Cats have always been part of my life. From childhood and the time when our family cat always knew half an hour before the sirens went that a bombing raid was on the way to more recent days when Ben and Pip slept on the kitchen boiler.”

Artists note: Cat pictures – “They are fantasies mixed with actual events such as the appearance of Hale-Bop, the comet, to the death of Princess Diana. ‘Narcissus’ is one big tease! Is the cat really reflected? Is the bird the same in the sky as in the pond? And is that really sky or is the whole thing just paint? Why has the orange cat turned blue? There is always a sense of mystery about a cat. A dog can be obedient and controlled but a self-respecting cat – never!”

1987 – 2001 Roy served as Newsletter Editor and Chairman for the Devon and Cornwall Open University Graduate Association.

1999 - 2005 he designed and set up his own website aardwark.com. (A new website set up and designed by Zoë Bennett, one of Roy's nine grandchildren, now showcases some of Roy's work.)

<https://royralphartist.com/>



The Mermaid c.2000 acrylic on board 27cm

There have been exhibitions over the years, some work has been sold and paintings have been shown in various galleries and institutions including The British Museum, The Stanhope Institute and The Royal Watercolour Society but most of this timeless collection, spanning six decades, is waiting to be discovered.

This is a brief synopsis of Roy Ralph's life and works. For further information please do not hesitate to contact either myself or Zoë at nicola_bennett@btinternet.com or zoe.bennett@btinternet.com.