



Fred Sinkinson
1922-2009
Teacher and Artist

Fred Sinkinson was for many years President of the New Forest Art Society. This short note outlines his life and times, and tells something of his teaching methods and ideas.

Timeline

Fred was born in Yorkshire, and grew up in Dorset and Somerset. I believe he attended Rugby School. He studied art at the Taunton School of Art and later in Paris and at Bournemouth Teacher Training College. During the Second World War he was a Conscientious Objector and like many others was imprisoned. Fred volunteered for non-combatant service in bomb disposal and served out the war in that capacity. He subsequently taught for many years at La Sainte Union¹ in Southampton where he became Head of the Art Faculty. He retired from there at the age of 65.

Fred's later years were involved with 'The Centre Group' which he established at Lyndhurst Community Centre. This enabled him to pass on his skills mainly in painting and life-classes. The Centre Group has an annual exhibition at the Community Centre in which Fred always participated. He continued working with the Group until this last summer. He became President of the New Forest Art Society around 1989 and remained President until his death.

Fred was a fine golfer and won trophies in his time, as well as coaching golf. He once said that he had considered taking up golf as a professional but art won out.

Fred died on October 11th 2009 after a short illness. He is buried at St Eustace Parish Church, Ibberton (near Blandford Forum) where, 51 years earlier, he married his beloved wife Hazel. They had four children.

Fred's work is to be found in many private collections locally. The Southampton City Art Gallery holds one work, recently acquired, a gift from his friend Peter Morice of "Downs by the Sea", circa 1960, oil on hardboard, 564 x 814 mm.

Fred as a Person

He has been described as a man of the countryside - keen on understanding nature and how it worked - in particular the Dorset landscape. He also loved the Lake District and spent considerable time there painting. 'He was always keen to get under the skin of what we saw in front of us'. Fred was also described as a

¹ La Sainte Union College of Higher Education was a teacher training college owned and run by the La Sainte Union des Sacres Coeurs order of nuns. It collapsed in 1997 in controversial circumstances and became a campus of the University of Southampton, specialising in adult and continuing education programmes. The campus was sold off in 2006.

sceptical, questioning man. He had his own priorities. He once preferred to watch 'Monsieur Hulot's Holiday' (a mime film from the early 50s) to eating his Christmas dinner. He knew where to look for snakes, he cultivated mistletoe in the garden, and loved Pink Floyd. He raised (at one time or another) goats, pigs, chickens, and dogs.

Fred's Teaching Methods and Ideas

Fred told his students about when he was a conscientious objector and met one of the St Ives artists and he became quite involved with the St Ives scene and seeing the land- and sea-scape in quite an abstract way. He talked of seeing everything in an abstract way in fact but had to turn this off whilst driving for safety reasons. He remarked that he was eventually banned from household painting and varnishing jobs since he would enjoy the mark making too much and not make the desired even finish that was expected and leave areas of ground showing through....

All his students have said how individual his teaching was, giving them a feeling that they were the only student at times. He never directly criticised but tried to bring the student around to a different way of looking at things. 'Try this and try that' was the way one student described it. Fred's described his approach as follows: "let the paint do the work by moving it around until something happens that feels good". He therefore never aimed to achieve a pre-determined end result. He used to advise students to try cropping their paintings and if they found something exciting in there, it could be the basis for something new. Not everyone was comfortable with his emphasis on keeping to a theme rather than to the detail, and some only lasted a term or two, but he acquired a loyal group of students who tried to absorb his ideas. He once said that if he could have his students for two years, all day every day, he would make artists out of them.

He famously went to Norway and came back and developed a series of pictures without the benefit of any photos (which he disliked as motifs for painting) or sketches. The pictures however gave a real feeling of recollection of the scenes he found there, perhaps following Wordsworth's dictum, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity"?

When he did draw, it was with an emphasis on tone rather than line. He did give, and later participated in, life drawing sessions, always keen to find the 'triangles' of the form

Several students have remarked on his mid-class critiques, looking at the work in progress and often drawing from the masters – a great deal of art history was communicated that way. Says one student: 'during the tea break we would put all the drawings or paintings together and discuss them after the break on the theme that he was focussing on that day. This was an enormously helpful method of teaching which I've never come across since. We might focus on layers, or a limited palette or starting a painting using only blue'. This idea of a theme was typically followed for a term, and might be 'skies', or 'colour' for example and he often spoke of how the masters would have treated the motif. The particular theme of 'skies' was in fact followed by 'foregrounds', and the students struggled to make their foregrounds as loose and as free as their skies.

'That's a good start' was another of his dictums. He would never say 'that's finished', there was always something else to be discovered. Although once in a while he would say 'leave that alone', or simply 'just leave a mark there'.

Many members of the New Forest Art Society will recall how he recently set the 'Fred Sinkinson Challenge' where members were asked to paint a work *'in the style of'* a well-known masterpiece. Fred then delivered a fascinating critique taking as his basic theme what the master himself/herself would have thought. This led to many insights which we wouldn't have come to the traditional way, through the discussion of composition, colour, etc.

One of his students has written: 'He was a great man and an artist and teacher. He passed so much on and will be sorely missed!'. A good epitaph which I think he would have liked.

Declan Good

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