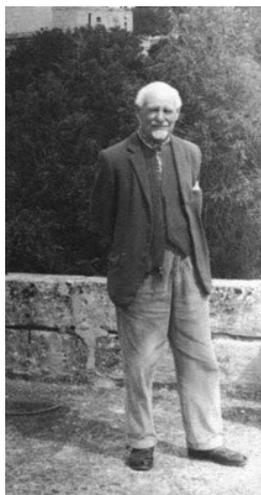


Malta and Gozo

In my Grandfather's footsteps



This year sees the 125th anniversary of the birth of the cartoonist H.M. Bateman. Arguably the most influential and widely published comic draughtsman of the early 20th century he was always just grandpa to me.

When he reached the age of forty, at the height of his fame, he decided to retire from cartooning and fulfil his lifelong ambition to become 'a real artist', as he'd hankered to be since his early art school training. He took his painting equipment out into the English countryside and began to travel abroad in search of inspiring subject matter. A genius in his own field of cartoons he struggled modestly for the rest of his life to master the art of colour and light.

When I was asked to take my most recent a painting group abroad for The Artist, I chose as our destination Malta and Gozo. I had a personal motive for this: my grandfather had spent the last five years of his life living and painting on Gozo and I had recently come across a number of his paintings and drawings of the island as it was in the late 1960s. They were unsigned, un-dated and gave no hint of location. Many were on the backs of envelopes or wall-paper, even magazine pages, sometimes primed to take the oil paint, often not. I planned to discover the specific places he had painted and to see how they looked now. Never having been there before, it involved considerable detective work but the island was a delight and the group found a wealth of subject matter to paint.

Painting in all weathers

During his last years there, having turned eighty, my grandfather wrote at least four articles for The Artist (I had no idea about this until recently and, having been writing articles for the magazine myself for 20 years, was amazed at the coincidence). One of his pieces discussed the hazards of painting out of doors. How many of us would recognise these sentiments:

"...I rank the wind as Enemy Number 1. The rain usually comes most readily to mind but I think of it as a more honest, gentlemanly opponent than the wind. When it rains you either don't go out at all or you just have to pack up and go home. The wind is more cunning. You fancy maybe with a bit of ingenuity you can get into a sheltered corner, only to find the outlook is useless. You grit your teeth and may try defiance, sticking it out in discomfort I wonder how many times my easel has been blown down and materials scattered... as I have known when trying to work close to the sea."

This could have applied to many of our painting days on Gozo. It was May and we had to cope with rain, high winds and then hot, bright sunshine. One day, the rain having truly set in, a Maltese friend invited the entire group to take shelter in her house. 'Dora's Loggia' was painted from under her arches as the rain drizzled into the

courtyard beyond. By later increasing the tone of the shadows cast by the columns I have managed to achieve a semblance of sunshine.

With watercolour, drying times are affected by rain or sun and adjustments need to be made. If it's damp you can wait ages for washes to dry, so you may have to leave spaces between adjacent areas so they don't run, whereas when it's hot and dry you need to increase the amount of water you add to your paint so it doesn't get sucked straight into the dry paper and create unwanted hard edges. When I was painting *'Kunsil Lokale, Mdina'* it was as important for me to shelter from the sun as it was to previously shelter from the rain. So finding a good subject that is both inspiring and that can be seen from a sheltered position is a constant challenge.

Shadows

Once set up you need to work quickly to establish the essentials before the light changes. The placing of shadows is as important as the solid elements of the composition. *'San Anton'* is a painting largely about light and shade and I had to put in the dappled shadows on the path and the building early on so that when the sun wheeled round, I would have captured them where they had fallen when I was first attracted to the subject. Again my grandfather's words ring true:

"... the biggest problem of all is the constant change of aspect. There is nothing more beautiful than the variety of effects in their different seasons, but they are so very fleeting. To record them with any certainty we need to strike with the rapidity of a snake. But if you want to work for several days running on the same subject you may consider yourself lucky if you get two consecutive days alike"

My own way of dealing with these problems when I'm abroad is to work on the spot for as long as I can and, once the sun changes completely or the rain sets in, I pack up. Sometimes I return in the next few days but often I encounter the problems my grandfather mentions. Eventually I accumulate a bundle of not-quite-resolved pictures to work on once I get home. I usually finish the picture from memory, or, failing that, I can refer to the photos that I have taken as a back up.

Squaring up

Falling back on photographs wasn't the way for my grandfather. He drew continuously and usually made preparatory pencil sketches before starting a painting. He often squared up the drawings he had made on the spot to translate into paintings back in the small hotel room where he lived. He often made colour notes on the sketches but also must have had a vivid visual memory. His pencil drawing of *'Mgarr Fishing Boats'* was the exact basis for a slightly larger, unfinished oil painting I found (the titles are mine). The squares are clearly visible through the under-painting, which is as far as he got with it. As there is no evidence of squaring on the drawing I imagine he would have overlaid it with a piece of tracing paper marked with a grid of the same number of squares in order to copy each square accurately onto his painting paper.

I am convinced, however, that the more successful of his paintings were executed on the spot as in *'Across the Harbour'*. They have a speed and spontaneity that I

recognise. I usually paint my watercolours on the spot, as I did with all those illustrated here, without any preliminary drawing. That way of working gives rise to a slightly precarious spontaneity which can be lost in translation from drawing (or photograph) to painting. I find, if I need to use a photo or sketch as the basis for a painting, the best way to keep it fresh is to square it up, just as my grandfather did, and then dive in with the watercolour just as I would if I were on the spot, making small marks in paint to plot the composition before gradually building up the image.

My grandfather's out-put in his final years was as prodigious as always and his dedication to learning his craft was relentless. Not long before he died he wrote in *The Artist* "*If you are a confirmed sketcher, as I am, you will have learned that it is always better to travel hopefully than to arrive. I shall be out again tomorrow!*"

In early 1970, aged 82, he died on Gozo whilst out for his daily walk. My mother found, when sorting through his clothes later, a small pencil in every jacket, sharpened and ready for use.

Lucy Willis's paintings from Malta, Gozo and Syria will be exhibited at the Curwen & New Academy Gallery, 34 Windmill St, London W1T 2JR

Tel: 020 73234700 Email: gallery@curwengallery.com

May 10th - June 1st 2012

www.curwengallery.com

www.lucywillis.com

H M Bateman: *The Man Who Went Mad on Paper* is at the Cartoon Museum, 35 Little Russell St, London WC1A 2HH

Tel: 020 7580 8155 Email: thecartoonmuseum@btconnect.com

April 11th – July 22nd 2012

www.thecartoonmuseum.org.uk

www.hmbateman.com

Henry Mayo Bateman: *The Malta Years*. Paintings from Malta and Gozo will be exhibited at Abbott and Holder, 30 Museum St, London WC1A 1LH

Tel: 020 7631 0575 Email: gallery@abbottandholder.co.uk

May 11th - May 31st 2012

www.abbottandholder.co.uk