

Chapter 2

In the England of the early 1920s the Slade School enjoyed the highest reputation of the art schools, being famous for the teaching of Henry Tonks and Wilson Steer. Few people in the London art world could have told you anything about the Royal College of Art, or even where it was.

It had been the idea of the Prince Consort that a new Museum of Science and Art should be built in South Kensington, and contain collections from three sources: from the Great Exhibition of 1851; the Museum of Manufactures, established by the Department of Science and Art in 1852, and from the Government School of Design. The new museum was opened in 1857, but the collections grew, and new ones were donated, so that by 1891 additional building was necessary. The foundation stone of this new extension was laid by Queen Victoria in 1899, who directed that its name should be the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was opened by Edward VII in 1909, the scientific part of the collection having been taken off to form the new Science Museum.

The Government School of Design was still in its first home in the original part of the building, but was now called the Royal College of Art. Its chief function was to produce teachers for the provincial art schools, as well as designers for industry. In 1910 a government committee had been set up to inquire into the scope of the Royal College of Art, but nothing seems to have come of it until after the First World War. In 1919 the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, appointed a new president of the Board of Education, H. A. L. Fisher, who decided that, as the chief Government School of Art, the prestige of the Royal College must be raised, and that a change of policy was desirable. He asked William Rothenstein to be the new principal and to undertake this mission.

Herbert Fisher had first met Rothenstein in Paris in the 1890s, where the young history don from New College was attending lectures at the Sorbonne and the artist – then seventeen and fresh from the Slade School – was studying at Julian's Academy. Rothenstein blossomed in the artistic milieu, with the encouragement of many painters, poets and writers – Degas, Whistler, Camille Pissarro, Conder, Bonnard, Vuillard, Max Beer-bohm, Verlaine and Mallarmé – of most of whom he drew portraits. Fisher became Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University in 1917 and invited Rothenstein to give a series of annual lectures. He clearly recognized Rothenstein's qualities not only as a painter, but also as a witty speaker with a talent for expressing his ideas.

Rothenstein's acceptance of the new appointment to the Royal College raised a storm of protest in the National Society of Art Masters. Here was a plum job being given to an unqualified teacher and a painter with no experience of the crafts: no wonder they were furious. But they had to accept it, and by the autumn of 1922 Rothenstein had already begun to make the changes he felt to be necessary. It was an interesting moment



The Royal College of Art. Above, left Diploma Day, 1923. From left to right Miss Potts of the Engraving School, Professors William Rothenstein, Robert Anning Bell and Frank Short. Above right In the Common Room – Cecilia Dunbar Kilburn, Eric Ravilious, Anthony Betts.

for the eighteen-year-old Ravilious to be starting his career as a student.

Although on that first morning all the new students had been told to which of the four Schools they would belong, they found that for their first term they were all to work in the School of Architecture for an introductory course under Professor Beresford Pite. That was to be for four days a week, from half-past nine in the morning to half-past three in the afternoon, and then drawing classes from four to six in the evening. There were drawing classes on Wednesday mornings, too, but the afternoon was free, with opportunities for playing hockey, football or cricket for those students who wanted to do so. Ravilious was one of these, but not his new friend Bawden.

The life-drawing classes were primarily for painting and sculpture students. Design students might be started on plant drawing; some would be promoted to draw plaster casts from the antique, and finally allowed to draw from a model. Ravilious had already done much more life-drawing than most of the design students, and was admitted to the life-classes from the beginning. In fact when, later on, some students' life-drawings, of varying styles, were chosen by staff to be pinned up on a wall to inspire the rest of us, I remember noticing a sensitive, rather tentative pencil drawing, signed with the name Ravilious.

There were four or five teachers with rather confusingly different advice about drawing to give the new students. In the women's life-class, for instance, we would have started drawings when the door would open and in would come the principal – a short, slight figure, wearing very emphatic horn-rimmed glasses. Those students who had taken his advice to buy plumb lines for themselves now held them out, and tried to use them to test the perpendiculars in their drawings. Rothenstein's ideal was the pencil drawing of Ingres. He would go round the class, criticizing, advising, and perhaps sharpening the blunt pencil a student was trying to draw with, and then would go out. A little later, the door would open again; heads would turn to see who it was this time. A larger, clumsier man would stand waiting in the doorway; a thick dark fringe of hair covered the top of his face, while the lower part was obscured by his hand, the fingernails of which he was biting. The weaker students felt a little shiver of fear. It was Leon Underwood, the exponent of 'Form', of cylinder and section; drawings would darken, line was out, shading was all important.

Underwood, one of Rothenstein's new appointments, was a great source of inspiration to some of the painting and sculpture students, and ran special classes at his own home later in the evenings, for a chosen

group of students which at this time included Henry Moore, Raymond Coxon, Barbara Hepworth and Enid Marx.

The College's Common Room was a remarkable institution, financed and run entirely and very efficiently by student committees. The food was simple but quite good, and in London art-student circles reputedly the cheapest, yet there were sometimes profits from it to help finance the students' magazine. Committee members took it in turn to help hand out the food from a counter, and then would find their way to one of the small tables arranged up one half of the long room. There was one larger table which was known as the 'Leeds table' because the students who sat there, who seemed more lively and confident, were mostly from the Leeds School of Art. Most of the men had been in the First World War, and so were a little older than the other students, and they were determined to make the most of their time.

And then the girls wore such charming clothes. In the early 1920s there was only one fashionable colour – it was called 'beige' and was a pinkish café-au-lait. Ordinary girls wore skimpy straight and knee-length dresses of this universal colour, with very low waists, and front and back as flat as possible. Hair was cut very short, under cloche hats pulled right down over it. But the more dashing art-students would have none of this; they chose beautiful strong colours – scarlet, lemon, magenta, black – and in the little Common-Room sewing-room they made themselves long full skirts and bodices which emphasized their waists and their feminine curves. A wide-brimmed black felt hat might be worn with a dark cloak, and with sandals if possible.

Everyone was hard up, and a few painfully so; Ravilious might have been one of these, if his mother had not helped him by sending him a little money when she could. Common Room life had an important place in college education. Most students lived in lodgings, cheap bed-sitting rooms in Fulham or Earl's Court. Ravilious found himself a bed-sitting room of 'comical disagreeableness', but was soon able to move to other lodgings nearer to Edward Bawden and another student called Douglas Percy Bliss, whom Bawden had got to know in the Architecture School. These three found each other's company immensely stimulating – Bliss, already a graduate of Edinburgh University, with a degree in English, was a student in the Painting School. His literary explorations and discoveries were now shared with his two friends, and the three of them talked about books all the time.

This is how Bliss described 'Rav', as his friends at college called him:

He was a delightful companion, cheerful, good-natured, intelligent and prepossessing in appearance. He was not robust physically, nor was he delicate. He could play a good game of tennis, but had no surplus energy. He tired easily and suffered often from what he called 'a thick head' – I never saw him depressed. Even when he fell in love – and that was frequent – he was never submerged by disappointment. Cheerfulness kept creeping in. . . .

Some students at the R.C.A. worked far too hard. They never found time to relax. But E.R. spent hours in the Students' Common Room with the prettier kind of girl and never missed a dance. But he was not idle. He was educating himself, finding in the indigestible superabundance of the great city's art the particular nourishment he needed. He was fastidious and assimilative, culling his fruits from any bough, trying

out conventions from Gothic tapestries, Elizabethan painted-cloths, the wood-cuts of Incunabula, or Persian miniatures. He had exquisite taste and sifted with the skill of an anthologist the rare things that could help him in his work. In the great dish of Art confronting us in South Kensington, like Mrs Todgers, he 'dodged about among the tender pieces with a fork'. Ravilious went his own way, rather like a sleep-walker, but with a sure step and an unswerving instinct for style.

And he was usually whistling in that special way he had, which his friends remember so well, and have described as 'better than a nightingale'. Cecilia Dunbar Kilburn has written of 'that enchanting way he had of whistling; it sounded as though he whistled in thirds, but perhaps it was such a rapid trill it seemed like two notes at the same time.'

Edward Bawden was certainly one of the students described by Bliss as working far too hard. Except with his intimate friends he was shy and unsociable. As Bliss wrote about him once, 'girls scared him and he hated all hale and hearty fellows. He stood a little outside life. He saw it like a foreigner at a cricket-match, marvelling at its madness.'

Bawden and Ravilious were drawn together by their special sense of humour. Bawden's was the more sardonic, but they both had a wonderfully keen eye for any oddity or absurdity in their surroundings. Bawden was much less easy-going than the other two, and could infuriate as well as delight them, but they were inseparable companions, except in official classes, when Bliss would be working in the painting studios, Bawden and Ravilious in the design room.

After the first term of architecture, the new design students were able to settle down to work at their chosen subjects. Bawden and Ravilious chose two places next to each other in the front right-hand corner of the design room, where they could be undisturbed by the sight of their fellow students. The professor of design was Robert Anning Bell, but it was his last year. His students did not see much of him, but he was encouraging to the two friends, and took them to hear Arthur Rackham talking to the Art-Workers Guild about book illustration, and to a Royal Academy Club dinner.

E. W. Tristram, who was Anning Bell's assistant, and succeeded him as professor the following year, was more accessible. He looked rather like a figure in one of the medieval wall paintings on which he was an authority: very thin and stiff and straight, with a narrow bony face and an unchanging expression. He talked very little, but he was helpful, and prodded the students in some of the right directions: this freedom suited Bawden and Ravilious well.

One of Rothenstein's first moves at the college was to persuade the Board of Education to allow him to employ part-time artists as well as full-time teachers. The most imaginative of these appointments was that of Paul Nash to teach once a week in the Design School.

Some years earlier, before the war, Rothenstein had been asked to give a criticism of the students' compositions at Bolt Court (now the London School of Printing) and had singled out one drawing as having exceptional promise; it was by the young Paul Nash, and since that time Rothenstein had kept in touch with him. Of course by the time he was invited to the college, Nash had made his reputation with his very impressive war paintings, and with several one-man exhibitions.

Ravilious and Bawden had both worked in watercolours before they

went to the college, but in London, in the Victoria and Albert Museum Print Room and in other galleries, they were able to see paintings by the artists they particularly admired – William Alexander, J. R. Cozens, Thomas Girtin, J. S. Cotman, and particularly Francis Towne and Samuel Palmer, whose work was almost unknown at the time. So excited were they by an exhibition of Palmers that the two students, together with Bliss, made a pilgrimage to Shoreham where Samuel Palmer had worked.

Ravilious and Bawden had been captivated by the 'breath-taking freshness' of the latest London shows of watercolour paintings by Paul Nash and his brother, John, so their new tutor's appearance one morning in the design room was an important event. Paul Nash was tallish, with a hint of plumpness, and had very thick shining black hair, smoothly brushed back from his brown-skinned face, with blue eyes, curving nose and red lips. He wore a bow tie and a dark suit and looked almost too smart for an artist. He would wander down the long room, looking carefully at what the students had to show him; he was witty and jokey and often encouraging, or he might say 'this is just what we want to get away from'. He was particularly helpful with watercolours, demonstrating ways of using the medium, trying out colours with a starved as well as a full brush, or washing one transparent colour over a ground of another.

Paul Nash had been making some beautiful wood engravings at this time, and was interested in Ravilious's first experiments in this craft, helping him later with introductions to publishers. Nash was experimenting in various other directions; for instance, he had designed the sets and costumes for a curious half play, half ballet written by Sir James Barrie for the dancer Karsavina, and performed at the Coliseum. In those days the Diaghilev Ballet Company used to come for a season to the Coliseum, giving a different ballet at each performance, as one of the turns in a regular music hall programme. Ravilious was not himself a fan of the Russian ballet. His enthusiasm at that time was for a revival of Nigel Playfair's 1920 production of *The Beggar's Opera* at the Lyric



Model for Claud Lovat Fraser's set for Peachum's House, Act I, *The Beggar's Opera* 1921. Theatre Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum

Theatre, Hammersmith. The designer was Claud Lovat Fraser, whose use of brilliant primary colours had shocked and delighted London audiences. The music was lovely, and Ravilious sang or whistled the old tunes happily and endlessly.

Paul Nash had made friends with Lovat Fraser not long before his sudden death in 1921. As well as sharing a lively interest in theatre design, the two artists had new ideas about decorations for the printed page. They had each, for instance, made designs for Harold Munro's *Broadsheets*, published from the Poetry Bookshop in Bloomsbury – Lovat Fraser had decorated four rhyme sheets and three songs from *The Beggar's Opera*, Paul Nash a poem by Ezra Pound, John Nash one by Walt Whitman. Bawden, Bliss and Ravilious were enchanted with the *Broadsheets* when they first came across them in the Victoria and Albert Museum Library, and Bawden bought some to pin round his room.

At this time Ravilious was as much interested in mural painting as in book illustration. Edward Bawden had this to say of him during this period at the college:

To take Dip – the R.C.A. Diploma – needed three years but Eric had to take it in two as the grant from Eastbourne was insufficient for the full course. He picked on mural decoration as his examination subject. As then taught, mural dec, as it was affectionately called, meant the preparation of gesso panels, using egg tempera, grinding earth colour, and playing about with gold leaf, all simple enough to do but made more tricky if one followed Cennino Cennini's ancient recipes; but to follow them, though it was counted a sign of merit, seldom proved to be a surefire guide to success – Eric, who was off-hand and casual, ignored Cennini, he failed to slake whiting or grind gritty colour or touch an egg. Yet the Boy, as we called him, came out a winner – when the dip screens were removed it was seen that he had used bought gesso powder and ordinary colour, moreover he had slapped up a big gay painting that really had some pretensions to being a mural. The Boy passed dip with distinction and was awarded the Design School Travelling Scholarship.

Travelling scholars invariably went to Italy; when Henry Moore won the Sculpture School scholarship that same year, he asked the new registrar, Hubert Wellington, if instead of going to Italy, he could go to Berlin or Paris to study Egyptian sculpture, in which he was much more interested than in Renaissance sculpture. But this was impossible, he was told, as the money was kept waiting for the scholars in Florence, Rome or Venice and had to be claimed there. So to Florence he went, and managed to find some of the sustenance he wanted from Giotto, Masaccio, Michelangelo, and some primitive carvings, and to stay two or three weeks in Paris on the way back. But though excited by what he had seen, he said he felt that he had aesthetic indigestion when he got home, and considered that it took him four months to recover his own direction.

Ravilious seems to have felt baffled and unsure of himself on this his first visit abroad, and unwilling to make the regulation copies of Italian paintings expected of travelling scholars. He stayed most of the time in Florence – with brief visits to San Gimignano, Siena, and Volterra – and enjoyed most of all going for long walks by himself along the banks of the Arno, miles into the countryside. Three little wood engravings were sent home as evidence of what he had seen there. Like Moore, he found

that the superabundance of art all round him stifled the wish to do his own work, though later when he was back in England, and had left the college, he made admirable use of what he had learnt in Italy.

There were other students from the college in Florence at the same time, as well as Henry Moore: Norman Dawson from the Painting School and Edna Ginesi and Robert Lyon, who had just won the Prix de Rome. (Thus was one of Rothenstein's ambitions for the college achieved, the Prix de Rome competition being open to students from all the art schools). On the strength of his prize, Bob Lyon had just married (not officially allowed at that time) and he and his charming wife, Mabel, had taken half a flat in Florence, to which the other college students often went in the evenings, to meet and exchange news of their day's activities; or they might go to a nearby restaurant after the regular meal, which they could not afford, to have coffee and fruit and to dance to the music of violins. On Sundays the Lyons sometimes took Ravilious for a picnic, exploring the countryside around Florence. They stopped once at an inn, where the proprietor asked them about themselves, and became flatteringly attentive when told about the Prix de Rome. They felt privileged to be in a country where art was held in such respect. But this proved to be an illusion; the inn-keeper thought it was the Rome bicycle race that Lyon had won.

Italy at this time was in a state of political unrest. The signs were ominous; that summer the poet Matteotti had been killed by Fascists outside the British School in Rome, and his body thrown into the Tiber at the Porta del Popolo. In Florence, the Lyons would occasionally hear shots in the street, and their landlady would rush up to their room, crying, 'Keep away from the window.' Mabel Lyon remembers standing one day with Ravilious at the bridge of Santa Trinita, while a large detachment of Mussolini's Blackshirts tramped endlessly across the bridge. The people in the road watched in silence; there was a chill of fear in the air. Mabel felt this, but perhaps not Ravilious. He was not at all interested in politics.

Robert and Mabel Lyon stayed in Italy, soon going on to Rome, but all the others came home, laden with Alinari photographs of works of art. Henry Moore told his friends the Coxons, of the Painting School,



Travelling Scholars from the R.C.A. in Florence: Robert Lyon, Eric Ravilious, Henry Moore; seated in front Mrs Robert Lyon and Norman Dawson.

that he had got to know a design student called Ravilious, whose company he had much enjoyed; this was a surprising statement, for the painting and sculpture students felt themselves to be pursuing aims so much more serious and elevated than those of the design students that there was little contact between them at college.

Another student, Vivian Pitchforth, remembers that his first knowledge and appreciation of Rav's work started with the Students Sketch Club Exhibition, always held after the summer holidays. In his view, 'these shows always separated the sheep from the goats'. He took the quality and number of exhibits from each student as evidence as to which of them promised to be good artists of the future. At one of these exhibitions he had specially noticed the 'Bawden-Rav watercolours'; other students whose work he had found promising were Barnett Freedman, Enid Marx and Albert Houthuesen. These three were all painting students, but in a few years' time, Barnett Freedman in lithography, and Enid Marx in textiles, had in fact made names for themselves as designers.

One of Rothenstein's important contributions to the college was the sharing with his students of his friendships with many of the most gifted men of his generation. He would often bring his distinguished sitters over to the Common Room to meet the students. Vivian Pitchforth remembers the visit of Rabindranath Tagore, 'tall and stately in his Indian robes, with a long white beard and high-pitched voice and the Indian students kissing his feet'; Lawrence of Arabia 'very quiet', and G. K. Chesterton, 'rather grubby in a large black hat and cape'.

There would also be evenings at the Rothenstein's house in Airlie Gardens, to which groups of students would be invited; there, as mentioned in his book *Men and Memories*, they might have met Gordon Craig or James Stephens, Ralph Hodgson or Arnold Bennett. Once Ravilious was excited to find himself in the presence of Max Beerbohm whose drawings he particularly liked, but Max was carried off by Lady Cunard before there was a possibility of speaking to him – even if the Boy could have overcome his shyness enough to do so. However, except for those he saw much of – and they were the most gifted and the most intelligent – the students on the whole did not appreciate Rothenstein. They felt he represented something alien and antiquated, and some were dull enough to mock at his allusions to what he had heard Degas saying thirty years before. In his own student days Rothenstein had written 'the very young are suspicious of artists who frequent fashionable circles'. Many of his own students now felt exactly the same way about him.

When Ravilious got back to England and the college, he found himself caught up in the new enthusiasm for wood engraving, which Bliss also shared. Some of their earliest experiments had been printed in the R.C.A. students' magazine, of which Bliss took on the editorship in his second year. He was cautious to begin with, using the same handsome but staid design for the cover as had his predecessors, but for the third number of June 1925 and with the help of his two friends, he decided to break new ground. This new spirit was proclaimed by the magazine's new name of *Gallimaufry*, drawn on a bold new cover designed by Ravilious. Inside there were also two wood engravings by him; one of them, the frontispiece, was larger than any he had done before, and more varied in technique. In fact he was just beginning to find his own style.

In his editorial, Bliss commends the magazine to its readers, writing, 'We have tried to give you something cheerier, with clearer type, more

Eric Ravilious's cover
design for *Gallimaufry*
June 1925.



stimulating designs and a touch of colour, hand-applied by the Committee for love of you all.'

The *Gallimaufry* had some success; the Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, Campbell Dodgson, bought several copies, exhibiting two in the print room, and giving one to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Francis Meynell, who had recently founded the Nonesuch Press, was interested in the method of adding colour, and persuaded Bliss to help him with the hand colouring of one of the Nonesuch books. Even while they were still at college, the three students had been getting some professional work, especially Bawden. But it was Bliss who was the first to have a book published, in his third year at college. This was *Border Ballads*, a selection made by him, and illustrated with wood engravings.

But college days were coming to an end – Bawden was awarded that year's Travelling Scholarship in Design, and in London, Ravilious and Bliss moved from their bed-sitters to share a more spacious studio in Redcliffe Road. Before them, it had housed first Bob Lyon and then Ted Halliday, fellow students from the Painting School who had each in turn won the Prix de Rome and left for Italy.

There were a number of college friends living in studios on the same side of Redcliffe Road, and when Bawden got back from his travels, he found a nearby studio for himself, and the three friends continued to see much of each other.