

Foreword

Sir John Rothenstein

This book will surely afford widespread pleasure: Eric Ravilious remains one of the most ardently admired members of a generation marked by outstanding talent, and Helen Binyon, a fellow-student and intimate friend until the end of his life, was by far the best qualified person to write it. Regrettably she died before its publication.

Within an hour of his arrival at the Royal College of Art – to which he had been awarded a scholarship by the Eastbourne School of Art – Ravilious met Helen Binyon and Edward Bawden, also new arrivals. Within that hour or so his friendship with them both was firmly established. Both he and Bawden were assigned to the Design School to take their diplomas in book illustration; their friendship became ever closer. The art evolved by each of them was highly original, yet it had enough in common to enable them when occasion arose to work in close concert.

At the Royal College Ravilious was soon accorded a place among fellow-students of exceptional talent, including Henry Moore, Bawden, Albert Houthuesen, John Piper and Percy Horton. Ravilious's accomplished versatility delighted my father, then principal at the College, who also particularly liked him. I well remember his expressing his admiration for Ravilious, and this at a time when the college was attended by so considerable a number of students of conspicuous ability.

Owing to my parents keeping 'open house' on Sunday evenings during term for the students I had the privilege of coming to know a number of them, including Ravilious, Rav or the Boy as fellow-students called him, considering that the name Eric did not suit him. Friendly we immediately became but owing to the wholly different circumstances of our lives we rarely met. When we did, however, he was warm and candid, discussing works of art he had seen on his frequent visits to the Victoria and Albert Museum, certain departments of which he might already have been serving as a professional guide, such was the range of his knowledge. He discussed much else, including people whom he knew. Among these there must have been some whom he neither liked nor approved of, for his own standards of conduct were scrupulous, yet I cannot recall his uttering a critical word about anyone. His attention was focussed rather on friends and acquaintances whose work he admired, whose company he enjoyed. Later on I became aware of a similarity in his attitude to his fellow men and women and the subjects he selected to represent. Instead, as many artists do, of accepting subjects come upon more or less by chance, or ennobling the ugly, he selected those which evoked his particular admiration, whether on the South Downs or, as a war artist, Arctic landscapes and flying boats.

Not many years after they left the Royal College the memorable opportunity came to him and Bawden to work on a major project, the decoration of the Refreshment Room at Morley College, Lambeth. The

paintings, among the most notable British murals of the time, were begun in 1928, completed some two years later and 'opened' by Stanley Baldwin – only to be destroyed, during the Blitz. These works I had the privilege of seeing, and clearly recall how deeply impressive they were.

My father – one of those consulted by the Principal of Morley College, Mrs Hubback – suggested that subjects from Shakespeare would be appropriate. 'Bawden and Ravilious,' he wrote in the third volume of *Men and Memories*, 'accordingly made a series of designs from Shakespeare's plays, also from some of the earlier miracle-plays. These they carried out beautifully on the distempered walls, first drawing the outlines freely, with so sensitive a touch one almost regretted they would not so remain. Happily, in adding colour they showed no less perfect workmanship.' The Morley College paintings evoked ardent admiration and their destruction, long felt regret.

The range of Ravilious's work was extraordinarily wide, spanning watercolour painting, wood engraving, lithography, and design in the fields of ceramics, glass, furniture, textiles and advertising. He also served as an Official War Artist, making a number of memorable works while attached to the Royal Marines, before his premature death in Iceland at the age of only thirty-nine. Had Ravilious lived to twice that age the extent of his creativity, always scrupulous, often inspired, would have been extraordinary. Its quality and variety are treated by Helen Binyon with admirable discernment.



*Eric Ravilious
photographed by Serge
Chermayeff, Autumn
1939.*