

About Face

Richard Beer goes 'junking'



At the end of April, Richard Beer will be having a one-man exhibition of his paintings and etchings in a small gallery opposite the British Museum. He's very surprised.

"It came as a bolt from the blue. I just didn't think I'd ever have another show. It's very nice when jolly things happen when you're old." In two years' time Richard will be ninety.

He lives contentedly in the house he bought in Primrose Hill for just over

£4,000 in 1958. He volunteers at the Library, has many friends and as active a social life as he can manage. He lets a fellow artist have his studio in the basement, where he used to have a full-size 'double bed' etching press.

Richard has lived in France and Italy, studying etching in Paris in the early 1950s at the studio of S. W. Hayter, the master of ground-breaking etching techniques. Hayter founded the famous Atelier 17, which became the focal point for the twentieth-century revival of print as an art form in its own right.

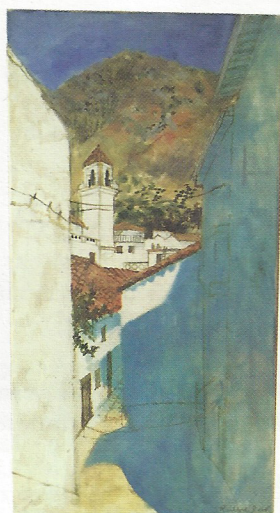
"I was there on a French government scholarship, having studied at the Slade under William Coldstream. But the art schools in Paris were the pits. At the Ecole de



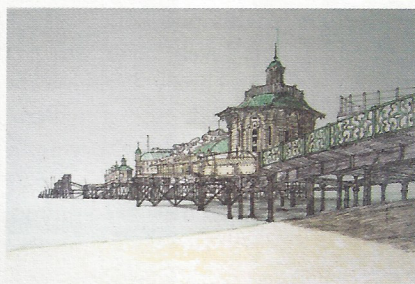
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Beaux Arts they had these ridiculous 'fagging' initiations. So I packed it in and came back. But Coldstream said, Why not go and learn etching with Bill Hayter, so I did – and returned to Paris. The jolliest person working in that studio was the Spanish surrealist painter Miró. He was just having fun. We'd have supper together in a bistro round the corner. I think the meat was horse. Terrible elastic steaks. I stupidly went out and got a room in the suburbs, not a little garret in the centre of Paris, which would have been better. But you see I was born and brought up in Finchley – a child of pebbledash land. In fact I'm surprised I'm not in Finchley now!"



It was a £300 commission from John Cranko to design a ballet for Covent Garden that enabled Richard to leave home; and after a bedsit or two, he finally bought his current house with an art editor friend. They were told, "There's this funny area with a few roads not far from the park."



"It wasn't called Primrose Hill then. And there were proper shops: a butcher, a proper butcher, not a 'meat boutique', and there was a lovely junk shop and a wonderful chemist, Mr Alderton's, on the corner of Sharpleshall Street. No smart restaurants or cafés, as it wasn't a rich area then. Quite scruffy, in fact. And there was one famous artist living opposite me, William Roberts. He's got one of the three blue plaques in this road.

I suppose he was the first of the arty brigade. He was a mad Vorticist and he wouldn't talk to anyone. He never got over the fact that he wasn't as famous as Wyndham Lewis. Then A. J. P. Taylor and his wife Margaret lived next door to William Roberts. In fact I used to teach Margaret Taylor etching at the London Poly in Regent Street. She was charming. I've got a little painting of hers on the wall there. I didn't like him much. I remember she bought a house for Dylan Thomas; she was a great patron of his, so she bought a house just to help him, in Delancey Street."

Richard made his living from commissions for book covers and illustrations, selling paintings

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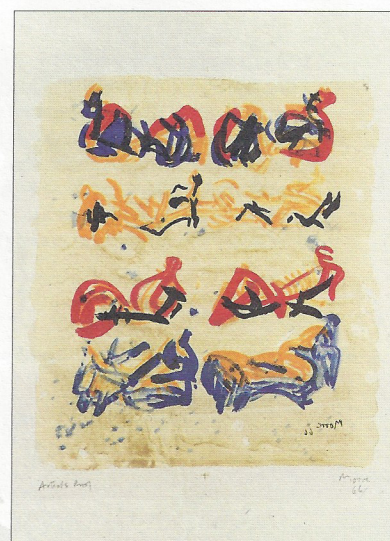
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Anthony Gross, *The Church at Cabanac*, 1978, engraving



Henry Moore, *Eight Reclining Figures in Yellow*, lithograph

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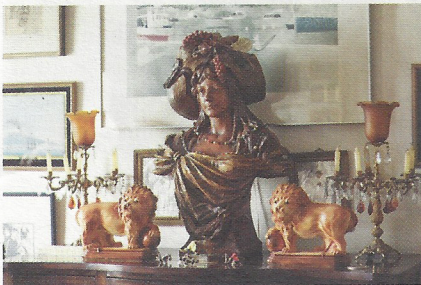


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This pub table cost £3 in Bromley, this lovely chair was £1.

This nineteenth-century French café clock I brought back from the Paris flea market in the back of a friend's mini.



and teaching etching at Chelsea. He exhibited at the RA and at the Zwemmer and Curwen galleries. Then John Betjeman, who was a friend of his, suggested they collaborate on a folio of prints and prose based on the Wren churches of London. *Ten Wren Churches* was published by Editions Alecto and was quite a success.

Over the 58 years he's lived in Primrose Hill, Richard has been scouring junk shops and marchés aux puces and bringing back his treasures. His Aladdin's cave of a house will be featured in the May edition of *Interiors* magazine, along with a piece about his lifelong hobby of 'junking'.

"I've always gone junking. Not antique shops, can't bear them. All that polished furniture looking rather self-conscious. This pub table cost £3 in Bromley, this lovely chair was £1. This nineteenth-century French café clock I brought back from the Paris flea market in the back of a friend's mini. [Since it's the size of a small cartwheel, that must have been quite a



journey.] Oh and this sofa was given to me by Cranko; too big for his house, but it fits in here perfectly, and I love the colour. This is why I want to stay here as long as possible. I do like it here, and one gets fond of all one's junk!"

Richard Beer's one-man show is at the Abbott and Holder Gallery, 30 Museum Street WC1, from 27 April to 7 May.

Annie MacDonald

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