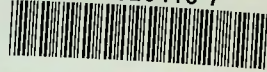


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Eimer Diamond

15th March 1991

'The Phenomenon of Naive Art'

Fine Art Painting
Newstructure 4th Year

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INTRODUCTION

Naive artists, whether or not they have had formal training, are outside the current movements and fashions of the fine art world. Their paintings are created out of love, even obsession, for their subjects. They present a fresh and startling perception, often of a visionary or dream-like quality of the world. During the last few years there has been a growing world-wide interest in naive and primitive paintings and in the United States and Europe many public galleries have devoted special sections to this genre.

I came across naive painting while studying primitive art last year and while really only touching on the issue, it aroused my interest sufficiently to decide to make it my primary area of study in my thesis this year.

In chapter 1. I will address the question and clarify , what is naive art? Beginning with a brief history, explaining the terms 'Naive' and 'Primitive' what is meant by each of them. I shall outline the problems facing naive art, to be dealt with in greater depth in chapter 3. Also the qualities and characteristics of their work. To be demonstrated by example in chapter 2. The aspects such as; truth, memory image, amateurism and the quality of abstraction found in naive painting. In this opening chapter, I shall give an insight into what goes to make up naive painting, an understanding of the subject undertaken.

Following this, in chapter 2. there is a case study of the naive painter Alfred Wallis. put in context with his contemporary James Dixon. I will investigate the influence Alfred Wallis had on the St. Ives painters especially Ben Nicholson and take a closer look at how and why Alfred Wallis' work has gained recognition and popularity.

Finally, I think it is necessary to consider the future as far as one can and the parameters within naive art. Whether after the death of both Alfred Wallis and James Dixon, these artists whom it can be said are the last, now gone, in the line of truly naive artists, if it is possible to be a naive painter in the 20th century. So lastly I shall put naive art in context, where it stands with regard to the 20th century art world.

CHAPTER 1

In recent years according to Eric Lister and Sheldon Williams, artists, collectors and the general public have shown increasing interest in the variety, sensitivity and joy of naive and primitive art.¹ It is debatable whether one agrees with this, perhaps overtly possitive outlook for the future of naive art. But if it is true, that its popularity is growing then it might prove interesting, if confusing to decide why and what can we attribute as a logical reason or cause for this shift in taste. Economic, social and aesthetic factors all play a part - so perhaps it is more instructive to look at its origins, certainly it should shed some light on the difficult distinction between the terms 'Naive' and 'Primitive'.

Briefly, the serious interest begins at the turn of the century with the discovery of the great primitive works from Africa, Oceania and South America. Originally brought to light by ethnographers and archaeologists. But it was not long before these artefacts came to the attention of the leading artists of the day, like Picasso, Mondrian, Derain, Klee, Moore and Epstein. So it was through professional artists that primitive art was introduced to the public. It paved the way to a new visual dimentsion, a new way of seeing and it meant that 20th century primitives like Alfred Wallis and James Dixon were viewed with eyes that only a century before might well have found their work to be at best crude curiosities.

The essence of primitive art is its unhibited, non-intellectual quality the rawness of the emotional response to the thing depicted. It was a quality that sophisticated admirers of primitive art could never capture, only assimilate. This immediacy of response is I believe the link between primitive and naive art.

Naive art is sometimes called or termed 'art from the heart'.^{2.} Where primitive art calls for an emotional response into a work of art, naive art is more an immediacy of vision, unconcerned by conventions, whether of education or accepted cultural values. The naive artist paints what he sees, not necessarily 'what is there'. If one thinks of naive as describing the straightforward and honest quality to be found in these paintings and primitive as the direct response that they arouse in the viewer, then perhaps the terms are more acceptable and more comprehensible.

Many naive painters working today in a supposedly innocent idiom are not whatever else they maybe, 'naive'. This apparent contradiction demonstrates the confusion in which the whole area abounds. In an attempt to map this chaotic field Lister and Sheldon have identified eight catagories of 20th century naive painting. To categorize too much and try to make it all neat and tidy would be wrong as the definitions may be too constricting and narrow for every artist to fit in to a category. The titles vary and I think over-lap slightly. The eight are ; Straight Naives, Naive Sophisticates, Naive Realists, Naive Phantasists, Naive Mystics, Naive Innocence, Naive Humour, Eccentric Naive. I do not propose to investigate each of these terms, some seem self-explanatory others are branches of the first one, Straight Naives, and others perhaps alittle contrived. What I am really concerned with is the Straight Naives, I feel these painters are the original and for me the true naive artists, the characteristics of these artists are their direct naive vision, less childlike than the works by the Innocent Naives, but in their way they are just as fresh and unsophisticated.

This type of naive art is an art created out of love for the object painted, out of an obsession with it and at least initially with no expectation of material reward. Alfred Wallis is an example of one such artist. I shall be discussing him in greater detail in the following chapter. In general, the artists are in many cases people with no formal art training, though not to say, they haven't been influenced by the masters and have looked at their work in a startlingly perceptive way.

It is popular with the public but also equally there is interest being shown in it by other artists looking for a way out of the dilemma in which 20th century art has increasingly found itself. Fashion and commercialization on the one side, an obscure coterie language on the other. Naive art communicates a vision of the world more exciting, disturbing and surprising than almost any new work seen in the last 30 years.³ It must be noted that there has been a growing world-wide interest in naive and primitive paintings, in the art market in recent years.

In Britain, at the Royal Academy 1984 Summer Exhibition, there was a whole room of naive art and the 1985 Spring Exhibition St. Ives 1939 - 1964. Also the Tate Gallery included two naive painters Alfred Wallis and Bryan Pearce. If we accept that naive art is gaining recognition and popularity with artists and public alike, we must also realise the irony of the situation naive art shall find itself in, for as soon as naive art was recognised its continued existence as a living art form was in jeopardy.

Klaus Jurgen - Fischer perceptively remarked in 1970 at the Hlebine symposium, 'Naive art has lost its innocence, and is in danger of developing into an academy of amateurism'. It is hard to say if this is at present a real danger for the future or whether it is already too late. Also stated by Jurgen - Fischer, which one could consider the basis of naive art, its problem, and its reason for its popularity is an analogy by Fischer;

'In Britain the garden of Eden is no more, which is why the fruits of its naivety are so compelling'.⁴

The naive or primitive, not long ago ignored by critics is now suffering from the indiscriminating enthusiasm of discovery and crusade. Numerous exhibitions and articles have popularized the naive artist. But even so the qualities that constitute a 'naive' are still unclear in the mind of the public. A critical definition may prove helpful as it has not yet been defined by me in terms of its special period or its intrinsic style, the adjectives primitive or naive being loosely applied to describe any sort of early, provincial, crude or anonymous painting. A question to ponder, is if the problem also lies with definition? Naive artists spring from craft rather than painters' traditions and so are not related to any schools of painting, are typically non-derivative individual, unpretentious, the latter I find is a welcome relief. The above mentioned sum up the differences between naive artists and amateur artists of the same period. This type of painting flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century. Despite the general misconception; the quality of a primitive work of art is in direct proportion to its early date, the height of achievement in primitive painting was actually reached toward the middle of the 19th century. It has taken another half century to have its potential market realized.

It is interesting to note the direct comparison between some of the statements made in Emanuel Lowys' book; 'The Rendering of Nature in Early Greek Art' and naive art. This book enumerates the chief characteristics of archaic style and he concludes that, 'in all these characteristics there is one common principle, namely, an independence of the real appearance of objects, an independence that not seldom amounts to open opposition.' This is also as is obvious, the principle; the stylistic personality of the primitive. Lowy explains this type of art not as a deliberate convention or as the consequence of a dislike of optical, illusion, but as a result of what he terms 'the primitive memory image.' ⁵

The memory, he explains, does not retain all images equally, but makes a selection of those aspects which present the object in the greatest clearness and completeness. Thus along with the pictures that reality presents to the eye, there exists another world of images, living or coming into life in our minds alone, which although suggested by reality, are essentially metamorphosed as Lipman phrased it; Every primitive artist, when trying to imitate nature seeks with the spontaneity of a 'psychical function' to reproduce merely these mental images.⁶ This is why primitive arts are often distinguishable by a unique freedom from realism which has as a result the free, unself-conscious ability to develop the purely aesthetic qualities of abstract design. It is important to emphasize the strange peculiarity, which is that this abstract quality was a common trait in all or most naive art. It is this abstraction, which has recently placed a premium upon primitive and naive art. Our generation values abstract qualities above all else. Within the last 30 years maybe, painters created for the first time a deliberately abstract art and art historians and collectors have set a higher value upon the abstract attributes of traditional art than has ever before.

In every type of representation the distinguishing aesthetic qualities of the primitive, depends directly upon non - realistic factors. This non - optical approach explains not only the departures from visible reality in the primitive paintings, but also the so called inconsistencies, considered from the point of view of visual plausibility sure to exist between various aspects of a picture.

The nature of the abstraction came about simply because the untutored painter attempted to reproduce reality, but his relative inability to do so, because of the simplicity of his vision and the limitations of his technique resulted in an essentially abstract style. By 'abstract', I mean the strong element of design and the lack of reality in the composition. As in the case of Alfred Wallis and many other naive artists, their technical liabilities made way for a compensating emphasis on pure design. So, what was at first described as art which was uncouth, stiff, distorted and poorly executed by critics whose touchstone of value seemed to be fidelity to real or visual appearance. That the same are now described as original, individual, formalized, lucid, and abstract, merely implies a shift in the attitude of the viewer, who has come to value abstract above illusionistic representation and hence have come to evaluate primitive art positively rather than negatively.

In representational painting, the usual assessment of skill has been based upon the artists ability to achieve verisimilitude and the works that earn praise of the majority are those which, being highly finished in every detail, are immediately convincing as representation. The majority of artists will admit they do live by pleasing the public to some extent.

Their susceptibility to the existing situation is made manifest by the patent insincerity of their works. They may claim to be tradition - directed artists, but in fact they are self-directed artists who are untrue to themselves, the only tradition - directed artists now living, being members of very poor, backward and remote communities.

This is somewhat of a generalization, but it illustrates my point with regard to the major difference between naive artists and other traditional artists. The academic path had always been too narrow, gradually then with the growing taste for naive painting, for the peasant, the artist was left with no path of any kind the world was all before him. In aesthetic theory it became necessary to search for some common denominator the painter was left to the dictates of his own artistic conscience. Thus, the painter found that he may express himself freely with no outward censor to thwart him, while the inward censor has but one question to put to him; Are you being honest with yourself.

With each individual painter, it is of course a personal question, one only the artist will know for certain. But in the case of the straight naives' it is a quality engrained in their very nature and that of their work. I quote John Bensuson - Butt, in his writings 'On Naturalness in Art'.

'We should not judge man by what they don't know, but by what they do know, and the manner in which they know it'.⁷.

Naive art exists at many levels, but all of them are outside the canons of taste established by the elite culture. It is only the aesthetic uncertainties of the 20th century that have led us to praise the inadequate as naive.

No wonder the argument could run, it took a period such as ours to hail the work of the french customs official Henri Rousseau and the originality of the british naive Alfred Wallis. James Ayres sums it up well, stating:

'...with our more proletarian aspirations, the exceptions assume a socialological importance that unconsciously effects the eye.'⁸

Ayres believes we are predisposed to like the work that was conceived and born in the egalitarian circumstances of a painter producing pictures which, unlike child art show an experience of life largely innocent of the prejudices which both formed and isolated the elite culture. In this way, the naive artist achieved originality through an earthy native genius. This 'genius' may not represent a great sweep of philosophical thought but where it exists, it has the instinctive power to provide enjoyment for the unprejudiced spectator.

In 'The Meaning of Art' by Herbert Read, he discuss' naive art at length with regard to art in general, he notes three major characterisations of naive art which seem to be well observed if a little too broad and simple of an outlook. Read believes in any consideration of the elements of art, we should take into account the art of simple, unsophisticated people, generally known as Naive Artists. He believes that this term so widely used, encompasses too much, and so the significance of the phenomenon is not so clearly recognised as it should be. An important point he makes about naive art is that it is not art made by painters in imitation of the art of more cultured classes, that is to say, it is not a crude reflection of the art of sophisticated people, as amateurism might be but rather, it is the art that springs from a sophisticated love of simplicity and the simple life. To be precise the term should be limited to work done by uncultured peoples in accordance with a native and indigenous tradition owing nothing to outside influences. In light of this it is even more interesting to note Reads' characteristics which he attributes to naive art.⁹

In the first instance, it is never what an odious distinction calls a 'fine' art: it is always 'applied'. Secondly, Read suggests, it shows a surprising tendency towards abstraction either towards geometric abstraction, or towards a rhythmical stylization of naturalistic motives. Direct representational art of the type dear to the academic artist is almost unknown in naive art. The naive painter never seems to have found it serve his purpose of making his world a more pleasant place to live. He prefers to add something to his life rather than act as a mirror to its drab actuality.

The third characteristic of naive art is its conservatism, of all art it is according to Read the most difficult to date with any accuracy. Simple motives are involved and persist for centuries. There is no restless desire in the naive mind for novelty, he only asks that the object should be 'gay' and he seems to realize instinctively that an infinite variety of effects can be obtained from the combination of a very few motives and colours. What the naive artist has, and what we expect in any work of art is a certain personal element. We expect the artist to have if not a distinguished mind at least a distinguished sensibility. We expect him to reveal something to us that is original, a unique and private vision of the world.

But perhaps the most amazing characteristic of naive art is its universality. The same motives, the same modes of abstraction the same motives, the same form and the same techniques seem to spring up spontaneously out of the soil in every part of the world. The characteristics of naive art bear directly on any discussion of the nature of art. They reveal that the artistic impulse is a natural impulse implanted in even the least cultured of folk.

The naive artist is in a delicate position, as normally it is impossible to detect any sign of chronological development in the career of a naive painter, although over the years he may well perfect his technique and handle the material of his compositions with increasing ease. But problems occur if feeling and sensibility begin to flag, then he starts repeating himself and produces work of a purely routine kind, so that originality and spontaneity are soon lost. As his paintings become technically more accomplished their tension and radiance decline. On a larger, less personal level this danger is also one very real one facing naive art as a whole.

The relationship between naive art and the art world is not yet one I have considered. Although naive art is outside the confines of established art and artists, there must be a relationship between the two, as recently as five years ago for the first time Sotheby's included a special collection of English naive paintings in an auction of British paintings. For folk enthusiasts it represented a breakthrough in winning greater recognition for naive art, which had traditionally enjoyed, as stated earlier an outsider status, although it commands a large and loyal popular following. Sotheby's test sale was a great success and the naive paintings section promised to be a regular feature. More dramatic proof of folk art's enhanced prestige comes with the big exhibition at The Royal Festival Hall, New Frontiers of Naive Art in Europe. This exhibition managed to bring together more than four hundred paintings. This celebrated the phenomenal flowering of naive art that has occurred since the Second World War.

The main charms of naive art lie in qualities that have nothing or little to do with established art criteria. It is the passionate, sincerity, affection, quirky, often unconscious humour and directness of these paintings that makes them so appealing. These defects become positive advantages and underline the fresh, sharp innocence that makes the best naive paintings so memorable. Some of the artists included in the exhibition have struggled to produce their art in the most difficult conditions and their work has a corresponding depth and conviction that singles them out from other amateur artists of the same period.

CHAPTER 2

Alfred Wallis must surely be renowned today as Britain's greatest naive artist. There could not be a better artist to use as an example to demonstrate the qualities and characteristics of the truly naive artist.

It is necessary to briefly pick up on some aspects of his life, as they have a direct bearing on the way he painted and the initial reason, why he painted at all. To understand Alfred Wallis and his work, one must first realise this Cornishman did not begin to paint until he reached his late sixties, as with many other naive painters including Henri Rousseau and Louis Vivin. Alfred Wallis worked from childhood on fishing vessels for most of his life and always in close connection with the sea. He was a natural recluse and when he first started to paint he curiously kept this a secret from all but his closest friends. He continued painting and like many naive painters became obsessed by his own work. He was a lonely man and was really only happy when painting pictures of boats, the local fishing grounds, schooners, steamers, fish, harbours and occasionally strange aerial views of St. Ives where he lived.

Looking at Alfred Wallis' life, one notices a constant running through his life, that of the sea. It played such a major part in his childhood, his livelihood and consequently his painting. While living as a virtual recluse in Cornwall, Wallis started to paint for company, he started using the remains of glossy ship's enamel paint and working on scraps of wood and cardboard of all shapes and sizes. The texture of the boards which he used made the original surface part of the picture (fig. 2.5). His depth of colour and the abstract way in which he painted the sea, using a purposely limited but strong selection of marine greys, blacks, rich greens, dark blues and whites were so unusual and although 'plain' colours, like their subjects, together the colour and picture itself are all, as Edward Mullins said, "imbued with a fierce beauty."¹⁰ There is no decoration, every single image appears ungarnished

It was these elements inherent in Wallis' paintings which were immediately recognised for their true value and unconscious strength by the leading British artists, Christopher Wood and Ben Nicholson, who were also at this time in the 20's living and working in St. Ives. Nicholson and Wood saw Wallis quite differently, but both with admiration. To Wood, Alfred Wallis was a Cornishman and his paintings were the language of an emotional and mystical oneness with the sea and ships, with lighthouses and cliffs, with boats riding the storms, and with the nestling granite houses holding firm under threatening skies. Whereas to Ben Nicholson, Wallis was a painter, Nicholson spoke about him with the same reverence that he reserved for Mondrian and Miro. He described how Wallis would begin with a piece of cardboard, sometimes torn or cut in an odd shape, so that its edge had a compelling rhythm to start with and a surface with a particular colour and texture. How he would make a painting of ships and storms, using only the simplest at hand colours, how he would manage quite naturally to incorporate the incidental shape of the cardboard and its colour and make them precise elements in the painting.

For Nicholson the excitement of Wallis was on how alive and direct his work was and from them he learned the most difficult lesson of all for a painter, how to be unselfconscious and innocent while being true to the intensity and precision of the experience. Alfred Wallis had awoken in Nicholson the possibilities which lay outside the flat, framed picture. Nicholson's forms and colours had been growing gradually freer of the real life situations on which they had become dependent and instead lent towards self-sustaining as elements of composition. The physical surface on which he worked was also potentially the space in which these forms were set free. As Nicholson's involvement with the surface of his paintings became more intense so his work became more abstract.

It seems odd, but correct to say that in fact the influence of Wallis upon Nicholson was to add sophistication and abstractness to his work, rather than any superficial naivety. Nicholson's first completed relief has the object quality of one of Wallis' cardboard shapes and preserves the experience and excitement of its making as a piece of cardboard would preserve for Wallis the magical properties of the sea or of ships painted upon it. Nicholson's conviction that to function effectively his work should take the form not of objects but of experiences has seldom shown up more strongly than over the those past few months. The insight provided by Wallis in 1928 when Nicholson realised that he brought odd pieces of hardboard vividly to life by treating his paintings as physical events, was to be reinforced as time went on.

Ben Nicholson's painting of Porthmear Beach, has notable similarities with Wallis' painting of Godrevy Lighthouse. The surface is quite visible through the paint, the sea is painted in streaks of thick white paint, crude waves going accross the picture, and boats which could have been painted by Wallis. It seems Nicholson was striving at what came naturally to Alfred Wallis. I quote from a letter Nicholson wrote to an artist friend.

'One was wanting to get right back to the begining and then take one step forward at a time on a firm basis and a painting for me if it's anything is a living thing and should achieve a form of life more real than life itself.'".

Although this quote does not refer to Wallis, it could quite conceivably have been an account of Wallis.

Sadly like so many artists and probably due to his age, his work began to decline somewhat during the late thirties. His almost classical simplicity, a feature of the earlier work disappeared and the paintings became more cluttered, almost as if he was rushing to say all he could about the sea before he died.

which knowing his obsession with his work might well have been the actual reality.

Alfred Wallis had alot in common with his contemporary, although it is certain they never knew eachother at all. It is worth comparing Alfred Wallis with James Dixon, the best known Irish naive painter. Inevitably, art connoisseurs compare James Dixon with Alfred Wallis. The similarity in their simple rural lifestyles is outstanding and they also share a certain affinity in painting styles. Both were 'discovered' by other artists, and both chose their surrounding coastline and sea to be their subject also both when settled down to paint lost every shred of artistic sophistication. With an eccentric rejection of anykind of perspective, both painted as if viewing everything from overhead. All the compositional aspects of naive painting reveal a non-optical attitude each unit of the painting seems to exist separately, as it did in the series of memory images in the artists' mind and these images appear to be combined rather than synthesized in the final painting. The spectator's eye travels from one section or aspect of the painting to another - as such accumulating bit by bit the represented content for it was in this way the naive artist constructed his painting.

Dixon similiarily to Wallis made what use he could of scrapings from bottoms of discarded cans of paint and made his pictures on bits of irregular wood or cardboard. They both showed total indifference for traditional perspective. Aerial views often being preferred especially when his subjects were drawn from the coastline or the lanscape. Both Alfred Wallis and James Dixon were absorbed by the sea in all its various aspects. James Dixon coming from a remote Donegal island called Tory Island, he is reputed never to have left this isolated place, so to some extent this would explain how Wallis, albeit after along time became an international figure in the world of naive art.

Whereas Dixon recieved far less recognition during the same period. Whether Dixon or Wallis is more gifted artist is a point which could be debated endlessly, but one thing is certain Dixon is the greatest self-taught painter to have come out of Ireland.

Similiarly to Wallis, Dixon was out of touch with anything connected with the world of culture. Island life was the subject of his work. Anything unusual on Tory Island was depicted by him ie: The unique and memorable occasion when the massive inflated german dirigible, The Hindenburg floated accross the sky over Tory, it was duly recorded. His colours were also dark and tenebrous, rarely straying outside the narrow compass of black, grey, grey-green, and grey-blue, except for contrasting whites and off-whites, used where deemed it necessary. Reds, browns and ochres also made appearance sometimes. but these variations apart frombrown were the exception rather than the rule. The most outstanding feature of his amazing talent was the way in which he was able to turn wind and weather into a palpable turmoil, angry and gripping in its intensity, rendering them with a fierce expressionism certainly not generally to be found in the work of other naive artists.

The degree of excellence in one of these naive paintings depends upon the clarity, energy and coherence of the artist's mental picture, rather than upon the beauty or interest actually inherant in the subject matter and in the artists instinctive sense of colour and design when transposing his mental pictures onto a painted surface not upon a technical facility for reconstructing in paint his observations of nature.

The artist, Derek Hill said of Dixon's painting; 'They are all painter's pictures and not merely the picture making.'¹² It is a hard definition to explain but it is largely attributable to the texture of paint and the brushwork, as well as an unusual vision of the natural phenomena around. The scenes Dixon chooses to paint of the island are the very opposite of picturesque, they are often 'harsh, rough and ready-made, but they are deeply concerned with the life that an islander lives. The clumsiness maybe called childlike or primitive, but it is true and intimately related to the place where the pictures have been painted.

Both Alfred Wallis and James Dixon since their deaths, have gained an increasing amount of praise and recognition right-fully so, paintings by Dixon are now to be found in many parts of the world and a large number of them are in the important collection at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. In the case of Wallis, although Nicholson and others such as H.S. Ede, Adrian Stokes, Barbara Hepworth, Winifred Nicholson and Herbert Read were all ardent collectors of his work, it was still twenty years after his death, until his first one-man exhibition was mounted in the Piccadilly Gallery, London. It transpired to be the first of many such exhibitions, his reputation grew rapidly and now good paintings by him are to be seen in museums like London's Tate Gallery and New York Museum of Modern Art.

I have chosen to include some illustrations of Wallis and Dixon's work, which demonstrate admirably the originality of their styles. Immediately the sombre yet attractive and original use of colour draws the attention of the unprejudiced viewer. One of the most significant characteristic of the straight naive artist is the fact, they are composite scenes, the extraordinary rhythmical arrangement manages to hold these separate fragments together adding aesthetic value to the image and also creating an abstract feeling within the paintings (fig.2) demonstrates this point very well.

Both of these painters especially James Dixon use the paint vigourously and obsessively to describe their memories of the sea and the simple surroundings in their lives. They have found a way in which to transmit a sense of struggle and isolation through paint. A truth and albeit crude technically, a sincerity is visible in the painting. Their work was not an aspect which either took lightly, and it would be an injustice to them if one refused to accept this and also one must recognize a quality which is often hard to find in painting, that is one of integrity and truth.

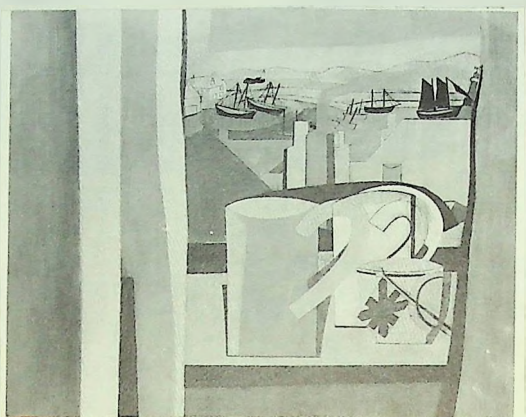


Fig.(2.1) St. Ives Cornwall
Ben Nicholson



Fig. (2.2) St. Ives with Godrevy Lighthouse
Alfred Wallis

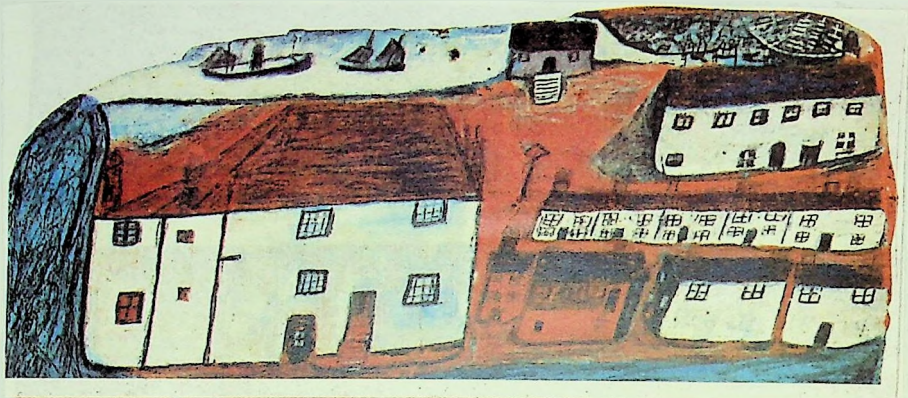


Fig. (2.3) St. Ives
Alfred Wallis



Fig. (2.4) The Hold House Port Mear Square Island
Port Mear Beach

Alfred Wallis

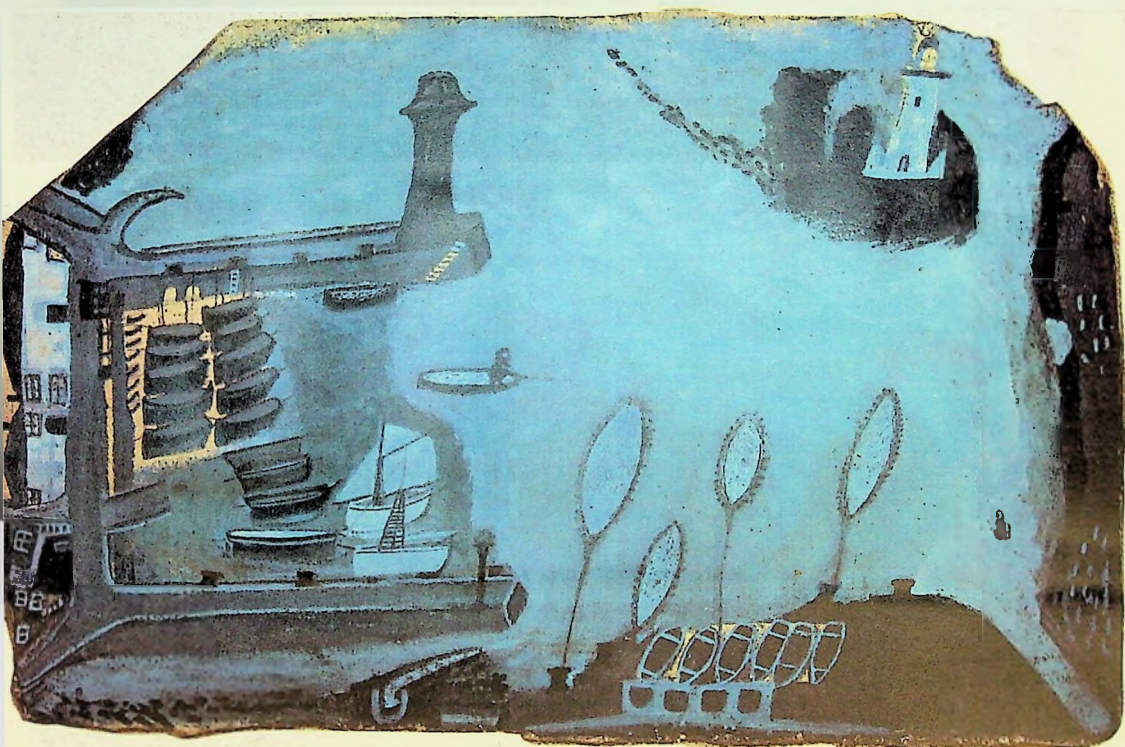


Fig. (2.5) This is Sain Fishery That Use To Be
Alfred Wallis



Fig. (2.6), Muldoon

James Dixon

CHAPTER 3

Oto Bihalji-Merin in his writing on 'A Hundred Years of Naive Art' under the subtitle 'Discovery of a Timeless Art' He states how more and more creative individuals are seeking refuge in naive art from the hectic and denatured world in which they live. Merin also believes, 'it is the infinite variety as much as the character of this propensity for artistic creativity, almost tantamount to a mass movement that attracts our sympathetic interest.'¹³ The size of the movement makes it necessary to turn a critical light on the phenomenon of naive art, to identify its lasting values. and to distinguish them from artistic works of other kinds. The question must then be posed as to whether it will be possible, in a world of mass media and rapid, radical change, to preserve intact a form of artistic expression which can be recognized as a survival from a more natural and spontaneous mode of existence or whether these preserves of the naive will also be swept away by the passage of time.

The naive painter endeavours to represent the inner nature of things and appearances from his own experience, without regard to the limitations of his knowledge or potential, he boldly attempts the most difficult of themes and precisely through the tension which arises from technical deficiencies and the truth of his inner vision, from the contrast of intellectual simplicity and visual imagery, he achieves that oddness of creative expression that singles him out from other artists. We see then that deformations and transformations of observed images are not a matter of stylistic intention but more correctly projections of his inner vision.

The work of naive artists is as old as man's need for artistic activity. Throughout the 20th century so far, naive art has outlasted the everchanging variety of aesthetic styles. So although subject to its own laws, naive art remains nevertheless an essential part of the artistic scene in any period. Bihalji-Merin said 'The growing attraction of naive art at the present time has profound roots and is not a mere fashionable craze.'¹⁴ One of the main reasons he sights for saying this is, he believes our civilization has entered a critical phase in its scientific and technical development. The more the world expands within our consciousness, the more acutely the individual feels alienated from it. We have learnt to view things in a new way. The irresistible march of technical progress, paid for by increasing confusion of our thinking capabilities, has directed the eye of the artist once more towards elemental images. In their search for comprehensive links and affinities, artists are turning toward the later forms of naive and primitive art.

It is important to remember, the character of naive art flourishes in an atmosphere of simplicity and ingenuousness. If the naive artist relinquishes these qualities, then he is liable to jeopardize the specific climate in which his art thrives. In the sense of De Chirico's words 'What is necessary above all to obtain this ideal naive state one must set aside every idea and every symbol that exists in painting. Then only, if no previous notion were joined to the vision of the artist as the first observer, if nothing were read into the picture, could things in their original character appear new. In Rousseau's words, 'as on the first day of creation.'¹⁵

The quality of naive painting does not so much vary with degree of primitiveness, but more with the mental and creative power of the individual artist. Without this creative energy the naive painting is merely crude, this means one must be able to distinguish crudity from the rich abstract design, which characterizes good naive painting. The most important aspect of naive art according to Jean Lipman is the element of abstract design, Lipman says it is the 'heart and soul of the primitive and naive.'¹⁶ Whether this is true, it is this quality which has won for it the acclaim of the moderns. The compositional means clearly and forcibly the mental pictures upon which he based his representation resulted, unconsciously in an enhancement of abstract design at the expense of illusionistic realism. It is also the firm belief of Lipman that some talented naive painters, such as Wallis and Dixon, unhampered by any external requirements or restrictions, arrived at a power and beauty, and a certain originality which was not surpassed by the greatest of the academic painters.

'I think that we shall have come about as far as we can come towards an incontrovertable statement, if we say that bad art arises from a failure of sentiment, that this is caused by some form of insincerity and that this, in its turn, results from a form of social pressure in favour of that which society at large calls beauty.'¹⁷

This is a quote by Quentin Bell on bad art, if this is an agreeable definition of bad art then it is perhaps without intending, praising the elements attributable to naive art. The naive retains throughout adult life the uniformity of achievement of the child. That there is some kind of casual connection between social development and patterns of aesthetic feelings. Our aesthetic sentiments are profoundly modified by the structure of the society in which we live.

The naive artist, outside the parameters of the established society seem to have escaped, as nearly as an artist can escape from the influence of fashion. This ability to resist the dynamic forces of taste or to put it positively, this power to say something personal comes pretty near to a definition of what in the present century we find admirable in art. So that, we enjoy the work of the child, the savage or the artists such as Alfred Wallis. All of whom escape the operation of fashion, simply because for them it does not exist and we can also trust that their art is at least true to the artist who created it.

Naive painters belong to no school, education, they are non-academic. They were then, isolated from outside influences their work is in this sense original, as any artists work can ever be. Naive artists are also the only type of artists who have more or less maintained traditional methods and standards. The laws of fashion and constant change forbidding professional artists this luxury. The phenomenon of the naive artist is certainly an intriguing if complex area of history of art. In that, although it has existed for along long time in its independence this art has not actually been studied in any substantial way. It is only in the late 19th century that any serious interest been shown in naive art from the established art world.

In spite of the many doubts and hesitations however, it is becoming more certain that naive art, if it is genuinely naive and truly art, can and will survive, because it can help to overcome the growing estrangement of man from his own essential self.

CONCLUSION

In these chapters, I wanted to prove the worth of naive art. It is a simple yet complex area of study, but one which is worthy of deeper exploration. There is not yet any indepth studies of naive art as a movement and this I see is due to a combination of factors. Firstly naive artists, even those whose work has been saved and whose lives have been documented, mostly live very reclusive lives, so information on them is scant. Secondly the artists themselves often do not understand or know much about the movement to which they belong. Also many of the truly naive painters have since passed away and their work which may have been gaining popularity is halted. As can be seen from the exhibitions I have mentioned earlier devoted to naive art, good naive painting is now sought after with a new intensity.

There are multiple varieties of the naive painter, so that to generalize would be impossible . These are the most individual of artists and should be treated in a similiar manor. It would be wrong then to try and conclude by saying naive art should be recognized by the art world as a valid art movement. It is outside the established art world and shall remain so. But individuals, two of whom I've concentrated on will be recognized as 'real' artists, and they deserve full recognition. In spite of all the critical opposition against naive painting in the past, for individual artists within, the public's belief in their fellow painter may well be realized in this the 20th century.

ILLUSTRATIONS

TATE GALLERY; St. Ives 1939 - 1964. London: The Tate Gallery, 1985. (catalogue)

Fig. (2.1) St. Ives Cornwall, Ben Nicholson.

Fig. (2.2) St. Ives with Godrevy Lighthouse, Alfred Wallis.

Fig. (2.3) St. Ives, Alfred Wallis.

Fig. (2.4) The Hold House Port Mear Square Island Port Mear Beach, Alfred Wallis.

Fig. (2.5) This is Sain Fishery That Use To Be, Alfred Wallis.

LISTER, Eric. British Primitive Fantasists. New York: Alpine Fine Arts Collection Ltd, 1982.

Fig. (2.6) Muldoon, James Dixon.

Fig. (2.7) The Sinking of The Titanic, James Dixon.

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- 5.& 6. Pg.7
7. Pg. 9
8. Pg.10
9. Pg.11, READ, Herbert. The Meaning of Art.
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