

HISTORY IN ART

Edward Burra 1905–1976

17 August 2022

1905 – Edward Burra is born in London but brought up in Rye, Sussex. His parents are very rich family and have eight servants. He is often ill as a child and suffers from anaemia and arthritis, and he has to be withdrawn from preparatory school in Potters Bar because he contracts pneumonia. His parents are told that he may not see his 21st birthday. Most of his paintings are watercolours, possibly because he found them less painful to execute.

1921 – After mostly being home-educated, he takes art classes in Rye and then studies at Chelsea School of Art.

1923 – He begins two years of study at the Royal College of Art. He mixes with the bohemian circles of artists in London but claims later that he never took drugs, like many of his friends, and remained celibate for the whole of his life.

1925 – Burra meets Paul Nash, an artist who becomes a friend and mentor. Burra's fascination with the seedy side of life in London prompts Nash to describe him as a modern-day Hogarth. He also travels to Paris, and seeks out the dark underbelly of society here too. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, he takes part in many exhibitions in London.

1931 – He designs sets and costumes for a ballet by one of his friends, Frederick Ashton, at the Savoy Theatre.

1933 – Burra travels to Harlem which is still experiencing its “Renaissance”, a flowering of black music, art, theatre, and literature. He spends much of his time in the speakeasies, witnessing the prostitutes and the drugs scene. He prefers the grimmer side of life in Harlem, rather than the glitz and glamour of the nightclubs. He also visits Spain and becomes fascinated by its culture, teaching himself Spanish and painting a number of pictures of Spanish dancers and musicians.

1936 – He takes part in the International Surrealist Exhibition in London. He visits Spain again during the Civil War and is shocked by the brutality he witnesses. This prompts a change in his demeanour, from ironic observation of humanity to an angrier involvement, which is reflected in his art.

1939 – The Second World War means that he can no longer travel, so he becomes more active in the theatre, designing sets and costumes for several works, including the acclaimed *Miracle in the Gorbals* ballet by Robert Helpmann. His other works become more sombre in tone, with less concentration on human beings, more on landscapes in which humans sometimes take part. In the 1960s and 70s he develops his landscape art with apparent distaste for the building and construction projects taking place.

1976 – He dies at the age of 72 having far outlived his doctor's expectations in his teenage years.