

CRAIGIE AITCHISON

Is the painter of crucifixions and Bedlington terriers a visionary or just an eccentric?

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Nothing can adequately prepare you for Craigie Aitchison's house in south London, but if you imagine a cross between Aladdin's cave and the premises of Steptoe & Son, you will be half way there. The amount of bric-a-brac is heroic. In the drawing-room, with its puce walls, bright blue door and gilded furniture, a larger-than-life china rabbit stares out of the window beside a statuette of Christ; the surfaces are covered with every imaginable trinket, from a brass palm tree to a flock of coloured glass budgerigars perched on the rim of a basket; a sparkly little reindeer sits in one corner, and a painted wooden cow from an Indian temple in another. The alarming news is that these are only half the original contents of the room, the rest having recently been removed to Aitchison's Italian home near Sienna.

'Chaos' and 'Kitsch' are two words that spring to mind, but it would be wrong to suppose that Aitchison's clutter has been acquired in a haphazard or ironic manner. 'He has got total recall about the things in his house,' explains his friend Lord Snowdon: 'you think that they've all been thrown down, but every single one has its place.' Aitchison regards this rum collection of disparate objects as essential to his work, and many of them have appeared – transformed into images of grace and beauty – in his colourful, idiosyncratic paintings. The writer Patrick Kinmonth tells the story of a desiccated sparrow, known as the Little Dead Bird, which Aitchison found on his windowsill and has painted several times: 'He's quite often been burgled, and I remember him saying, "If they've taken that bird, I'll kill them!" It's typical

Craigie to think that things only he can see the point in should be coveted by other people.’

Not everyone, it has to be said, sees the point in Craigie Aitchison. Although his paintings regularly sell for up to £60,000, there are many art-lovers to whom his parade of still lifes, landscapes, crucifixions and portraits of black people remains a baffling cul-de-sac. (The *Telegraph*’s own Richard Dorment dismissed his contributions to the Royal Academy’s Summer Exhibition as ‘nondescript little daubs’.) At 78, with a one-man show opening at the RA in September, his place should be clearly established in the pantheon of contemporary painters; but go to Tate Britain and ask to see any of the half-dozen Aitchisons in its collection, and you will meet with blank incomprehension. ([‘How do you spell his name?’] the man at the information desk asked me. ‘What era is he?’)

Yet to those who believe in him, Aitchison is a figure of the utmost importance – not simply as an artist who belongs in the first rank of colourists, but as a visionary in the mould of William Blake and Samuel Palmer. ‘I would absolutely put him in that canon, and very high up,’ says Patrick Kinmonth. ‘He belongs to that tradition of British art which, when it flowers magnificently, is completely individualistic: the tradition not of schools, but of great painters out on a limb – Gainsborough, Bacon, Freud, Michael Andrews.’

‘He paints in a way quite unlike anyone else,’ agrees Cecilia Trevis, the curator of his show at the RA. ‘It’s not just his feeling for colour, but his whole approach to the objects around him. Some of his still lifes take on an almost sacred quality: they convey that somehow even the simplest jug or piece of pottery is of the greatest importance.’

Visionaries are supposed to look eccentric, and in this respect the figure who opens his front door does not disappoint. With a mop of white hair

streaked down the middle with black, and a dark tie (depicting the moon and stars) hanging outside his baggy jumper, he is shambolic in appearance and Eeyore-ish in demeanour. He wears a large pair of spectacles attached to his neck by a cord, and when he speaks it is in a querulous, high-pitched voice with a Morningside accent, so that he resembles by turns a censorious Edinburgh matron and a tetchy cockatoo.

But there are reasons to distrust this first impression, and one of them is his choice of footwear: a pair of immaculate gym shoes[, worn with equally pristine red socks,] which belie his otherwise unkempt appearance. Secondly, there is his deep distrust of interviews[, derived from an anxiety that he may say something he doesn't mean]. A recorded conversation, he complains, denies him the process of revising and paring down which is so much a part of his modus operandi: 'When I'm painting, all I do is alter. I can't get started unless I've got the turps to rub it out.'

Fortunately, he grows more relaxed as the morning wears on; and when, at noon, the sun comes out and he suggests a glass of whisky, the transformation is complete. The grannyish spectacles are put aside, and he seems to grow younger before my eyes, the creases in his face smoothed, the black in his hair outshining the white. He chats happily about how he used to fancy the life of a hotel manager ('I've always liked hotels') or perhaps a taxi driver.

This benign aspect – together with the simplicity of his paintings, his eccentricity, and his occasional references to ['brainy people' and] being 'in a muddle' – have led some to ascribe a childlike naivety to Aitchison. Nothing, his friends insist, could be further from the truth. 'He's completely open and honest and eccentric,' says the writer and editor Ann Barr, who has known him since the Fifties, 'but he's as shrewd as they come. Driving is always a good test of character, and when you're with him in his car, you realise that

he's not actually the bumbling person he seems. He drives like a fighter pilot.'

Patrick Kinmonth seconds this. 'He has a really acute intelligence. His judgement – particularly about people – is incredibly accurate and funny. He trained as a lawyer, and a lot of that analytical mind is there, even though he's the most Bohemian of people.'

This side of his character is inherited from his father, a Scottish barrister who became a senior law lord and a member of Ramsay MacDonald's National Government. Lord Aitchison was known as a passionate champion of the underdog (he famously helped Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to secure the release of a Jewish immigrant wrongfully convicted of murder) and his son can be equally fierce in attacking injustice. ['If you upset him, his tongue is on his lung,' says Terry Danziger-Miles of the Timothy Taylor Gallery, which – along with Waddingtons – represents him. 'And if you don't respond, he gets very angry.'] A case in point was his resignation from the RA over the controversial portrait of Myra Hindley in its *Sensation!* exhibition. His decision, he explains, had nothing to do with his opinion of the painting: 'I resigned over the treatment the Academy was giving Mrs Johnson, the mother of the boy who's still not been found. She was screaming outside the exhibition wanting it to be taken down, and I thought they should have done it for her sake.' He was eventually persuaded to return to the Academy two years later, by which time he felt his point had been made.

The young Aitchison did not get on with his father, who died when the boy was 15. 'I think I irritated him because I was too like him. I hated playing games, whereas my brother was in the school team, and my father admired that, because it was something he couldn't have done himself. He liked people to do things, and a boy sitting around with no interests – which is what I must have seemed – must have annoyed him.'

Poignantly, having believed for most of his life that his father did not love him, Aitchison made a discovery last year which showed that he was mistaken. 'I found a letter he'd written to my mother, and he was worried that I was going to go on my bicycle over the Dean Bridge in Edinburgh, which was very dangerous, and it said, "Don't let him go over it on that bike". And I thought that he didn't care; but there was this letter written hundreds of years ago, and I thought, "Probably I got it wrong – probably he did care".'

Lady Aitchison, despite being a former hockey international, was much more sympathetic to her unhearty son. (The two remained close until her death in 1970, and his London house was acquired so that she could live with him in her last years.) But he never really felt at home in Edinburgh: he much preferring Arran, where the family spent holidays (and whose landscape he continues to paint), and he is apprehensive about an exhibition of his recent work which is to be held during this year's Festival.

'I was always very inhibited up there,' he remarks; 'but people say it was a long time ago, and I should have grown up by now, and all the people who were funny are probably dead. I don't believe in people moaning on about the terrible time that they had in their youth, because we could all do that; but if I'm asked, I can't say that it was right.'

'Funny'; 'right': such words, in Aitchison's vocabulary, have a resonance which is somehow distinct from their customary usage. (In the same way he talks not of 'my art' but of 'the paintings', much as a judge might talk of 'the plaintiff'.) 'He almost speaks in code,' agrees Patrick Kinmonth. ' "He's in a muddle" can mean that someone's unclear about their sexual persuasion, or that they're unable to hold their life together.'

Aitchison's own sexual persuasion is muddling enough. Though gay by most people's definition, he had a number of girlfriends in his student days, and continues to have passionate friendships with women. There has even

been talk of marriage to his closest companion, Alex Mayall, a vivacious, Bohemian aristocrat who is 25 years his junior. (While many of his circle are from the upper class, a friend explains that this is simply because they are more receptive to his eccentricity; he himself is by common consent the least snobbish person imaginable.)

Moving from Edinburgh to London in 1948 was a liberation. Excited by the drama of the murder cases in which his father had appeared, he spent three years studying at the Middle Temple, only to get bogged down in the tedium of conveyancing and tort. Instead of attending lectures, he began visiting the Tate and the National Gallery. Although he had never studied or practised art, his sense of colour had been awoken by reproductions of Gauguin and Van Gogh belonging to his father, and he was keen to see the originals. After trying his hand at copying, he sought tuition first from private teachers and then at the Slade.

The Slade was ‘paradise’ – particularly since, as a part-time student, he was excused exams and the courses that he found unappealing: anatomy, art history and perspective. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to draw anything in perspective. I *think* I’m doing it in perspective, because I’m doing it the way I see it. If I was handicapped by knowing perspective, I would never get it right.’ Although dismissed as hopeless by two visiting teachers, John Piper and Victor Pasmore, he was encouraged by L.S. Lowry, and by fellow students such as Myles Murphy and Euan Uglow, who was to become his closest friend.

In 1955, soon after leaving the Slade, Aitchison won a British Council scholarship to travel in Italy. Accompanied by Myles Murphy, he set off in an ancient London taxi on a journey which would change his life. It was a journey (Andrew Gibbon Williams in his book *Craigie – The Art of Craigie Aitchison* tells of them losing their reverse gear in the Alps and forcing a

convoy of coaches to back along a narrow viaduct with a thousand-foot drop on either side). I used

Because he had never studied art history, he was unprepared for the impact of the Renaissance paintings he found there – above all, those of Piero della Francesca. Just as important, however, was the Italian landscape: ‘I had got into painting bright colours before I went there, but I discovered on that trip that dark colours could be just as beautiful. There’s a colour I use a lot, raw umber, which is all over Italy in the fields. [People say, “Oh, you’re great with bright colours,” but it’s rubbish really, because no colour is any colour – it depends what colour it’s next to.’]

Aitchison now spends several months of the year in Italy, which is undoubtedly his spiritual home. (Helen Lessore, the Mayfair gallery-owner who first brought him to prominence in the Sixties, talked of his ‘naturally Mediterranean soul’.) In 1975 he brought a ruined house in the Tuscan hills, and he has been renovating it ever since. It is, says his friend Lady Henrietta Rous, ‘like walking into one of his paintings. It’s beautifully done up, wonderfully spacious, and by his standards pretty comfortable.’

Aitchison himself describes it as ‘a kind of dream place. It’s fantastic in the winter, with thunderstorms and lightning. I like all that – I don’t really like the sun. The house I’ve got is away up a road on its own in a wood, and it’s like the house we had at Tulliallan [an estate belonging to his mother’s family] in Scotland.’ (Tulliallan, in Fife, was an estate belonging to his mother’s family, where Aitchison did some of his first landscape painting.)

It is a paradox that while Aitchison craves isolation in which to work, he is also hugely gregarious, and seldom appears at a public event without a large retinue. Sheelagh Cluney, a Canadian collector who owns over 40 of his paintings, remembers her first meeting with him at an exhibition of his work in 1978. ‘We’re hanging around and thinking, “Where’s the painter?” and the

most amazing-looking person turns up with his hair all curly and sprayed with gold. He's completely drunk – but in a very nice way – and he's surrounded by all these people who are pressing nosegays [bouquets] on him, there are so many nosegays that he has to hold them with both hands.'

Aitchison is a man who shows, and commands, great loyalty. 'He's very protective,' says Henrietta Rous. 'I first met him 30 years ago, and ever since he's been the friend that will always be there no matter what.' By the same token, he is slow to forgive those – particularly critics – who cross him. 'If anything nasty's said, that's it,' he says. 'I don't want to know. Some people say, "You should rise above that: they might like you but not your pictures."' But I don't understand that, because the pictures are part of you.'

Loyalest of all are his Bedlingtons – the elegant, woolly-coated terriers that he has celebrated again and again in his paintings. At present there are four dogs, each with its own Aitchison-designed cushion in front of the single-bar radiator in his sitting-room. He also used to have canaries, but couldn't bear to keep them in a cage, 'So I let them out, and there was a couch tat was worn, and they took all the stuffing out and made a nest and had eggs and young ones.'

Controversially, he has even included the Bedlingtons in his many paintings of the Crucifixion. ('It makes them look sadder,' he once explained, 'if there's an animal there getting in a state.') His fascination with Christ's Passion dates back to his schooldays, when Glasgow Corporation made the headlines by paying a large sum for a crucifixion scene by Salvador Dali. 'I went to see it, and although it was a long time after that that I started painting crucifixions, it stuck in my mind. It [Christ's Passion] is a horrific story, and I think more worth trying to say something about than anything that's happened since.'

The novelist Candia MacWilliam, who has twice used his paintings for her book jackets, describes him as ‘a painter of the sublime and how it saturates things in a secular or religiously corrupt time’. But while he says he has always believed in God, Aitchison dislikes being called a ‘religious’ painter: ‘I don’t know what it means. I think if you *think* you’re religious, it’s a bit conceited. Perhaps the Pope is religious – but it doesn’t seem to me an important enough word for him.’

He refuses commissions for portraits because, he says, clients always want to be shown as better-looking than they are. Any deviation from what he sees as the truth is anathema to him: he tells of a friend dismissing one of his rare self-portraits as flattering – ‘And I was in such a precarious state after she left that I slashed it to bits’. He likes painting black people because, he says, they are ‘completely unvain’ and yet love to pose and dress up.

With 50 years of painting behind him, Aitchison shows little sign of flagging. He paints – one might almost say religiously – every day (rising at 6.30 when he is in Italy); he has also recently been experimenting with hand-painted etchings, some of which will be on view in Edinburgh. The only thing that disturbs this routine is Wimbledon, to which he confesses a surprising addiction: ‘It’s completely irrational, isn’t it? Even though you don’t know the people, you get somehow involved with who you want to win. I can’t stand that one they all get so worked up about – Henman.’

He is, above all, a perfectionist. ‘You’ve always got to be getting it better,’ he says. ‘I suppose that’s why we go on. Sometimes you think, "I haven’t done anything that’s any good. I’ve done a few perhaps.” SO I look at my book and think, “Yes, I quite like that one.” But it will never really matter how many you do – you’re always going to be thinking you haven’t done any good ones. or you should be doing a better one. Let’s hope it’s always like

that, because when the day comes that it's not, you might as well pack up. If you thought you were good at what you did, it would be pointless.'

'Inspiration', like 'religious', is a word that Craigie Aitchison hates. ('It's a very arrogant word which people attribute to themselves.') But to meet him is to be inspired in the purest sense – and humbled – by his dedication to his vision. He may not see, like William Blake, the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower; but does see a bird of paradise in a glass budgerigar – and that, perhaps, is as close as any of us is likely to get.