



Figure 1. Lyons tea-shop exterior.



The Lyons Lithographs

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The 1940s was a decade dominated by war. So much so that the immediate post war years, at least until the Festival of Britain in 1951, have always seemed, in contrast, to be a dull, dour period. Without the mitigating circumstances of war the continuing austerity must have led to frustration and bitterness. Fifty years on, it is surprising how little is known of that period, or of the artefacts

produced at the time. This is not to say that nothing of interest was achieved; more that, in relation to the war and the new world of the 1950s, the late '40s seems a strange, quiet moment of transition.

The end of the Second World War was not marked by any change in the material conditions of life in Britain. Indeed, the privations and difficulties on



Figure 2. Lyons tea-shop interior with lithograph on wall.

the home front continued for several years. It is against this backdrop of rationing, dereliction, and power cuts that J. Lyons & Company Ltd commissioned a series of lithographs to decorate their tea-shops.

The Lyons tea-shop was a familiar sight on England's High Streets and thoroughfares. They offered teas, meals and refreshments to their customers in well appointed rooms. The waitresses, known affectionately as 'nippies' were renowned for their speed and helplessness. The rooms were both decent and informal and quickly became a resting and meeting place on many shopping trips. The location of the shops, adjacent to stores and railway stations, made them an integral part of English social life for the new suburban middle classes. The tea-shops disappeared in spectacular fashion at the end of the 1960s so that they are now hardly thought of. But, for 20 years or so, they were the social space on England's High Streets.

Lyons were prevented, by building regulations and limits, from redecorating their shops. Faced with the problem of adding colour and decoration to some 250 shops in London and the provinces they decided that a series of prints might do the job. Their solution was at once pragmatic and inspired.

Before the war, in 1937 and 1938, John Piper and Robert Wellington had published a series of prints called Contemporary Lithographs. These had successfully introduced artists to lithography and their prints to the public. An account of their enterprise is included in Pat Gilmour's *Artists at Curwen* published by the Tate Gallery in 1977. Another, more immediate, precursor to the Lyons scheme was that organised by Kenneth Clark at the National Gallery under the auspices of the War Artists' Advisory Commission. They published, in 1942 and 1943, lithographs to be exhibited for morale boosting purposes. There is obviously a sense in which the efforts of these forerunners made it easier for the Directors of Lyons to contemplate their own related venture.

Lyons called in Jack Beddington and Barnett Freedman to implement the scheme that would, hopefully, popularise the work of British artists and enliven the surroundings.

Lyons could hardly have chosen two better qualified people to assure the success of their scheme. Jack Beddington had, during the 1930s, been in charge of publicity at Shell-Mex. In an age before advertising agencies he had single-handedly instigated a poster campaign which made full use of the artistic talent available in Britain. Practically every artist of note produced work for Shell-Mex during that period. The work was printed by lithography and pasted on the sides of delivery

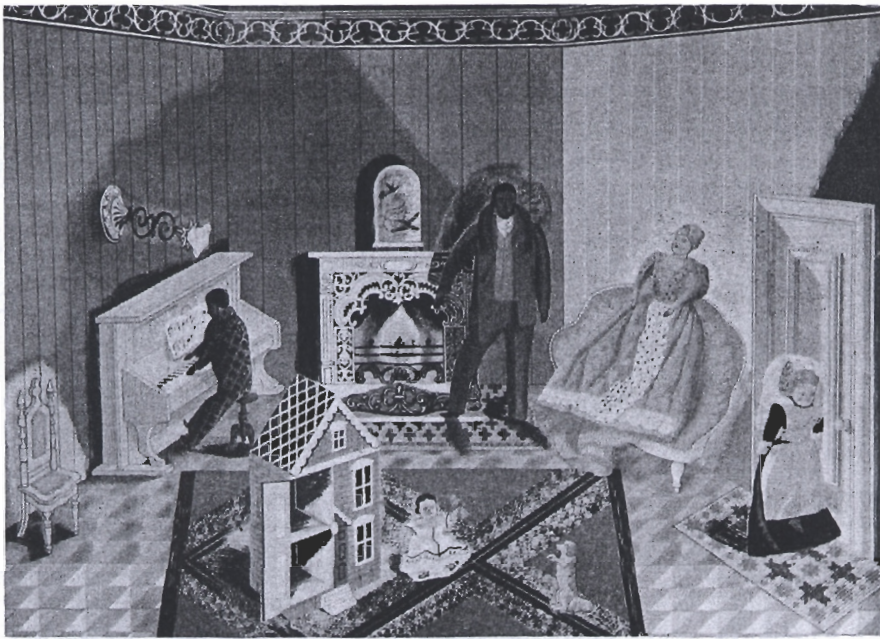


Figure 3. Edward Bawden, 'The Dolls at Home'.

Figure 4. Clifford and Rosemary Ellis, 'Teignmouth'.

Figure 5. Barnett Freedman, 'People'.



lorries as well as at Shell garages. Often the work shows some famous 'landmark' and the caption - 'Everywhere You Go, You Can Be Sure Of Shell'. Beddington was remarkable for not interfering and allowing the artists a certain autonomy. The result was a campaign that was modern but not revolutionary; traditional but not hidebound.

Barnett Freedman and Beddington were well known to each other as Freedman had produced work for Shell-Mex. In addition, both were members of the Double Crown Club, a dining club whose members were taken from the printing and artistic communities. The membership of the club, under the guidance of Oliver Simon, met for dinners and cricket outings in a spirit of informal conviviality. Freedman had trained at the Royal College as a painter and draughtsman, but during the 1930s was drawn toward printing, illustration and design. He immersed himself completely in the workshop traditions of the presses and was proud to consider himself a skilled artisan. Freedman was the only artist of that generation who mastered the technical skills of printing. His skill was such that the books illustrated with his auto-lithographed plates rank amongst the finest printed work of that decade. Freedman would certainly have acknowledged the debt he owed to Thomas Griffiths and Harold Curwen, at the Baynard and Curwen Presses respectively, for their help in his achieving this mastery.

With these two characters at the helm it is hardly surprising that the scheme progressed apace. Sixteen artists were approached to produce a painting or design that would be printed in quad-crown size: 30in. x 40in. They would be free to draw on the plates themselves, or their design would be transferred by skilled lithographers at the press. Lyons would own the original work and the copyright.

The firm of Chromoworks was chosen to undertake the printing. Edward Ardizzone, Edward Bawden, Anthony Gross, Edwin La Dell, John Nash and William Scott, in addition to Barnett Freedman, all worked at the press to produce auto-lithographs. The others had their designs lithographed by the press. Freedman's notes held in archive at Manchester Polytechnic Library show him overseeing the work in all its detail. The instructions to the artists were quite specific; seven plates were to be produced. The first would act as a key

Figure 6. Anthony Gross, 'Herne Bay Pier'.

Figure 7. George Hooper, 'Hotel Entrance'.

Figure 8. John Nash, 'Landscape with Bathers'.

and would be off-set on to the other six, which would then each be used for a different colour. It is these six-colour separations that give the prints their luxurious depth and distinguish them from the rather flat four-colour photographic reproductions from that period. Freedman advised that the first four plates be proofed before the final three plates were drawn and that 24 proofs be passed by the artist before the edition of 1,500 be run off. Because of the size of the prints special zinc plates were used rather than the traditional stone. Details of the work and its production were included in an imprint in the bottom margin.

On 21st October 1947 the prints were exhibited at The Trocadero in Piccadilly, London. The show was to have been opened by Sir Stafford Cripps, but the re-assembling of Parliament on that day caused him to withdraw. In his absence, Sir Ralph Richardson took on the task of opening the show which was honoured by a visit from Her Majesty Queen Mary.

The catalogue for the exhibition has a forward written by Philip Hendy who was Director of The National Gallery. He makes a strong case for the prints themselves, remarking on the pleasure and delight they afforded in a time of austerity and utility. Being mass-produced and bearing the unmistakable mark of human personality made them especially contemporaneous. These sentiments were echoed in the notes of James Laver which were included in the brochure sent to the shops.

The response of the public was, inevitably, mixed. In general, those who bothered to write to Lyons did so to congratulate them in terms of 'mental tonic', 'splendid uplift' and 'high praise'. In the shop customers grumbled about 'waste of money', 'drab pictures', and the cost of fruit cake. Few of the pictures themselves seem to have provoked comment except for William Scott's 'Birdcage' which some speculated was drawn by a child of eight. Ardizzone's 'The Railway Station' reminded the public of queuing, whilst number 9 in the series, Mary Kessel's 'Flight into Egypt', seems to have been disliked for an unspecified reason notwithstanding its bold use of colour.

No records exist that substantiate the success of the scheme. Lyons felt able to produce a further series of twelve prints in 1951 and in 1955. It is unclear whether this was in response to demand or a reflection of the prolonged period of austerity suffered in Britain. Only one print seems to have sold out

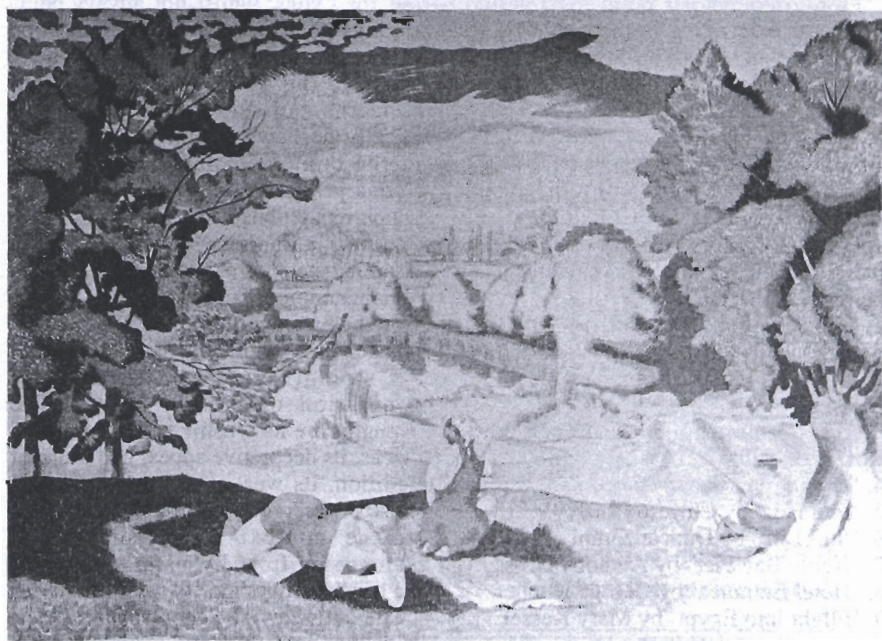
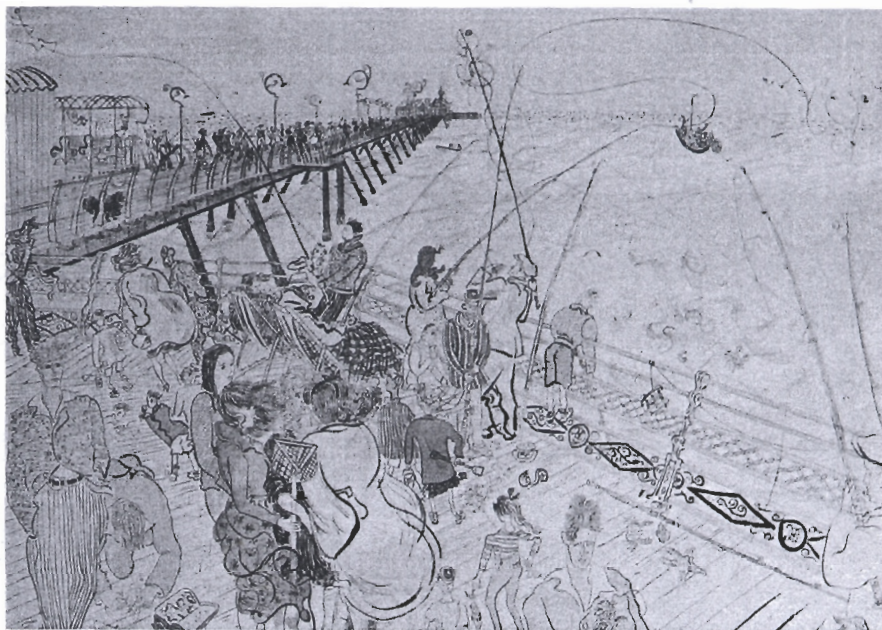




Figure 9. Laurence Stephen Lowry, 'Industrial Scene'.

immediately, that of 'Herne Bay Pier' by Anthony Gross. The prints cost 15s.9d; this included a purchase tax but postage was extra.

We can only speculate at the number of these prints that remain, but I would suggest that there are fewer than expected. In the first instance, all those exhibited in shops will have been destroyed as they were pasted direct on to the wall. This will account, conservatively, for a third of the edition. The remainder exist if they were sold to the public. However, few homes or businesses would have gone to the expense and difficulty of framing them and so the same applies as before. Unframed and loose, the prints would have little chance of surviving intact being of so large a size.

From a collector's point of view the prints are interesting in their own right, as examples of a type and quality of work that has all but disappeared. More importantly, they provide an opportunity to examine what artists were up to in Britain during the 1940s.

Individual copies of Lyons Lithographs are available at auction and from specialist dealers. A checklist of the prints published in 1947 is presented below:

1. 'The Railway Station' by Edward Ardizzone
2. 'The Dolls at Home' by Edward Bawden
3. 'Teignmouth' by Clifford and Rosemary Ellis
4. 'People' by Barnett Freedman
5. 'Fun Fair' by Clifford Frith
6. 'Still Life' by Duncan Grant
7. 'Herne Bay Pier' by Anthony Gross
8. 'Hotel Entrance' by George Hooper
9. 'Flight into Egypt' by Mary Kessel

10. 'Hastings' by Edwin La Dell
11. 'Les Lecques Bay' by John Lake
12. 'Industrial Scene' by Laurence Stephen Lowry
13. 'Landscape' with Bathers by John Nash
14. 'The Birdcage' by William Scott
15. 'Billiards Saloon' by Ruskin Spear
16. 'Albert Bridge' by Carel Weight

The biographical details of these artists are well known. Most are listed in Frances Spalding's *Dictionary of 20th Century British Painters**.

The 40 years since the publication of these prints has seen several reputations made. It is clear that Grant, Lowry, Nash and Scott can now be counted amongst our most important artists. The reputations of the others are also, mostly, in the ascendant. The work they did for Lyons, whilst not always being amongst their best, is a clear indication of the esteem in which they were held. Mostly, the work is indicative of concerns and subjects more systematically dealt with during long careers. In the context of these careers, the Lyons prints are hardly the works on which reputations hang. However, in the context of their time and the circumstances of their production they remain an important series. The more so, with the passing of time.

Taken as a whole, the series illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of a generation of British artists. The strengths are its sensitivity to people and places, its decorative appeal and sense of tradition. Its weaknesses derive from a sense of reserve, even of a holding back. In the context of a commercial commission from Lyons these feelings are hardly surprising.

The activities of School Prints Ltd, a

company which published two series of prints in 1946 and 1949, makes an interesting comparison with Lyons. The company was founded by Brenda Rawnsley who enlisted the help of Herbert Read and Thomas Griffiths to supervise the production of prints suitable for the decoration of schools. Twenty-four prints were produced in a first English series which was sent to several thousand subscribers. The success of the venture prompted Mrs Rawnsley to attempt a European series with prints by Braque, Dufy, Leger, Matisse, Miro, Moore and Picasso. The resulting lithographs proved too advanced for English taste and failed to sell. Abstraction was still obviously regarded as dangerously foreign and subversive. School Prints never really recovered from this although the company continued into the 1970s. The commercial reality of the art market in the 1940s vindicates the traditional, narrative content of the scenes favoured by Lyons.

The Lyons series of lithographs are part of a movement that, along with the nascent Arts Council, introduced art to a much wider public through travelling exhibitions and by effectively colonising public spaces for exhibition. The political agenda of post war Britain sought to create a new society; at the same time a parallel cultural movement sought to create a new modernist landscape of architecture, space and art in new communities. This vision was best expressed in the arrangement of the South Bank site for the Festival of Britain in 1951. By that time a fundamental change in society had occurred and it is for contributing to that change that the Lyons lithographs deserve to be remembered.

Various exhibitions of the Lyons prints have been held. The most recent and most complete was held at The South London Gallery in 1977. Single prints and designs have been included in retrospective shows when appropriate but, generally, the series remains scarcely known and little seen.

I should like to thank Yvonne Walker at J. Lyons and Co Ltd for her help with the documentation and photographs for this article. Also, I should like to thank Ian Rogerson at Manchester Polytechnic Library for making available the relevant parts of the Freedman Archive.

**Dictionary of 20th Century British Painters and Sculptors by Frances Spalding is published by the Antique Collectors' Club at £45.00. You may order this book on page 56.*