

Eric Estorick: The making of an art collector

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Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art Gino Severini's "Quaker Oats - Cubist Still Life," 1917.

At rare intervals, exhibitions lift the veil over the secretive ways of those who live for art and sustain themselves through the ambiguous relationship they strike with it.

The story of Eric Estorick, whose feats are celebrated by a show of 20th-century Italian art on view at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art in North London until April 6, falls somewhere between a dark humorous tale by Evelyn Waugh and a fantasy straight out of one of P. G. Wodehouse's spoofy novels.

In 1905, Eric's Russian parents, fed up with the anti-Semitism of their native land, emigrated to America and settled in Brooklyn, New York.

The father found work in a paint factory. There Stage One of the American dream began for the Estoricks. He devised a machine producing impeccable color sample cards and amassed a pile. In 1913, baby Elihu ("Ely" to his parents) was born. In keeping with Jewish tradition, the boy was encouraged to go to New York University where he spent as much time discovering the dizzying intellectual life of leftist circles as he did studying.

Young Estorick's encounter with the American photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who had opened the 291 Gallery on Fifth Avenue, was the prelude to Stage Two in the family's American dream. Stieglitz displayed the art of European avant-garde painters among whom the Italian Futurist Gino Severini left an indelible impression on the student.

The student experienced his second visual shock as he visited the Gallery of Living Art at Washington Square College, where the collection of Eugene Gallatin was on loan with works by Picasso, Braque, Matisse and the early Surrealists. Fascinated, he returned again and again.

In his unpublished memoirs quoted in the exhibition book by Roberta Cremoncini, director of the Estorick Collection, Eric paints an unflattering picture of himself: "I was overweight, my legs were slightly bowed, I wore eye glasses." He became a political writer. By 1938, he was a lecturer in sociology at New York University, a position he kept until 1941, when he left for England to research a book, "Stafford Cripps: Prophetic Rebel."

So committed was the leftist intellectual to his subject that he returned to England after World War II to write a second book, "Stafford Cripps: A Biography," but once again art caught up

with him. In post-World War II Europe, where contemporary drawings cost next to nothing, the writer turned dealer feverishly snapped up sketches by Picasso, Braque, Gris, Léger.

Traveling home on the Queen Elizabeth, Elihu who now called himself Eric, met Salome Dessau. The young woman's German parents who had fled the tidal wave of anti-Semitism in 1932 were textile manufacturers in Britain. Salome had studied art in London, focusing on textile design. Within 10 days of their landing in New York, Eric proposed to her. They married weeks later and went off on a six-month-long honeymoon to Arosa, Switzerland, where all the strands in Eric's life came together.

Salome befriended Peggy, the daughter of the then Sir Stafford Cripps, who introduced the couple to her art teacher Arthur Bryks. Passionate about avant-garde art, Bryks showed Eric Umberto Boccioni's book on Futurism with illustrations by Severini, Giacomo Balla and other artists. Eric raved and decided to travel to Milan with his new friend.

Bryks took him to the studio of Mario Sironi who showed them pictures covering more than 30 years of his career. The dealer's excitement rings in his memoirs: "I just bought hundreds of drawings, and as many pictures as I could get into my Packard convertible Roadster." For weeks, Eric sifted the hoard, working out a chronology.

A year later the American was back in Italy. This time, he met Massimo Campigli. The painter, who spoke impeccable English, was punctual and had a businessman's acumen. Hugely impressed, Eric started buying Campigli's work. Soon, the Estoricks and Campigli were best friends and the painter threw open the doors of Italian artistic circles for the dealer.

Campigli introduced the Estoricks to Zoran Music. A very private man, Music stood apart in the contemporary art crowd. Despite the lifelong friendship that would bind him to the Estoricks, he never asked Eric to watch him at work in his studio, as Sironi and Campigli did. The only chance that the mortified dealer ever got to observe Music's creative process was when the two sat together on the beach where Music endlessly sketched rocks.

The Estoricks' holdings in contemporary art became huge. In the 1950s, the dealer started promoting his "collection" around Britain. Exhibitions were organized with the help of the Arts Council, notably a show put together at the Wakefield Art Gallery in Yorkshire. To this end, Eric traveled several times to Italy, buying drawings. In 1950 he had managed to buy an important still life of 1917 by Severini in which Cubist stylization is somehow combined with the sense of movement that runs through Futurism. In 1954, the year of the show, Estorick acquired Balla's "The Hand of a Violinist" from Alex Reid & Lefèvre, a famous London gallery. That, his son Michael reports in a superbly written chapter in the book, "Eric Estorick: A Son's Angle," cost £300.

In 1956, Eric pulled off the coup of a lifetime in persuading the Tate to hold an exhibition of "Modern Italian Art from the Estorick Collection," which later traveled to several European and American venues. Cremoncini assures that Eric "was initially against the show consisting exclusively of works from his collection, but the Arts Council - mostly for financial reasons - was adamant that this should be the case." If his dealer brethren ever heard Eric uttering these words, their laughter must have rumbled through the museum. Cremoncini goes on: "so the Estoricks embarked on another spending spree in Italy adding several works to their collection." Some "collection."

Michael Estorick, when describing how the foundation was set up by the family after Eric's death, wryly notes: "The collector and dealer form an unholy alliance, glued together by a mutual suspicion." Citing his father's words that he would have loved to keep all the works he ever bought and would never have been a dealer if he had had enough money, Michael lucidly comments: "conveniently forgetting that he was a dealer from the very beginning and would temperamentally never have been otherwise."

Because he lived in the intimacy of one, the dealer's son hints here at a truth that is rarely spelled out. Selling art, if it is to be successful, is more than a profession, it is an attitude to

life. As often as not, this is a way of dealing with society by those who live on its edges. For them, it is about settling scores. They are the ones with the better eyes, the sharpest minds.

Great dealers expose in imagination - doing so publicly would be commercially counterproductive - the inferior knowledge of those who have millions, and their naiveté in art transactions. Many art dealers come from minority communities or are the sons of émigrés who had a hard time, or rebelled at school and botched their studies. They are snipers who shoot at society by making artistic coups. In this respect, they resemble collectors who feel much the same about museums.

Ironically, great dealers and collectors sometimes make their peace with the enemy by joining him. In order to secure their place in eternity, they bequeath art to a museum, or build one. Others, however, are more ambivalent about it.

Eric certainly bought much that was museum-worthy. He spotted masterpieces that escaped the attention of others - Boccioni's 1907 sketch in charcoal of a seated woman; Sironi's landscape done in oil on paper around 1924, Giorgio Morandi's little known etchings, from "Savena Landscape" (1929) to "Still Life with Drapery" (1931). But, as his son puts it, "Were he to visit the collection in Canonbury Square, he would undoubtedly be very proud of what has been done in his name, but in his life he was never very clear about what he wanted."

Asking rhetorically "What made Eric a great collector?" Michael Estorick concludes: "a wonderful eye, timing, foresight, energy." And that neatly sums up what it takes to be an art hunter, whether as a dealer or a collector.

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