

LONG AGO AT THE SLADE

LEARNING TO DRAW WHILST TONKS LOOKED OVER YOUR SHOULDER

From A Correspondent

When I was 17 my father, knowing little about art schools and full of the belief that I was destined to become successful artist, consulted Frank Brown, the architect, on the subject and was told that there was only one art school in the country worthy of the name and that was the Slade School. It was utter waste of time sending a young fellow anywhere else. And because my father had vaguely heard the name of the Sade School before and because Frank's brother Fred was the head professor there, he decided that this was the place for me.

Now, my mother's uncle was a celebrated illustrator of Dickens's works and I had been brought up to venerate his name and to respect and imitate his drawings. Further, I had given myself a very severe training in the study of the volumes of Punch, and for me at this period and for some years later the goal was to become a regular contributor to that journal.

The day came, then, when I was taken by my father to interview Professor Frederick Brown at the Slade. I was a very shy boy and the interview was something of an ordeal to look forward to. I took with me some specimens of my drawings, chiefly pen-and-ink, and oh horrors ! of a humorous nature. These were, of course, highly thought of by my family and my father produced them with some show of pride.

The professor looked at them. He was a lean man with grey, waving hair, moustache and a small imperial that concealed, or perhaps, tried to explain a rather prominent square jaw. He did not seem to be either favourably impressed or even amused by my efforts. We waited. At length he asked, in a rather weary voice: " What does your boy want to do?" My father replied: " He wants to be a black-and-white artist." Brown seemed profoundly depressed and, after a pause said with a sigh, " It's a life of great...MISSING TEXT... said: "I think Ernest is prepared for that."

It was arranged that I should join at the Slade and we left, feeling, I think a little crestfallen.

I enjoyed my life at the Slade, although it proved to be quite the wrong school for training a black and white artist, as that class of work seem to be thoroughly despised, I learnt a very great deal; and it was there, I suppose that my education really began. I found myself among enthusiasts to whom art really mattered, young men who read and discussed books and talked about poets and poetry as if they were something that was real and vital. There were many students there who has since become distinguished men.

Henry Tonks was the tremendously forceful assistant professor there. He was admired and greatly feared by men and women students alike. He was enormously stimulating and at the same time could be completely crushing. He would enter the life room with brisk, alert step, is tall, gaunt figure, erect carriage, lean, pronounced features and nose which resembled the beak of a flamingo, all decidedly impressive and not a little terrifying.

Arrived at the student whose turn it was for a lesson, he would seek himself on the donkey – the low stool furnished with the support for the drawing board – look for a few alarming moments at the work in front of him, and then, sweeping his head round slowly, back and forth in the manner of the search light sweeping the sky, he would probably give voice to some all too clearly expressed opinion about the complete worthlessness of one's work. Perhaps he would preface his remarks with hey Grant, as if to rouse the attention of the whole room and then exclaim: "I don't know how you justify your existence!"

He was not always so dashing, and I remember my astonishment at hearing him say to the student next to me: "well! I can't teach you anymore about drawing. Your drawing is very good indeed. You know all I can teach you!"

It was always a mistake to try to show off one's intelligence to Henry Tonks and I think I often made this blunder. Mr Russell, another teacher, later so Walter Russell R.A., had said to me in his sad hesitating voice as he looked at my work: "I think you are too conscientious." In a rash moment, trying to show an alert mind and wishing to break the awful silence of Tonks as he Grimley examined my drawing one day, I repeated this remark to him and foolishly asked him what Russell meant. Tonks looked around the class in his searchlight manner until he was sure the other students were listening and then exploded, as it were, into the surrounding atmosphere, the words: "well, really – I can't tell you what Mr Russell means by his remarks! You must ask him yourself!" On other occasions, with equal emphasis, he told me: "you talk like a book!" And "you talk just like a woman!"

I recall what a thrill it was in my last term when he led me from my easel up to a drawing by Ingres that was hanging on the wall, in order to illustrate some point in his talk, addressing me as if I were a brother artist. His methods were certainly not gentle. He had been trained as a surgeon and believed in the use of the knife. His cutting remarks were salutary and were never ill meant and I remember the constellation on his face when a girl is student, unable to bear his criticisms any longer, suddenly rushed from the antique room where I was that day working, sobbing as she went: "I, I think you're very unkind."