



From paint to page

The New English Art Club celebrates 125 years with paintings to savour, and a series of notable publications pay tribute to talented artists and dealers



Fig 1: *Rajastani Man*, mixed-media by Madeline Fenton

THE Critics' Lunch of the New English Art Club (NEAC), which takes place towards the end of November during the annual show at The Mall Galleries, is one of the pleasantest occasions in the calendar. The generous cold buffet is supplied by the members—they do not stint—and the company is excellent. It is, of course, a very happy way to view the 10-day-long show, which is open to public submission, as well as to the 70 or so members.

This year, the club (and it prides itself on being clubbable rather than coldly associative) celebrates its 125th anniversary, and so is not as New as it was. The art on offer accepts that people may wish to enjoy it rather than be 'challenged' as the current cliché has it, and it is a haven for values that are not always observed at the RA or more fashionable areas of the market. One of my favourite paintings this year was a recent work by one of the older members, William Bowyer, patriarch of a talented clan. This 23in by 19in *Path to the Bell Hotel, Walberswick* (Fig 2) was a reminder of happy holidays. Another thing that took my fancy was an 11in by 9in mixed-media study *Rajastani Man* (Fig 1) by Madeline Fenton. The NEAC



Fig 2: *Path to the Bell Hotel, Walberswick*, by William Bowyer, at the New English Art Club show

runs a valuable drawing school, and www.newenglishartclub.co.uk is well worth visiting, both by potential pupils and by buyers, even after the end of the show, which closed on December 5.

Last week, I mentioned the exhibition of David Russell's woodworking tools at Bernard Shapero in St George Street (to December 11) (Fig 3). Now to the

catalogue *Antique Woodworking Tools: Their Craftsmanship from Earliest Times to the 20th Century*, published by John Adamson at £90. This is a superb achievement, with more than 1,500 tools beautifully photographed by James Austin. Mr Russell was apprenticed to a joiner in Kendal before setting up his own successful building

firm, and his first love was a Norris plane that he was forbidden to touch. Now, he has more than 200 examples, and his interests widened to almost any craftsman's tool displaying quality and fitness to purpose. There are Continental and American as well as British examples, and Mr Adamson, himself knowledgeable on the subject, has contributed a valuable essay. There are paragraphs on tool types, makers and firms, and also the social history that produced particular designs.

Other books that have come my way recently include two memoirs of the antiques trade, with rather different perspectives. Molly Freeman, who traded under the name of Harriet Wynter, was the doyenne of the antique scientific instrument trade, with shops in Brighton and later the King's Road. In her early days,



Fig 3: A selection of plumb-lines from *Antique Woodworking Tools*



Fig 4: *Coastal Scene*, 1979, by Sheila Fell, shown at Otter Waterman



Fig 5: *Skiddaw*, 1964, by the subject of Sheila Fell, *A Passion for Paint*

the trade was largely male-dominated, and, as a divorced single mother, she needed to be both tough and lucky to succeed as she did. From retirement in the South of France, she looks back over a long career with wisdom and humour. She reminds us that there are two kinds of knowledge: intellectual won from books, and experiential given by life. The latter 'is part of oneself; a mixture of experience and the faculty of intuition, which shortcuts decision-making'. That encapsulates what is needed to

be a great dealer, which she was. Harriet Wynter's *The Price of Every Thing* is published by The Grimsay Press at £16.95.

Lanto Syngé's self-published *Telling Tales* is a small limited edition, so to get a copy you will have to make up to the man himself. He subtitles it 'Anecdotes of family, antique dealing on Bond Street and collecting textiles', and it is a genial conversation that is typical of him. At times during the 20th century, Mallett, under his colourful predecessors, acquired a justified

reputation for over-much 'surgery' on its furniture and works of art. When he came to head the business, he made sure that ceased. I much enjoyed reading this, as, in many ways, our careers have run parallel, from Co Wicklow and Co Dublin to the West End.

In *Sheila Fell, A Passion for Paint* by Cate Haste (Lund Humphries, £35) is a very different career, that of a talented artist who died aged only 48 in 1979. It was launched with a loan exhibition at Offer Waterman's Chelsea gallery, which will move to the Abbot Hall Gallery in Fell's native Cumbria on April 8, 2011. She was a friend and contemporary of Frank Auerbach, whose introduction says: 'A fitting book was necessary. Here it is, and about time too.' Fellow Cumbrian Miss Haste has done a splendid job on the colourful life of Fell—one of the youngest ever RAs—and

should further the revaluation of her work (Figs 4 and 5).

I wonder what Fell would have made of the Frasers of Bedfordshire. The eccentric Victorian watercolourists shared her love of place and her enjoyment of partying, and they also had the enjoyment of winter in common. At their best, the Frasers' landscapes have a heightened realism that perfectly fits the melancholy beauty of the Fens (Fig 6). The numerous painters with their confusion of names have also long deserved a book, and Charles Lane's *The Fraser Family*, published at £40 by Chris Beetles, a dealer who has eagerly promoted their work, finally untangles them. Just as Cumbria belongs to Fell, so, once one knows them, is it difficult to see the Fens other than through the Frasers' eyes. ↘

Next week Surprising finds

Private Collection, UK

Pick of the week

Mention of Offer Waterman leads naturally to Jenna Burlingham, who was a director of the gallery until earlier this year. She left in the summer to set up her own gallery (www.jennaburlingham.com) dealing in modern and contemporary British pictures, sculpture, ceramics and furniture, with a price range from £50 to £20,000, in Kingsclere, Hampshire. Hungerford is known for antiques and Newbury for auctions and theatre, but she noticed a gap for a gallery in the area. Her opening show includes work by established favourites such as Craigie Aitchison, Mary Fedden, Elisabeth Frink, Barbara Hepworth, John Piper (below), Patrick Heron and Julian Trevelyan. In an upstairs gallery will be less expensive work by 20th-century and contemporary artists and craftsmen whose reputation has yet to grow. Among them are ceramics by Laurence McGowan and Andrew Hazelden, and prints by André Bicat, with new work by Madeleine Floyd, Jane Skingley and Liz Taunt.



Fig 6: *The Ouse, Bedford from Newenham*, 1886, by Arthur Fraser