



Burra, Edward (1905-1976)

by Caryn E. Neumann

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Edward Burra, a British illustrator and stage designer, depicted the possibility of gay sexual encounters in his drawings and watercolors of the urban underworld.

Edward John Burra, eldest son of barrister Henry Curteis Burra and Ermentrude Anne Robertson-Luxford, was born on March 29, 1905 in South Kensington, London, England. He left school at thirteen because of a combined attack of anemia and rheumatic fever.

Burra's parents worried that their son was too sickly for a regular job and encouraged his artistic interests. After studying art at home, Burra attended the Chelsea Polytechnic (1921-23) and the Royal College of Art (1923-25).

Burra was not openly gay, but he visited gay bars, had gay friends, and possessed a camp sensibility. He met the dancer and theatrical director William Chappell at Chelsea and the two were apparently lovers although they never lived together. Burra may also have been involved with artist Paul Nash in the 1920s.

Burra, from an upper-class family, had a fascination with the lower class and with the urban underworld. He loved to spend hours in sailors' cafes and brothels in Mediterranean port cities, especially in France. He visited New York in 1933-34, where he became fascinated with black culture and the Harlem scene.

Typically featuring sailors, his early works portrayed clearly outlined and modeled forms and an absence of atmosphere. The intricately detailed and vivid watercolor *Toulon* (1927) is among the best of his works from his early period. Burra usually used watercolor and tempera and occasionally collage oil paints.

Burra's most famous work, *John Deth* (1932), shows his interest in the bizarre. Created in honor of poet Conrad Aiken, who had lost both parents at age eleven in a murder-suicide, the painting depicts a party. The scythe-bearing Grim Reaper is in attendance, and he is striking down guests, much to the horror of one man who dips his partner in a dance at the moment that he recognizes the presence of Death. The faces and figures are distorted in a nightmare characterization typical of Burra's work.

Burra gained a following with his first one-man show at London's Leicester Galleries in 1929. Participation in the avant-garde Unit One exhibition in London in 1934 cemented his reputation as one of the best modern artists. Burra took ideas from Cubism, Dada, and, especially, Surrealism but remained independent.

Captivated by Spanish civilization, Burra focused his attention in the 1930s on Spain. In Granada in 1933, he witnessed the outbreak of violence that preceded the Spanish Civil War. Brutality and destruction, deprivation and poverty became frequent subjects in his art.

During World War II, Burra was unable to travel. Necessity forced him to focus on English subjects. Very large landscapes dominated his work during the rest of his career. Joining together several sheets of paper, Burra painted watercolors that featured sparse lines and broad washes of color.

With many friends in the theater and ballet, Burra became a stage designer in the 1930s. He received a steady stream of commissions for set and costume designs for Covent Garden, Sadlers Wells, and elsewhere between 1932 and 1958. He designed five ballets and an opera, including Frederick Ashton's "Rio Grande" (1931), Ninette de Valois's "Barabau" (1936), Robert Helpmann's "Miracle in the Gorbals" (1944), Bizet's *Carmen* (1947), Ashton's "Don Juan" (1948), and de Valois's "Don Quixote" (1950).

After World War II Burra resumed his travels, including several trips to the United States, where he again depicted scenes of the urban underworld.

While Burra very rarely draws explicitly gay scenes or subjects, a homoeroticism pervades his work, perhaps because in his depictions of urban nightlife, sexual liaisons of various kinds are always a possibility.

Burra's drawings and watercolors inspired by the cabaret, the music hall, and the theater have earned him comparison with the German artist George Grosz, with whom he shared a similarly satirical wit and a sharp eye for the revealing detail.

Burra was made a Commander of the British Empire in 1971, and his works are included in most of the major British collections. His reputation may be somewhat deflated because he rarely worked in oils, preferring his own technique of thickly applied watercolor.

Plagued by arthritis and poor health, Burra died on October 22, 1976 in Hastings, England.

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