

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Collector of Surrealism: Roland Penrose

2016

[05:44]

Interviewer:

What do you think have been the most important influences in your life?

Roland Penrose:

To begin with, of course, Quakerism and, I suppose, after that, Surrealism.

Antony Penrose:

I think what drew Roland to Surrealism was that fundamental to the surrealist beliefs was the importance of peace and freedom and justice, and Roland was brought up as a Quaker. He never ever rejected the Quaker values of peace and freedom and justice, and those fitted perfectly with the surrealist ideals.

Roland became a surrealist by marriage, if you like, because he met and fell in love with a surrealist poet who was called Valentine Bouet. And she introduced him to the leaders of the movement who were blazing this fantastically exciting trail with this art movement that was way beyond an art movement, it was a way of life. And that, I think, really excited Roland and he became a surrealist artist.

Roland Penrose:

They were mostly a very vigorous, boisterous group of young people who were very excited about the new ideas that were coming chiefly from Breton, Eluard, Tzara. And so my life from the seclusion, the cloistered seclusion, of Cambridge began to change rather rapidly.

Interviewer:

And Max Ernst was your introduction to the surrealist group?

Roland Penrose:

Yes, an odd thing happened there, too, because looking round the studio I saw a picture hung rather high up on the wall. It was a big white canvas with a big blue splodge on it, and underneath the blue splodge it had 'Ceci est le couleur de mes rêves' (this is the colour of my dreams), and I went away thinking Max has really opened doors into a new world, the world of dreams, the world of the imagination. It wasn't until some years later that I discovered that that picture was not by Max at all, it was by his neighbour Miró.

Antony Penrose:

He was able to acquire works by people like Max Ernst really at mates' rates, support buying those who were having a really hard time, but he never set out to become a collector. He describes in his biography the collection that collected itself. It was him really taking the opportunity of that thing that the surrealists' love - chance - and running with it at the time.

Roland Penrose:

Surrealism became a cause to me, almost, because Surrealism was not just a new school of painting, it was a way of life, which relied very much on spontaneity, the unconscious, and I had a feeling there should be much more human justice and human understanding in society in general.

Antony Penrose:

The early days of curating and presenting Surrealism in Britain were really fraught because the establishment hated it, and actually Roland rather liked this. I think he felt that if the establishment wasn't reacting, they were doing something wrong, they were missing the point.

Narrator:

A strange looking carving, by the modern sculptor Henry Moore, watches the arrival of a young lady whose comings and goings make news. The name is Lee Miller.

Antony Penrose:

Lee Miller moved in with him in 1939, and their household became a tremendously continuous party of all kinds of people, particularly in 1942 when the Americans showed up, and there were even guerrilla fighters and spies. Of course, nobody knew them as that at the time. I think being friends with this slightly stepped-back, rather shy, very British person was a surreal thing in itself because that person, that British, shy person was as committed to being a Surrealist as the rest of the French were, but he sure didn't look like it on the outside.

I think it was the enormous mixing of talent during the war years that inspired Roland to start the ICA. And it just continued like that but on a slightly more formal footing. And in that moment Roland began to make the switch from being a painter to being a curator. And that was a massive change in his life.

I think he gave up painting because he always compared himself harshly and unfavourably to his contemporaries. He felt he could never be as good as them, and the best thing he could do would be to promote their work. And it was a tremendously wonderful thing that he did because it caused a huge sea change in modern art in Britain at that time.

Mysterious voice:

Wider...

The road is wider than long.

Trees are thicker than tall.

Wells reached to the clouds.

Their blood is more solid than their bones

Bones, blood, blood...

Antony Penrose:

In 1949, the focus just shifted to Farley Farm House and people came at the weekends from all over the place, from all over the world, in fact, exchanging ideas and inventing things and putting exhibitions together. It was the most exciting time to be around, and it went on like that for a long time. In fact Roland was still encouraging young artists right up to when he died in 1984.