

# beaverbrook r t gallery

Bell's most important and influential friend was Kathleen Fenwick, former curator of prints and drawings of the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. She was responsible for selecting Bell's first prints in 1956 for international graphic art shows. From then on he exhibited in an increasing number of important European and American show cases.

Bell has always avoided regional style. Perhaps this was due to the fact that historical and contemporary major print shows were exhibited frequently in Vancouver, Seattle and San Francisco. Certainly after 1950, when he made his first visit to London, the artists whom he most admired were those to whom drawing was the fundamental element in art. Most of them were also printmakers: Jacques Villon, Max Beckmann, Oskar Kokoschka, Gaudier-Brzeska, Graham Sutherland and the earlier German expressionists. Bell was certainly influenced stylistically by these artists. They gave him a standard of quality against which he could measure his own work. He studied original prints. He supplemented this by the study of his fine library of catalogues and books on printmaking. He drew constantly. He finally acquired the rare qualities essential to the graphic artist. He developed a perceptive eye, a grasp of terse, frugal form and the extraordinary patience essential to woodblock and plate-making. Bell's subject matter reflects his isolation from vogue Canadian art.

Subject for him has usually been the starting point. Only indirectly has locale affected his vision. His drawings and prints of boats whether done in Vancouver, France or England are non-specific. The tidal marshes and sand dunes do the Pacific Coast, the gorse bushes of Cornwall, the arid landscapes of the British Columbia interior, the animal drawings of Rotterdam, San Francisco or London are fused into a single concept. Always the specific form is isolated from a particular setting. One dominant composition is singled out. One mood is caught.

Simplicity of vision is what is aimed at.

It is the archetype Bell strives for. The essence of a subject. There is an awareness that skeletal permanence underlies flux. What makes Bell's work important is the combination of magnificent drawing with the ability to love dispassionately at the same time. Only in his water colour landscapes - which are drawings and not paintings - are there romantic overtones, sometimes too obviously brooding and self-consciously emotional.

ALISTAIR BELL'S retrospective represents the specific, measurable achievements of 35 years. The methodical, sure development from an amateur enthusiast to an international printmaker seems even and consistent. Form, concept and refined technique appear to have emerged simultaneously and to have developed without struggle. Retrospective shows are fascinating but quite misleading.

The real process of Alistair Bell's maturation can never be presented visually. One chooses the best of a lifetime's work. The hesitations, mistakes, the barren, unfertile periods where self-doubt was stronger than conviction are integral to art and taken for granted.

What can never be assessed is the range and quality of the hundreds of drawings in pen, chalk and water colour which Bell destroyed in the late 1930's, in 1949 and again in 1959. Bell felt ruthlessness was mandatory, that he was his own best critic. Perhaps he was right. For 25 years his work was virtually unknown critically except among a small circle of graphic enthusiasts.

Sales for decades were negligible in spite of Bell's firm reputation by 1960. It is worth noting that the artist sold more work in the three year period 1967-1970 than he did in the previous thirty.

There are approximately 900 drawings and water colours, and 100 different prints extant which the artists produced between 1935 and 1970. The drawings, with a few exceptions, are all listed and dated. Complete records exist for each edition of prints; the number sold and the balance of the edition left to be printed is meticulously catalogued. While all Bell's drawings in public and private collections are known, the prints are scattered in Europe, the United States, Canada and Japan. Carefully filed in the artist's studio are most of the original blocks for his woodcuts, wood engravings and etchings.

Largely self taught, Alistair Bell was a serious, enthusiastic member of sketch clubs which flourished in Vancouver through the Depression into the fifties. Lawren Harris, of Group of Seven fame, one of the most influential Canadian artists, was a sincere patron and advisor. Bell associated with B.C. Binning, Gordon Smith and Jack Shadbolt who helped bring the West Coast School into prominence in 1955. Partly through choice he remained on the periphery of official art: his encounters with artists of some sophistication did, however, enlarge his horizons.

Occasional breaks in self-restraint, where the artist puts feeling before form, are seen in his early sensuous drawings of nudes and in the stark studies of dead birds, animals and plants.

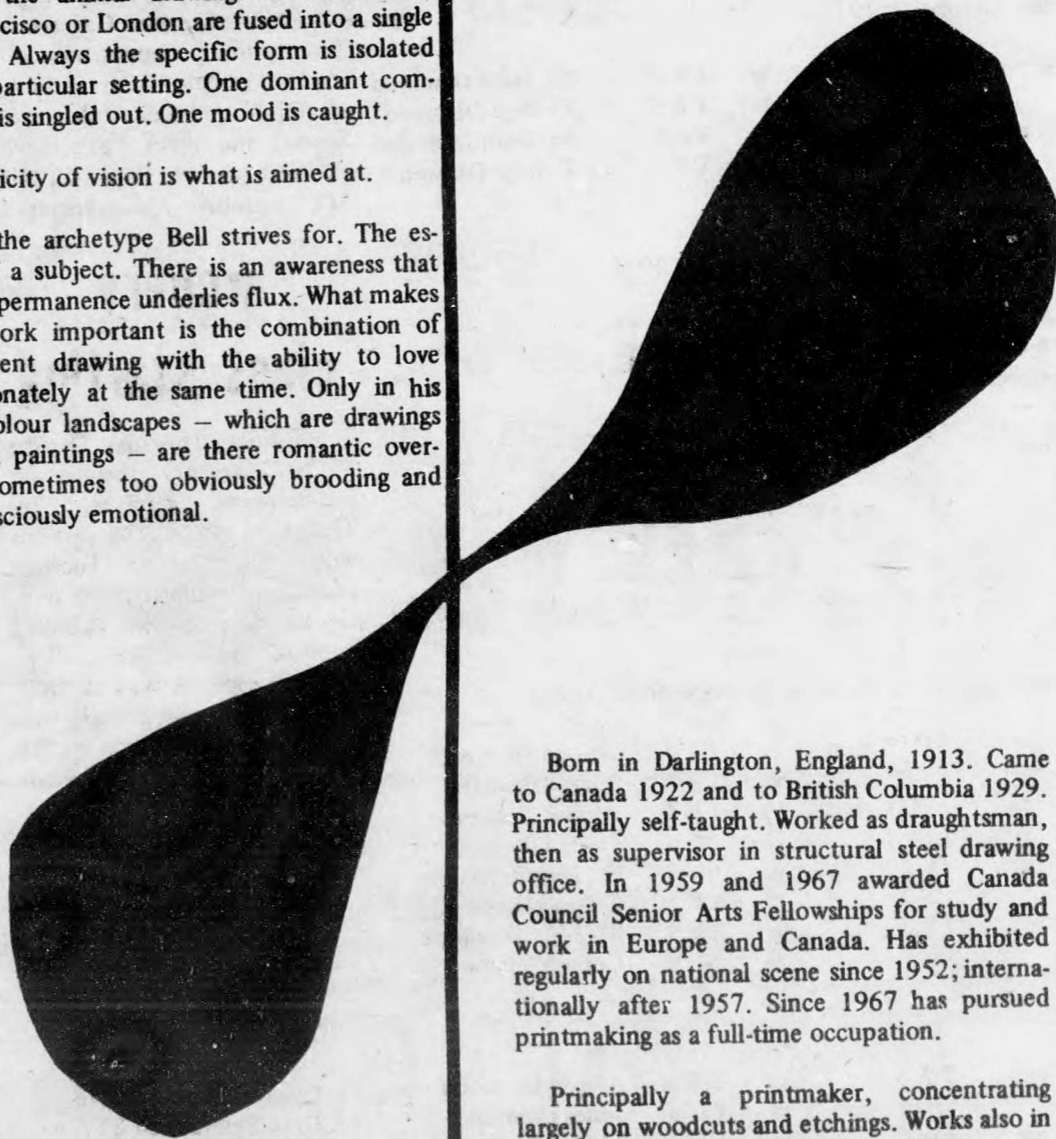
Otherwise as in his best zoo drawings he is able to grasp the heraldic quality of a bird or an animal which is congruent with the species as a whole. As far as I know there are few contemporary artists - certainly no Canadians - who have had the unlimited patience of Bell; few who have understood the laws of animal form and been able to recreate these in expressive prints. The texture of paper, wood and inks are unified with the subject.

Again and again Alistair Bell returns to his early drawings for his subject. Often there is a decade between a finished drawing and its use as subject for a woodcut or etching. Obviously in those drawings he has retained, the artist feels there is a uniqueness which he will never be able to realize again.

As a printmaker Bell works in the classic tradition. Only four or five woodcuts or ten etchings are pulled at one time. This often produces a richness and variety of inking within the same print. Some editions have been sold out, but the artist, regardless of circumstances, refuses to re-cut his plates or issue a second edition.

His simplicity shifts constantly; becomes more complex. Often there is a haunting, lonely grandeur. Bell's contemplative nature makes for quiet, often powerful experiences. The understatement pervades his art.

RICHARD SIMMINS



Born in Darlington, England, 1913. Came to Canada 1922 and to British Columbia 1929. Principally self-taught. Worked as draughtsman, then as supervisor in structural steel drawing office. In 1959 and 1967 awarded Canada Council Senior Arts Fellowships for study and work in Europe and Canada. Has exhibited regularly on national scene since 1952; internationally after 1957. Since 1967 has pursued printmaking as a full-time occupation.

Principally a printmaker, concentrating largely on woodcuts and etchings. Works also in water colour and most drawing media.