

Roy Oxlade

Painter who contradicted the traditional expectations of the artist as a bohemian rebel

The painter Roy Oxlade was a man of passionate contradictions, both in his art and in his life. A devout Roman Catholic, he was also master of a vocabulary that could turn even the atmosphere of the Royal College of Art blue. He seldom hesitated to use it — one of his pupils said it was like being taught by Gordon Ramsay. At the outset of his career he was a student with Bomberg at the Borough Polytechnic, 1951-52, and a great admirer — his PhD thesis at the RCA 24 years later was Bomberg and the Borough: An Approach to Drawing — yet he, uniquely among Bomberg's students, showed no hint of Bomberg's style in his mature work.

As this implies, he was always strongly independent in his behaviour. He was committedly left-wing in nearly all his views, dubious about the monarchy, passionately anti-militaristic, rootedly opposed to honours for artists or any way that the artist could forsake his natural calling to be a thorn in the side of the Establishment. Yet he contradicted the traditional expectations of the artist as a bohemian rebel by being the most devoted of husbands: he married fellow student Rose Wylie when they were both at Goldsmiths College in 1957. Years later it was widely noted, with some surprise, that they behaved like newly-weds, wandering round hand-in-hand and clearly preferring each other's company to anyone else's.

Oxlade was born in Tottenham in 1929, son of an engineer, and educated at Bromley Grammar School and, showing a strong artistic bent early on, at Goldsmiths College. It is not clear what his early works were like: by the time of his first solo show (which happened in Vancouver of all places) he was already more than a decade out of Bomberg's sphere of influence, and well on the way to his own distinctive style. In the context of the early Sixties this seemed rather akin to the contemporary work of some of the erstwhile St Ives abstractionists, particularly Roger Hilton, who had returned to a recognisably representational style, though approached from a naive or child-like point of view. The opposite, one would think, of Bomberg's highly sophisticated style, but Oxlade continued throughout his life to pay tribute to Bomberg's principles, which required an appearance of spontaneity underlaid by an intense awareness of overall design in a painting.

It was these ideas that he practised himself, and tried, with remarkable success, to inculcate in his own pupils. They were mostly mature students, notably at the adult education centres in Kent at Tunbridge Wells and Sittingbourne. His students universally adored him, though he was capable of giving them a rough ride if they did not measure up to his own high standards. How could one fail to warm, one of them said, to such a brave and lucid intellect who also painted like a child of genius and dashed around the Kentish lanes in a succession of red Renault sports cars?

Apart from the major retrospective at the Gardner of the University of Sussex which marked his seventieth birthday, he exhibited quite widely in London between 1985 and last year. Despite the kinship to Roger Hilton and Victor Willing perceptible in his mature art, he was inclined to dismiss British art in the 20th century as provincial and anaemic.

Along with poetry (he was especially devoted to T.S. Eliot), music was his great passion: he always painted with music in his ears, particularly Bach and Mozart. As to his artistic influences, the only contemporary artist he admitted to was the American Philip Guston, another abstractionist who had reverted to representation. In terms of visual impact, the connection between Guston's later work and Oxlade's seems very tenuous: Guston's is related mainly to Pop art, treating popular motifs in a cartoony manner, with perfect clarity, while Oxlade's, though similarly brightly coloured, is deliberately sketchy and apparently naive, handling a similar collection of motifs in an unmistakably child-like way.

Oxlade wrote prolifically on art for various magazines, and his collection of such writings in *Art and Instinct* (2010) has proved influential on a whole generation of would-be artists. Possibly because of his ancillary career as a teacher, his art has never had quite the public exposure and critical attention it should in all fairness have had — something he expected and accepted uncharacteristically with only moderate resentment.

He is survived by Rose Wylie, his wife of 57 years, a son and two daughters, and two grandchildren.

Roy Oxlade, painter and teacher, was born on January 13, 1929. He died on February 16, 2014, aged 85