

Eric Schilsky RSA

RSA Obituary by Ann Henderson RSA

Transcribed from the 1974 RSA Annual Report

Eric Schilsky was born in Southampton on 22nd October 1898. His father was the violinist Charles Schilsky, who was leader of the originator of Proms, Henry Wood's Queen's Hall Orchestra; his uncle Edouard Schilsky, who lived for a time in Paris and with whom Eric spent occasional holidays, was amongst other things a pianist. Possibly it is to those two very important people in his early life that Eric owed his deep love for and knowledge of music, which was as important to him as sculpture and painting.

He was educated initially at Haberdashers Askes School in London, followed by College de Genève. This background probably also nurtured the cosmopolitan in him. As soon as he could find the means, all his holidays were spent looking at sculpture and painting either in this country or on the Continent. He was equally at home in Paris, Florence, Venice, or Rome.

His art studies started when he was a boy at school in Geneva where he studied drawing, anatomy and sculpture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. On holiday in that city the year before he died, for the first time since he had been there as a boy, Eric visited the Ecole des Beaux Arts again and was touched and thrilled on being shown his student's card, still part of the filing system.

Later, he studied sculpture under Harvard Thomas at the Slade. His studies completed, he took up an appointment at the Westminster School of Art in London. It was during this period that many of his well-known portraits were made, including those of Ernest Thesiger, Kyra Nijinsky, Early Beatty and Gabrielle Saoene who was Modigliani's model. The latter, though his first portrait of a woman, he worked on quite recently, bringing to its completion all the experience and development of his lifetime.

Sickert was a good friend at the time, once insisting on Eric's portrait of his uncle Edouard being exhibited with his own paintings. He also had a habit of borrowing Eric's works, sometimes keeping them for a long time - indeed on one occasion Eric was called to Sickert's home to retrieve a work of his only a few minutes before the arrival of the bailiff.

During the First World War he served in Egypt and Palestine; his second World War service was spent in the Directorate of Camouflage under the Ministry of Home Security until 1945 when he was appointed Head of the School of Sculpture in the Edinburgh College of Art, a post he enjoyed until he retired in 1969. During this period, in 1952, he was elected A.R.S.A., becoming an Academician in 1956.

At his own request, he was transferred to the Honorary Retired List in 1973. He was honoured by the Royal Academy, London, being elected to Associateship in 1957 and a

full Academician in 1968. He was happy and contented with life in Edinburgh - indeed, he loved the city. On many occasions he was heard to say to students who yearned for the great art centres - "we are fortunate to live 400 miles from London - here we have peace to work, and yet the possibility of visiting any centre to look at works or exhibitions within a few hours of travel."

There is no doubt but that the full realisation of the formal values of sculpture, for which he is renowned, came to Schilsky during his years in Edinburgh. Students will remember his words - "basically, I would say that sculpture is the expression of man's emotions and spiritual aspirations conveyed by and externalised into the language of form, in a concrete medium."

He never moved away from figurative sculpture because he always felt that the most direct method of expressing the essence of Man came through the use of the image of Man as a vehicle. He was not so concerned with the body as anatomy but as the outward expression of a being with emotions and feelings. He often said - "a sensitive artist can make a good figure with little knowledge of anatomy, but if he is not first an artist, no amount of anatomical knowledge will help him."

His understanding of the expressive possibilities of form was profound. His work, never concerned with violence of movement, was rather the subtle juxtaposition of refined forms - arrangements of planes and masses within a unified basic form. Indeed, the spiritual power in his work was an almost unconscious quality on his part - it happened rather than was contrived.

While he seldom felt the need to accompany his own work with verbal explanation, he had, when teaching, the ability to reveal the most complex and sophisticated work of art in precise terms and was able to dispel some of the false mystique that sometimes surrounds art. He was a traditionalist in the sense that he was aware at all times of the high standards set throughout the history of sculpture and so able to distil many of those constant values in his own work.

A perfectionist who took a long time to complete a work, he was a learned artist not only in "know-how" but also in his understanding of certain chosen works of the past - Egyptian and Early Greek sculpture, the works of Rodin, Malliol, Despiau, the paintings of Renoir and the drawings of Degas.

He was not only a teacher to students - many a student was privileged to become his close friend - but, interested in all young people, he also made it his duty to help especially the less fortunate.

There is no doubt that he enjoyed his teaching at which he worked extremely hard, so cutting down tremendously on his own output of work; not to teach would have denied some part of his personality. To students he was modest and unassuming, constantly

encouraging quality in work - when necessary, a strong disciplinarian - and always full of humour.

He was the assessor of sculpture at the Royal College of Art, London, for several years and gave a teaching seminar at the Kennington School of Art. On one of his last visits abroad he went to Greece, where he visited the Academy Schools in Athens and was invited to address the students in the life-class. His talk, explaining the Classical Greek form, was given to the staff as well as to the students.

The brief account of the life and life's work of this distinguished Artist would be far from complete were there no mention of Eric's work as a draughtsman. Whether executed with point or brush, his work in two dimensions was invariably hall-marked with that same sensitivity which illuminated his sculpture.

While Schilsky never sought popularity, for long he had serious admirers and so received a number of commissions, both public and private. His works are in many collections - Stoke-on-Trent, Paisley and Aberdeen; Edinburgh Corporation has his well-known bust of Miss Jean Watson, founder of the "Jean Watson Bequest".

This year his work of "Patricia" was bought by the "Chantrey Bequest". It can with truth be predicted that sculpture such as Eric Schilsky's is bound to find its place in public estimation.

His wife, the painter Victorine Foot, and their daughter, Clare, survive him. He also leaves two sons, René and Ronald, from his previous marriage to Bettina Fenton. He is also survived by his elder and only brother, the actor, Austin Trevor.