

Artists unmasked

Jenny Lee speaks to Philip Vann, author of *Face to Face*, a book which takes a revealing look at some of the most influential artists of the 20th century...

YOU may be able to recognise the work of particular artists but the faces of the artists themselves often remain unknown. In a landmark publication, art critic Philip Vann unmasks around 200 artists, including Belfast's John Lavery, right, and John Luke. In *Face to Face* Vann confronts self-portrait, one of the most demanding and revealing of all artistic genres and discovers a range of artistic influences including art school, academicism, expressionism, the Euston Road School, kitchen sink and continental existentialism. The illustrations include superb examples of self-portraits by Gwen John, Walter Sickert, Stanley Spencer, Christopher Wood, John Minton, Francis Bacon and other major 20th century figures. Each portrait is accompanied by a text discussing the work in some detail, the artist's background and development and any relevant writings on the subject. "Self-portrait is something very unique and special. It gives a particular insight into the artists and brings up so many questions about self awareness and them coming to terms with their identity," Vann says. The core of the book is a detailed examination of 100 British self-portraits in the remarkable Ruth Borchard Collection. Borchard started collecting British self-portraits in the late 1950s, her interest spurred by viewing art school shows and the Young Contemporaries exhibitions of student art. With astonishing bravado, she set herself a ceiling of 21 guineas for any one picture, irrespective of the artist's fame, and usually succeeded.



the artist's name, and usually succeeded. Vann researched the book over a five-year period. "What struck me when researching the book was the richness and diversity in 20th century Britain and Ireland in terms of painting and sculpture," he says. Starting as a small commentary on the Borchard collection, the project constantly evolved to its present state, with Vann being asked at a late stage to make his own selection of artists. "It was a wonderful opportunity and experience to be given the freedom to make my own selection," says Vann, who had no hesitation in selecting Belfast artists Lavery and Luke. "It took me a while to work out his (Lavery's) portrait. At first I thought the background was a porthole on a ship. It is actually a litho with near-naked background swimmers reflected from an opposite wall in his studio." Vann says that Lavery's 1928 oil self-portrait was "a strikingly modern commission for an artist whose work, up to then, was known for its languid, nostalgic atmosphere." John Luke was born in Belfast in 1906 and

attended evening classes at the city's College of Art in 1923 while working as a shipyard riveter, before winning a prestigious art scholarship to the Slade School in London. His atmospheric oil self-portrait, *The Tipster*, in *Face to Face* dates to around 1928 and is held in a collection in The Ulster Museum. "John Luke is a wonderful artist. His portrait is a hypo-realistic picture. It has a sense of mystery surrounding it in a film-noir way," says Vann. The author corresponded with a number of artists and their families when researching his book. In emailing Luke's nephew, he discovered that the naming and use of props in this portrait was one of the artist's jokes as he was totally divorced from the world of gambling and "would never have indulged in placing even one single bet in his life". Vann's other selections included the very famous such as Gwen John, Stanley Spencer and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. "You get great pleasure doing a project like this with original research," he says.

Another heart-warming story he came across was of a budding artist turned legend of the art world. The man in question is lithograph printer David Freed. Vann managed to trace Freed, who is now a professor in print making at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. "He got a big surprise when I got in touch with him 40 years later. By coincidence he had just received a copy of a retrospective catalogue of his life's work." "He has gone on to become a renowned artist in the US and it's amazing to think that those five guineas Borchard paid him once paid his rent." Another artist who stands out is FN Souza. You get some indication of the nature of his self-portrait from the catalogue notes to his 1961 show at Gallery One in London, in which he wrote: "I leave discretion, understatement, discrimination to the finicky and lunatic fringe. "In any case, I have never counted the number of teeth I've drawn in grinning mouths. So what of a few extra eyes, fingers, etc?" *Face to Face* is not a book just for the art student or collector. "How people see themselves is part of the primal human characteristic and fascination," says Vann. "People respond to human faces and how people see themselves. For this reason I believe this book transcends the boundaries; that this is not solely for people interested in art or as a reference book on self-portraits."

■ The permanent display of Ruth Borchard's collection will go on tour later this year and will find a permanent home in 2007 in the new arts centre at Kings' Place, King's Cross, London. *Face to Face: British Self-Portraits in the 20th Century* is published by Sansom & Company.

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