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Michael Lyne (1912-1989)

A Christmas card from Michael and Jessie Lyne to Mrs. Frederick H. Warburg of Middleburg, Virginia in December of 1986 contained a letter from which the following excerpt read, "Dear Wilma . . . I love to be reminded of those days when Freddy got me going in America—it was the turning point in my life and I will be forever grateful . . ." The year was 1949 and further note will be made of it below, but more importantly what can be gleaned from Lyne's quote is his honest sense of gratitude. It is from this foundation of humility that the artist in his life and work can best be understood.

In the many obituaries printed about Lyne throughout England, Ireland and the United States the sense of loss for the man was obvious, but the suggestion that the last connection with the Golden Age of Sporting Art had gone was the more subtle tug for those of us whose families have lived the country life since the end of the last century.

Michael Lyne was born in Herefordshire England in 1912 as the third son of the Reverend and Mrs. Lyne. With an avid watercolorist for a mother and a great great grandfather, John Bacon (1740-1799), as one of the first Royal Academicians, Lyne's artistic precocity had roots in heredity. At the age of four he dictated to his mother the text for two books which he illustrated. These were about a rabbit and a dog and were titled Mrs. Bunnie's Day Out and The Lonely Dog. At the age of six he was taken to the meet of his first fox hunt where a deep seeded impression was made that would never escape his mind's eye. In point of fact, from this introduction, the field of sports would develop as a compelling central theme for his art.

Lyne's education was at Rossalls school where he continued to develop his artistic talent by drawing and painting animals. In his free time he enrolled in classes at the Cheltenham School of Art. Realizing that his academic skills wouldn't qualify him for veterinary college, the decision to become a professional artist came easily.

Unlike many of our contemporary animal and sporting

painters, Michael Lyne knew his subjects literally from the inside out. His understanding of anatomy was acquired by helping the huntsman of local beagle and fox hound packs skinning and dissecting for the kennel food, animal carcasses, especially horses from the local countryside. Stella A. Walker in her new book British Sporting Art In the Twentieth Century published by the Sportsman's Press, London 1989 with a foreword by Paul Mellon, notes among other things about Lyne that even the perfectionist A.J. Munnings was unable to stomach these first hand lessons of anatomy.

Through the encouragement of his friends, Lyne continued to paint and began to sell at Cheltenham with Mr. Rutland's Gallery. Persistent attendance at all local meets and regular visits to kennels awarded the artist the odd day out with hounds and with commissions from local sportsman like Sir Jocelyn Lucas. The then secretary of the Ledbury hunt, Captain H.S. Clive even enabled the young artist to establish his own pack of beagles.

By 1938 at the age of twenty six, Lyne continued to illustrate published books. Horses, Hounds and Country by title alone manifests the artist's central themes. Another book Hunting Here and There was delivered to the publisher as Lyne entered war service in the Royal Armored Tank Corps. Unfortunately, it and all the original artwork for it was destroyed by a German bomb. Throughout his career, notes Anna B. Francis, a Lyne scholar from Katonah, New York, the artist illustrated in whole or in part, over thirty books. Additionally, in those volumes of his own authorship like A Parson's Son and the Michael Lyne Sketch Book appear many entertaining anecdotes about country life the artist had experienced.

After the war, friend and sometimes agent for America, Robert J. Perham of England found Lyne driven to paint without stop, as it were, to catch up with lost time. This drive lasted, despite periods of poor health, until the end, a characteristic of most serious painters. Although the artist did not rule out the use of photographs as supplementary points of reference, his paintings and watercolors were composed almost exclusively from sketches done first hand of the subject, and later embellished from an uncanny memory. From the sketch to the finished work there remains a sense of liveliness and of motion captured of the moment. In oil the paint is generally bright in color and laid on thick. In gouache and watercolor one finds more sensitivity and a lighter touch. In each medium, the artist is able to focus the viewer's attention toward what really matters and often the sketchy edges of the image add to a feeling of action rather than to the thought of an unfinished landscape or interior.

During the years after the war, Lyne produced at a rate of a picture a week. But, as Anna Francis notes, his keen eye remained uncompromising, though his hand may have been prolific. Over

the years Lyne hunted with over forty packs in England, Ireland, Scotland and America and also managed time to judge horse and donkey shows as well as various dog breeds. He too became a recognized expert on coursing and otter hunting. From the realm of these first hand experiences, the artist was able to capture body language and facial expression of his subjects which, along with accurate conformation and appropriate light, resulted in a visual connection with the viewer that few so-called animal and sporting painters have had or will attain.

Ackerman's of London promoted Michael Lyne in exhibitions beginning in 1946 and 1947. At that time Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Warburg of New York City and Middleburg were in London and during a visit with Warburg's brother Paul, then special assistant to Lewis Douglas, the United States Ambassador to Great Britain, Frederick saw on the office wall a watercolor by Lyne. To make a long story short, Paul had bought the watercolor for Frederick but had grown to like it too much to give it up. So, Frederick Warburg went to Ackerman's, then on Old Bond Street, to an exhibition of Lyne's work. There they arranged to meet the Lyne's at their Gloucestershire home where Jessie was pregnant with their second child. Mrs. Warburg recalls Michael as a shy provincial young man, whom her husband took to immediately and whom he invited to America to paint as soon as he was able.

The Warburg's returned home without any paintings or watercolors and with only a fox hunting book illustrated by Lyne. Nevertheless, these illustrations and Freddy's enthusiasm sold the idea of commissions by Lyne to Fred Bonticou of Millbrook, Mr Paul Mellon of Upperville, George Ohrstrom, Sr. of The Plains, Russell Arundel, Sr. of Warrenton, The Newell J. Wards, Jr. of Middleburg, Bob Winthrop of Myopia and John Schiff of Long Island.

In October of 1949, Michael Lyne made his first journey to America on a trip arranged by Mr. Warburg. Here he was able to visit America's finest hunting country. Although the artist didn't actually do the finished paintings while abroad, he filled a large portfolio with sketches that would later become two dozen finished works for these original patrons from the East. Hence the story of the turning point mentioned above.

Over the years Lyne was able to make in total over nine trips to the United States both for commissioned work and exhibition. After the 1950's Frost and Reed replaced Ackerman's as agents until the mid-1970's when his work was distributed in the United States by Robert J. Perham and in England by the Heale Gallery. On April 4, 1989, an important retrospective of Lyne's work was shown in London in a joint effort by The Tryon and Heale Galleries which provided a befitting epitaph, and in which all works on paper were sold.

Most noted for drawings, watercolors and paintings it should

be mentioned that Lyne also was an accomplished woodcarver. The pond at "Dunfield House" his Gloucestershire home was populated with at times as many as one hundred ducks which included up to twenty-nine imported species. Many of these were carved in miniature and painted by the artist as decoration for the family mantle. Other carvings of trout, bassets, salukis as well as whimsical foxes (used as car hood ornaments by close friends) have been done. Additionally, several bronze casts of whippets were completed in 1974.

In interviews with Anna Francis in the middle 1980's Lyne remarked that George Stubbs and Ben Marshall were the painters he most loved and that he had great admiration for Edwin Landseer. "Lionel Edwards was most influential" he said, "He portrayed what I enjoyed. He was my shining star".

When asked by Francis, "What advice can you give the aspiring sporting artist?" Lyne's reply was a quotation from his Cheltenham school of art instructor Gerald Garner, "he said to me 'I can't teach you anything. The best thing you can do is to paint prolifically and observe the things you do wrong.'" Lyne continued, "None of it is easy, it is all difficult and one should learn to recognize happy accidents." A humble truth followed by his idea of hard work." In my experience from a painting point of view, unless you approach it with dedicated enthusiasm you have little possibility of success."

Lyne achieved solid success and recognition in his lifetime. Although uneven at times and later in life hampered with failing eyesight, the artist on the whole was significant in his field and will be remembered as such. He has enjoyed great commercial success in galleries and at auction, and his work continues to climb. Stella Walker boldly states "Time will confirm that Michael Lyne ranks as one of the most important artists of his generation."

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