

Craigie Aitchison

an exploration of the lovable

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This article came about after two conversations with Craigie Aitchison. It is an appreciation of his work which I have been looking at for many years.

I vividly remember the first time I saw a painting by Craigie Aitchison. It was a reproduction on a postcard. The card was saturated in deep pink and red with a thin line of turquoise. The image on the card was of a small Chinese whistle. It was blissful and I loved it. From that day on I sought his work out and became familiar with his subjects, still-lives, landscapes, portraits and Crucifixions. Much later I was able to meet and talk with Craigie Aitchison twice. There is something lovable about his work. This article is my appreciation of that and my attempt to understand it.

In worldly terms, Craigie was a well known and successful painter, despite the fact that his work is quite at odds with the mainstream. He has been exhibited in both small and large exhibitions in London, Glasgow and New York, and his images can be seen in cathedrals and small galleries all around the country. He also won many honours. He was a member of the Royal Academy and a CBE. If one wishes to learn about Craigie's life and work there are many catalogues and publications in which his work is described and justified in formal art historical language. Using this special language, the curators of exhibitions stretch this way and that to give his work conventional credibility. The very thing that makes it so wonderful, however, is that it doesn't need any such credibility. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins described two sorts of poetry. One he called Parnassian, which is merely based on knowledge. The second form, which Hopkins calls "poetry proper", is the highest form. It comes not just from knowledge but from the highest level of emotional intensity and technical energy, in other words from true inspiration. Craigie's work stems from such a poetic vision, although his poetry uses visual language, rather than verbal.

When looking at Craigie Aitchison's pictures I instinctively feel that if I am to understand them, I have to meet them with the most unguarded part of myself. It is necessary to become this self, because when we look at Craigie's most successful paintings we are beholding something that every human being once had, and which most people have abandoned in the struggle for existence which is being an adult. Wordsworth knew this self when he described how we are born trailing clouds of glory, and Proust described being transported deep into that green and transparent place when he ate the Madeleine dipped in the linden-blossom tea that evoked his childhood so strongly. This self lives in the magical and joyful world which we inhabit unconsciously in our early life. It is characterized by the most beautiful ability, that is, to give way to a mood of

play which is self-forgetting. Paul Klee described this world as the wellspring of his work; Rabindranath Tagore conjures it up when he describes children playing on the sea shores of the world. Imagine the map of the world and around every land mass the waves lapping and the beaches dotted with tiny figures absorbed in play. That is the world to which one must return in order to enter Craigie's pictures. This is their magic and their appeal. They are refreshing not because they let us escape from reality, but because they take us into a deeper and more real place, to the sources of life and imagination—to the source of eternal youth.

It seems almost a miracle that Craigie could grow up into a functioning adult and retain the absorbed and unique way of playing that is essential to creating this kind of work. And of course it raises the question: how did he manage it? In one of Grimm's fairy-stories, two little girls fall down a well where they meet Mother Holle, who gives them tasks. After a certain time, they both return home, but one is covered with a shower of gold coins and the other is covered in tar. The child covered in gold has fulfilled her tasks with no thought of reward; her motive was the joy in doing what was needed. The tar child has done the tasks carelessly, thinking not of what was in front of her but of the reward she would get. The story is about the strange phenomenon that some are born lucky and some unlucky. It is also about the authority we achieve by being instead of having. Craigie's life resounds with this story. When I asked him about his life he said of himself that he was a lucky person. He seemed to have gone through his life in a shower of gold coins, a shower of luck. This luck is itself connected to the mysteries of life and creativity. The world which we glimpse through Craigie's pictures is only accessible to him—and through him, to us—because he has had the presence of mind to stay with his way of playing and his way of seeing. This can be the hardest work any artist ever does. It is the difference between the competent many and the remarkable few.

Craigie Aitchison gave the impression of being a gentle person. However, he was immovably strong where it mattered. No one was ever able to prevent him from maintaining his vision or to shake his belief in his way of seeing things and of making work. He managed the world rather than letting the world manage him. He went to art school and took the courses he needed and avoided those that would have harmed him. In Charles Morgan's novel, *The Judge's Story*, the wise judge is asked for advice by a young woman. Rather than tell her what to do, he says, "There are those with whom your voice is muffled and those with whom your voice is clear. By this rule your life, God is not dumb!" In the art world from which Craigie emerged and in the places he learned there were supporters and opponents. His genius partly lies in knowing who to listen to and whom to

ignore. He is never cool or hard but he is strongly himself. Kandinsky said that Gabriella Münter had a gift that needed not teaching but protecting. Craigie's way of seeing has something of that quality too.

Art history acknowledges that artists influence each other. I suspect however that there is something much more important in an artist's biography: artists *recognise* each other; they recognise who belongs to their family. This recognition comes from meeting work which gives the artist confidence in their way of seeing. I could not say who Craigie was influenced by, but I know other artists who, I sense, belong to the same family. These artists are united by three essential qualities. First, they have colour magic. This cannot be taught; it is a gift like perfect pitch. In the hands of these artists, something happens to paint that is alchemical; it begins to have a life of its own. Second, they simplify what they see to essentials; and third, these artists inspire optimism. This family includes Macke, Klee, Gabrielle Münter, Franz Marc, Chagall, Redon, Milton Avery, Rothko and Matisse. They are immune from fashion and cynicism and they are protected from their detractors because their peculiar mix of colour and poetry intoxicates us and we love them unconditionally.

The gallery owner and painter Helen Lessore, who was Craigie's first dealer, was asked in 1965 to come and talk to students at an art school in London. She refused with the following explanation:

“The whole art world has become like a *maison d'haute couture*—it is even more grossly commercial than it used to be even thirty years ago, even fifteen years ago—more superficial, more vulgar, more greedy... I cannot stand up and tell the students what they must do to be “successful”; nor have I the heart ... to stand there and exhort these hopeful young things to take the martyr's road.”

It would be interesting to hear what Helen Lessore would say about the art world and the art schools of today! My interest in Craigie's originality and success has at the heart of it the questions posed by Helen Lessore's despair. He seems to have passed through this frightening world intact and to have succeeded in communicating to enough people so that he has a place in the mainstream of the contemporary art world. His poetic and original vision and the optimism that he succeeds in expressing suggest that there is a way to be yourself beyond fashion and a coherent way of looking at the world which would suggest we have reason to rejoice in our existence despite its many struggles.