

Jean-Georges Simon and Harrogate

On September 18 2021 a Harrogate Civic Society plaque commemorating the Hungarian artist Jean-Georges Simon is to be unveiled at 4 Park Road, where he lived from 1952-68. Robert Waterhouse sets the scene

Occasionally good things happen via the vagaries of war. Jean-Georges Simon and his wife Patricia arrived in Harrogate during 1943. They'd been staying at Ramsgill in the nearby Dales in a cottage offered by a friend to escape the London Blitz, where not only they but the precious work the artist had brought from the Continent were at risk.

First 7 Park Drive and then 4 Park Road became home until Simon's death in 1968. Harrogate was Simon's first permanent base since leaving Budapest in 1920, having decided there was little to stay for in a Hungary shattered by being on the losing side of the First World War.

Simon had fought in that war as a conscript, been invalided out and had resumed his studies under Joseph Rippl-Ronai. His aim was to get to Paris as soon as possible, but visa issues prevented that until 1925, by which time he'd worked his way through Italy and Switzerland. In London during 1936 to study calligraphy at the British Museum he met Patricia Frayling. They married in London a year or so later.

Simon staged his first British exhibition at his Fulham Road studio in June 1939 where the *Times* art critic found him "an extremely versatile artist, turning with ease from portraits to landscapes and from oil to tempera, water-colour or Chinese ink."

Not just versatile but prolific, both in style and production. Simon's post-impressionism carried hints of Matisse, Rouault and indeed Cézanne. Hungarian expressionism was never far away, either. The voluminous archive of paintings, drawings, sketchbooks and notebooks he left was catalogued by Lois Smith in the loft of her Hebden Bridge terrace helped by Eunice Musk, who'd been a pupil of Simon's at Bradford Regional College Art.

Simon also taught at Harrogate School of Art alongside Lincoln Jenkins and Oliver Pemsel during the 1940s. A 1990 exhibition at the former Harrogate Art Gallery in Victoria Avenue celebrated the work of these three. Much more recently, the exhibition "Their Safe Haven, Hungarian artists in Britain from the 1930s", inspired by Simon and due to have been held at the Mercer Art Gallery from April-August 2020, was cancelled amid the fallout from Covid-19.

All the same the plaque, prepared to mark the exhibition's opening, serves as a permanent reminder of the artist's contribution to Harrogate's cultural life.

I'd got to know Simon in 1960 through Lois Smith, who was my aunt. By chance, I became the *Guardian's* northern art critic and in 1966 found myself reviewing an exhibition of his at the Silver Coin Gallery in Harrogate. Months later I met him socially. "Who was that young imbecile who wrote about me in the *Manchester Guardian*?" he asked with the hint of a smile.

He was, in fact, a charming individual, as recalled by one of his neighbours, Betty Blanchflower, at the time of the 1973 Wakefield memorial exhibition in his honour.

Talking into a tape recorder, the day after the opening, she said this:

"You know, the speakers last night seemed to miss the most outstanding thing, as far as I was concerned, about Jans (he was known as Jans or Jancsi) and that was his warmth, his lovable nature.

"When he spoke to you, you were the only person in the world at that moment. You could be in a room with 50 people, it didn't matter. His eyes looked at you, he spoke to you, there was immediate contact, human contact, love, understanding and gentleness, and at that point in time you were the only person that mattered to Jans. This is a rare gift, very few people have it, and I consider that I and Robbie too (her husband), are very privileged to have experienced it."

Harrogate was Simon's safe haven, the place where his best studio work was created, where he found peace and security after a life of wandering. The twentieth century did not treat Hungary or Hungarians well. As a result of the First World War, Simon's father lost his estate in Transylvania. His sisters suffered in the German, then the Russian, occupation of Budapest during and after the Second World War. Simon found consolation in Yorkshire life; in its people who he sketched in public spaces, cafés and pubs; in the freedom to catch the London train and enrol, as he did most years, in refresher life-drawing classes in Paris (faithfully supported by his wife Pat, who worked as a civil servant in a Harrogate office).

It's fitting that his legacy is finally marked, almost 53 years after his death in a Leeds hospital. Simon recorded and spoke to the human qualities which are seeing Yorkshire and Britain through the Covid crisis. And even though he would be the last to request recognition, I suspect he would be quietly proud of his newfound status in his adopted home town.