

Obituary: John Anthony Michael Bull, FIIC (1931-2020)

Submitted by sharragrow on 08 Jan 2021

Image



By Sarah Bull

John was born on 17th January 1931 in Bristol, England. After Bristol Grammar School, he studied Fine Art and Cabinet Making at Royal West of England College of Art, where he met his future wife of 64 years, Anne. On 12th November 1956, he began working as a junior restorer at Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery starting the Monday after his marriage to Anne.

Over the next year, Hans Schubart, the director—who had studied under Helmut Ruhemann in the 1930's—taught John everything he knew and felt that he had a special talent for the work. He persuaded John to apply to the Tate Gallery for the newly created role of assistant restorer in February 1958.

When John left Bristol, his brother David, who had also studied at the Royal West of England College, followed in his brother's footsteps and took the position under Hans Schubart. Some time later, he also left Bristol for London to work at the National Gallery. The brothers were already on parallel paths to eminent careers in paintings conservation.

John spent six years at the Tate Gallery, working with Percy Williams, Alexander Dunluce (overlapping for a year) and Bruno Heimberg. Upon resigning his position, Tate Director Sir John Rothenstein wrote to John, "...I don't think I need to tell you that I personally regret your departure....The Chief Restorer (Stefan Slabczynski) has always given me an excellent account of the conscientiousness of your work."

In the spring of 1964, John set up in private practice in Wimbledon. David Bull's studio was already established in a parallel road, 5 minutes walk away. In South West London there was quite a community of paintings conservators at this time. John's next studio was a converted printing press at the end of the garden where a snooker table in the workroom doubled as a workbench. Fridays became regular snooker nights with Peter Newman and Robert Shepherd (who was in partnership with David). Games of boules on Wimbledon Common, with David, Robert and Richard Watkiss, were played in the summer.

John went into partnership with Katharine Reid, the daughter of Sir Norman Reid, director of the Tate Gallery. They specialised in the conservation of Modern paintings. At the forefront of the profession, John developed techniques to restore paintings that were created with challenging modern materials. In constant communication with British artists of the day, his approach was able to encompass their techniques, concepts and intentions. Over the years he tutored many assistant restorers who went on to have successful careers around the globe.

In 1977 John was asked to make several trips to Tehran by the British Council, in conjunction with the opening of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, overseeing the arrival of pictures and carrying out any necessary treatment. The timing with the Iranian Revolution 1978-79 meant that the collection of Western Art has only been able to be displayed for short periods since then.

In 1981 John collaborated with Peter Newman, picture re-liner, to restore Bryan Organ's portrait of Lady Diana Spencer after it was vandalised whilst on show at the National Portrait Gallery. He collaborated closely with Bryan who became a life-long friend.

John's enduring association with Lord Kenneth Thomson began in the 1970s. His son David became a close friend, sharing many and varied interests. John worked on their collections and became an expert on the paintings of John Constable; by the end of his career he had worked on an extraordinary number. Through this work he became great friends with expert Ian Fleming-Williams; they also shared a passion for Schubert.

Conservation in the Bull family has become a family trait. John worked with his brother David and his wife Teresa Longyear on the Annenberg Collection in Rancho Mirage, California. He often collaborated with his daughter Sarah (paper conservator) on projects. John's client base was extraordinarily broad, from private family collections of Siegfried Sassoon to Modern British artists including Patrick Heron, Bridget Riley and Richard Hamilton (who engendered his passion for Porches). John worked for the major auctions houses and West End galleries. His daybooks are a catalogue of world class paintings and collectors. Visits to the studio in Wimbledon by artists, collectors and dealers were the daily norm often concluding with a convivial and delicious meal provided by Anne, given rave reviews by all who came.

During 1995—after a long, demanding and often stressful career—at the age of 64, John suffered a major stroke that cruelly affected the use of his right hand as well as his speech and language. But one of his assistants remarked that he could do more with his left toe than most people could with both hands. Over time he determinedly learnt to use his left hand with great skill, and he returned to work. Culminating in 2003 at the National Gallery London, at his brother's old easel, he restored Ruben's Massacre of the Innocents at the specific request of Lord Kenneth Thomson.

John adored planes, trains and automobiles. The latter particularly resonated. He was devoted to sport cars and shared the passion with friends. Professional drivers would often accompany John and share the experience. Scale models lay scattered within the studio, the Spitfire and Bugatti being his favourites.

Classical music cassettes and CDs were ever present in the studio. The joy of discovery seemed endless, and every hour taken with works of art was accentuated by this form of beauty. The aura within the studio was sublime. One sensed the deepest communion amongst human spirits.

John continued to work until 2015. After which he had time, at last, to indulge in his life-long love of drawing and painting. Inspired by David Hockney and the natural world in rural Gloucestershire, he also mastered the use of his iPad for drawing and painting. His oeuvre includes pictures in the style of Constable cloud studies, Van Gogh ink drawings, Cézanne watercolours and Morandi paintings.

(See the article with all the images in the December-January 2021 "News in Conservation" Issue 81, p. 40-42)