

Harry Barr, artist with a frank philosophy

Interviewed by Alison Tonkin

IT SEEMS to be the unhappy lot of most talented and artistic people to be appreciated only when they have been dead for at least a century. Harry Barr, gentleman extraordinary, and internationally known painter is one of the rare exceptions.

"Extraordinary" is a word which I use advisedly to describe the fascinating and vital person who talked to me at his home in Deodar Road, Putney, the other day.

It seemed somehow irrelevant, and irreverent to ask the age of the short, stocky man who talked so avidly, not only about his work, but about practically everything else under the sun.

Bearing in mind that it was a question which I really ought to ask however, I plucked up courage, and received a predictable Harry Barr answer. Age, he said, was as old or young, or alive or dead as one felt. The number of years didn't matter.

Quoting something that happened to him once, he had asked an 80-year-old friend of his what it was like to be 80. He received the reply "it slows you down Harry, it slows you down."

Although he has used all the painting media, Harry is probably best known for his water colours.

An art critic in "Arts Review," Max Wykes-Joyce, in discussing some of Harry's paintings, says: "These will hold their own against the

best, past and present, that British water colours can offer."

Although I am not in any way qualified to criticise art, I can enjoy it, and sitting in Harry's lofty studio, bright only by the light coming through the huge window, I found much to enjoy in the paintings on the wall.

Explaining his love of water colours he told me, "Water colour is volatile, it runs. You cannot stem or control it. Other paints don't work in the same way—all the time you are having to stretch and worry them."

Strangely enough, this ties up with his own philosophy for he believes that more misery is caused in the world by jealousy than anything else. If only people could accept other people, he says, instead of clinging on to them. People are cannibals, they depend too much on one another.

THE BUSINESS OF PAINTING

Of his own, "business" of painting, Harry says, "There is so much nonsense talked about painting." He regards it not as creative fulfilment, but as a necessary job, something he has to do. To him it is like any other job, with perhaps one disadvantage, a painter never knows what the finished product will be.

After he has finished a water colour (which incidentally he believes "should never take more than an hour to complete if it is worth its salt) he puts it away for at least three weeks, so that when finally he does look at it, he can see it objectively, and away from the place and feelings he had when it was done.

Some time ago the Crown commissioned him to paint the reclamation of The Wash. "They would not have asked me to do that if I could not paint excitedly the vast nothingness of the place."

This seemed to be reflected in his water colours for his subjects were demanding and not in the least bit "pretty." Boredom and a sort of loneliness seemed to be there in all his water colours.

LIFE, A MASS OF LIES

Quite different were his "piggy paintings." Back in the 1950's, because "it suited him at the time," Harry did dozens of paintings on a pig farm. One of a mother and her litter he has called, "Holy Family." When someone at an exhibition asked if this wasn't rather blasphemous he replied, that if it wasn't blasphemous God wouldn't be angry, and if it



Mr. Harry Barr pictured recently at an exhibition of his work.

was blasphemous only God could help him.

He is true to his own philosophy in allowing people to be themselves and enjoying them for it. Once, he was lecturing on Picasso, and afterwards a woman asked him, "Is Picasso genuine?"

"What, the hell," Harry said to me, "we have his paintings, who the hell cares if his tongue is in his cheek?"

His life he said, was a mass of lies, because what was truth? Having to pay the rates and ones tax was truth, but as for the rest, how could one separate truth from fiction. Telling the truth, he said, only hurt people, wasn't it better to lie, and thus make people happy.

When I left Harry Barr, I felt emotionally drained. "I won't possibly be able to do you justice," I said, "but I'll try."