

Thoughts of Dolf

Richard Rieser 2018/2020

I remember him putting Bay Rum on his hair with a pair of horsehair brushes, emitting a distinctive smell, fruity and pungent. Though his hair was thinning from the front and flecked with grey, he still appeared distinguished and exotic.



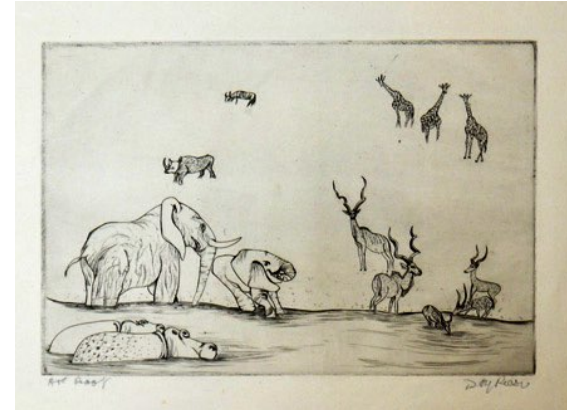
Dolf was attached to patent medicines - a few drops of Dr Cloredene's solution for an upset tummy. TCP to gargle for a severe throat or put on cuts. Camomile dried flowers (gathered each summer in Cornwall) for a tea or poultice. Aspirins for colds and flu, later replaced by Boots Flu Mixture.

Dolf cooked occasionally - a sign of his previous Parisian bohemian life. A favourite on Sunday mornings was fried mushroom, bacon and tomato pieces, surrounded by beaten eggs placed in pots in the oven in a roasting tin full of water to coddle. We each had a pot and enjoyed their unusualness.

Another choice was Pot-au-Feu to which Dolf regularly added ingredients such as lentils, vegetables, mince or stewing steak and seasoning. It reminded him of his studio days in Paris before the War, before he married Barbara, when money was tight and there was little heating.

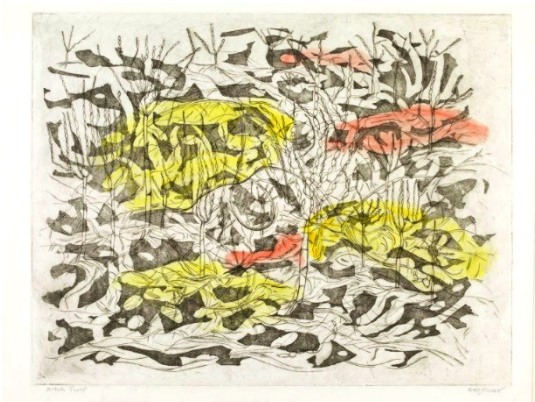
In his large studio in Sumatra Road, surrounded by a couple of paraffin heaters, a chunky jumper and scarf, Dolf worked for hours engraving a copper plate - day after day, sometimes for three months.

Then eventually, like an excited little boy, he would come down holding a piece of damp hand-made paper with two cardboard hinges from a Woodbine packet (to prevent inky thumb prints) to show us the first trial print; rich in the smell of linseed oil, the black ink sucked out of the engraved prints by the press. Both self-deprecating and hanging on every word we said. We had to complement him and looking back most were brilliant. Incidentally, Dolf had learned etching and engraving at Atelier 17 in Paris before the War with Stanley Hayter and Józef Hecht, the veteran Polish engraver. Once Hecht had wagered Dolf he could not engrave animal images as well as him. Dolf won the bet with this engraving African Animals¹.



Then over the next few days, further trial prints became ever more definite in image as he worked up the plates. He added colour with a roller, after rubbing in the black ink with muslin into the etched or engraved shapes and lines. Sometimes he added several coloured inks to the plate. For the larger plates, down to the double garage (Barbara having removed the car) he placed the plate face-up on on top of the flat metal press bed. The soaked paper cut by him to the right size, placed face down on the plate. Then two or three felt blankets placed on top. With a large spanner Dolf adjusted the pressure.

He then grabbed hold of the handle, extending from a large



¹ <https://dolfrieser.com/>

metal fly-wheel, attached by several greased gear wheels to two huge solid metal rollers - the whole weighing over half a ton - and Dolf strenuously began to turn the press. Now the moment of truth!

The plate having passed between the rollers, creating the pressure for the wet paper to suck up the ink, it left a printed embossed reverse image. The blankets are pulled back and the paper carefully lifted off the plate. Had it worked? Usually. But sometimes it did not take. Dolf managed to deal with such setbacks philosophically and after a little expletive such as 'bloodi gahen a trecht' (Switzer Deutsche for 'bloody hen shit'), he started all over again.



Dolf was innovative, experimenting with plaster prints, silk scarf prints for Liberty's, printing on leather, printing on plastic paper to be laminated table-tops and on fibre glass to create translucent panels. He even designed for the whole side of a building a 'print' to be sand blasted into the concrete, at a university Witwatersrand in the form of a Bushman cave painting. Dolf worked with a plastics expert, Richard Wood, to develop the laminated hand made prints and the prints on fibre glass. The prints went off to the factory to be laminated, but the fibre glass he rolled onto the plate which had been inked with specially prepared plastic pigments, then had resin spread on and then another layer of fibre glass. The resin warmed up and emitted a sweet smell, like honey, and when it was set it could be peeled off the plate. A light could be put behind to give a translucent image. His abstracts based on plant cell structures, sub-atomic particles and fish were particularly successful. In the 1950s, plastic was a big deal along with nuclear energy - these were innovations for a brave new techno-world where almost anything seemed possible. Fifty years later plastic waste has spread to every corner of the earth with devastating environmental impacts.

The Ideal Home Exhibition provided a focus for Bakelite and other laminates and Dolf brought home loads of samples that were integrated into our wooden building blocks box to build countless structures.



All the experimentation culminated in a commission for the Coffee House at 15, Fleet Street², opened in 1957 . Coffee bars were very trendy in the late 50s/early 60s. This was to have tables with Dolf's laminated prints on their tops. On the walls were several translucent fibreglass prints, back lit in specially made frames and on the ceiling two large etchings on fibre glass and lit from behind. The smaller prints were etched fish and the larger ceiling panels

were abstracts. The biggest problem had been how to get the right coloured inks to fix with the resin and fibreglass and then harden. This process was patented by Dolf and Richard Wood and was unique. Earlier issues included how to etch a six by three-foot zinc plate in a large enough acid bath? The problem was solved by acquiring a certain type of acid resistant thick plastic sheeting placed inside a wooden frame. The acid bath was laid out in the garden hut and a large zinc plate with a design made by Dolf in acid resistant varnish was placed in the Sulphuric Acid.



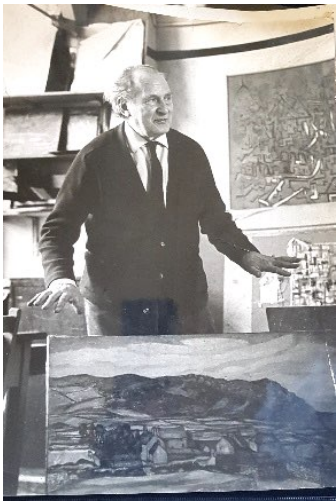
² <https://dolfrieser.com/innovation/>



A Caribbean carpenter put a new floor in the Studio at Sumatra Road, where we had moved in 1961. The old floor was riddled with woodworm and money had been taken off the purchase price to replace it. This was no mean task as the floor measured forty by twenty feet. The acids produced considerable poisonous fumes. Later large etchings at Sumatra Road were completed with the garage door open! Such Health and Safety considerations did not figure in etching in the studio and to this day all materials, including many prints, pictures and books from the studio have an acidic smell and taste.

Making plaster prints was another of Dolf's 'Heath Robinson'³ techniques. On a glass sheet the inked plate was laid face up. The plasticine was used to build a raised surround to the plate. Plaster of Paris was mixed in an enamel bowl in sufficient quantities to cover the plate between a half to three-quarters of an inch in wet plaster. The plaster then slowly heated up and dried. It is the same quality plaster used for casts for

broken limbs. When it is completely dry (about six hours), a scraper is placed underneath and it is raised up. If it has worked there is a beautiful colour print on plaster, with indentations of lines filled with ink and the colour from the plate on the surface of the plaster. These could then be mounted and sold.



Dolf was not very good at selling his amazing art-work. Maybe because he was of German Jewish extraction by way of South Africa (1898-1908), Germany (1908-1914 and 1922 to 1927), Switzerland (1914 to 1922) and France (1927 to 1940). People in England had some prejudice (Anti -German and Anti-Semitic) but also were intrigued by him. It was more likely caused by Dolf's sense of insecurity and his not valuing the uniqueness of the Art he produced.

He would regale potential buyers with tales of Paris before the War and the many artists he met and knew on the Left Bank. Then eventually he would show them different trial prints, often not perfectly printed and not give them time to look, putting one upon another. He did the same with his oils that were stacked against

the studio walls. As for the watercolours and pen and ink drawings, these were stuffed in folders that he flicked through. As there were more than 2000, the problem was the same.



Unlike most limited edition print-makers, usually Dolf just pulled off one or two prints at a time himself, rather than getting the whole edition printed, which he could not afford. Only the Africa Folder (left 1938) and Tales of the Congo for the Folio Society (right 1952) had full editions printed. Usually Dolf wrote in a little notebook for each print the number of the edition and who had bought it. Dolf had galleries that exhibited his work. Lumley Cazalet in Davies Street in the 1970s/1980s.



Zwemmer Gallery in the 1950s which stocked his prints and gave him a one man show in 1956. Dolf's prints were shown widely, including as a member of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers. He introduced colour intaglio to post-war Britain. He took part in group shows widely throughout Europe and America, including Peggy Guggenheim's Gallery, 1939; Atelier 17 in New York and San Francisco, 1954. His solo shows were international, including Galerie Bonjean, Paris, 1936; The Little

³ A popular book at the time of sketches of weird and outlandish inventions

Gallery, London with Lipschitz 1948; ICA 1966, Lumley Cazalet, 1968; David Paul Gallery, Chichester 1979. The Victoria & Albert Museum, Imperial War Museum, the Arts Council UK, National Gallery of Canada and New York Public Library hold his work.

Barbara, my mother had been a personal secretary to the CEO of J Walther Thompson advertising agency before she met Dolf. Mum used her administrative skills to try and organise Dolf's work, keeping records, typing his articles and books. But this was either before we boys arrived or when we had grown up a bit and were at school or college.

Before we moved to Sumatra Road in 1961 we lived in Flat 1, 3 Greville Place, NW6 on the Hampstead side of the road. The other side was Marylebone. This meant two lots of rubbish collection- one on either side of the street. 3 Greville Place was a St John's Wood Regency Villa which had later (1920/30s) had two studios added. It would originally have been a single upper-class family dwelling with room for live-in servants, but was now divided into 9 flats with the studios.

There were many studios in the area. Round the corner and backing onto our large rear communal garden was Augustus John's old house and studio. 3, Greville Place comprised three storeys with an attic-basement, raised ground floor and first floor. We had a four room flat with bathroom and kitchen-two bedrooms, a general playroom and a drawing room. Dolf had made a studio up the stairs in the attic. [see sketch of front elevation].



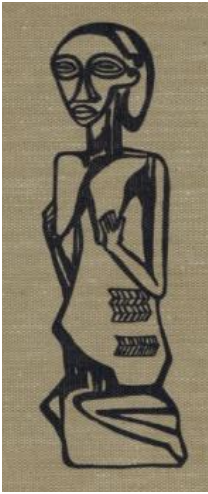
- 1) Dolf, Barbara, Richard, Martin and cat.
- 2) Mrs Gillacki - a Greek Cypriot mother of grown up sons who visited her.
- 3) Mr and Mrs Green in the basement
- 4) At the back 'The Pool Deluxe' as Dolf rudely called her.
- 5,6 and 7) were unknown to us.
- 8) The Studio behind the house with a conservatory was lived in by an architect, Frank Newby. He sublet the conservatory to Dolf for his large printing press which

was later moved into a creosote wooden shed in the garden.

9) Mr and Mrs Cormice. He was a sculptor and she rushed out to shovel up horse shit in the road to put on her roses.

Martin and I were the only children in the whole block and people were always complaining we made too much noise, particularly when we ran down the corridor in the middle of the flat. Dolf would spend a lot of time in his studio in the attic. It only had a low dormer window and was constructed of struts, plaster board and floorboards. The rest of the attic one could access from here was dark with no floorboards, just joists and the sloping slate roofs, though there was a skylight to get on the roof. It was reached by steep stairs and was probably a servant's room in the past. Under these stairs in the playroom was a cupboard that I made into my museum, which contained the weird and wonderful objects that Dolf's brother Herbert gave Martin and I for Birthdays, Xmas and at other times. Herbert was a dealer in ethnographic art and had picked up these objects in sale lots.

Herbert Rieser was Dolf's younger brother and had been a photographer before the War, but settling in London in 1930s developed his interest in African, Polynesian and other ethnic art objects and became a well known authority on the objects, by whom and when they had been made and their cultural



significance. Trading from his flat in George Street in the 1960s he opened a shop F H Rieser in New Quebec Street. On visiting, such luminaries as David Attenborough or Desmond Morris would often be ensconced with Herbert discussing the finer points of ethnographic art. Occasionally a taxi would arrive with an object from the British Museum which Herbert had to identify for them. Towards his older years Herbert confided to my Mum he only ever felt comfortable wearing women's lingerie under his blue serge suits and high neck polo jumper. This may have been as in Edwardian custom he had been dressed as a girl until he was aged five. Dolf would often drop into the shop and purchased a number of objects. He was particularly proud of his comb collection. I remember when money was tight some of these were sold. Dolf however made a number of art works featuring these figures and combs. When Herbert died his collection was sold at Sotheby's and Attenborough wrote a forward to the catalogue.

The studio at Greville Place was not very large, perhaps twelve by twelve feet, with a sloping roof and half walls. In this Dolf had a work-table, small press and blankets about twenty inches wide, acid and acid bottles, glass, ink, rollers, a rack for pictures, flat glass for wetting paper and folders for prints. There was no sink which entailed bringing water up from the bathroom in a big white enamel jug. It also meant Dolf was often soaking paper in the bath or washing plates and equipment with solvent in the basin.

Occasionally, Dolf would put on his old army combat jacket and come and play with me and Martin in the back garden. About 1.5 acres and now a nature reserve (see diagram)



We would play hide and seek, Cowboys and Indians and war games and later built dens in the wilder rear part. This was a great playground and having Dolf, his imagination and stories, was an added bonus. If it got very hot, we sometimes filled a blow-up paddling pool on the lawn. But several of the neighbours did not like us playing near the house. This resulted in us often using the Maud's garden at the adjoining 1, Greville Place. Sir John Maud was a senior civil servant. He was High Commissioner in South Africa in the early 60s and Dolf stayed with them in Pretoria at Government House. Lady Maud was a musician and tried unsuccessfully to teach me piano. But I think they saw themselves as patrons to the struggling artist next door and they had a show for Dolf in Government House. Prior to this, they invited Dolf and Barbara to their parties to meet potential clients and to avail them of Dolf's stories. He was a fascinating raconteur. We were allowed to use their garden when they were away and this had a great big Mulberry tree in the middle of the lawn, which we were fascinated to learn was doted upon by Chinese silk worms.

The Maud in the 2010-2019 Tory Government who messed up public sector pensions must be their grandson. His father was a Tory grandee. 1, Greville Place appeared to us children as a very different world. At Christmas they held a musical 'At Home' evening which was not like anything we knew. The whole family performing various musical instruments or singing. My mother had come from a similar upper middle-class family, but we were rarely invited to her many cousins. I picked up that this was because Dolf was both an artist and a Jew and Barbara had married him against the family wishes. I am sure Dolf reciprocated in not wanting to meet them.



Once, around 1957/8, Dolf took on a commission to paint an oil painted panel four by eight feet of all the plants and animals of the Amazon for a Royal Mail Line new ship SS Amazonia. This was of great interest, as a corner of the drawing room had to be requisitioned as a stand-in studio for large easel, paints, brushes and wooden block. The carpet was rolled back and for three months we viewed the jungle and animals growing in the painting. Particularly prominent was a Jaguar and a giant Anaconda. I have tried to trace this painting, as the ship is no longer in service. Perhaps it now adorns a bar or house somewhere up the Amazon. I hope so as it was a 'tour de force' bringing together Dolf's biologist background and artistic flare.

Richard Rieser 26th April 2020