

## **Basil Ivan Rakoczi 1908 – 1979 A (very) brief synopsis**

### **Early Years**

Born 31<sup>st</sup> May 1908 in Chelsea, London. Named Benjamin Dobby Wilce.

Father, Istvan Rakoczi (known as Ivan) was Hungarian. His mother, Charlotte May (known as Dolly) was from County Cork in Ireland. She was an artists' model including, it is believed, for Augustus John and John Lavery.

His parent's marriage was short-lived and his father died when Benjamin was about 4.

In 1912 his mother re-married, a Harold Beaumont. Lived in rural Sussex. Known as Benjamin Beaumont (hence signature from his early paintings). Mother had a son with Harold, named Dudley – Benny's half-brother.

Family life appears to have been unhappy and he spent much time on his own developing an imaginative other world. Three aunts, who lived near, were important early influences on him.

Main education was at the colleges of St Francis Xavier in Brighton and Bruges. After school studied art at Brighton, Worthing and Academie de la Grande Chaumiere in Paris.

### **The 1930's**

Met the Mather family, and good friends with the son, Pip and daughter Natacha (known as Tache). He married Tache in 1930. They had one son, Tony, born in 1931. But marriage began to fail and they separated around 1932.

Benny moved to London in the early 1930's. Worked initially as a stage and costume designer, before turning to his major interests of painting and psychology.

The 1930s were to be enriching for him. He found himself connected to the Bloomsbury Group, living in Fitzroy Street and got to know Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell.

He founded, with Herbrand Ingouville-Williams (known as Billy), the Society for Creative Psychology. Gave many talks.

Became deeply involved with Theosophy and Rosicrucianism

Travelled widely, including Egypt, India and across Europe. In India lived in Gandhi's ashram and met Tagore.

In 1935 met Kenneth Hall. Later that year they formed the White Stag Group for "the advancement of subjectivity in psychological analysis and art".

He began to put on exhibitions of his art and also with Kenneth. Met Lucy Wertheim who supported them both with more shows and purchases!

In 1937 he took full custody of his son. He had also changed his name by deed poll to Basil Rakoczi. His family and close friends continued to call him Benny.

### **The War years**

At the outbreak of war and as pacifists, Benny, with his son Tony, and Kenneth moved to Ireland to seek refuge and settled initially on the west coast, near Leenane in County Mayo.

Soon moved to Dublin, and resurrected both the White Stag Group and the Society for Creative Psychology. First exhibition held in Dublin in 1940. Attracted many other artists in and more shows quickly followed. This period is well documented in S.B. Kennedy's *Irish Art and Modernism*, 1991.

Became a Quaker.

At the end of the War, they left Dublin and went to London. Sadly, Kenneth took his own life in 1946.

### **In Paris**

Benny felt lost and it was not until 1949 that he settled anywhere, and that was in Paris. He studied sculpture under Zadkine. Met Matisse. Collaborated with the painter Alexander Sarres (known as Mau) with whom he lived for a number of years through the 50s. They set up the White Stag Press and produced a range of work including lithographs, engravings and books.

Life was at first largely moneyless and he supplemented his painting with lectures and art classes. Met and became friends with Samuel Beckett. Eventually he set up his home, a studio in Montrouge, Paris and it became his main home until his death. His "At home" Saturdays became legendary and well attended. And it kept his working week free for his painting.

In 1952, his son married Jessica and they had a son in 1953 (Benny's only grandchild), Christopher.

Benny continued to regularly have exhibitions of his work including Paris, London, Dublin, and Amsterdam.

In 1965, he bought a small property in Fornalutx in Mallorca and enjoyed summers there each year, continuing to paint.

In 1966, his son Tony tragically took his own life. This was something he found great difficulty in talking about but did become expressed in his paintings.

### **The final years**

He found great companionship and love with Jacqueline Robinson in his final years. He moved on from the '66 loss to find a kind of peace in the '70's. He continued to paint and write in both Paris and Fornalutx, and his works became more representational, perhaps reflecting this peace.

In 1976, he became seriously ill and his final painful years were spent mostly in hospitals in Paris and London. He died in London, the city of his birth, in March '79.

## **Summary**

Basil Rakoczi has left an impressive volume of work in different media. As a painter, a writer, a poet, a sculptor and a designer. But it is his painting that stayed with him throughout his life - from his first imaginative drawings as a very young child to his final pieces, also drawings, shortly before his death.

He has had one man shows in, amongst other places London, Manchester, Paris, Dublin, Brussels, The Hague, New York and Philadelphia. His work is exhibited in public galleries across three continents. His work continues to endure and find a voice. He was a key part of the White Stag Exhibition at IMMA in Dublin in 2005, and was featured in The Moderns Exhibition also at IMMA in 2010/11

As a writer and poet, he has seven published books and made illustrations for four more. He is referred to in "The Three Painters" 1945, prefaced by Herbert Read. He wrote regularly for many different journals and magazines.

He has also left an impressive autobiography, full of interest not only for its documenting of events, but for the quality of its thinking, often profound and sometimes quirky!

There is also an official website, run by his family, featuring more information and a gallery of some of his work. This can be found on [www.rakoczi.org.uk](http://www.rakoczi.org.uk)

## **Why I Have Painted.....by Basil Rakoczi**

I have painted, and continue to paint, using diverse forms of expression. I do not call these forms of expressions styles. A style is an easily identified formula that, once arrived at by an artist, becomes adhered to more often than not for the rest of the artist's life and can weaken by repetition and boredom through time. Only a few artists escape this fate.

People like the game of identifying. Having a marked and repeated style makes identification easy. Passing through different forms of expression may confuse the spectator but it does satisfy the unfolding creative in the artist. It keeps both the artist and his or her work alive. There can be a constant renaissance in the developing art.

I "think" with my brush not with my head. That is to say, I work out my artistic challenges through my medium. I am not intellectual about painting, do not theorize or hold pre-conceived solutions where the art-task is concerned. My vision expresses itself through my brush, journeying from one experience to another, maybe doubling back and forth and exploring in many directions. And hence my work shows diverse faces. I have worked through many different aspects of art, entering into each in turn, to try to fully understand each expression. And doing this even though my basic work is always subjective and imaginative, with visions and wishes rising from deep within my being. Within this diversity I believe my individual hand-writing can be discerned underlining each new artistic experience.

Understanding with the brush means I worked through many experiments objectively. As I encountered the approaches of many different artists I had to know these as best as I could, by entering into them and feeling their experiences until I came to transform these in my own way. This was a lengthy and exciting method, an exercise in technique and vision.

My basic work was, and is always, subjective, a matter of imagination, rising from the depths of my being, and manifesting through the medium used. As a child I drew my longings and dreams, my hopes and fears; above all, that which I wished to be in the world around - more hidden than mundane. Later, I came to witness the reverse of my idealizations and began to express the cruel and the tragic. Either way I fell foul of teachers who made me copy a print of flowers, a landscape or a still life. To come to terms with this objective approach to art, I set out to master it. I watched how other artists dealt with flowers and landscapes and I sought a similar approach until I felt I understood it. Having thus satisfied myself, I sought then to see these things through my own temperament and found what is called a style or styles. This though soon disappointed me. I did not want a style. I wanted a personal and imaginative expression that would give me satisfaction in both the doing and the unfolding. Sometimes I managed this by working in different mediums, oil on paper with pencil added, monotypes, lithographs, ink with a touch of colour, using a bamboo pen, working with the left hand rather than my natural right and so on. I paid great attention to different ways of applying brush strokes to achieve either light and colour vibrations or direction with movement. Thus also came an appreciation of texture.

If I saw a work of art that intrigued me I had to experiment along similar lines, not copying but trying to feel into what the painter was trying to convey. Not only artists of this age but, even more, those of the past and different cultures.

Watching children paint and feeling into the way they set about it and the results achieved has been another education for me. To pass through painting as a child into adulthood, moving, in a way, from being a primitive to arriving at a measure of maturity, are each equally important. Primitive and modern have one aim yet a different outer realization. These swings on the pendulum of art reveal a wholeness of experience and a blending of humble searching into a transcendent moment of, one hopes, a fullness of expression.

The beacon that comforted me in my diversity of vision was the example set by Picasso. Not that I desired to paint after his manner but to benefit by the liberation from a set style. I learnt that I needed to create my own freedom, by doing daily my own "thing" no matter what anyone thought. The dangers are great but who cares? Why not take the risk?

*This is taken from a text for a lecture given by Basil Rakoczi in 1970.*