



THREE'S A CROWD

While his name is in the shadows of his friends Eric Ravilious and Edward Bawden – two of the 20th-century's best-known artists – Charles Mahoney's work is every bit as good, as a new exhibition showcases, Paul Liss reports

In the vibrant junior common room of the Royal College of Art in the 1920s, a group of young artists began to form friendships, some of which would last a lifetime.

Despite their different backgrounds and personalities, these men and women – among them Henry Moore, Enid Marx and Barnett Freedman – were part of what their tutor Paul Nash famously called “an outbreak of talent”, some of whom went on to become some of the most celebrated 20th-century British artists. Three in particular,

all born in the same year, became a trio of firm pals: Eric Ravilious (1903-1942), Edward Bawden (1903-1989) and Charles Mahoney (1903-1968).

While Mahoney did not go on to be part of the inner circle of the feted artistic community in Great Bardfield, his artistic persona is inextricably bound to it. He regularly stayed there in the 1930s and it was Mahoney to whom Bawden first proposed they set up an artists' hub in the Essex village.

And yet while Ravilious and Bawden are well known to collectors, with works of the former regularly selling for six-figure sums, Mahoney's name is on few people's radar.

So who was the artist who the former Tate director, John Rothenstein, called: “a distinguished successor to the finest of the Pre-Raphaelites”, and why does his name languish in the wake of his more famous pals?

‘Until now, Mahoney has had only two solo exhibitions – a modest memorial exhibition at the Ashmolean in 1975, and a touring exhibition at The Fine Art Society in 1999. As the general interest in the last generation of artists who were trained to draw and design in the traditional manner grows, his star will rise’



Opposite page Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) *Oak Cottage, Kent*. All images, unless otherwise stated, copyright of the artist's estate, courtesy of Liss Llewellyn

Left Charles Mahoney (1903-1968), *View from rear window at Mahoney's family home Anerley, c.1922*

Below right Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) *The Willow Grove, Great Bardfield*

Early days

Charles Mahoney was born Cyril Mahoney in Lambeth in 1903, the son of a mechanical engineer and hat maker. He was the second child of a family of seven boys, three of whom died in infancy. Money was tight. Charles and his brothers attended the local school at Oakfield Road, Anerley, where Charles' gift for drawing and painting was strongly encouraged by the art master, though his parents showed less enthusiasm, and urged him towards a career in banking. Mahoney's early experience of poverty, combined with Sunday afternoons spent at a Socialist Sunday School forged a lifelong belief in Socialist principles, later allied with a growing atheism.

Blind in one eye

Two other early events cast a shadow on his life: the first was the loss of an eye in a tussle with one of his brothers over the possession of some scissors. The second was a near fatal attack of diphtheria, which left him less robust than formerly (poor health dogged Mahoney, especially chest problems, and he died early aged 64).

After school he took up employment in the City, not as a banker, but in an advertising agency. He wrote: "Feeling a need for basic training in drawing and design, I persuaded my father to allow me to enter the Beckenham School of Art. I gained a Royal Exhibition in Drawing to the Royal College of Art in 1922. In September of that year I entered the School of Painting which was then under the active professorship of Sir William Rothenstein."

Interestingly, in Rothenstein's memoir *Since Fifty, Men and Memories 1922-1938* the first two names that appear on his list of top RCA students were Henry Moore and Charles Mahoney.

Great Bardfield

The Great Bardfield School set up and populated by Mahoney's artistic friends dates to around 1930 when Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious discovered the sleepy village while cycling. Soon after, the pair rented the famed Georgian building, Brick House, from a retired ship-stewardess and widow, Mrs Kinnear.

In 1932, Bawden married the potter Charlotte Epton (1902-1970) and as a wedding gift, Bawden's father purchased the house for the newlyweds. The couple shared the house with Ravilious and the artist Tirzah Garwood, whom he had married in 1930.

Of the foursome, Bawden in particular took to revamping the garden, a project for which he called on his good friend Charles Mahoney who, with his then girlfriend Evelyn Dunbar made many visits to Great Bardfield. Their longest stay was in the spring of 1933 (while Eric and Tirzah Ravilious were working on hotel murals in Morecombe) when they helped in the garden and marbled the hall. On the Raviliouses' return Tirzah wrote the garden had been transformed by their efforts. It is here Mahoney painted Willow Grove (below) a well-known picnic spot close to the village.

Soon Brick House became known for its gardens, which attracted the attention of its neighbour, the fellow artist, John Aldridge RA (1905-1983) – perhaps Great Bardfield's most well-known artist – who became another of Bawden's gardening companions and moved there himself in 1933.

Next came John Nash (1893-1977) in the nearby town of Wormingford who, by the 1950s, led the way in illustrating the botanicals for which the school came to be known.



COLLECTING GUIDES *Charles Mahoney*

Firm friends

During four years at the RCA one of Mahoney's closest friends was Barnett Freedman (1901-1958) an outspoken and talented Jewish artist from the East End. Mahoney's daughter Elizabeth Bulkeley writes: "On learning that my father's name was Cyril, he at once renamed him Charles. This was a welcome alteration for my father, although it was never accepted by his parents." Their friendship continued until Freedman's early death in 1958, with his early marriage, in 1925, aged 24, playing a vital role in Mahoney's own future romantic involvements. Elizabeth continued: "My father later felt that Barnett's early marriage, and the need to provide for his wife and home had prevented him from achieving his artistic potential. My father's conviction that the pursuit of material gain could seldom be reconciled with the highest artistic achievement became a fundamental part of his personality." This may be one of the reasons he ended his later love affair with fellow artist, Evelyn Dunbar.

Morley mural

In 1928, Rothenstein, who was a staunch advocate for the display of art in public places, selected three of his former RCA students – Mahoney, Bawden and Ravilious – to paint the murals for the back of the stage at Morley College for Working Men and Women, a project sponsored by Sir Joseph Duveen.

While Bawden and Ravilious were given the refectory to decorate, Mahoney was given the wall at the back of the stage used for orchestral concerts and folk dances. He called his subsequent mural *The Pleasures of Life* and for the first time Mahoney used the theme of the Muses.

The murals were destroyed when the college was bombed in 1940, and can be judged only from black-



Above Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) Compositional study for *The Pleasures of Life* at Morley College, 1928-1930

Below left Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) portrait of Barnett Freedman (1901-1958)

Below right Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) study for *Joy and Sorrow* mural at Brockley County School for Boys, 1933

Below far right Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) study for *Fortune and the Boy at the Well* mural at Brockley County School for Boys, 1933

and-white photographs and some of Mahoney's, mainly monochrome, preparatory sketches. The Morley scheme was classically Italianate and sculptural, emulating a frieze in low relief, with seven large figures representing Dancing and Plastic Art, Music, Philosophy and Drama; Poetry and Prose.

Brockley mural

In 1933, Rothenstein, via a BBC programme, again urged the nation's public authorities to encourage mural painting in public buildings, partly to provide employment for young artists struggling as a result of The Great Depression.

Two years later Mahoney, who was by then working as a tutor at the RCA, was asked to decorate the hall at Brockley County School for Boys (now Hilly Fields School). In the task he was assisted by three of his fourth-year female students – Evelyn Dunbar, Mildred Eldridge and Violet Martin. The required space was made up of five recessed panels in the assembly hall, and a gallery wall above an arcade at the back of the hall.

Mahoney undertook to decorate two of the large lunettes himself and allocated the third to Dunbar. His chosen subjects were taken from *Aesop's Fables*: namely *Fortune and the Boy at the Well* (which he signed *Chas Mahoney 1933*) and *Joy and Sorrow*.

The Brockley mural cycle stands out as one of the most important decorative schemes of the 20th century in Britain, and the hall was listed by the Department of National Heritage in April 1992 "Solely because of the high quality and rarity of the mural paintings."



Doomed love affair

During the spring of 1933 while working on the murals at Brockley, Mahoney and Evelyn fell in love, and so began a correspondence remarkable for its emotional intensity. Letters from Dunbar were full of drawings, more than words, and frequent (she wrote several times a week). Sadly, none of Mahoney's letters survives.

The problem of sharing time and intimacy together (both were lodging at the time) was solved by staying with friends, often with Edward Bawden and his wife Charlotte, doyens of the group of artists gathered round the village of Great Bardfield in Essex.

But while the pair shared a mutual artistic respect and love of nature, other factors would ultimately drive them apart: Dunbar came from a family of Christian Scientists, whose religious beliefs did not sit well with those of Mahoney. Mahoney may also have been aware of the perceived detrimental effect marriage had had on his friend Freedman's career. Marrying Dunbar could have affected both their careers.

Right Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) *Bathsheba* late 1940s

Below Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) *Study of Irises*

Below left Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) *Study for Yellow Ox-eye Daisies*, mid 1950s



'Drawings by Mahoney, which would never have been intended for exhibition or sale, can have real "wall power", revealing his creative genius as his ideas unfolded. Seek out the subjects that he is best known for: plant studies, (especially sunflowers), back garden views, muses in nature, kitchen-sink interiors and quirky still lifes'



LOVE OF NATURE

Early portraits of family and friends showed Mahoney's ability as a draftsman, which was developed later in his paintings and mural work, for which many studies were made in sketchbooks.

In later life he concentrated mainly on his plants, using different pens, washes, charcoal, or soft pencils to capture the essence of each.

Throughout his life Mahoney had favourite themes: the artist as creator was one of the most recurrent – whether as indicated by a hand reaching into the picture, a preferred motif of his, or in the endless compositions of the artist seated sketching outdoors, attended by his muse.

Adam and Eve

Mahoney's first depiction of Adam and Eve dates to his relationship with Dunbar in the mid-1930s, where references to 'Charlie and Eve' occur frequently in their correspondence. The idea of the Garden of Eden well encapsulating their love of plants and nature.

The Muses were another favourite theme. First used at Morley College, they represented the spiritual and creative values that the artist strove to express. In a large design for a mural he was planning at the end of his life, entitled *The Muses* the central image is of the mountains that form the Fairfield Horseshoe and dominate Ambleside's north view; perhaps attesting to the happiness of his time there. Mahoney's landscapes were more typically taken from the parts of southern England where he spent his holidays: the Cotswolds, Wiltshire, Suffolk and Great Bardfield.

Love of nature

Today it may be difficult to imagine the role plants and gardens played in Mahoney and his friends' lives, possibly answering a need in inter-war Britain for safe, enclosed and cultivated space.

Gardening nurtured a source of friendship, particularly for the circle including Mahoney, Bawden, Freedman and Percy Horton. Between them there was a constant exchange of plants and cuttings sent by Royal Mail. Plants also provided endless artistic inspiration.

Mahoney and Evelyn Dunbar travelled widely visiting gardens, writing and illustrating their influential book *Gardener's Choice* (1937). In her book *Long Live Great Bardfield and Love to You All*, Tirzah Garwood remembers Mahoney sketching sunflowers at Brick House: "There was a row along the wall by the lavatory and halfway up the garden... Charlie Mahoney made drawings from the top of a ladder, one rather resented his continual presence outside the lavatory."

Move to Kent

Love of nature may have been one of the reasons that in 1937 Mahoney bought Oak Cottage, Wrotham, in Kent, presenting him with the first garden of his own. Another reason for the move was to provide a home for his mother, which proved especially useful later, during the war, away from the London bombing.

The cottage was cheap and in poor condition, Mahoney carried out the repairs himself despite it worsening his overall health. He chose second-hand furniture and on the walls he hung paintings by friends. He added a studio for himself halfway down the garden and used a formal garden layout to suit the simplicity of the cottage, while allowing plants to follow their natural habits within each bed. Sunflowers grew beside hogweed and in a garden that would give him artistic nourishment for the rest of his life.

Below right Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) *Ambleside, View from the Library Roof*

Outbreak of war

When war broke out in 1939 Mahoney and his mother were living at Oak Cottage. His relationship with Dunbar was over, although they remained friends. Between 1937 and 1940 Mahoney made sketching expeditions around Wrotham, making studies of the North Downs, the brickfields at Platt, and the Borough Green sandpits.

At Great Bardfield the Bawdens had taken in refugees from Spain and Germany, while Ravilious had become a War Artist (he would later die having been shot down over Iceland in 1943). With one eye and a weak chest, Mahoney was unable to join the Forces and in 1940, along with his fellow RCA tutor Percy Horton, he accompanied the college's evacuation to Ambleside in the Lake District.

It was here he met Dorothy Bishop, a calligraphy tutor from the design school. They were married in September 1941, Mahoney was aged 37 and Bishop, 39.

Many of Mahoney's drawings of the Ambleside period relate to his depiction of a room which he and Dorothy shared. In them he concentrates on the interior of the room, on tables, chairs and domestic detail, and then moves to drawing the view from the window, and finally to the landscape beyond.

After the war

After the war Oak Cottage formed the backdrop of family life. To ensure a regular income, both Charles and Dorothy taught part-time until 1953 at the RCA, when changes introduced by the then Principal, Robin Darwin, meant that they both lost their posts.

It was a time of great stress and financial hardship. Subsequently they taught at Bromley, Maidstone and Woolwich Schools of Art for two or three days a week. When not teaching, Charles worked throughout the day in

Why isn't Mahoney better known?

His natural modesty and lack of vanity played a part. He wanted to spend his life painting and viewed fame and fortune as a distraction. He didn't seek commercial success and actively distrusted dealers, so didn't employ anyone to represent him.

Added to which he was an intellectual and committed to teaching and helping other artists. Perhaps even to his own detriment. His daughter Elizabeth Bulkeley writes: "His modesty allowed him to recommend anyone but himself, and his perfectionist tendencies ensured that he felt that any work of his own could always have been better."

Until now Mahoney has had only two solo exhibitions - a memorial exhibition at the Ashmolean in 1975, and a touring exhibition in 1999. As the general interest in the last generation of artists who were trained to draw and design in the traditional manner grows, his star will rise. The Tate archive has a huge body of work, which will go on display when it has been fully catalogued. When it does it will help write him back into British art history.





Left Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) *Room at the Queens Hotel Ambleside* c.1940



Right Eric Ravilious *Bathing Machines, Aldeburgh, 1938*, set a record for the artist when it sold for £269,000 in 2016, image courtesy of Christie's

his studio avoiding lunch because the light was then at its best for painting.

From 1939-1953 Dorothy was in charge of calligraphy at Royal College of Art, after the retirement of Edward Johnston. Like Mahoney, she had a love of plants, and excelled in painting in miniature on vellum the wildflowers she found on walks.

Their daughter, Elizabeth Bulkeley, writes: "These were the plants that they liked to draw, paint and grow. They were sculptural and bold, yet subtle, and unusual for their time. Each one was described lovingly, as if in sharing their favourite plants they were sharing their mutual happiness."

Despite Mahoney's declining health he continued to paint and teach – by then at the Royal Academy Schools – even managing to draw the nurses tending to his final illness. Fortunately Dorothy's health was much more robust, and after Charles died in 1968 at the age of 64, she was able to live at the cottage for a further 20 years.

Below Dorothy Mahoney (1902-1984) *Study of cottage garden flowers, Borage, dianthus, geranium, violet and wild strawberry*, watercolour over pencil

Bottom Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) *The Beach at Pevensey* c.1958

Bottom right Charles Mahoney (1903-1968) *Sheet of studies of giant Sunflowers*, ink and watercolour



Pleasures of Life: Charles Mahoney is on at the Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden until October 27. For more information on the artist and to view works for sale visit www.lissllewellyn.com



EXPECT TO PAY

Not only was Mahoney an exact contemporary of Bawden and Ravilious and a lifelong friend, he also shared their aesthetic sensibility. But prices for Ravilious are typically in the range of tens of thousands to hundred of thousands of pounds; Bawden regularly sells at auction in a price range of low thousands to tens of thousands. But works by Mahoney can be bought for a fraction of their prices, ranging from a few hundred pounds to a few thousand pounds.

It is true to say Mahoney's time has yet to come. While a large gift of his work was given to the Tate's archive, astonishingly good works (that have never been on the market before) are still available.

Quirky still lives

While Ravilious and Bawden produced predominantly small-scale works on paper, in watercolour and gouache, Mahoney worked across a variety of media and sizes, including paintings produced in oil.

Quality is the key. Drawings by Mahoney, none of which would have been intended for exhibition or sale, can have real "wall power". Seek out the subjects for which he is best known: plant studies, (especially sunflowers), back garden views, muses in nature, kitchen-sink interiors and quirky still lives.

Look out also for design-based work – children's illustrations, stage sets, and mural schemes which are often closest to the spirit of Bawden and Ravilious.

Work that he carried out alongside Evelyn Dunbar (for *Gardener's Choice*) and the murals at Brockley School can also carry a premium.

When it comes to pricing for Mahoney's work, the auction market has yet to be tested because so little of consequence has been sold to date. The best is yet to come.



