



# CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

## Sir Frank Brangwyn, R.A.

### THE GREAT INNOVATOR

by William Stout

**A**T THE PEAK OF HIS FAME Frank Brangwyn (1867-1956) was the artistic lion of his day. Although Brangwyn is considered by many to be one of the greatest artists Britain has ever produced, his robust life actually began in Belgium. Frank Brangwyn was born in Bruges on May 12, 1867 as Guillaume François Brangwyn, the third son of a Welsh mother, Eleanor Griffiths, and English father, William Curtis Brangwyn. His father, an ecclesiastical architect, muralist and designer of textiles and furniture, manufactured church furniture in Bruges. He was undoubtedly a major influence on young Frank's formative years and throughout the rest of his life.

The Brangwyn family returned to England in 1875, and shortly thereafter Frank entered the **South Kensington Art Schools**. Bored with his formal art education and eager to work as a professional, Brangwyn left school at age twelve. At fifteen he began

two years of work for the celebrated designer **William Morris** (1834-1896). Due to his Belgian upbringing Brangwyn already had a broad knowledge of Dutch and Flemish art. To complement what he had already studied, early *Art Nouveau*

**Victoria and Albert Museum**). Brangwyn was also mentored by the highly influential connoisseur and art dealer **Siegfried Bing** (1838-1905), owner of the Paris gallery **L'Art Nouveau** and famed for inspiring the "Bing Style" synonymous with Art Nouveau.

Brangwyn proved to be a prodigy—his first acceptance to exhibit a painting at the **Royal Academy** came at age seventeen. At twenty-four he won a gold medal at the 1891 **Paris Salon**. At that time, his paintings were primarily monochromatic, referred to as his "grey period." However, Brangwyn's limited palette was perhaps a result of his limited funds. This all changed in 1888 after Brangwyn boarded a freighter and

worked his way to Istanbul and the Black Sea. His travels through the sun-drenched Middle East and the influence of his travelling companion, Scottish colourist **Arthur Melville** (1855-1904), dramatically altered Brangwyn's colour sense



*The Departure of Lancaster for the East Indies, 1904*  
Sepia sketch for oil on canvas mural panel  
Collection of Skinners Hall, London

designers **Harold Steward Rathbone** (1858-1929) and **Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo** (1851-1942) encouraged Brangwyn to copy the works of **Raphael** and **Donatello** in the collection of the **South Kensington Museum** (renamed in 1899 as the



Twenty-two year-old Frank Brangwyn in Wentworth Studios, Chelsea, c. 1889

forever. Russian-born French Expressionist painter **Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)** praised Brangwyn's sense of colour, noting that Brangwyn was the first western artist to use the red-blue combination that was predominant in Oriental carpets. Painting adventures followed in South Africa (1891), Spain (1892) and Morocco (1893), affirming Brangwyn's talents in the *Orientalist* genre. Brangwyn's brilliant palette shocked and outraged the British art establishment who upheld the tradition that paintings should consist primarily of properly subdued colour with only occasional accents of bright hues.

Brangwyn's marriage to nurse **Lucy Annie Ray** in 1896 did not slow his wanderlust, but limited it to nearby Spain, Italy, France and Belgium. His sketches, notes and paintings derived from his exten-

sive travels financially sustained him and provided him with artistic resources and inspiration for the rest of his life.

His working association with Siegfried Bing led Brangwyn to exhibit paintings at Bing's first **Salon de l'Art Nouveau** in 1895. The exhibition, promoting a penetration of art into everyday life, caused an outrage. The salon's focus was not the traditional presentation of paintings by themselves; instead it exposed the public to the concept of entire rooms being designed as art where every element of each room was in harmony with its decorative and functional details.

At the Salon, Brangwyn also exhibited his applied art in the form of carpets and tapestries. Throughout his career he designed furniture, fireplaces, stained glass, tables,

beds, panelling, electric lamps, chairs, door handles, screens, jewels and glassware. He even designed gravestones and the interior of *The Empress of Britain*, the ill-fated luxury ocean liner that was later torpedoed in World War II.

Brangwyn also worked for the English company **Royal Doulton**, makers of fine pottery and ceramics, designing vases, jugs, dinner services, ashtrays, biscuit tins, goblets, bowls, candle sticks, lamp stands and ashtrays. Brangwyn's designs were considered daring and revolutionary; his colours and stylizations were in direct contrast to what had traditionally been produced in Britain.

**D**ESPITE HIS EARLY ASSOCIATION with Art Nouveau, Brangwyn never let his work be limited to that genre's stylistic strictures. Brangwyn was nothing if not an independent artist, an experimenter and innovator. He followed his own powerful muse, producing work that crossed over into the *Arts and Crafts Movement*, as well as into the *Vienna Secessionists'* domain where he was a correspondent member. Although he ultimately came to represent *British Modernism*, initially in Europe long before being recognized as such in Britain, Brangwyn's work was always his own.

The critics were at a loss as to how to pigeonhole this artistic titan. Brangwyn's individuality and diversity worked to the detriment of his posthumous reputation; he was not strongly linked to any "school" or movement of art, making it difficult for future critics to "make their name" by writing about his work. Brangwyn's artistic legacy most strongly emerged in the United States via the southern California landscape artists such as **Franz Bischoff (1864-1929)**, **Frank Tenney Johnson (1874-1939)**,



Edgar Payne (1883-1947), and William Wendt (1865-1946), as well as through the American illustrators of the early part of the twentieth century, known as the "Golden Age of Illustration." Brangwyn's work hugely influenced the artists Dean Cornwell (1892-1960), Mead Schaeffer (1898-1980), Frank Earle Schoonover (1877-1972), Saul Tepper (1899-1987) and many others. Some of Cornwell's works have even been misidentified as being by Brangwyn. In 1927, when Cornwell was awarded his commission to paint the Los Angeles Public Library murals, he put his successful illustration career on hold for three years, journeying to England and apprenticing himself under Brangwyn to learn his new craft of mural painting from the master, or "the Boss," as Brangwyn's students referred to him.

Brangwyn believed in self-discipline. Of the three biographies written on him two are by William de

Bellerocche: *Brangwyn Talks* and *Brangwyn's Pilgrimage*; both consist of numerous discussions and interviews with the artist, capturing his lively personality. One of Brangwyn's students, James Daugherty (1887-1974), wrote in his diary on 20 October 1905 that he was beginning to understand his teacher's success, and by contrast, the failure of other artists because of their inability to "clinch with the vital questions...[they] haven't the courage and intelligence to achieve them. 'It is work!' as the Boss says. Hard, enterprising, intelligent work for the fun and glory of doing it." He further quotes Brangwyn's urging, "Training! Training! Training! In the thoroughness of it lies your salvation and training out of schools is better than training in school.... Draw! Draw! Draw like hell!"

Brangwyn's favourite artistic theme was the depiction of modern industrial life at the docks or in the factories, symbolizing the heroic and noble facets of manual labour. This



*The Blacksmiths, c. 1905*  
Oil sketch for mural panel in the 1905 Venice International Exhibition

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*Raja's Birthday*, 1908

Oil

Collection of Leeds City Art Gallery

subject matter resulted in his reputation as the most masculine of artists. His brawny drawings exhibit the power and solidity of sculpture.

WHATEVER ARTISTIC MEDIA Brangwyn touched, he mastered. Brangwyn was capable of both large and small scale projects, ranging from murals, oil paintings, watercolours, etchings, woodcuts and lithographs to bookplates and commercial posters. Brangwyn illustrated numerous books, including a four volume *Arabian Nights* (1896), *Don Quixote* (1895), several heroic seafaring yarns, *The Spirit of The Age*

(1905), *Eothen* (1913), a particularly fine *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1909) and the sumptuous yet simple *The Girl and The Faun* (1916). It is estimated that the prolific artist produced over 12,000 works during his lifetime.

The most popular art magazine of its time, *The Studio*, published from 1893 to 1922, was important in championing the work of Brangwyn. Scarcely an issue went by without some reproduction of his work. When *The Studio* began its *Famous Water-Colour Painters* series of books, Frank Brangwyn was the subject of their first volume.

Brangwyn produced well over

three hundred etchings, many of them gigantic in size. James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was furious that Brangwyn broke the long hallowed size limit rules established for etchings with huge, stunningly designed works—Whistler was angry mainly because he wished that he had thought of it first! Brangwyn intended these large etchings to hang as stand-alone works of art. Once again, *The Studio* series of *Famous Etchers* books debuted with Brangwyn (he was one of only two artists to be given two volumes).

As a result of his acclaim and accomplishments many official



commissions came Brangwyn's way. Perhaps the most famous and dramatic of these were his murals, the best known of which are the British Empire Panels (1925-32), a work originally intended for the Houses of Parliament at Westminster, but now housed in Brangwyn Hall in Swansea. He also completed a series of panels for the chapel of Christ's Hospital (1912-23) in Horsham. Other important mural commissions included the Worshipful Company of Skinners (1902-09) in London and St. Aidan's Church (1908-16) in Leeds. Brangwyn's international status gained him numerous commissions in North America including the murals in the Manitoba Legislative Building (1918-21) in Winnipeg, Canada. In the United States Brangwyn painted the murals inside the dome of the Missouri State Capitol (1915-25) in Jefferson City, and in San Francisco he created murals for the Pan Pacific International Exhibition (1915). In 1930, after being rejected by Picasso and Matisse, John D. Rockefeller commissioned Frank Brangwyn to create four murals for the interior of the Art Deco R.C.A. Building at Rockefeller Center. The project took Brangwyn four years to complete.

**B**RANGWYN STARTLED THE ART Establishment when he began the lay-in for his first major mural commission with ultramarine blue instead of traditional umbers (a painting method that was later adopted with great success by Maxfield Parrish (1870-1966). Brangwyn's outrageous method was verbally castigated by other artists and critics as he progressed on the project; they scoffed when queried regarding the mural's outcome. But upon completion of the mural all doubts and criticism were cast aside as young Brangwyn's bold mind and brilliant hand ultimately revealed



Dean Cornwell (1892-1960)  
*The Road to Damascus*, c. 1926  
 Study in oil for his 1926 book, *The City of the Great King*  
 Note Brangwyn's influence in this painting.

him to be the art world's fresh new reigning genius.

Most major art museums of the world exhibit Brangwyn's work. The Frank Brangwyn Museum in Bruges, however, is somewhat disappointing if one is expecting to see a vast collection of Brangwyn's oeuvre. For years it was only visited annually by a dozen or so Brits and the odd

American until the 1970s when most of the museum was given over to exhibiting local artisans' arts and crafts. With this change the museum now draws a significant number of visiting tourists. The few Brangwyn works exhibited on the first floor, however, are magnificent. Hopefully, with the growing resurgence of interest in Brangwyn's work their com-



CAC Executive Director Elaine Adams and Signature Artist John Asaro in front of Brangwyn's murals.  
Oil on canvas mural panels for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition, Herbst Theatre, San Francisco

prehensive Brangwyn collection will again soon dominate the museum. The **National Gallery of Zimbabwe** has one of the largest collections of Brangwyn's work. One of Brangwyn's finest oil paintings, the large still life he painted for the Royal Academy upon his acceptance into that fellowship, is part of the permanent collection of the **Brooks Museum of Art** in Memphis, Tennessee.

In 1919 Brangwyn was elected to the Royal Academy and in 1941 he was knighted. Sir Frank Brangwyn passed away in Ditchling, Sussex on June 11, 1956. Although virtually forgotten in the annals of art history, the flame of his artistic torch still burns bright as his work continues to inspire new generations of artists.

*Notes:*

*A major exhibition, Frank Brangwyn 1867-1956, opened at the Leeds City Art Gallery (April 6-June 11, 2006); travelling next to the Brangwyn Museum, now known as the Arents House Museum, in Bruges (July 7-September 17, 2006); followed by the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in Swansea, Wales (October 1-December 31, 2006). A superb catalogue is available through [www.bruceholdsworthbooks.com](http://www.bruceholdsworthbooks.com). The author William Stout is a Signature Member of the California Art Club and Managing Editor of its Newsletter.*