

Watercolours for Science

Title 189

During World War II, I worked in a chemical laboratory during the day [see Title 30] and during the night I was active, often very active, as a part-time fireman during the *Blitz* in the western parts of London. [See Title 28] My fire station was 34-A-2X in Chelsea. My natural curiosity often drove me to re-visit in day-time the scenes of fires fought the night before, and soon I took a sketch pad with me to record the weird shapes of twisted girders and the avalanches of brick rubble which had blocked the streets.

The most colourful sights were the patterns of walls and interiors of rooms, revealed and laid bare by the complete collapse of the remainder of the building. There were bath tubs still attached to the blue wall-tiles of a bath room on the third floor, or the mirrors of a pink boudoir, incongruously juxtaposed on the floor below. These I sketched and watercoloured afterwards. Free nights I spent at life classes in the Art School of St Martin which helped me greatly to get my perspectives correct.

All this ended in 1945 when 'peace broke out' and other activities, like cinematography and temporary emigration to Australia [see Title 47 *et seq.*] fully occupied my time. I gave all these war-time sketches to Ann Aikman, my wife, as a wedding present and I do not know if they still exist, as she continued to live in Australia when I returned to England in 1954.

Not until 1969, 24 years later, when I, as the Science Correspondent of the *The Daily Telegraph*, was invited by the US Navy to visit Antarctica and the South Pole, that I took up sketching again and have continued it ever since. I record for my own pleasure such scenes of scientific or other scenic interest as I have been fortunate enough to visit during my travels all over the world.

My watercolour technique has remained the same, ever since I started in London during the war days. I make rapid outline sketches in Indian ink, using a Rotring Rapidograph or Rapidoliner, 0.35 mm. But as soon as possible, I colour them from memory. For that I have a paint-box with 24 half-cakes, which takes up very little space and can easily be packed. I have never coloured my sketches on the spot, and this has greatly helped me to develop my memory for colours. I have always used 140 lb, 300 gram per square meter, Bockingford acid-free paper, 10 × 7 inches, 254 × 178 mm.

Only a few of the 1200 watercolours I have by now accumulated can be of any direct scientific interest, but as each is accurately dated, they may be of some historical value in years to come. Apparently they have given some pleasure to those who have spent a few minutes looking at them.