

Albert Houthuesen

During WW2 a number of well-known people, such as Leonard Cheshire, came to live in Tickhill. Possibly one of the least known people who came here at this time was the artist Albert Houthuesen, born in Amsterdam in 1903. Following the death of his father, who three weeks earlier had been attacked by his mother frustrated by her husband giving up reliable work in the piano-making business in favour of art and praising his son's artistic attempts, Albert with his three siblings and mother moved to London in 1912. (Albert later admitted that the attack haunted him for the rest of his life.) To make ends meet his mother became a boarding house keeper in Hampstead. All five members of the family became naturalised British citizens after taking an oath of allegiance on 19 May 1922 (as recorded in the *London Gazette*, 4 July 1922). In spite of his mother giving him no encouragement to become an artist, he was awarded a scholarship to the Royal College of Art in 1924. Many of his paintings were destroyed during the war and his home in St John's Wood was badly damaged in a bombing raid in 1940. By then he already had recognition of his work, one of his paintings *The Stack Yard* (one of the 'most brilliant paintings of the year') being purchased by the Chantry Trustees for the Tate Gallery in 1939. (*Daily Herald* 29 April 1939)



Rejected by the army on health grounds, he accepted work as a tracer in a draughtsman's office at the Plant Works in Doncaster, tracing replacement parts for locomotives. He lived briefly in Letwell then Loversall before moving to Tickhill in 1943. This war work led to a nervous breakdown and his discharge from the Plant on 15 March 1944. Meeting a family of musical Russian Jewish clowns, the Hermans, who performed in Doncaster's Grand Theatre, encouraged Houthuesen to return to his art, making drawings and paintings of them and other clowns in 1945 while he lived at 21 St Mary's Gate, Tickhill, rented from the summer of 1943 for £1 a week. Some of these pictures, such as the ink drawing of the clown Danny Polo, left, are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. (This drawing is Ref. S.420-1980.)

A possible reason for Houthuesen's affinity with clowns is that his father's cousin was a leading comic actor in Holland and his father, a talented musician as well as an artist, also enjoyed performing comic routines on the piano. The artist himself explained that he was 'always clowning for friends, trying to cover things up, so I'll give up clowning and start being a clown through some drawing'. The sketches at the Grand Theatre were his first real clown studies. He noted that he used to go round to the back of the theatre and tell the Hermans how marvellous they were, which they couldn't understand because nobody else bothered. 'People rolled in, laughed like hell and went out.'

The biography of Houthuesen by Richard Nathanson (page 128) includes the following memory by the artist: 'When Cath and I moved to Tickhill we met a carpenter called William Green (born in 1904), a remarkable character. He was a highly nervous man who really wanted to be a painter. Various things in his life had stopped this so that just the very idea that I tried to draw and paint drew us together. William would come home latish in the day, wash, have his tea and sit down for a few minutes. And then, until daylight went, he would work like a maniac in his garden or shed. William was the only one who sometimes came into our cottage and saw what it was like. But there were a lot of people, for instance, who thought I was away from the Plant because it was amusing to be away.' (Houthuesen suffered from migraines at this time.) One day William gave him some roses and he began to paint *Somnambulist* and *Anvil*. *Somnambulist* (right) was begun in 1943 and completed in 1966, it shows the figure of a man (Houthuesen) surrounded by a glowing light in a dark landscape with two large full-blown yellow roses in the sky above him; the *Anvil* painting has three similar large yellow roses in a vertical row above an anvil in front of a dark sky. Houthuesen made one reference to his minute workroom in the Tickhill cottage to say that he had a little photograph of St Bernadette pinned up there.



Reflecting on the war Houthuesen said 'It was a terrible thing to see the planes going over, to think of the marvellous young men on those bombing raids and know perfectly well that many of them wouldn't come back. And that it was going to be ghastly at the other end.... There I was at the Plant, loathing the very idea of war, yet having to do this idiotic work.... One night German bombers went over dropping chandelier flares. I looked back - the sound of the bombers seemed to come from behind, in fact it's a funny echo - and then I turned round and the night was absolutely blue with two great chandelier flares hanging in the sky; and the whole village every tiny speck of it (could be seen)... as if it were carved out of a phosphorescent chalk. I've never seen anything like it. It was another world'. (See Nathanson's biography pp126-136)

During his time in the north Houthuesen exhibited several paintings at the Royal Academy. In 1940 two paintings *A Pony* and *Portrait of a collier* (a clever study in grime according to one critic) were shown at the United Artists' Exhibition. (*Nottingham Evening Post* 5 January 1940). In 1943 he was one of several Yorkshire artists who exhibited at the Royal Academy. Whereas most Yorkshire artists sent landscapes, Houthuesen sent a 'well-organised' still life. (*Yorkshire Post* 3 May 1943).

He returned to London, penniless, in July 1945 and initially took a job with his wife as wardens of a students' hostel. His wife Catherine Dean, whom he met at the RCA and married in 1931, continued to help with family finances by taking a teaching post. His pleasure at returning to London is clear, not only being able to explore many parts of the capital but also being able to visit theatres, particularly enjoying ballet performances which inspired more drawings and paintings. In 1950 along with his wife he attended a memorial exhibition of Sir William Rothenstein's work at the Tate Gallery (Rothenstein had made it possible for a scholarship to be granted to enable Houthuesen to study art at the RCA). The Houthuesens were photographed at the exhibition with Sir Ronald and Lady Matthews of Wadworth Hall in *The Tatler*, 17 May 1950.

Houthuesen's first one-man exhibition was in 1961; nine more exhibitions of his work followed. In 1967, for example, the Mercury Gallery in Cork Street exhibited his work. *The Illustrated London News* 16 September 1967 described Houthuesen as a 'latter day expressionist whose violent seascapes are as much pictures of a mental landscape as they are of a physical one'. In 1976 the BBC filmed an interview with him which can be seen on the website <www.houthuesen.com>. He died at home in Camberwell on 20 October 1979.

Many places apart from the V&A have collections of Houthuesen's paintings including Tate Britain, The British Museum and The Ashmolean Museum. Examples of his paintings sold by auction houses, sometimes for thousands of pounds, can also be seen on the internet.

See websites <www.houthuesen.com> for biographical details and many examples of his paintings; <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk>> for Houthuesen's paintings held by the V&A; <C:\users\Public\Pictures\houthuesenArtway_eu.htm> for Evens, J. *The spirituality of the artist-clown; the significance of the clown in the life and work of Albert Houthuesen*. A sample of Houthuesen's portraits, landscapes and still life paintings can be found on <<https://artuk.org>>. For the full biography of Houthuesen see: Nathanson, R. *Walk to the Moon: the story of Albert Houthuesen*, The Putney Press, 2008. Permission to reproduce the paintings and quote from the artist's reminiscences has been given by Richard Nathanson on behalf of the Albert Houthuesen Trust.