

The Artists of Northumbria

Marshall Hall 1973

This book does exactly what it says on the tin. It is an illustrated dictionary of the art of the North East covering the period 1625 – 1950. Northumbria is defined as extending from Berwick-upon – Tweed in the North to Bowes, Darlington and Yarm in the South, the whole of the East coast between these points and in the west taking in Wooler, Kielder, Haltwhistle and Middleton in Teesdale. It has colour plates as well as numerous black and white illustrations. The artists themselves are not just painters, but sculptors, engravers, stained glass designers, illustrators and cartoonists.

There is a useful opening introduction which discusses the different styles of art explored throughout, giving historical overviews of such topics as Marine, Landscape and Portrait painting, Historical, Religious and Subject specific works, Sporting and Industrial themes, as well as showcasing individual stylists, stonemasons, woodcarvers, caricaturists etc. It closes with some general remarks about influences on the output from the region, the opportunities offered by different art schools, galleries and teachers.

How best to use a book such as this? Of course for the subject specialist it amounts to an invaluable reference work – you would simply look up the name of the artist you wanted to research alphabetically. Searching through for references to Darlington artists for instance, we discover that in the seventeenth century Francis Place of Dinsdale is thought to be ‘the first British artist whose main preoccupation was landscape’. Local man John Priestman was one of the earliest professionals doing statuary on graves for the wealthy. One of the colour plates, ‘The Harvesters’ depicting shire horses at work, is by the extraordinary twins, Elizabeth and Dorothy Alderson of Neasham. They were long-lived, born in 1900 and had a very unusual way of working: ‘one sister starting at one part of a painting, and the other at another, with a complete fusion of their talents in the finished work.’ Other artists with Darlington connections who have entries in the dictionary are Mary Bigland, James Lindsay Bird, Alfred Dresser, John Dobbin, Edgar and Samuel Elton, George Fothergill, John Gibbs, Myles Meehan, Ralph Swinden, and Thomas Young.

For the interested amateur, why not begin with the colour plates, see what catches your eye and then trace back to the commentary on the artist whose work appeals to you. It could be the beginning of a whole new voyage of discovery. This reviewer discovered the work of the Spennymoor artist Norman Cornish through the dictionary and is happy to report that the Library also has a lending copy of ‘The Quintessential Cornish’, full of his paintings and an account of his life.

An invaluable reference work for the subject specialist, but also a tempting gateway for the amateur enthusiast.