
Anniversary Essays



Julian Cooper, *Barre des Ecrins*, oil on canvas, 61 x 40cm, 2013

JULIAN COOPER

The Alps Through Paint

When Steve Goodwin commissioned 10 paintings from me to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the *Alpine Journal* I first thought I'd enjoy two or three summer weeks moving between perhaps Grindelwald, Zermatt and Chamonix and getting up into interesting high places whilst making paintings of some significant Alps entirely from life. Indeed, to that end I made several visits to the Turner Bequest archive at Tate Britain and was able to study Turner's Alpine sketchbooks at first hand.

As it turned out I didn't have the time or resources for that, and instead looked for inspiration among my own sketches, photos and books and among Steve's extensive mountaineering library.

The *Matterhorn* was painted in 2011 from one of the seven drawings I made in Zermatt in 1990 of the surrounding peaks. It was Christmas week and as well as enjoying the holiday I was also keen to get up high to draw and photograph the surrounding mountains. The weather was perfect; each day my wife and I ascended on the cable cars with the skiers, and descended in late afternoon to the valley on foot, feeling very much outsiders in our drab clothes.

Four of these paintings were done from that sketchbook and the photographs I took at the time – *Matterhorn* and *Dent Blanche* were from drawings on the 22nd of December, *Monte Rosa* and *Weisshorn* from drawings the following day. The other mountains I also went on to draw were the Rimpfischhorn and the Strahlhorn on Christmas Day, and Lyskamm on Boxing Day.

I chose the Matterhorn east face partly because it shows Whymper's Hörnli Ridge so well, and partly because I liked its schematic, triangular, 'mountain' shape. I climbed it this way in 1974, and while climbing the mountain does enhance the act of painting it, and similarly drawing and painting from life gives one a lot, one can still be intensely involved in the form and presence of a mountain by looking 'through' the photo and interpreting the three dimensional reality rather than just copying it, imaginatively entering into the specifics of form and light even if it's someone else's photograph.

Weisshorn and *Dent Blanche* also have that triangular pediment shape, one more symmetrical than the other, both with a series of vertical ridges and flutings reminiscent of classical architecture. By emphasising their symmetry the irregularities are pointed up and with a rhythm running through it.

In each of the paintings I wanted to show the mountain as a piece of sculpture in the full light of day rather than partially obscured by weather and cloud as often happens in reality.

Four of the 10 paintings are derived from illustrations in a book – *The High Mountains of the World* by Helmut Dumler and Willi P Burkhardt, published

by Diadem. (A literary-academic friend and AC member assures me that this is perfectly alright and is called 'intertextuality'.) They are *Täschhorn*, *Allalinhorn*, *Barre des Ecrins* and the *Dom*.

I wasn't any the less engaged with painting these than the others and consider them just as successful as paintings. My main concern was to make them self-sufficient as images in themselves, zooming in on only the aspects that interested me for visual and dramatic reasons, (always including the summits of course) and that would fit into the self-imposed format I'd settled on, and which would work both as a celebration of a particular peak and its history and as a serious painting in its own right. I couldn't limit myself to only depicting the route of the first ascent either, many of those not having enough visual interest in themselves.

Although I've often cropped summits off in paintings in order to free them of some of their symbolic baggage, summits are interesting in themselves as almost conceptual spaces where success or failure on a mountain is defined, and sometimes conversely as sacred spaces which can be either respected or defiled by entering them or not.

My interest usually rests in the main body of the mountain, its internal spaces where things are shifting and provisional and part of a process that's happening fast or slowly. From a distance my own gaze is as much drawn towards the field of forces within and across them as in their defining edges.

I counted 37 English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish first ascents of Alpine 4000ers from this 'Golden Age' – 18 of which I chose as possible subjects. My choice of which to paint was primarily whether they fired me up enough and had the potential to be more than an just an illustration or mountain portrait and whether they would work within the restriction of the size and proportions of the 16 x 24 ins. rectangle I'd chosen for them all. There were many more that equally interested me and that I could have painted.

I hope that the series forms a whole unit, a kind of fugue with counterpoint of variations on the same theme – 10 visual routes from the bottom of the canvas to the top, mountain base to summit, comprised of thick and thin paint, being translations of snow, ice, rock and sky, with sunlight and shadow defining the form, and the formal abstract visual interest spread over the surface of the canvas. The summits nearly touch the tops of the canvas so as to maximise the visual extent of the mountain and to align it with the picture surface.

I included one peak from outside the period – *Aiguille Blanche du Peuterey*, climbed in 1885. I couldn't resist its dramatic steepness and hanging glacier, which, along with *Mt Blanc de Tacul* – (I also wanted to include a rock face) – were sourced from photographs I'd taken whilst climbing the Dent du Géant in the summer of 1983.

It has been an absorbing journey, revisiting the Alps through paint. While working on the *Weisshorn* I couldn't but wonder what John Tyndall, who first climbed the mountain in 1861, and was also the physicist who 150 years ago discovered that carbon dioxide traps heat, would think of the situation we are in now, and what these Alps will look like in another 150 years' time.

150 Years of Climbing on Monte Disgrazia



Monte Disgrazia from Monte Sissone. On the left is the Val Malenco approach, on the right the Val di Mello side climbed by the Kennedy-Stephen party. (Giordano Giumella)

The 150th Anniversary Celebrations by Sash Tusa

Monte Disgrazia (3678m), the highest mountain in the Val Masino range of north-east Italy has, perhaps, become slightly overlooked in recent decades by UK climbers, but it remains a complex and challenging mountain that is very closely associated with the Alpine Club. This is both through its history (the first ascent was by a team that included ES Kennedy and Leslie Stephen) and, more recently, the dedication and extensive work of AC member Giuseppe 'Popi' Miotti.

A native of nearby Sondrio, Popi has worked tirelessly to publicise the mountain and maintain awareness of its history, current climbing opportunities, and significance within the broader story of 19th century alpinism. It was Popi who extended the formal offer to Club members to come and commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the first ascent, with a climb planned for 24 August 2012. The Club was represented by Paul Braithwaite (past president), Henry Day (past vice president) and Sash Tusa (associate member).