
ROBIN N CAMPBELL

The Art of Everest

To celebrate this year's centenary of the first full expedition to Everest, the *Alpine Journal* chose to put together frontispieces that illustrate the art of Everest. It has to be said that such art is in rather short supply, understandably so. Besides the cost and difficulty of getting there, brushes, colours and fingers do not perform well in extremes of cold and altitude. Artists who have attempted plein-air work at high altitude are few and far between. Karl Blodig reported Edward T Compton's suffering and hardihood in working thus in the high Alps.¹ Edward Norton complained in his Everest diary about 'everything freezing'. Rob Fairley wrote to me that: 'The high altitude sketches were not done in a book but on individual sheets ... in a book everything froze together making an interesting bookwork but useless topographically. Very high up I also carried water in a vacuum hip flask but even then the sketch freezing before drying was a constant problem ... and freezing brushes also, even on lower peaks like Ama Dablam.' Howard Somervell made frequent use of pastels, presumably at least partly because the pastel sticks performed better than messy mixtures of colour and water or oil. I selected four works by Howard Somervell, two by Edward Norton, four by Rob Fairley, and one each from Elsie M Dixon and Philip MacLeod Coupe, and will make a few remarks about each of these artists and the works chosen.

The work of **T Howard Somervell** has been well described in the *Alpine Journal* by David Seddon² and readers consulting his excellent articles will be amply rewarded. Seddon sometimes describes Somervell's work as cubist but his paintings are all topographical in intent, without significant deconstruction of the depicted mountain. However, he did tend to use a restricted range of colours and tones, and to build up his images of mountains using a geometry of approximate triangles, rectangles and trapezoidal shapes. This restricted range is sometimes unhelpful. In his views of Everest from Rongbuk, for example p105, it is impossible to resolve Changtse in the middle ground from the background of Everest's north face, unless you know it is there. To some extent Somervell assumes the viewer of his work knows the structure of the mountain. In his pastel works we see a more uninhibited use of colour as in his 'Seracs on the East Rongbuk Glacier' (p281) rendered in spooky blues and purples, or in the striking 'Monsoon over Sikkim' shown below, using a full range of strong colours.

1. P Tallantire, *Edward Theodore Compton (1849-1921)*, published privately, 1996.

2. *AJ* 2005, pp217-230; *AJ* 2020, pp87-104; and *AJ* 2022, pp86-91.



T Howard Somervell's 'Monsoon over Sikkim', 23cm x 33 cm, pastel, 1922. (*Alpine Club*)

Somervell showed considerable dedication to his art in trekking twice to the Rupia La (in 1922 and 1924) to paint Everest's east face and north-east ridge, see p287. However, I think the finest of the works used here is on p1, his view of the Everest group from the Singalila ridge, which perhaps shows some influence from his friend and hero Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) in the strong perspective produced by the ranks of misty foothills and the reducing grain and tone of the sky as it recedes from the viewpoint. Although Roerich produced a few views of the Kangchenjunga range that are clearly topographical, he didn't set out to record mountain topography and didn't paint Everest, despite some works with hopeful titles given to them by others. He seems to have been a painter interested in showing the 'spirit of place' rather than particular mountains, very much as was his near-contemporary Lawren Harris (1885-1970) in his magnificent paintings of imaginary Canadian mountains.

Perhaps the strongest climber of the 1922 and 1924 expeditions **Edward F Norton** (1884-1954) held the height record on Everest for 30 years. He was also an amateur artist who sketched plein air in watercolour and gouache. The two Everest views from the Pang La (p49) and from Chogorong (p217), both drawn in 1924, are simple in execution but attractively rendered in his favoured harmonious colours of purple greys and reddish browns. He produced some other sketches that were in my view more effective, for



Edward F Norton's 'Chomolhari from Jebel La', 18cm x 25cm, watercolour and gouache, 1924. (Courtesy of Norton Family Archive)

example the well-composed and carefully drawn Chomolhari from the Jebel La shown above.

Based in Darlington, **Elsie Margaret Dixon** (1889-1980) was a very able amateur watercolour artist. She was born in Bombay to Robert Hume Gunion and Lilian Eleanora Cassels and married John Reginald Dixon in 1913. Dixon became MD and CEO of the Cleveland Bridge and Engineering Company which constructed a number of well-known bridges around the world, and this enabled Elsie to travel widely in Europe and the Antipodes, where she drew Alpine and New Zealand mountains. She exhibited her work locally, and at the Society of Women Artists and Royal Institute exhibitions, as well as at the Alpine Club. Her watercolour of Everest's northern aspect (p125) is as successful as any, yet it received criticism by the anonymous reviewer in *AJ* 1935, p131: 'Several drawings of the Everest district and of other Himalayan peaks by Mrs Stephenson, Mrs Dixon, Mrs Hartley Bibby and (in oil-colour) by Mr Harold Meyer were very well executed. All, however, were done from photographs, a form of art which, in our opinion, is hardly suited to a serious exhibition.' This was surely harsh, and unjustified. How could any woman get herself to Rongbuk in 1934 without male disguise and illegal visas? Besides, a mountain's structure can be known well

through close examination of written accounts, maps and photographs. This is how we plot our expeditions after all. Why should an artist attempting a mountain portrait endure the suffering of plein-air work, or, painting a person, subject the sitter to countless hours of discomfort, if these can be avoided by using knowledge obtained by means other than the fetish of life drawing?

Brought up in Southport, **Philip MacLeod Coupe** (1944-2013) drew and painted from an early age but his father disapproved and he was obliged to study architecture. However, after election to RIBA in 1974, he turned to professional lute making before concentrating on painting and moving to Cumbria. He was elected to the Lake Artists Society in 1984 and was president from 1990 to 2005. He was known for plein-air painting in oil or watercolour, and visited Iona every year, authoring a book *Paintings of Iona: Peploe and Cadell* (Malvern, 2014), published posthumously. His powerful image of Everest's north face reddened by sunset (p151) hangs in the hallway in the Club's rooms in Charlotte Road. He produced at least one other version of this painting, which was sold at Mitchell's of Cockermouth in 2014 for the paltry sum of £300.

The artist **Rob Fairley** (b1953) has been a member of the Club since 1991. His work was featured in the frontispieces for *AJ* 2016. He was educated at Edinburgh College of Art and has been a mountaineer and painter throughout his life, producing work of the highest quality in all media from pencil to oil painting, and climbing at a high standard in Scotland, the Alps and the Himalaya, which he first visited with Mal Duff in the 1980s. His exemplary watercolour of 'Everest Base from Rongbuk Glacier' (p335) features beautifully drawn Changtse and Everest, but my eye, which has had a varied history, was pulled down to the bravura still-life painting of the blue storage barrels and the drapery of the tents. Fairley's other watercolours show Everest from the south, towering behind the Nuptse-Lhotse ridge. While 'The Burning of Tyngpoche Monastery' (p373) is another large finished painting, with every detail of rock and snow carefully observed, the final two works are unremoved A5 sketchbook pages. The top image on p391, with its fresh washes of beautiful colour recalls Edward Norton's sketches but the one below it, despite the small format, has a high degree of finish with the tree-crinkled middle-ground horizon and the triple-peaked Kusum Kanguru both meticulously painted. To my mind, Fairley is our foremost mountaineer-painter, carrying on the splendid tradition established by Edward T Compton, Ernst H Platz, and of course Norton and Somervell.

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