



Honorary Awards 2006

Cliff Holden, FCSA

Chancellor. Our next recipient of an Honorary Doctorate is a painter of figures and landscapes who, unable to sell his paintings, earned a living as a textile designer for 11 years before he was able to accept briefs from architects. He has been credited with having introduced screen-printing to Britain as a fine art form and his prints are sought after. He has paintings in the Tate Gallery, the Arts Council Collection, Manchester City Gallery (Rutherford Collection) and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, plus ten other museums in Sweden. He is also a former student of the University, when it was the Borough Polytechnic, between 1945 and 1951 he, along with a group of young artists, trained under the legendary David Bomberg.

He is Cliff Holden. Born in Manchester in 1919, he was educated at Wilmslow Modern School and Reaseheath School of Agriculture where he studied agriculture and veterinary science. He held various jobs on farms and explored his interest in politics, religion and the study of philosophy before painting gave way and became his life. Instead of seeking security within the establishment, he took odd jobs to survive. He worked at fruit-picking in the autumn and hoeing by the acre in the spring, salmon fishing in Scotland. He also worked as a circus hand with Bertram Mills Circus, as a model for established art schools, commercial screen-printer, and various other labouring jobs, such as repairing the Thames embankment at Kew Gardens, night-porter at Victoria station, Walls Ice Cream factory etc.

Holden began painting in 1943 without guidance or direction. At the same time he attended lectures in philosophy at the City Literary Institute, where he first met David Bomberg, and joined his drawing classes. In 1945 he followed Bomberg to the Borough Polytechnic (now London South Bank University). Bomberg's teaching at the Borough Polytechnic is now routinely described as 'legendary' and Holden was part of a young group of artists that studied under Bomberg.

After intense discussions with Bomberg during 1944-45 Holden conceived the idea of the 'Borough Group', which, with Bomberg's approval, he organised and established in 1946. The Borough Group came into being with the express purpose of disseminating knowledge of Bomberg's approach to art and the teaching of art - to provide a platform for promoting those ideas and exhibiting the group's work. The founder members of the Borough Group along with Holden were Peter (Miles) Richmond, Dorothy Mead and Edna Mann. Bomberg suggested Holden as President. In 1948 the group was extended to 11 members and after 5 years of intense activity and 7 major exhibitions, the Group was dissolved in the spring of 1951.

Both Bomberg's teaching and Cliff's efforts to secure recognition for it have been a hard-won achievement. There were three principals 'schools' of art in London during Bomberg's teaching at the Polytechnic. Of these, the Borough Polytechnic was by far the least prestigious. By comparison, it was seriously lacking in funds and in connections with curators, galleries, dealers, critics and academics. The other two main 'schools', both across the river in the area of the West End, were the Slade (now part of University College, London, which had expelled Bomberg in 1913 for drawing 'not in accord with lines laid down') and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, lavishly funded by Sir Roland Penrose, which gave birth to Pop Art, later in conjunction with the Royal College of Art.

Unlike students in the establishment art colleges, Bomberg's students such as Cliff Holden received no grant for their study at the Polytechnic, and received no diploma either - a serious matter, when the National Diploma in Design was a necessary requirement for teaching tenure. They paid for their study the hard way, by working part-time - in Cliff's case as a labourer.

Cliff's experience at the Polytechnic laid the foundations for his subsequent career both as a painter and designer.

When the Bomberg Group dissolved in 1951, in the autumn of the same year Holden exhibited at the Parsons Gallery, London, together with Dorothy Mead, Dennis Creffield and Miles Richmond. A Swedish painter-sculptor, Torsten Renquist, saw this show and invited the four to exhibit in Stockholm. The exhibition took place in 1952. It was a critical success. Cliff and Dorothy stayed in Sweden for nine months, and then living and painting in Spain for two years before returning to London. Holden was invited back to Sweden in 1956 to have shows in Gothenburg and Stockholm. And with Dorothy Mead in Halmstad 1959- This stimulated him to promote cultural exchanges between the two countries. He became a sort of unpaid, unofficial "cultural ambassador".

Holden lived and painted mainly in Sweden since 1956. He met the two textile designers Lisa Grönwall (now his wife) and Maj Nilsson – together they created design firm Marstrand Designers.

Marstrand Designers gained an international reputation, winning 10 national and international awards, including Holden's best design of the year award 1962 from Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, at the Design Centre. In the middle sixties, after 11 years of designing textiles, wallpapers and carpets, Holden and his wife Lisa Grönwall began to be commissioned by architects for large scale projects for the public domain. This meant working to a brief, creating murals for Swedish Consulates and Embassies, hotels, ships, and hospitals. They are represented in hundreds of public buildings all around the world from Moscow to Washington.

It would be difficult to over-estimate the amount of energy given by Cliff to the University, as the former Borough Polytechnic, through his indefatigable efforts in attracting students to Bomberg's classes in the mid to late Forties, in setting up the Borough Group (of which he was the first president, followed by Bomberg later on), in helping to organise the exhibitions which gave attention to student work being done at the Polytechnic, in arranging (with Dorothy Mead, his fellow student) for the first retrospective for Bomberg at the Arts Council gallery in London in the year after Bomberg's death.

The award is appropriate recognition for Cliff's dedication to the teaching he received at the Polytechnic.

Chancellor, it is with great pleasure that I present to you Cliff Holden for the granting of Honorary Doctorate of London South Bank University.

Phil Cardew
Pro Vice Chancellor
London South Bank University
November 2006