Lithic Illustration: An Exhibition
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The Lithic Studies Society has always treated the illustration of lithic artefacts as a subject of special concern. This was reflected first of all in its publication in 1988 of the Occasional Paper The Illustration of Lithic Artefacts: A Guide To Drawing Stone Tools For Specialist Reports, by Hazel Martingell and Alan Saville (a joint publication with the Association of Archaeological Illustrators and Surveyors). The success of this and the Society’s continuing interest in the subject suggested that an exhibition of lithic illustration would be an appropriate and enjoyable addition to this year’s anniversary celebrations. Accordingly, a display of over 70 drawings, watercolours and photographs was hung in the Vernon-Harcourt Room, an ideally large and well-it space where people could browse in between lecture sessions as well as during the conference reception.

There having been no formal selection procedure, the resulting exhibition was somewhat eclectic, being composed of contributions from Society members and associates, supported by loans solicited from the National Museum of Wales and the Donald Baden-Powell Quaternary Research Centre. Both contemporary illustrators as well as well-known names from the past were represented and subject matter included a wide range of artefacts, in differing media, as well as landscapes. The latter included several highly atmospheric watercolour sketches of Bamborough Pit, Swanscombe, in the mid-1950s by John Wymer’s father, the late Mr B.O. Wymer (1891-1959), at the time of the discovery of the right parietal of the Swanscombe skull, itself illustrated in one of the paintings on show. A more imaginary and fleshly view by the same artist was of ‘Swanscombe Woman’, very reminiscent of the flights of anthropological fancy of Worthington George Smith (1837-1917). Thanks to Robin Holgate the exhibition briefly included Smith’s splendid watercolour rendition of a family group of ‘primeval savages’, more famously reproduced in ink on the title page of Man the Primeval Savage (1894). It was unfortunate that none of Worthington Smith’s output of lithic illustration (only a part of his immense talent) was otherwise included in the exhibition.

Of the same vintage as those of Smith were watercolours by Benjamin Harrison (1837-1921), well known for his ‘soliths’ and gently lampooned for his belief in them by Smith. Illustrations of palaeoliths of a less controversial nature were represented throughout the exhibition. The watercolour tradition was seen to be revived in the detailed studies of Kentish handaxes by Jacqui Watson. The more familiar line drawings in pen and ink were represented by the faultless work of the late Charles Waterhouse, John Wymer, Phil Dean, Meredydd Moores, Jeff Wallis, and Hazel Martingell. These are amongst the cream of modern artefact illustration. Drawings of choppers from Swartkans were by Mary Leakey. The problem of conveying the textural complexity of non-flint palaeoliths from Pontnewyd was illustrated by the pencil work of Pat O’Leary.

Mesolithic artefacts were represented by drawings and sketches by both Graeme Clark and W F Rankine, examples of a genre of bold, direct and unfussy delineation made familiar in a score of classic papers. Contributions from both the British Museum and the English Heritage Drawing Office exemplified the highest quality of today’s publication drawing with many examples of flint and pebble tools of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age date. The hues of polished and weathered Langdale tuff were captured in a series of delicate watercolours by Michael Webb. That photography should not be neglected was well expressed by Cath Price’s display of colour prints.

It is peculiarly difficult to recount in so few words all the attractions of such a varied and talented show. There can be little doubt, though, that the exhibition was a valued addition to the conference and generated wide interest and appreciation from those attending. Such a favourable reception suggests that this rather experimental and low-key exercise could be followed up in the future by a more formal and ambitious exhibition. This would allow a more representative overview of lithic illustration, including the work of current artists unfortunately not included beforehand, and doing greater justice, for instance, to the great achievements of the antiquarians, wood engravers and lithographers of previous decades. Such an exhibition, set in a major museum, or travelling between venues, would have great appeal to both artists and prehistorians alike.

It is certainly to be hoped that the modest show at Oxford may one day generate a larger and more authoritative display. In the meantime warm thanks are extended to those institutions and individuals who contributed to the success of the recent exhibition.

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