

OBITUARIES

Edith Simon

Original artist with unflagging creative energy

EDITH SIMON was in every sense an extraordinary artist. She left a legacy of 850 paintings, drawings, sculptures, and what she called scalpel paintings which defied any easy categorisation because of their basic three-dimensional nature.

She was the author of 17 books as a novelist, biographer, and historian, published by the likes of Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, Cassel, Doubleday, Hodder and Stoughton, Bodley Head, and Putnam. She could have quite easily rested content with her undoubted gifts as a writer to express her wide-ranging, incisive views on the human condition.

However, she also embarked on a career as a painter and sculptor, experimenting with all sorts of materials and techniques by drawing and painting in pen and ink, pencil, water-colour, oil paint, and most effectively, with a scalpel. She had experimented with various materials to make sculpture with a mixture of resin and bronze, as well as fibreglass and resin together with aluminium.

As a schoolgirl, her gifts for draughtsmanship led to her drawings being used as illustrations in *Men's* newspapers.

Born in 1917, she was the daughter of Walter and Grete Simon who had lived and worked comfortably in Berlin, running a family business making clothes. Her father had fought for Germany in the First World War as an artillery officer, but despite his war wounds and his heroic war record, he knew he would not be acceptable in the Nazi Germany he lived to see coming into being.

His life story was a classic example of countless German Jewish families who were obliged to leave Germany. They settled in London in 1932 where, aged 16, Edith Simon continued the art studies she had begun in Berlin.

She attended the Slade and Central schools of art. Her early career as an artist was short-lived when her interest in designing and illustrating books led her to consider a career in Berlin. In 1937, she wrote and illustrated a book for

children, *Somersaults and Strange Company*, and, soon after, she used her fluency in both English and German to translate Arthur Koestler's novel *The Gladiators*.

This experience prompted her to become a novelist, and she earned good reviews with her first novel which was inspired by the life of Moses. It was a tragedy that during a war-time air raid the warehouse in which the whole edition was stored was consumed by fire. Undaunted, she then wrote two more novels, *Biting the Blue Finger* in 1942, and *Wings Deceive* in 1944.

In 1942, at a party in south London, she met the scientist, Eric Reeve, and their subsequent marriage gave her the benefit of more than six decades of happily married life. In 1946, Eric Reeve was invited to work, as part of a new team of geneticists, in Moredun Hall in Edinburgh. This led him to be invited to continue his work at Edinburgh University. So it was that they were to spend the rest of their married life in Scotland.

Edith Simon thus began her life in Edinburgh as a successful novelist with her career firmly established in London. In the 1950s, she was able to concentrate on other novels. *The Piebald Standard*, published in 1959, was based on the history of the Knights' Templar. Then she turned her attention to two biographies – one in 1962 was entitled *Luther Alive*. This was followed by *The Making of Frederick The Great*.

It says much for her gifts as a historian that this biography is still in popular use now that it is translated into German. Her biographical writings attracted the attention of the editors of Horizon Books in New York when they decided to publish *The Makers of Modern Britain* and their choice was placed among a splendid company of writers including Jacob Bronowski, Anthony Burgess, and Corelli Barnett.

She gave up her career as a writer because Lord Wiedenfeld would not agree to publish her novel on the assassination

of a monarch. Lord Wiedenfeld did not think this would be acceptable in the court circles of London because the monarch in question was the present Queen.

Many of her wide circle of Edinburgh friends found themselves the subject of her impressive number of portraits which together provide a remarkable and probably unique portrait of Edinburgh's society over a period of half a century.

The walls of the town house in Grosvenor Crescent are decorated with innumerable portraits. Among the most compelling is a large-scale pencil drawing of the Italo-Scottish painter, Alberto Morrocco, as well as pen and ink drawings of Emilio Coia, the cartoonist and art critic, and Marjory Middleton, the doyenne of Edinburgh's world of dance.

These fine drawings are juxtaposed with others made with a continuous line, providing more evidence of her capacity to catch the physical presence of human beings in movement.

However, it is the portraits which she made with a scalpel cutting into layers of paper sometimes all white and sometimes multi-coloured, that attract attention by the sheer virtuoso skills she employed to bring them into being, extending and questioning the normal methods of both drawing and painting.

With this new and experimental medium, she expressed her interest in every imaginable facet of Edinburgh's social and cultural life.

For 30 years – from 1970 until 2001 – the Edinburgh Festival Fringe was unthinkable without Edith Simon's contribution in the form of her annual festival exhibition.

Fearless Vigour was the title Edith Simon gave to her 1998 Edinburgh Festival exhibition. It is more than less serves to describe her attitude to making art. It was John Bellany who first used these words to describe her working.

She is survived by her husband and their three children, Simon, Jay, and Antonia, who, as a gifted Edinburgh photog-



rapher has made an invaluable photographic documentation to her mother's life and work. Antonia's portraits of her mother catch that mixture of wit, good humour, and commitment to life.

In one particular portrait, above, she photographed her mother wearing her trademark outside spectacles with a quizzical smile on her lips and a sparkle in her eyes, and on

her head four of her favourite outlandish hats.

Edith Simon's house and studio could have easily been identified with the Bohemian life of Paris, particularly at Christmas when she and her family invited their friends to legendary fancy-dress parties.

All those who were fortunate enough to be invited were made able to feel that their lives had been blessed by Edith Simon's

brand of creative energy. She generated this throughout her long life, sharing it generously with her friends, including the last seven years during which she suffered the great discomfort of emphysema.

She died leaving Edinburgh with an extra and irreplaceable and essentially European cultural dimension.

There surely has to be a memorial exhibition. With

this should be readings from her novels and histories, and the showing of the BBC film which W Gordon Smith made for BBC Scotland in 1973. This would be a fitting homage to her multi-faceted artistic personality.

Edith Simon, artist; born May 18, 1917, died January 7, 2003.

RICHARD DEMARCO