

## Obituary

## Edith Simon

**Edith Simon, artist and writer**

Born: 18 May, 1917, in Berlin

Died: 7 January, 2003, in Edinburgh, aged 85

THE death of Edith Simon deprives the Edinburgh art world of one of its most colourful and individual talents. Anyone who attended one of her exhibitions – she showed at every Edinburgh Festival between 1973 and 2001 – or who met her in person was immediately aware that she was a remarkably gifted artist and a woman of considerable wit and originality.

Never one to follow fashion, she worked in media of her own devising and to her own standards. The best of her work combines intellectual rigour, a truly European breadth of cultural reference, extraordinary craftsmanship, energy, and an earthy feeling for and appreciation of life's essentials.

All the more remarkable is the fact that the final 30-year burst of creativity in the visual arts was her third career. In her youth, she worked as an illustrator – initially for newspapers in her native Berlin, and then in the London publishing world. In her maturity, before and after her move to Edinburgh, she enjoyed a highly successful literary career. She had 17 books published in three genres: fiction, historical fiction and jacket history. Only in 1970, following the publication of acclaimed biographies of Luther and Frederick the Great, did she return to art full-time.

She was born in Berlin to agnostic Jewish parents. Her father had just been invalided out of the German army, wounded in the trenches where he had served as an artillery officer. Her talents emerged early: at school she excelled in history, and by her early teens she was already producing excellent portraits of friends and relations. Her line drawings appeared in Berlin newspapers.

With a foresight not shared by most of his extended family, her father quickly recognised the seriousness of the Nazi



Edith Simon at work in her studio on a scalpel-painting.

threat and moved his wife and daughters to England in 1932. At the age of 16, she studied briefly at the Slade School and the Central School of Art, but her family was not well off and she turned for a living to book illustration and jacket design, where her breadth of interest and fluency served her well.

Her first book was published just five years after she moved to England. It was an illustrated children's story entitled *Somersaults and Strange Company*. In contrast, her next publication was a translation into English of Arthur Koestler's *The Gladiators*. This sparked off a new interest

in historical fiction, and her first novel, *The Chosen* (1940), centred on Moses and the Exodus.

In 1942 she married the geneticist Dr Eric Reeve, and in 1947 they moved to Edinburgh, where he worked in genetic research, initially at Moreton Hall and then at Edinburgh University. For the next 20 years, she combined writing with bringing up three children and throwing what are said to have been some of the New Town's most memorable parties.

Initially, she focused on fiction, producing a dozen modern and historical novels, of which the best known is probably *The Golden Hand*, about the

building of a medieval cathedral, a success on both sides of the Atlantic.

She then turned increasingly to straight history: 1959 saw the publication of her fascinating account of the Knights Templar, *The Piebald Standard*, and in the Sixties in addition to the biographies of Frederick the Great and Luther she produced *The Saints*, on the early Christian fathers.

Her last book, *The Anglo-Saxon Manner*, appeared in 1972, but her interest had already returned to the visual arts. Sterile abstraction, on the one hand, and tasteful decorativeness, on the other, were anathema to her, but the late Sixties had seen

a renewed interest in figurative art coupled with an emphasis on experimentation in forms. This was fertile ground for her, and the focus of her considerable energies and talent for the last 30 years of her life.

She began by returning to her original love, line drawing, but with a new twist. Relying on her phenomenal skills – as a draughtswoman, she depicted individuals and groups using a single continuous line, producing highly complex but lifelike and dynamic images without lifting her pen from the paper. This in turn grew another dimension when she moved to sculptures built from resin-covered rope – single continuous lines in space producing three-dimensional objects, such as her *Crown of Thorns* in St Mary's Cathedral.

Finally, she developed a medium unique to her which synthesised her interest in line, colour and depth and the portrayal of human life and consciousness in all its richness: "scalpel painting". The technique involved super-imposing several sheets of coloured paper and then using a scalpel to cut through to differing depths. These are works on a grand scale; the juxtaposition of intricately worked detail and large blocks of colour is often stunning, and every image hovers mysteriously somewhere in the space between two and three dimensions. Most but not all of the scalpel paintings are portraits of Edinburgh friends and public figures, often in an allegorical setting but always instantly recognisable and vivid.

The qualities of intense discipline, exuberant delight in the world of flesh and objects, and sheer graphic ability involved in these productions are rare enough individually. She had them all, together with considerable intellectual power, literary gifts, charm and a mordant wit. She was striking in appearance, trenchant in her views and generous to the young and those in need.

She is survived by her husband, Eric Reeve, and their three children, Antonia (the photographer Antonia Reeve), Simon and Jay.

ALLAN GOODWIN