

David Measures: Artist whose work blended scientific curiosity with luminous beauty

By Paul Willetts

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Thanks to his enthusiasm, mischievous jollity and self-effacing charm, not to mention his distinctive looks, the painter, naturalist and art-school teacher David Measures cut a memorable figure. His virtuoso skill as a painter and his wide-eyed fascination with the natural world combined to create pictures of such delicate intensity that they rival those of John Ruskin.

Most of Measures's character traits and abiding passions were the legacy of his late 1940s and early 1950s boyhood, spent in surroundings straight out of a classic children's novel of yesteryear. The Elysian setting for his upbringing was 55 Mill Street, a picturesque house in Warwick, just across the river from the town's imposing castle. Looking back on his boyhood, Measures would recall swimming in the river, climbing the castle walls and watching the wildlife attracted to the rustic garden which his father – a gentle Birmingham bank manager – had planted around the ruins of a medieval bridge.

A rare whiff of conflict between father and son occurred when Measures announced his desire to attend Leamington Spa college of art. Paternal support was only granted on condition that Measures went on to study for the teaching qualification that would enable him to obtain a secure job. During the consequent year in Bournemouth, he met Christine Cummins, a fellow student on the art teachers' diploma course. The pair eventually married and became the happiest, most compatible of couples.

Despite being a self-confessed country boy, Measures moved from Bournemouth to London, where he joined the renowned postgraduate painting course at the Slade School of Fine Art. "Even there, surrounded by flamboyant young artists such as Patrick Proktor, he stood out, not only because of his talent but also because of his warmth and humour," remembered his contemporary Ken Lee.

Under the influence of tutors who included David Bomberg, Measures's hitherto figurative work grew more abstract. Not long after completing his course, he landed a full-time teaching job in the fine art department at Nottingham College of Art and Design, where his understated charisma earned him the adoration of numerous students. Besides helping to lead regular field trips to Slapton and other cherished spots, he helped to shape what turned into a pioneering, open-ended course, featuring contributions by visiting lecturers from other disciplines. These lecturers ranged from the naturalist David Bellamy to the composer Michael Nyman, who set up an orchestral project in which Measures, a keen amateur musician, took part.

Measures was, moreover, involved in an eccentric working trip to Brantwood, John Ruskin's Lake District home. Throughout this week-long sojourn he and his colleagues, together with their students, wore authentic 19th-century costumes, borrowed from Nottingham Playhouse. "We even ended up scaling a nearby hill in our frock-coats," recalled a fellow teacher. "David was dressed as Charles Darwin, one of his great heroes. He looked impressively dignified next to hill-walkers wearing bright plastic cagoules."

In the late 1960s Measures returned to his original sources of inspiration, producing watercolours of the butterflies that flourished on the disused railway-line near his home in the Nottinghamshire town of Southwell. Frequently picturing them on the wing, with their transient presence reduced to exhilarating flecks of colour, he had found the subject with which he would always be associated. Soon his sketchbook paintings began to incorporate drawing, entwined within paragraphs of attractively handwritten notes on the butterflies' habitat and behaviour, notes that reconciled the inherent tension between his creative and scientific impulses.

Over the ensuing decades his recurrent subjects expanded to include birds, hares and woodland landscapes, often the product of weekly forays into the Peak District. Alongside his painting and teaching, he was the

subject of a David Bellamy television documentary. He also produced two illustrated books, *Bright Wings of Summer* (1976) and *Butterfly Season* (1984), the first of these containing a preface by Sir Peter Scott. In addition Measures contributed to *Second Nature* (1984), a collection of natural-history writing edited by Richard Mabey. Commenting on his approach to wildlife painting, he wrote, "Contained in [each picture], in that response of marks and dashes, is something perhaps of the creature's vitality and elusiveness."

His choice of medium and subject matter exiled him from the world of fashionable art dealers, yet he attracted a stalwart band of curators who regarded him with reverence, among them Julian Spalding, former director of Glasgow Museums. Examples of Measures' work can be found in the Natural History Museum and many private collections.

Last year Derby Museum and Art Gallery hosted his final exhibition, comprising a survey of his pictures of the flora and fauna of his beloved Cressbrook Dale. Three decades earlier he had, on behalf of York Festival, co-curated a show entitled "The Artist-Naturalist". That label encapsulates Measures, whose work – like James Audubon and Thomas Bewick before him – blended scientific curiosity with luminous pictorial beauty.

David Guy Measures, painter and naturalist: born Warwick 22 November 1937; married 1963 Christine Cummins (one son, one daughter); died Nottingham 4 August 2011.

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