

Desmond Paul Henry: Manchester Pioneer of Computer Art

Exhibition catalogue for the Henry exhibition at the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry (07/02/2011-07/05/2011)

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(The following is the full text of a short essay by Douglas Dodds, published in the catalogue of the exhibition, p.36)

RESPONSE: DOUGLAS DODDS

In the past few years the V&A has been able to acquire two major collections of computer-generated art, a culturally and technologically significant genre that had been somewhat neglected by many curators and collectors until recently. As a result, the Museum now holds the emerging national collection of this distinctive art form. In addition, a major grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council has allowed us to undertake fundamental research into the history of the new medium.

Whilst the computer art research project was under way, we became increasingly aware of the unique work produced by D.P. Henry. Through the generosity of Elaine O'Hanrahan, we acquired three excellent examples of Henry's work and included one of them in a ground-breaking V&A exhibition entitled *Digital Pioneers*. Henry's machine drawings were shown alongside works by Ben Laposky (1914-2000) and Herbert W. Franke (1927-), who both photographed the swirling lines produced on oscilloscope screens. Laposky's electronic abstractions pre-dated modern computers, whilst Franke went on to produce some of the first digital images. The *Digital Pioneers* exhibition also included works by Charles Csuri (1922-) who, like Henry, also exhibited at *Cybernetic Serendipity*, held at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1968. With more than a hint of swords into ploughshares, Henry converted analogue bombsight computers into benignly beautiful drawing machines, while Csuri used computers that had been developed for the military to create powerful works such as *Random war* (1968). Other artists in the V&A's show – and now in the Museum's collection – include Roman Verostko (1929-) and Jean-Pierre Hébert (1939-), who both wrote their own software to create computer-controlled plotter drawings. Produced a decade or more before artists such as Harold Cohen (1928-) attempted to codify the process of making art, Henry's pioneering work anticipates the use of computers to make the sophisticated images that we all take for granted today.

Biographical notes:

Douglas Dodds is a senior curator in the Victoria & Albert Museum's Word & Image Department, which incorporates the prints, drawings, paintings and photograph collections plus the National Art Library. He was also the Co-investigator in the Computer Art and Technocultures project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.