Avigdor Arikha abandoned abstraction for the close study from life. **Stephen Coppel** explains

Drawing from life

One of the world's leading figurative painters, the Paris-based Israeli artist Avigdor Arikha paints, draws and etches from life. An exhibition celebrating a generous gift by him to the Museum of 100 works on paper, comprising 71 drawings and 29 prints, opens this summer and covers the last 40 years of his career. It marks the first retrospective of his graphic work in the United Kingdom.

Avigdor Arikha was born in 1929 of German-speaking Jewish parents in Romania. With his family he was deported to Nazi concentration camps in the western Ukraine in 1941. His release from the horrors of the Holocaust came when his drawings of the harrowing scenes he had witnessed as a thirteen-year-old boy during deportation were shown to visiting delegates of the International Red Cross in December 1943. With his sister he was rescued from the camps, under the auspices of the Red Cross, and travelled with a convoy of other children to Palestine, which they reached in May 1944. Arikha worked and lived in a kibbutz outside Jerusalem. He received a Bauhaus-based education in art and design at the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts in Jerusalem. After his first visit to Paris on a Youth Aliyah scholarship in 1949, he settled there in 1954. Although it was in Paris that he established his home and studio, he continued thereafter to make periodic visits to Jerusalem. He studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and became a highly acclaimed abstract painter during the 1950s. His friendship with Samuel Beckett, whom he called his 'lighthouse' and mentor, began at this time and continued for over 30 years until Beckett's death. As one of the most promising abstract painters of this period, his work was shown by leading contemporary galleries in Paris and London, and in 1964 he represented Israel at the Venice Biennale.

In 1965 Arikha suffered a crisis: he felt that abstraction had brought him to a dead end, that he was just repeating the same inner forms and that all he had been doing was 'painting from painting'. In March that year he suddenly abandoned abstraction and began to work from life: it was a decision both courageous and unexpected. Arikha later explained: 'When I was an abstract painter I thought I was the well ... and I thought the well was bottomless. But of course it was all wrong. After seven years I hit rock. I felt that all the forms I was expressing were the same form, *my* form. ... I soon realised that there is only one thing that is not reachable, never knowable, truly infinite, and that is the world around us.'

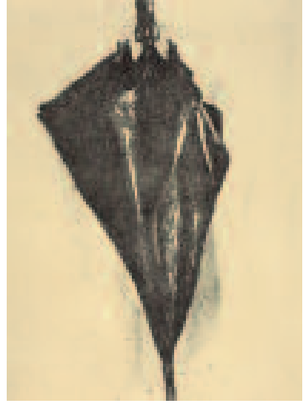
In what he called his 'eight years of crisis', from 1965 to 1973, Arikha concentrated on graphic art, producing delicate silverpoint drawings and bold brush and sumi ink drawings as well as etchings. With the exception of a brief relapse into abstraction during this period, he

Far left: *Interior with Persian helmet, mirror and books*, 28 March 1972; above: *Anne*, 16 May 1965; left: *Samuel Beckett with a glass of wine*, 7 October 1969, all brush and sumi ink, by Avigdor Arikha (Images © Avigdor Arikha)

worked only from life. He imposed upon himself a further restriction: the motif was to be executed from life entirely in one session. No revisions or subsequent reworkings or modifications were allowed. For Arikha these restraints were necessary if the subject was to express emotional force and intensity. Indeed, tension expressed by the work was regarded by him as essential to its expression of life. Arikha made it plain that the programme he had set himself was not a return to 'representational' or 'figurative' art but a move forward to post-abstract naturalism – a progression that could only have developed out of the modernist achievements of abstraction, particularly by Mondrian. Arikha saw his drawings and prints as communicating an intensity of feeling that was deep-rooted and based on observed life. As he explained in 1978, five years after he had taken up oil painting again, 'Painting from life, in its submission to observation, a given space and limited time, by restricted means, is a sort of seismic trace. It's provisional, but intensive.'

Etching became important to Arikha during these years. In the studio of his Paris apartment he prepared the plates, bit them slowly in the acid bath and printed them himself on his own small press. He produced more than 40 etchings and aquatints between 1970 and 1973, usually pulled in very small editions. The plates were often printed on a variety of carefully chosen papers, ranging from handmade rag paper to Japanese papers. His etchings and aquatints possess the unmistakable quality of prints produced by the artist himself.

Although he returned to painting in oils and to the use of colour in 1973, Arikha has continued to work only from life. His subjects all reveal an acute intensity of vision: the self-portraits; portraits of his wife the poet Anne Atik; his friends; intimate interiors of his Paris studio flat and objects as ordinary as an umbrella or a pair of spectacles. His subjects come to him with an urgency that cannot be resisted; he has compared it to the ringing of a telephone that must be answered. In an interview in 1978, he explained: 'All subjects are equal but not at the same time. The choice is unpredictable and my relationship to subject-matter is like to a phone call: when it rings, I run.' The urgency of this 'call' underlies the intensity of his vision. It is perhaps most striking in his still lifes where an everyday object, like an old umbrella, is transmuted by the artist's 'seismic trace' into the very essence of the object in question. Not surprisingly this sense of presence is felt most acutely in his self-portraits, whether in his paintings, ink drawings or prints, which evoke the transience and fragility of life. The artist catches himself open-mouthed before the mirror, sometimes with surprise, or in uncontrolled anger, as in the unforgettable ink drawing, *Self-portrait, shouting one morning*, made in 1969, which the film critic Alexander Walker owned and presented to the British Museum in his bequest of 2004.



Top: *The umbrella*, 4 February 1973, sugar aquatint; left: *Self-portrait, shouting one morning*, 7 November 1969, brush and sumi ink, both by Avigdor Arikha (Images © Avigdor Arikha)

Forty years after his momentous decision in 1965 to abandon abstraction, Arikha continues to work from life. In a very real sense he works in a post-abstract idiom. Arikha has never denied the lessons he learnt from abstraction, particularly from Mondrian: a respect for the edges of the plate, sheet or canvas; an awareness of the flatness of the picture plane and the formal elements of the composition. As Arikha wrote in an essay entitled 'On Abstraction in Painting', first published in 1980: 'Modernist abstraction permitted the liberation of painting from the literary misunderstanding, from the anecdote (that virus of the eye) and gave the illusion that the old *mimesis* had vanished into oblivion. But she didn't. It permitted Mondrian to clean Vermeer's room, and empty it of its content. Mondrian closed the door, but left the key behind.'

For Arikha the challenge of working from life is always present: to seize the motif the moment it appears. He has neatly explained the paradox of working from life: 'All that is visible around us is in itself inexpressible, whereas what's expressible is within us, in itself invisible.'

'Avigdor Arikha From Life: Drawings and Prints 1965–2005' is on view from 29 June to 7 January. The accompanying catalogue with essays by Duncan Thomson and Stephen Coppel is published by BM Press (£20; ISBN 0–7141–2647–0); the fully illustrated publication also reprints brief texts by Samuel Beckett and Robert Hughes.