

# Trifling with a serious theme

By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 09 October 2003



**A**s the wonderfully louche Anthony Blanche warns the mannered painter Charles Ryder in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*: "Charm is the great English blight ... It spots and kills everything it touches."

Craigie Aitchison, 76, commercially successful and a distinguished Academician, has long been propping up the quaint and charming end of traditional English painting.

His distinctive work, familiar to the public from its regular airing in the RA's Summer Exhibition, most typically features naively rendered objects, animals and figures, set against backgrounds and landscapes of flat and expansive colour.

Some 65 pieces from throughout his career now make up the largest London show of his work since a retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery in 1981.

The essence of Aitchison is captured in the painting *Crucifixion* (1984-86). A work in which the pathos is laid on with a cake slice, it combines his two favourite subjects, Bedlington terriers (a breed to which he has been fiercely loyal as a dog owner) and the *Crucifixion* scene.

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Set against an entirely flat, red and dark green landscape, a quadruped - presumably a terrier, though it could be read as a sheep - looks pathetically up at its master, a simplified, indeed armless, "crucified" Christ. Poor doggie!

Here then is an exemplification of that "simple, creamy English charm", which is more inclined to expend itself on animals than on human beings. So, though Aitchison has described the Crucifixion as "the most horrific event", he might as well have picked the sherry trifle as his leitmotif for all the profundity he has brought to this age-old symbol of visceral human suffering.

Many find profundity in the work's simplicity, likening its spirit to that of Giotto and Piero della Francesca, but naive art has always functioned through its ability to both soak up and reflect the feelings the viewer projects on to it. Naive art is, after all, if not a blank, at least a highly simplified canvas.

Tellingly, Aitchison hates the description "naive", but if we all went around ignoring accepted definitions, then we would be doing the verbal equivalent of painting trifles when we meant to paint crucifixions.