



*The unseen work of Ron Embleton*

*back cover*

1. Landscape and Town I  
oil on canvas 76 x 102 cms 29½ x 40½ ins

*front cover*

5. Landscape IV  
oil on canvas 76 x 102 cms 29½ x 40½ ins



*Ron Embleton*

# Ron Embleton

The Oil Paintings

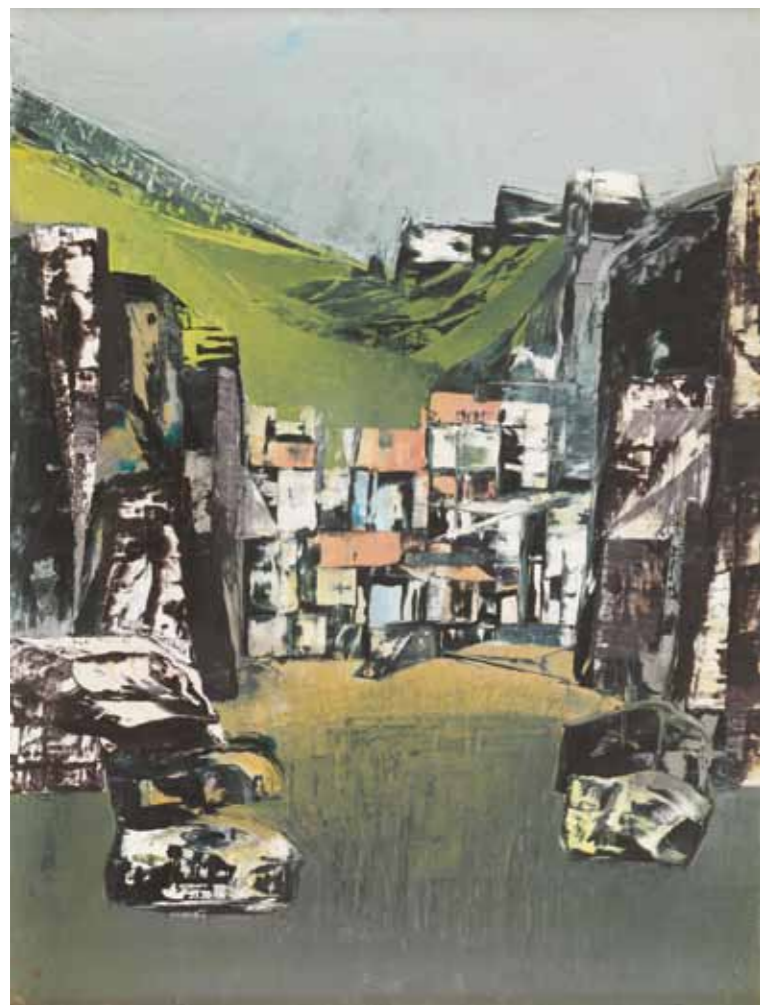
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## *The Unseen Work of Ron Embleton*



2. Cornish Landscape II  
oil on canvas 102 x 76 cms 40 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 29 $\frac{7}{8}$  ins

'This is Ronald Embleton,' a 1968 short film begins. 'Painter, extrovert, illustrator, writer, atheist, sculptor – obsessed with shapes, forms and colour, obsessed by people, their lives, reason and inhumanity.'

The man needs little introduction to the aficionado of post-war British illustration. At the time of his sudden death from a heart attack in 1988, aged only fifty-seven, Ron Embleton was one of the best known comic and historical illustrators at work in this country, with a reputation that stretched far beyond these shores. His obituary in *The Times* justly described him as 'a grand master of his art.' Less well known, however, was his equally energetic career as a painter. In fact, being a painter had been his life's ambition – his 'driving force,' as his daughter Gillian puts it.

Embleton was born in Bow, East London, in 1930 into what he called 'a very ordered and conventional background.' But from an early age he was set on becoming an artist, and in 1946 went to the South-East Essex Technical College and School of Art. There he had the incredible good fortune to be taught by David Bomberg, one of the greatest – though at that time sadly underappreciated – British artists of the twentieth century. Bomberg was also one of the most unconventional, inspiring and influential art teachers this country has ever produced. As well as Embleton, his students would include such significant figures of post-war British painting as Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Peter Prendergast, Miles Richmond, Denis Creffield and Dorothy Mead. Auerbach was also only a teenager when he first met Bomberg in 1947 at the infamous class he went on from South-East Essex to run at the Borough Polytechnic in south London. Auerbach considered him to be 'probably the most original, stubborn, radical intelligence that was to be found in art schools' at that time. Creffield, meanwhile, described him as 'a teacher of the type of the perennial radical, the fundamentalist who reminds us of our obligation to aspire to quality and excellence.'

Bomberg almost certainly recognized both Embleton's determination and his rebellious streak – traits he admired – and his influence on the young artist would prove long-lasting and deep-seated. When Embleton went to Ronda in 1956 it was because Bomberg had lived, worked and virtually died there, and Bomberg's influence probably wholly explains Spain as a subject in Embleton's painting. From early on Embleton juggled his early-established love of writing and illustrating with a compulsion to work as a fine artist. For as his daughter told me, Embleton always thought of himself as a



3. Landscape III  
oil on canvas 76 x 102 cms 29 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 40 $\frac{1}{8}$  ins



4. Spanish Town II  
oil on canvas 102 x 76 cms 40% x 29% ins

painter foremost and primarily; he could sometimes be dismissive about his work as an illustrator, but he was never dismissive of his oil painting.

Embleton was thus an incredibly assured artist, working with a natural and astonishing fluency. He was also very ambitious, and always hard working – though the beginning of his career was interrupted by two years of National Service, which he spent with the Army on active service in the Far East during the Malaya Emergency. The Army, he later recalled, was a ‘terrifying,’ ‘shattering’ experience, one that ‘offended every sense I possessed. I was quite horrified by the whole experience.’ But it entrenched his will to succeed, to make something significant and meaningful of his life. In a letter to his future wife written from Malaya in 1950 he explained that once he returned home he intended to ‘carry on with comics & illustrations for a while and then I shall get down to serious painting.’ His desire was to find a place in ‘some very busy part of London’ where he could live among ‘the joys and the miseries of people, [and] the thousands of little stories and happenings that can be found in the cafés and streets,’ and he would ‘put that life into painting.’ In London he sought ‘the formula that will make a painting something more than just a painting ... I see no limits to what I might be able to do.’

Starting out with the intention of finding ‘that something that makes the difference between a good painting and a masterpiece,’ he set himself exacting standards. Working seven days a week and often twelve or fourteen hours a day, he was very self critical, and destroyed many early works. (Gillian recalls a lot of bonfires growing up). At first he made ‘endless paintings’ of the human figure, then became an abstract expressionist, before finally settling on landscape, a subject he saw ‘as the ultimate expression of the human condition.’ He enjoyed early success, and was only thirty when invited in 1960 to join the Royal Institute of Oil Painters.

His paintings were about being alive, about the experience of what it means to be human in the modern world, and the imposition of man’s forms upon the landscape. ‘What they express,’ he explained in that 1968 film, ‘is my own frustration, my own dissatisfaction with everything around me; a reaction to the order I impose on my own life, a reaction to the order that society imposes on human beings and a reaction to the order that logic imposes on one’s thoughts ... I think basically that chaos is the predominant feature of existence and that we try to impose our own order on this.’

Significantly, most of his surviving oil paintings are very different from his illustrative and comic work. Among those exhibited here, only *Warriors* is a clear nod to his historical interests: landscapes, urban dystopias and the occasional interior or nude were his focus. There is an essence of Bomberg in the application of paint and the abstraction of physical places, both in his views of London and the paintings of Cornwall and Spain. They are very much of their time, and there is a clear sense of the



5. Landscape IV  
oil on canvas 76 x 102 cms 29% x 40% ins



6. Landscape II  
oil on board 77 x 50 cms 30% x 19% ins

alienation apparent in much post-War European art. One sees hints of Peter Lanyon's early Cornish landscapes and the kitchen sink realism of John Bratby (such as in *Winter Garden*). It is not insignificant that Embleton's personal archive includes a notice kept from a Bratby exhibition he visited in Edinburgh in 1963, as well as a lovingly preserved catalogue from Bomberg's 1958 Arts Council retrospective.

The painter Graham Metson, who knew Embleton in London in the 1960s, has described himself as working in a loose comic book format since the 1950s, producing what the critic John Berger called 'Speculative Fictions' – a type of collage art that was part Abstract Expressionism, part Pop. Though this 'comic book format' might have been a natural approach for a comic book artist, this was not for Embleton, who was seeking a unique and personal vision and form of expression. The 1960s was a time of upheaval and innovation in the fine arts – a situation that offered the chance to test the limits, though one that also came with the threat of a crisis of too many opportunities, too many potential routes. It was, as Metson told me in a recent email from his home in Canada, a challenging time: 'The beginnings of Pop & Abstraction ... conceptual concerns. I remember we all visited the major shows at the Whitechapel ... new directions, Richard Hamilton, Victor Passmore ... THEORY over everything.'

'Ron wanted to be an Artist, he wasn't content,' Metson continued, 'he had an infectious enthusiasm ... the will to succeed, [but] Ron wasn't in step with the directions art was taking.' This fact – as well as the increasing demands of his illustrative work – perhaps explains why Embleton eventually stopped exhibiting, though he never stopped painting (and in the 1970s he even took up sculpture).

Embleton's work was shown in London, the USA, Canada and Australia through the 1960s, often in contributions to group exhibitions organized by the Royal Institute of Oil Painters, the London Sketch Club and the National Society of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers and Potters, which held annual exhibitions at the Royal Institute Galleries in Piccadilly. He made his impact. In 1961 a series of his works, 'Tentacle cities,' was picked out for particular comment in *La Revue Moderne des Arts et de la Vie* when exhibited in London. The French critic particularly praised Embleton's paintings depicting 'the horror of inhuman cities in which man is more lost than in a forest and where, in short, there is no more humanity ... Abstraction, practiced in this way, is a very real form of an extremely noble art.' There could hardly be better praise for this extraordinary and highly individual artist.

David Boyd Haycock  
*Author and Curator*



7. City (Night) II  
oil on canvas 76 x 102 cms 29% x 40% ins



8. Cornish Landscape I  
oil on board 61 x 51 cms 24 x 20<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> ins

9. Landscape and Town II  
oil on board 60 x 120 cms 23<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 47<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> ins





10. London (Buses)  
oil on board 50 x 61 cms 19% x 24 ins



11. Figures in a Restaurant  
oil on board 50 x 72 cms 19% x 28% ins



12. City by Night  
oil on canvas 76 x 102 cms 29% x 40% ins



13. Majorcan Landscape II  
oil on canvas 76 x 102 cms 29 7/8 x 40 1/8 ins



14. Landscape I  
oil on canvas 76 x 102 cms 29 7/8 x 40 1/8 ins



15. Cathedral  
oil on board 54 x 30 cms 21¼ x 11¼ ins



16. Dancing Couple  
oil on card 45 x 33 cms 17¼ x 13 ins



17. City (Night) I  
oil on board 76 x 102 cms 29¾ x 40¼ ins



18. Winter Landscape  
oil on canvas 102 x 153 cms 40 1/8 x 60 1/4 ins



19. Abstract Landscape  
oil on canvas 51 x 76 cms 20 1/4 x 29 7/8 ins



20. Spanish Landscape  
oil on board 40 x 66 cms 15 3/4 x 26 ins



21. Spanish Town  
oil on canvas 76 x 102 cms 29 7/8 x 40 1/8 ins



22. Details of Landscape (Green)  
oil on board 56 x 47 cms 22 x 18½ ins



23. Details of Landscape (Red)  
oil on board 56 x 47 cms 22 x 18½ ins



24. Details of Landscape (Blue)  
oil on board 56 x 47 cms 22 x 18½ ins



25. Purple Landscape  
oil on board 31 x 76 cms 12 x 29¾ ins



26. Majorca I  
oil on board 21 x 44 cms 8¼ x 17½ ins



27. City Images  
oil on card 24 x 48 cms 9½ x 18¾ ins



28. Majorca II  
oil on board 28 x 43 cms 11 x 16¾ ins



29. Abstract City by Night  
oil on card 36 x 30 cms 14¼ x 11¾ ins



30. Desert Town  
oil on paper 30 x 29 cms 11¾ x 11¾ ins



31. *Nude (Green)*  
oil on board  
76 x 30 cms 29 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$  ins



32. *Life Model*  
oil on board 36 x 46 cms 14 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins



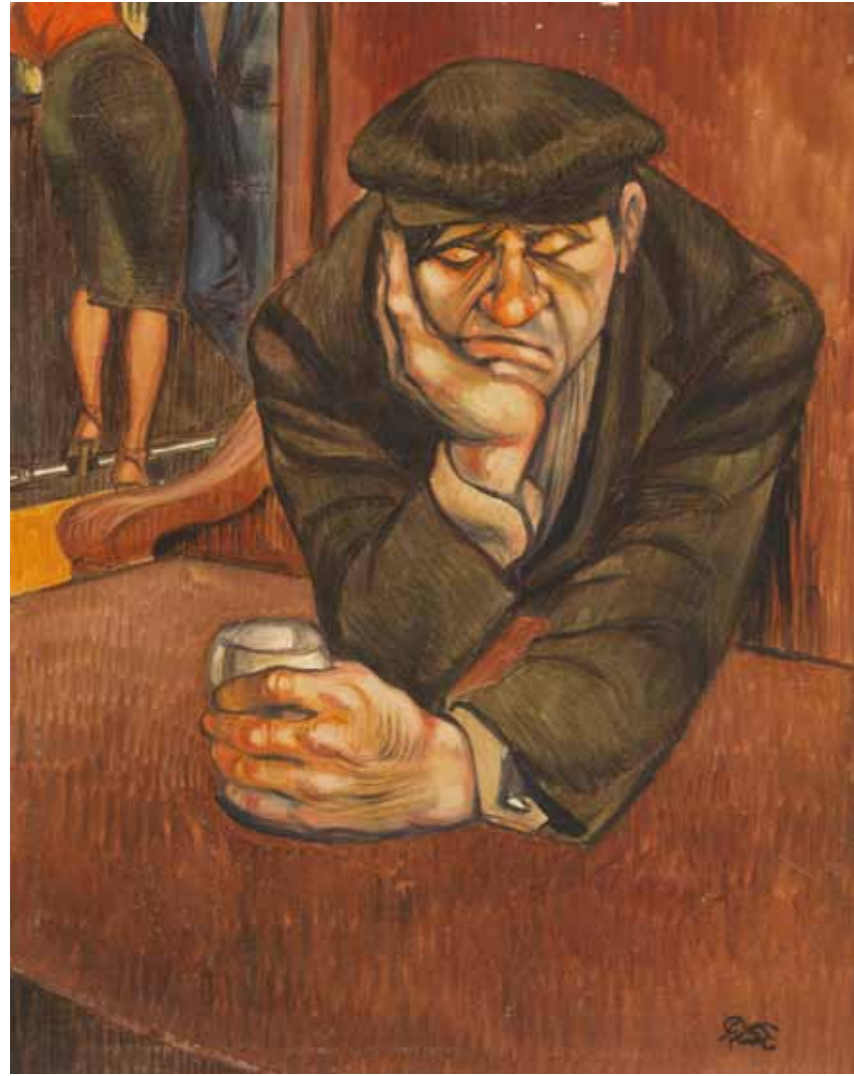
33. *Nude (Red) II*  
oil on board  
54 x 26 cms 21 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10 ins



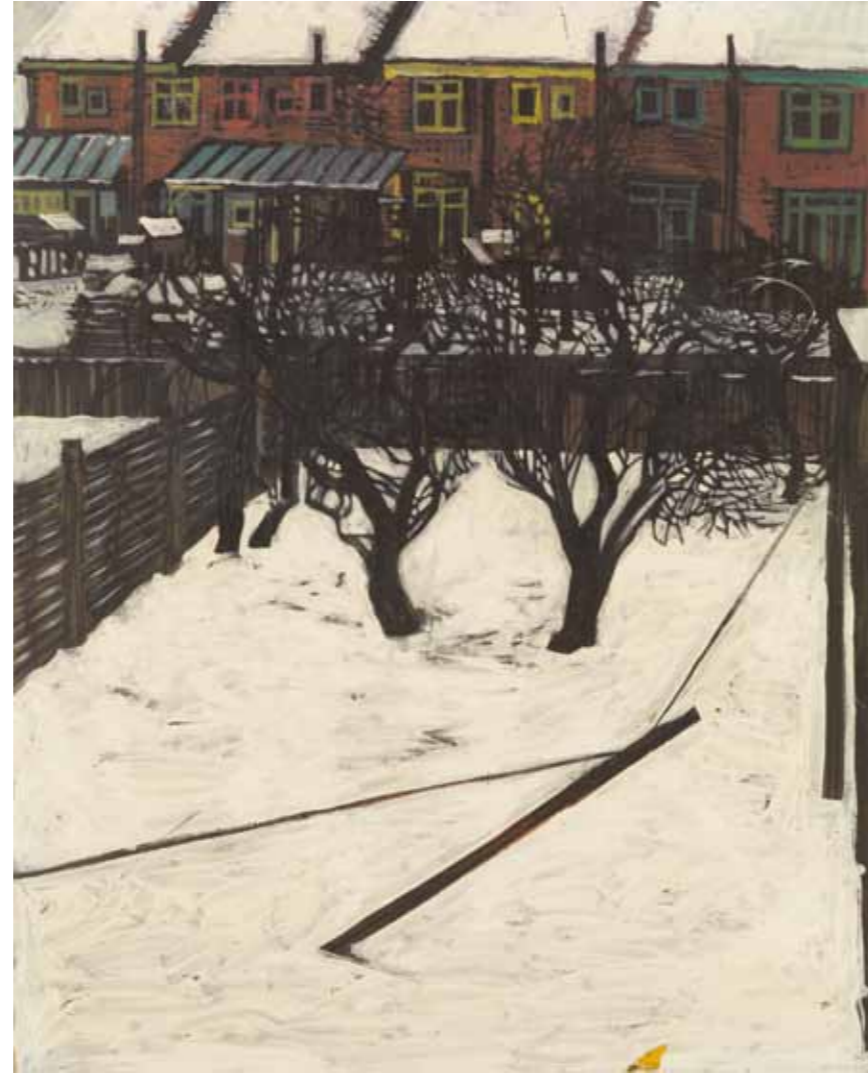
34. *I am the King*  
oil on board  
46 x 25 cms 18 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$  ins



35. *Warriors*  
oil on board  
31 x 40 cms 12 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$  ins



36. Man in Bar  
oil on board 51 x 41 cms 20½ x 16½ ins



37. Winter Gardens  
oil on board 51 x 41 cms 20½ x 16½ ins

# Ron Embleton

## The Illustrations

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# Ron Embleton

by Peter Richardson

*Editor and Art Director of Illustrators*

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At the peak of his powers his work was everywhere. An artist whose output was as formidable in quantity as it was in quality, Ron Embleton remains one of the greatest creators of action themed historical illustration. But the scope of his stylishly distinctive and super-charged art was almost limitless as this in depth exploration of his career by Peter Richardson reveals.

Ron Embleton's work seemed ubiquitous when I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s—his finely rendered, yet earthily dynamic art appeared in comics, book covers and even the back of cereal packets. He single-handedly wrote, and painted an epic two-page weekly comic strip titled *Wulf the Briton*, a feat which is all the more astonishing when one considers that Frank Hampson studio with its team of artists was struggling to achieve an equivalent work-flow with *Dan Dare*. When Gerry Anderson's *Stingray* and *Captain Scarlet* puppets were holding TV, audiences spellbound it was Ron's comic strip adaptations that powered their adventures into new levels of excitement that far exceeded the limitations of televisual animatronics. A fact that was not lost on the Anderson team who commissioned Ron to design the *Stingray* logo as well as produce the title cards for the *Captain Scarlet* series. During the 1970s his work began to manifest itself beyond the confines of the juvenile market, when his beautifully rendered paintings began to chronicle the adventures of *Wicked Wanda* in the pages of *Penthouse*. The latter part of his career heralded a return to his love of history with ongoing series of books on the Roman Army in Britain for the publisher Frank Graham and series of prints on Victorian street urchins and characters from historical fiction.

In short, Ron Embleton was an illustration super-star to generations of young people growing up in the 1950s through to the 1980s. His premature demise at the relatively early age of 57 was, at least in part, as a result of his meteoric success and the demands that this made upon him, not just in terms of the long hours spent accommodating a never-ending succession of client deadlines but his own thirst



**Buffalo Hunter** oil on canvas 64 x 66 cms 25¼ x 26 ins

for developing self-generated projects. Ever the consummate artist, Ron Embleton's ceaseless quest for perfection drove him to a level of artistic commitment that distinguished him as being an exceptional talent, even amongst his peers.

But to fully appreciate Ron's achievements, it is necessary to go back through the mists of time to Ron's birthplace in Limehouse in London's East End Maternity Hospital, Commercial Road, where he was born on the 6th October 1930. The Embletons could trace family ties to East London and, more specifically, Walthamstow back to the 1600s. Beyond that, there is evidence of familial connections going back to Northumberland, which even boasts its own Embleton Bay, a picturesque stretch of coast which, in 2017, was voted the UK's beach of the year amongst BBC *Country File* viewers. The Northumberland connection was to have a fortuitous resonance later in Ron's career.

Ron's parents were, by all accounts, very supportive of their son's artistic talent. His father, Sydney Embleton, was a borough clerk who worked as a food inspector. Sydney was a very talented and competitive sportsman, who excelled at tennis, cricket and football. He also shone musically, a gifted piano player who could play by ear, and he was part of a trio who played at a variety of London night spots. These high energy levels were a gift that Ron was to inherit from his father, and while he may have railed against his father's competitiveness (Ron always being quick to praise the work of his peers and relatively dismissive of his own achievements) he may well have outstripped his father in terms of drive and focus.

The eldest of three brothers (his younger brother Gerry was to follow Ron into a career as an illustrator with a passion for history) Ron was a lively and bright child with a naturally wayward bent and an aversion to some of the less enticing aspects of the school curriculum.

When war was declared in September 1939, Ron's family were subject to the disruption and uncertainty that such momentous events always bring in their wake. Ron's father Sydney joined the ambulance corps and saw action in Greece and Italy and Ron and his brother Terry were evacuated. However Ron's mother, Frances soon brought her children back to London, where they stayed on through the bombings of the Blitz, with night times spent in the air raid shelter at the bottom of the garden, and the devastation evident all around them in the destroyed buildings and pieces of shrapnel lying in the streets. Ron's grandfather was tragically killed by a bomb blast.

But with such grim reminders of the transience of life around him, Ron's thirst for escapism was, if anything, intensified. In common with many gifted children, he had an ability to think for himself and step outside the system, so that his school attendance fluctuated in accordance with whatever temptations lay within the portals of his local cinema. Westerns were a particular passion and his school attendance dipped to levels which were sufficiently concerning for the authorities to contact his father, who by this stage of Ron's development was serving as a stretcher bearer somewhere in war torn Europe. Embleton senior's leave was duly brought forward so that feathers could be de-ruffled and his wayward son redirected back through the school gate.

However, school wasn't entirely without its attractions and aside from drawing caricatures of his teachers, there were girls to chat to and in particular a girl who was sat at a desk in front of him. Joan Calnan wasn't exactly bowled over by Ron's advances, which initially were along the lines of pulling her pigtails and generally making a nuisance of himself, but a childhood friendship, which would ultimately lead to romance and marriage, soon developed.

Ron's forays into the world of art beyond the confines of the kitchen table commenced at the age of 9 when he submitted a cartoon to the *News of The World* and, although it didn't see print the editors were sufficiently impressed to send a letter of encouragement back to him and his parents. Exhibiting an



**Wicked Wanda I, 1980** oil on card 67 x 51 cms 26% x 20% ins

entrepreneurial flair that would serve him well throughout his career, he had a thriving Christmas card business up and running by the age of 11 and a year later he entered an art contest launched by *Beano* publisher DC Thomson with the strap line 'Save For Victory'. He won the first prize and his school friend Terence Patrick won the second prize. He also made what could be described as a semi-pilgrimage when he visited the UK's leading historical illustrator, Fortunino Matania at the great man's London studio. Matania's enthusiastic comments as Ron showed him the contents of his portfolio, while they sat in a studio resembling a film set from a Cecil B DeMille epic, must have seemed a valedictory moment for the young artist.

While Ron's naturally self-motivated inclinations led him to pretty much self-teach himself the fundamentals of art, his attendance at the South-East Essex Technical College and School of Art did bring him into the orbit of one of the UK's most visionary painters. A leading light amongst the avant-gardists of the early 20th century David Bomberg, despite his exceptional talents, had endured many highs and lows and the immediate post-war years were proving to be particularly difficult as he failed to obtain any kind of teaching work at London's most prestigious colleges. His commitment to his students matched that of the commitment to his craft and Ron and he formed an immediate bond, the young artist recognising in the older man a truly great talent as well as a great instructor and Bomberg recognising in Ron a great artist in the making. If anyone could have made a claim to have been a hugely influential force in the development of Ron Embleton's art, it was Bomberg. The fact that Bomberg had fallen so far out of favour with the art establishment that he was living in a state of abject poverty would have also made Ron acutely aware of the transitory and fickle nature of the art industry.

When Ron reached the age of sixteen—an age when many boys for much of the last century, ceased their studies and took their first tentative steps into the world of work, his father took him to a London studio where Ron found himself undertaking a variety of tasks under the watchful eye of Henry Bream, who was studio manager as well as the father of Julian Bream—the famed classical guitarist. There was one occasion where the elder Bream brought in his teenaged son en-route to a meeting with the great Segovia.

It was inevitable that Ron's innately independent spirit should want to break free from the confines of a studio where he was an anonymous cog working on briefs that, inevitably, made little demands on his particular strengths and were,



**Puss in Boots** mixed media 53 x 37 cms 20% x 14% ins



**Little Dorritt**  
pencil drawing, mounted  
40 x 27 cms 15¾ x 10¾ ins

in the longer term, leading him nowhere beyond a regular and modest pay cheque. It was the sale of his first strip at the age of 17 and his conviction that he could trade on his own talents that encouraged him to set up a studio with his school friend Terence Patrick and James Bleach, an artist who Terence had encountered at a local life drawing class.

The trio soon found themselves working on a succession of the cheaply printed and overtly US influenced boy's comics that were beginning to appear on newsagent's spinner racks in the late 1940s. Ron's work which showed influences of Will Eisner and Reed Crandall with its assured brush line and confident use of solid blacks, seemed a natural fit for the material which signalled a sea-change from the much more restrained drawing styles that had dominated UK comics in pre-war years.

However, just as the studio's fortunes were beginning to gain an upward trajectory, National Service sent the young artist off to the steaming jungles of Malaya. He was attached to the Intelligence Corps, but also found his painting skills

being called upon to repaint the regimental drums, fabricate some camouflage, and create scenery for entertainment but, however inconvenient the two-year interruption might have appeared, the disruption was not a game-changer and when Ron returned he was able to pick up pretty much where he had left off.

The 1950s proved to be an era of seismic developments in both Ron's art and career. His work dominated much of the UK comics market—from regular cover and interior strip assignments in comics such as *Lone Star Magazine* to weekly strip assignments in *Mickey Mouse Comic* culminating in one of his fondly remembered strips *Don of the Drums*, which provided the young artist with a platform on which to share his love of history as well as some of the most dynamic and inspired art to see print in a UK comic.

In parallel to his commercial art, Ron was developing his painting in both technique and subject matter. Although relatively unfamiliar to the fan-base that grew up around his illustration, his oil paintings were exhibited regularly in London and beyond the shores of the UK. He was an enthusiastic member of the London Sketch Club and was elected to the Royal Institute of Oil Painters on his 30th birthday. His passion for creating art unshackled by the constraints of working for print, saw him become a member of the National Society of Painters and Sculptors. If ever an artist was born with an inner compulsion to create work above and beyond the constraints of maintaining a commercial practice, Ron Embleton was such an artist.

His ability to push beyond even the expectations of his commissioners was demonstrated with typical bravura, when he took over an ailing comic strip. *Wulf the Briton* was the flagship cover feature for *Express Weekly*, which boasted the

same quality colour printing as its main rival *Eagle*. The problem that the editors of *Express Weekly* were wrestling with was that the artist who had been drawing the feature had abruptly left and they desperately needed someone with the requisite drawing (and painting) skills to come and fill the breach.

With Ron's arrival, they not only got a reliable and consistently excellent artist to take over the reins of a story about a group of ex-gliadiators taking on the might of the Roman army as they journeyed across Europe and, latterly throughout Britain, but they also got a visionary who could see a potential for the strip which had yet to be realised.

The strip was initially scripted by Jenny Butterworth, who was later to achieve fame as the deviser of the newspaper strip *Tiffany Jones*. Jenny's style leaned heavily towards a more fantasy driven approach to the story, which jarred with Ron. After he had been working on the strip for a few months, he increased his output from one to two pages a week and with Jenny's assent he took up scripting duties as well. From then on *Wulf the Briton*, turned from a romantic fantasy, to an epic adventure which set a new benchmark in storytelling for UK comic strips. Ron took over the entire production of the strip, even assuming responsibility for the lettering which was handled with great verve by Joan (or 'Liz' as she was known) who was now married to Ron and provided unstinting support for all his artistic endeavours. Ron's younger brother Gerry would also lend his increasingly confident artistic prowess to helping Ron manage the demanding production schedule. The practice of Gerry working as Ron's assistant had been established some years earlier, when Gerry had helped Ron when still only a teenager and, as he rather self-effacingly describes worked on a number of comic strips, "pencilled by my brother and I, sweating blood, did my best to ink them. Part of my training days and embarrassingly bad!"

Wulf was a tour-de-force, both in its scope and the maturing of Ron's artwork, which went from strong to magnificent over the three years that he dedicated to the project. In fact, such was the appeal of *Wulf*, that the strip was reformatted for a variety of European comics.



**The Wind in the Willows — Mole and Ratty enter the House** mixed media  
44 x 63 cms 17¾ x 24¾ ins



**Pickwick Papers** mixed media  
53 x 57 cms 20¾ x 22½ ins

as some of the best historical illustrators. Ron Embleton was a natural choice and his work appeared in the first issue, alongside other great illustrators, not least of which was Ron's childhood hero, Fortunino Matania.

However, it wasn't just *Look and Learn* that served as a regular showcase of Ron's dynamic artistry, his work was also appearing in the *Eagle* comic, where he drew *Johnny Frog*, *Princess* where he drew a delightful adaptation of *Lorna Doone* and *Boys World*, where he illustrated the first 23 episodes of the Michael Moorcock scripted *Wrath of the Gods*. Although regarded by many of his fans as a masterpiece, the world of Greek Mythology sat uncomfortably with the artist and he dropped it after the first story in the series was completed.

By this stage of his career, Ron's work was immediately identifiable. The remarkable finish that he achieved with his work, belied the speed at which he created it. He was a truly great illustrator, able to combine a boundless imagination with a deep knowledge of all the fundamentals of illustration—not least of which was a mastery of anatomy. This enabled him to work with speed and confidence. As his daughter Gillian recalled, "he would create very complicated compositions out of his head". The images would manifest themselves with a minimum of under-drawing and, in a manner not dis-similar to Fortunino Matania, elements of the art would appear like bits of a jigsaw puzzle at various points of the artboard. He typically worked with a very hard pencil with a long point where he could lay out the elements of the drawing, before applying black ink with a Sable brush and/ or a dip pen. Coloured inks would then be applied and light-coloured gouache would be employed to bring out highlights. Sometimes, he would create the drawing using red and blue biros, before applying the coloured inks and gouache—whatever the technique the results were always, distinctively, a Ron Embleton artwork.

His artwork attained an even higher profile, when he was approached to work on comic strip adaptations of the popular Gerry Anderson puppet shows. His

By the time that *Express Weekly*, had ceased publication, Ron had established himself as an historical illustrator of exceptional prowess and, as such, he was in constant demand by commissioners, not least of which was the legendary Leonard Matthews who, in 1961, was on the cusp of launching one of the most successful children's weeklies ever, the aptly titled *Look and Learn*. The new title was informative and entertaining, with a strong emphasis on bringing history to life with some of the best children's writers (Henry Treece and Alfred Duggan amongst others) as well

*Stingray* strip debuted in the first issue of the hugely successful *TV 21* weekly comic. It wasn't Ron's first encounter with the show as he had already designed the distinctive *Stingray* font which appeared at the start of each of the TV adventures. He also went on to create comic strip adaptations of *Captain Scarlet* as well as *The Man from Uncle* for *TV 21*'s sister title *Lady Penelope*. The involvement with *Captain Scarlet*, again, pre-dated his work on the comic strip, as he created the artwork used for the credits at the end of each TV episode.

It is easy to lose track of exactly what Ron was doing in any given year, he was a phenomenally fast worker—his studio was like a production line of art in progress. Strips for *TV 21* would be sharing studio-space with artwork for *Finding Out*, illustrations for *Once Upon a Time*, and several of his self-initiated projects. The high-profile exposure of his art, the quality of his art and his boundless determination to push ever forwards meant that he was constantly in demand.

This brought a degree of financial stability which is often at odds with a career in the arts but the, very considerable, downside of the equation meant that Ron was working hours which would have felled many a lesser mortal. Lack of sleep, cigarettes and a generally sedentary lifestyle were making inroads into his health, but his naturally ebullient spirit and love of his work continued to be a driving force in the development of his art.

Like a lot of artists, the desire to explore pastures new and not get stuck in a creative rut, meant that when new opportunities manifested themselves, Ron was more than ready to rise to the occasion. When, in 1972, he was approached by an entrepreneur to design a Hans Andersen theme park, he was more than keen to discuss the project. The work would involve the Embleton family upping sticks and moving from their comfortable home in Bournemouth to Los Angeles. Ron launched himself into this project with typical gusto and proceeded to work up concept drawings for the park, the themed rides and attractions and in the process found himself having to turn down work from his long-established client base.

The work consumed much of Ron's time and the enthusiastic reception that his designs received acted as a spur to making plans for



**Oh, Wicked Wanda – part 47 page 6**  
mixed media 61 x 43 cms 24 x 16¾ ins



**Centaur by Waterfall** mixed media  
75 x 53 cms 29½ x 20¾ ins

what would be a new chapter, not just in Ron's career, but also his families lives as packing cases were filled and Beverly Hills properties as well as schools for his daughter Gillian were considered.

However, the one thing that didn't appear to be happening was the financing of this epic project and in a weird parallel to the Hans Christian Andersen theme park that Anne and Janet Grahame Johnstone were involved in [see *illustrators 5*] the project fell apart when Ron, with daughter Gillian sitting on the stairs and wife Liz standing by him, put a late night call through to the wheeler-dealer. To Ron's horror he discovered that there was no credible plan for how the Embleton's were going to finance this move, or where the money was going to come from to pay for all the work that Ron would be generating, let alone where the money was for the months of work he had already committed to the enterprise, whilst having to turn down work from his regular clients.

With the embers of the burnt bridges still glowing and no work in hand, Ron started the process of building up a new client base with typical energy and verve. Having seen the success of *Playboy* magazine's *Little Annie Fanny* fully painted comic strip, he pitched an idea to Bob Guccione at *Penthouse*. Guccione liked the idea and commissioned Ron to work up a monthly saucy comic strip, which would be scripted by Frederic Mullally. The resultant strip, *Oh, Wicked Wanda* was an immediate favourite with readers and gave Ron an opportunity to indulge his love of caricature as well as develop a whole raft of tongue in cheek political pastiches, which provided a secondary tier to the raunchy adventures of the raven-haired dominatrix and her blonde assistant Candyfloss. The series would run until 1980 when it was supplanted by, another equally delectable strip; *Sweet Chastity*.

Despite the disruption occasioned by the fall-out from the abortive theme park project, 1972 proved to be a most propitious year when Ron and his family decided to take a summer break in Morocco. On the trip, he met another lover of ancient history and struck up a long-lasting friendship that would be both personally and creatively fulfilling. Like Ron, Frank Graham was possessed of an indefatigable and energetic spirit. He was a Northumbrian and a keen local historian, with a particular passion for researching and documenting the history of one of Northumberland's most historic landmarks—Hadrian's Wall. The story of how Hadrian's Wall came into being and the Roman army that policed its ramparts held an equal fascination for Ron and, in a serendipitous way, brought him back

to his work on *Wulf the Briton* some twenty years earlier. Ron's work with Frank Graham was to become an ongoing project, with paperback books, postcards and a substantial hardbound collection featuring the bulk of Ron's work, ably assisted by his daughter Gillian, who provided black and white illustrations for several of the topics explored.

In 1974, he was commissioned by the magazine *This England* to undertake a series of paintings of characters from the works of Charles Dickens. Twenty studies were produced which were published between 1974 and 1979. They are full of the warmth and charm which defined so much of Ron's work and provided a perfect accompaniment to Dickens' texts.

In addition, and never one to stand still, Ron devised a best-selling series of prints under the title, 'Victorian Children's Street Games'. The prints were so successful that they spawned another line of prints under the title 'Edwardian Street Traders'.

Despite the short-term hiccup that the abortive theme-park commission had occasioned, Ron was back in full throttle, burning the midnight oil and adding calendars to Eversheds (which also revisited Edwardian and Dickensian themes) as well as calendars featuring heavy horses (Ron's ability to draw dynamic and characterful horses was in a league of its own) to his roster of recurrent clients. His love of the comic strip and his ability to get to the nub of any story that he wanted to get across found a fresh outlet in a beautiful black and white fishing strip for the *Daily Express*, under the masthead of *Terry and Son*.

However, the success that Ron achieved not only rewarded him creatively and provided him with a comfortable income, but it also consumed him and the late-nights, omnipresent deadlines and juggling of projects that would have been beyond the capabilities of many of his peers finally caught up with him at the tragically early age of 57, when he succumbed to a massive heart attack.

His legacy was enormous and the joy that he brought to lovers of great art and great story-telling art the world over was immense. He was a unique talent and one that burned bright enough to inspire new generations of illustrators in the years that followed his passing.

There is a lot to be learned from Ron Embleton but, perhaps, the self-motivational force that underpinned all his endeavours is the one thing that aspirant illustrators need to take on board. Ultimately, illustration is a career that chooses you, it chose Ron and he rose to the occasion magnificently.



**Oh, Wicked Wanda - Hollywood Hits**  
mixed media 50 x 38 cms 19¾ x 15 ins

# The unseen work of Ron Embleton

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The oil paintings from Ron Embleton's Studio will be on view and for sale at Messum's, 28 Cork Street, London W1S 3NG [www.messums.com](http://www.messums.com)

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