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OBITUARY: Michael Wickham | The Independent

Terence Conran

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Michael Wickham was a master of many trades and an enthusiastic amateur of countless others. He was a furniture-maker, a gardener, a photographer, a painter, a musician, a cook, a motor engineer, a raconteur, a linguist, a romantic philanderer, a Marxist, a husband (four times), a father (of seven children), a grandfather (of 12) and, best of all, an enormously generous bon viveur. Despite, or even perhaps because of this, he was seriously impecunious for most of his life. He was an inspirational man who had a great influence on many people's lives - a particular influence on mine; he enchanted practically everybody who came under his spell. His generosity was both material and intellectual; he wanted to share his knowledge, his ideas, his dreams and passions with everybody he met. He also wanted to feed them, ply them with home-brewed beer and home-made wine, give them plants from his garden and things he had made in his workshop.

He would entertain them with wonderful stories from his extraordinary life, often amusingly embellished; play them music, usually Bach, from his grand piano, guitar or from the clavichord that he had made himself. And if this was not enough, he dressed himself in a totally original and stylish way with beautiful clothes found in junkshops, often Oriental, sometimes from Savile Row. He loved to work in the garden or his carpenter's shop in his bleu de travail and then bathe and scent himself and reappear looking and smelling like a handsome maharajah ready for an evening of entertainment.

Michael Wickham was the son of middle-class parents and went to Marlborough College and then on to the Royal Academy School. His first wife, Peggy Earnshaw, was the illustrator Mabel Lucie Atwell's daughter. He lived in a henhouse in Cassis in the South of France with his second wife, Tanya. It was a wonderfully creative and Bohemian environment rubbing shoulders and palettes with Braque, Picasso and Varda, and, back in London, with the artist Julian Trevelyan, who became his great friend. I have always found Wickham's paintings to be practically indistinguishable from Trevelyan's. They depict decent and charming English semi-abstract views of peaceful landscapes and assemblages of fine objects: happily undemanding pictures of a better sort of world.

He had a career as a photographer for Conde Nast which lasted for much of the Fifties and Sixties when he was married to his third wife, Cynthia. During this time he developed a unique Wickham style of interior photography for House & Garden, accessorised with objects from his own vast collection of ephemera. He was so concerned with the detail that he frequently found he had "ectoplasm" (i.e. polythene sheets) in the photographs when they were printed. He would laugh cheerfully, curse his assistant and take the photographs again.

The interiors of his houses and workshops, culminating in the laundry of the demolished Coleshill, in Berkshire, were, and indeed are, wondrous places. It would be difficult to imagine anything more chaotic. They are the work of an aesthetic magpie collecting objects of rarity, junk, sentimental memories, engineering curiosities and the odd furry pie cooked several months before and forgotten in some corner of a cupboard.

If you analysed the chaos you could easily create from it a series

of Duchamp or Braque still-lives. Even the towering piles of writs, final demands, and unopened letters from his bank (firmly placed under a cushion) had a certain Surrealist charm.

His interests were so wide and so varied and his generosity so total that it was inevitable that he met a vast array of people in all walks of life. It was difficult to mention an interesting contemporary politician, artist, designer, architect, writer or musician who Michael Wickham did not know and about whom he did not have a firmly held opinion. He would even admit with some pride that he had chatted with the Queen and made a friend of Prince Charles. He was the least snobbish snob I have ever met.

Wickham had a strange attitude to money. He acted as if a substantial income was his birthright and was rather dismissive of anybody who worked nine to five to make a living: rather vulgar, he thought, as indeed did many of his generation. This fitted awkwardly with his energetic devotion to Marxism. He was easily able to intellectualise his way out of this dichotomy although it was, of course, one of the many paradoxes in his enchanted life.

He always had schemes to improve his finances, and his workshops are littered with expensive machinery and beautiful jigs, hand-made for some great project that was going to revolutionise the lot of the Wickham entourage. But no sooner was the first imperfect prototype complete than he was off on another more demanding project.

Although I and many others became vastly irritated by his apparently dilettante attitude to life, we failed to notice at the time that we were under the spell of one of the best teachers we could ever hope to have. He showed us a way of life that we could

reinterpreted and which has influenced the work and lives of many architects and designers and photographers. He was an 18th-century polymath who ended up in the 20th century.

He leaves behind the restored Coleshill laundry and the beautiful garden that he created - first with Cynthia, then with Denny, his fourth wife - on the foundations of the ruin of the 17th-century house; two remarkable wives; his skeleton for medical research and a vast body of people whose lives have been enhanced by his life.

Terence Conran Michael Whalley Wickham, designer, photographer, artist: born Coventry 11 August 1909; married first Peggy Earnshaw (died 1978; two sons; marriage dissolved 1940), secondly Tanya Langendonk (died 1976; two sons, one daughter; marriage dissolved 1949), thirdly Cynthia Blackburn (two daughters; marriage dissolved), fourthly Denny Andrews; died Swindon 23 January 1995.