Moving the Merzbarn.

Fred Brookes,
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Kurt Schwitters spent his last years in Ambleside and left unfinished, at his death in 1948, his third Merzbau. Since it stood in a barn, it was called the Merzbarn. The barn was the property of the late Mr. Harry Pierce of "Cylinders", Elterwater, who offered the use of the barn to Schwitters to carry out this large work. After Schwitters' death Mr. Pierce looked after the Merzbarn and took care that it should come to no harm, but the extreme dampness of the climate caused a gradual but accelerating decay. So it came about that, in 1962, after considerable negotiation Mr. Pierce offered the Merzbarn to the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. In 1965 it was made over by Deed of Gift to the University, on the understanding that it would be removed to a new location, restored and preserved. In May of that year under the direction of Richard Hamilton, three students of the Department (of whom I was one) undertook an extensive survey of the Merzbarn, making countless photographs, drawings, measurements and colour matchings, collecting up fallen fragments of the surface and amassing as much data as possible. This was to ensure that, should the Merzbarn be damaged on its journey, it would be possible to restore it.

A scheme of operations for the removal was devised, funds were raised and contracts agreed. In July 1965, the contractors John Laing of Carlisle, and I, as a representative of the Department of Fine Art in the University, moved in to begin operations.

The problems of the removal were manifold. The primary problem was the fact that the work was a plaster construction applied direct to a dry-stone wall. This meant that the wall could not be taken apart and reassembled at its new site. It had to be taken in one piece. It was decided that the best way of doing this would be to secure the stones of the wall in concrete before attempting to move it. As anyone who is familiar with the construction of the Lakeland type of dry-slate wall will know, the wall is in fact a double wall, the two sides leaning slightly inwards, with a filling of rubble in between. At intervals there are courses of "throughs", long stones tying together the inside and outside leaves. So in order to embed in concrete the stones which support the plaster surface on the inside face, it was necessary to remove the outer leaf of the wall and dig out all the rubble filling. A perilous operation as you may imagine.

This part of the work was carried out, in sections about two feet square at a time, removing the outer part and the rubble and grouting the exposed inner part with a strong mortar. This would be left for several days to set while work continued on another part of the wall. The whole job was supported continuously by wooden shoring inside the barn and "Acrow" expanding props outside. These are easily portable and enabled us to apply support to the outside exactly where it was needed as the job progressed. The piece of wall which was moved measured about twelve feet by nine, so this initial stage took about a month to complete.

Our problems were complicated by the fact that the wall, though relatively recent (it was put up during the war) stood on old foundations. These consisted of large boulders set deep into the ground. They were judged too large to be moved safely with the rest of the wall and so a division was made to clear the tops of them. This meant losing the lower fourteen inches of the inside face, which, fortunately, contained no special features which could not easily be replaced. For the same reason, it was decided to leave behind the right hand end of the wall about three feet from the

corner. This part of the mural had been left in a very unfinished state at Schwitters' death and had been subsequently worked on by Mr. Pierce.

So that it could be moved the wall needed to be in a stable horizontal position. The plan was to tip over onto its back the completed steel and concrete mass with the wall embedded in it. The next stage of the removal was therefore to erect a steel girder frame behind the wall which would be incorporated into the concrete and provide lifting points as well as reinforcement. A concrete sill was built on which the whole thing would eventually heel when it was lowered. The erection of the steel frame was hindered by the presence of the "throughs", several of which intersected with the steel frame or projected beyond it. We realized that these would have to be cut off. The risk of vibration damaging the plaster was very great, as the fabric of the mural was in a very fragile condition. To prevent this as far as possible a fiber grinding disc was used rather than a metal saw. This had a certain degree of flexibility and did not catch and jar as a conventional saw might have done. The stones were cut successfully, without incident.

With the steel framework up and the concreting completed the next stage was to put up a gantry over the site to carry the lifting gear which would be used to lower the wall to the ground. Since the weight had been estimated to be as much as twenty-five tons, this had to be a mighty structure. The terrain posed problems. The barn stood about one hundred and fifty yards from the road and could only be reached up a steep slope and along a grass track with a wall on one side and a ditch on the other. It was impossible to bring up a crane and so all the steelwork had to be manhandled into position with a block and tackle hitched to a pole. As the job progressed the weather, which had been good, worsened and we had heavy rain during all the vital stages of the removal. After a great deal of heaving and struggling the gantry was up. It must have been twenty feet high and the girders on top carried four huge sets of lifting tackle which were attached to the lugs welded to the top of the steel frame now cradling the wall. A cover of tarpaulins was thrown over the gantry to keep off rain

The weight of the wall was taken on the gantry, and the joint at the bottom of the inside face was raked out. Wedges were placed along the bottom of the wall to help prevent it from skidding forwards as the wall was lowered. The lifting tackle was run slowly backwards along the gantry keeping pace with the top of the wall as it went over. Slowly, slowly the mass began to tilt and finally settled onto blocks of wood on the ground. The first stage was completed.

A frame of scaffolding was erected over the face and covered with polythene sheets and tarpaulins. Pickfords, who were the contractors for the transportation, arrived in the pouring rain and found the going too muddy for their lorry, it had to be hauled up by a hand winch to a point where the track levelled out. A road of railway sleepers was laid over the remaining section, and the actual move began. The process consisted of jacking up the wall, placing steel plates on blocks of timber underneath it and sliding it on "skates", sets of steel rollers in a frame. The wall had to be turned through ninety degrees and lowered down a six foot drop before reaching the relatively straightforward track, still in the pouring rain. All went well and the wall was winched slowly out and eventually onto the lorry. This part of the operation took about a week in all, the lorry with the wall and myself aboard left "Cylinders" at three o'clock in the afternoon, made overnight stops in Kendal and Darlington and on the morning of Monday, 4th October, it arrived at the site in Newcastle. It was stored in a horizontal position on a patch of empty ground at the corner of King’s Walk and Claremont Road, about fifty yards from where it is now. A hut was built over it to keep out the weather and a thermostatically controlled electric heater was installed to protect it from frost

and to help dry it out. The hut was closed and no more was seen of the Merzbarn until the twentieth of June of the following year, 1966.

The Merzbarn was to be installed in an alcove specially designed to receive it. This was cantilevered out from the new Hatton Gallery, part of the Fine Art Department's new building. The rear wall of the alcove, against which the Merzbarn would stand, had already been built, and the roof of the alcove was left open. The opening was a narrow slot through which the wall had to be lowered from above. It was only just big enough and furthermore the whole thing stood at first floor level over the roadway on which the Merzbarn now lay, back on its lorry, ready for the lift. The great height to which the wall had to be raised to clear the back of the alcove meant that a positively enormous crane had to be used (the largest in the North of England we were told).

The face of the mural could not be covered because of the danger of damage to the projections on its face. As it passed through the hole, we had to be able to see it every inch of the way. A gust of wind could have swung the huge weight against the wall of the gallery above the alcove; a shower of rain could have ruined it. Mercifully the morning was calm and clear and the job went off without a hitch.

The next step was restoration. This was begun by Stuart Wise, one of our teaching staff, and myself, in the Summer vacation of 1966. The chief problem here was that due to changes in humidity and temperature, and perhaps frost, the painted surface of several large areas had sprung away from the underlying plaster. The surface consisted of the top skim of plaster and a skin of oil paint and white lead wash. This shell was extremely fragile and had, not surprisingly, broken in several places, leaving holes. There were voids behind these areas and, since it was judged to be too risky to try to shrink the top surface back onto its support these voids had to be filled. Having taken advice from Murray MacCheyne, Master of Sculpture in the Department, and from the Tate Gallery's restoration department, we judged it was possible to fill the voids with a mixture of PVA adhesive and French chalk, which would provide a stable but still slightly flexible solid. All cracks and gaps were carefully closed with plasticene and, by using a hypodermic needle, the mixture was inserted. A small test area was completely solid after two days and work went ahead on the rest. Once a solid base had been established, the holes in the surface where the plaster and paint surface had broken away were made up with fine plaster and PVA using a small painting knife. Where there was substantial damage, the forms were built up to their original shape using our photographic survey and measurements as a guide.

Once all the filling and repair work had dried the problem was to retouch these parts to match the color of their surroundings. This was a long and tedious business, mixing color after color to achieve the best match, referring to the color samples and matches we had taken in 1964. Eventually satisfactory results were obtained.

A further problem was that of reconstructing the areas which had been lost in the removal, the lower fourteen inches and sections at either side. I had taken casts of these parts on site, but they proved unsatisfactory since the white plaster of which they were made could not be successfully stained to match the original. It was decided, therefore, to make these parts by hand, using the same technique as Schwitters had used. He had applied the wet plaster with a knife in a rough free way, showing the marks of the tool very strongly. The parts we were to recreate had not been much worked over and so it was possible for us to imitate the original quite satisfactorily. The worst problem here, in fact, was to match the color of the original material. A lump was analyzed by British Gypsum Ltd. in Kirkby Thore and identified as one of their products. Since 1947 however the

manufacturing process had been so "improved" as to completely change the color. It was now bright pink. We had therefore to make a long series of experiments, mixing pigments with the plaster, and leaving samples to dry, in order to check the match: eventually a satisfactory resemblance was achieved.

We had to be wary of doing too much work; to make the Merzbarn look new would have been an error. On the other hand it had to be made strong enough to resist further decrepitation, though the risk of this is greatly reduced by the air-conditioned environment which now surrounds it. We hoped that we had achieved a balance. It is indisputable that much of the original magic has been lost: that was inevitable in taking it from the barn; from Mr. Pierce's beautiful garden; from its remote and lovely setting. We hope that in rescuing it from decay and destruction we have done justice to the work of a great man.

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