

FACE TO FACE with Richard Mitzman

OF THE MANY interviews we have had with members of our fascinatingly varied profession none has been more fascinating than our recent one with Richard Mitzman — one of that comparatively small band of elitist practitioners in the environs of Wimpole Street who, at the peak of his career, has put dentistry behind him. Abandoning his old love he has become totally obsessed by a new one — a love of marble and stone and wood which he sculpts and carves into shapes and forms which are vibrant with life. We sat, surrounded by some of them, in his spacious studio near Primrose Hill and talked to him about his life.

HCD: Tell me about your early years — did you have a happy childhood?

RM: Yes. I had an elder and a twin sister and very caring parents. My father was a furrier who had a passion, shared by my mother, for antiques, especially Victorian prints on which he published a book and was an authority.

HCD: So you were brought up to appreciate beautiful

objects. Were you able to develop your interest in the arts at school?

RM: No. I went to the Merchant Taylors school when I had, I suppose, a vague leaning towards medicine and got swept into the science stream.

HCD: I rather dread asking my next one — why did you choose dentistry? Don't tell me you were good

with your hands and liked people.

RM: Well, I suppose I was and I suppose I did, but the real reason was that I had a passion for fishing and I found that I was in great demand among my pals for removing hooks from uncooperative fishes' mouths. Dentistry seemed somehow to be a natural follow-on.

HCD: What a splendid answer. How did you set about the next step?

RM: I was turned down by Guy's but accepted by UCH.

HCD: I hope you didn't tell Guy's about your piscatorial past. But you liked UCH?

RM: I loved it there and was very fortunate in my teachers. I remember with gratitude Professor Prophet and Jack Messing and in particular Nick Sturridge who gave me my first glimpse of how dentistry could be.

HCD: When did you qualify?

RM: In 1967 but there was one hiccup as four months before my finals the Six Day

War started and I volunteered as an anaesthetist, which was what they seemed to want most. Fortunately, it was all over so quickly that my services were not called upon (which was perhaps just as well). But by the time I came back I had to go straight into my LDS finals and failed my practical as I was hopelessly out of practice. But I took my BDS a month later and passed.

HCD: And then, of course, a house job in your continuing pursuit of perfection?

RM: No. I regret to say that I was seduced by an orange Morgan and the only way I could afford to buy it was to work flat out in a busy practice in north London, which was a blessing in disguise because I soon learnt that I knew nothing about real dentistry and I gradually gained confidence and speed.

HCD: Did you regret not doing a house job?

RM: I should have done had I not gone back to UCH as Professor Prophet's personal HS, from which I gained far more value



"Black Lady" Belgian black marble



"Tregiffian Piece" 1988. Carrara marble

because of my time in general practice rather than the other way round.

HCD: Were you tempted to become an academic?

RM: No. I went back to general practice where I felt I still needed more experience before launching out on my own. And then I was given an introduction to Max Walter.

HCD: The now legendary Max Walter who escaped from Nazi Germany in the 30s and established himself — to Hitler's enormous loss — in Wimpole Street?

RM: Yes. He seemed to like me but the first thing he told me I must do was to go off and get a DDS at the elitist University of Southern California. He knew Dean Ingle and I was accepted there without an entrance examination, on my reference from Professor Prophet.

HCD: It must have been a fabulously expensive undertaking?

RM: It was and the orange Morgan had to go as a start, but it was a wonderful school in a new building and the basic philosophy of the place was the pursuit of excellence, an almost obsessive attention to detail. And I remember thinking one day as I prepared a large MOD onlay that it was essentially a sculptural concept.

HCD: How interesting, the first hint of things to come so many years later. Did all go well?

RM: I got my DDS in December 1970 after only a year and a half and returned to London where I duly became Max Walter's assistant and we worked together for three years in perfect harmony. He was a superb clinician and diagnostician, but also a master of practice and patient management. We lunched together every day and he fed to me his wisdom and then, totally unexpectedly, he died.

HCD: What a blow... but by this time surely you were fully fledged?

RM: I felt sufficiently established to extend the scope of the practice with myself doing the restorative dentistry and three specialist associates doing perio, endo and prosthodontics — all of them, I need hardly say, American trained. But it became unwieldy, our overheads were enormous and I had to spend too much time on administration.

HCD: So what did you do?

RM: I moved up the road with one associate and with the aid of computers we got the overheads down and ran an extremely successful practice. I think our fees were the highest in the golden mile.

HCD: When did you get involved in postgraduate lecturing and demonstrating for which you gained such a high reputation?

RM: I was very keen to put across the principles of good practice management

and particularly the importance of a preventive approach to restorative dentistry and the old concept of perfection whether it was a simple amalgam or a complicated bridge. In 1978 I started the Absurd Dental Study Club with Mike Wise, Nick Sturridge, James Dewe Matthews, John McCormack and Brian Parkins.

HCD: Sorry, why Absurd?

RM: It stands for Attainment of Better Standards and Understanding of Restorative Dentistry.

HCD: Ah, I see.

RM: We watched each other work one day a month and learnt from each other; it changed our practice procedures more than any other influence.

HCD: Let's go back to that first hint of the shape of things to come in LA when you saw the link between the skills of the restorative

dentist and those of the sculptor?

RM: When I got back from the States I joined an evening class in experimental sculpture at the Camden Arts Centre. I went there every Monday for two years and although my tutor left me almost entirely to my own devices I was hooked.

HCD: But you must have had some mentors, some heroes... Rodin? Michelangelo?

RM: Henry Moore was looking for a new dentist and I was introduced to him by his accountant, one of my patients. He liked the idea of going to another sculptor as a dentist and he came to me and for 12 years until his death he became not only a patient but an immensely valuable friend and adviser. We would have morning and afternoon sessions in the surgery and then a long lunch break together talking endless shop. He taught me above all that I must learn to draw

as an essential preliminary to learning to sculpt.

HCD: We are still a long way from the change of life, but I can see it coming now. Go on.

RM: In 1978, the year I started the Absurd Study Club, I also got married and two years later my wife and I and our baby son went on a seaside holiday in Italy and while there I discovered a remarkable artist's colony in the little town of Pietrasanta near the great marble quarries at Carrara. There was no looking back after that. I went back each year and rented space in a studio and started to carve that wonderful marble.

HCD: Surely you were in danger of destroying yourself — a man cannot serve two masters?

RM: I had never been busier in the practice, I was still involved with my lectures and as secretary of the American Dental Society of London and I said to myself I've only got one life, why not change course while I'm

at the peak of my professional life? So I did. I was lucky to sell the practice to someone who I knew would uphold my standards, but what was so encouraging was that all my closest colleagues and innumerable faithful patients all supported my decision and wished me well.

HCD: Oh dear, it all sounds rather like Paul Gauguin, except that you didn't go to Tahiti.

RM: No, I went back to Pietrasanta and spent a whole year there working and watching other people at work and starting to come to grips with that wonderfully varied marble which can only be found at Carrara.

HCD: And what of the future?

RM: Last year I worked at coming to terms with my new profession and with learning the new skills and techniques that it requires. Now I am in the process of setting up a new studio

where I can live and do the same work I have been doing in Italy and look forward to a period of intense productivity and creativity culminating, I hope, in my first one person show.

HCD: I hope you will invite me to the preview and thank you for giving me so much of your precious time.