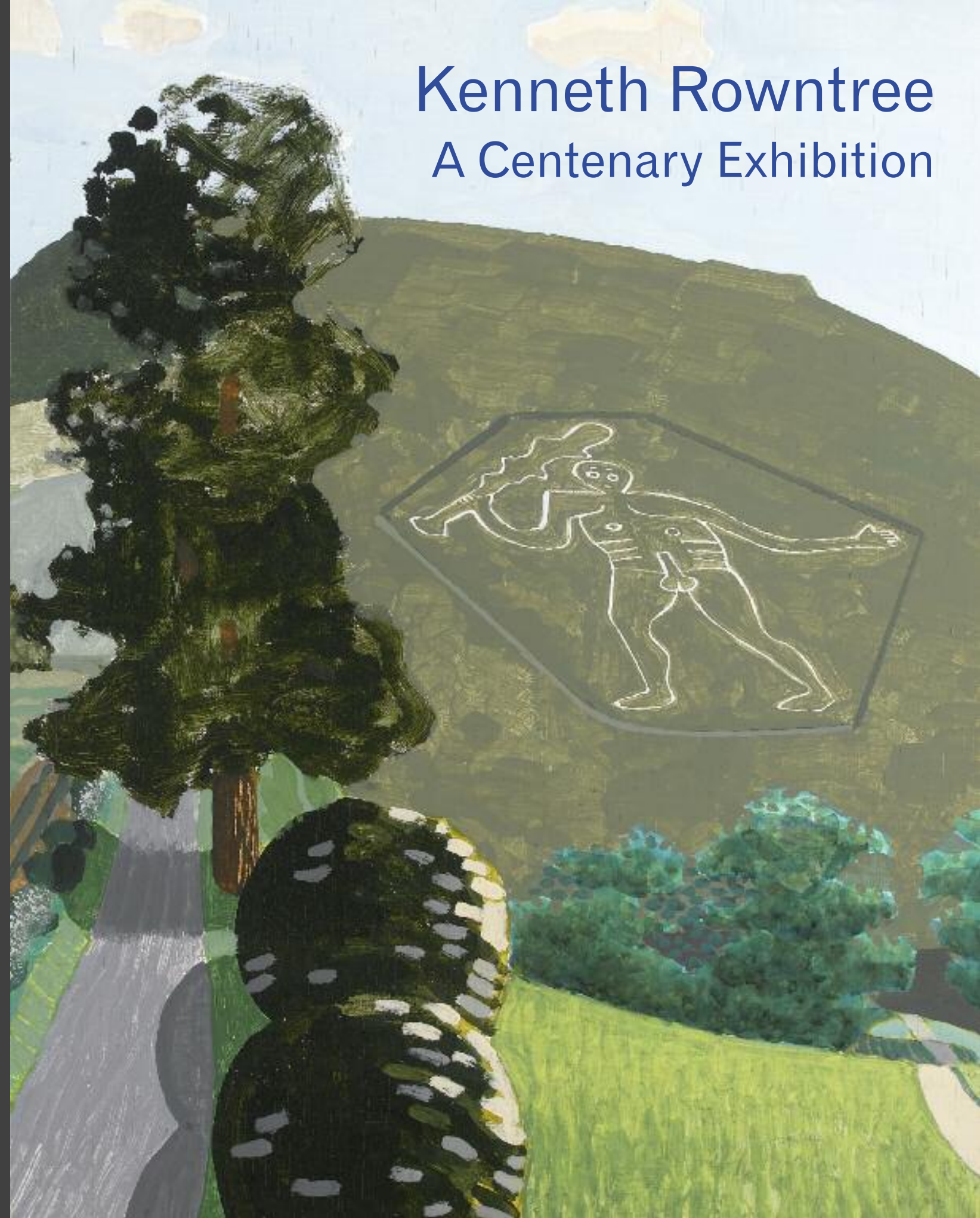


Kenneth Rowntree

A Centenary Exhibition





Kenneth Rowntree
1915–1997



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With essays by

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the centenary of Kenneth Rowntree's birth



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Forewords

The Fry Art Gallery and Pallant House Gallery are delighted to co-host the first comprehensive retrospective exhibition devoted to the work of Kenneth Rowntree since his death in 1997 which, coinciding with the publication of this book, marks the centenary year of his birth.

Kenneth Rowntree holds a prominent place in the Fry Art Gallery collection, alongside his contemporaries Eric Ravilious, Edward Bawden and Michael Rothenstein. Indeed, it was through his friendship with Ravilious, who had met him at the Ruskin School of Drawing in Oxford, that Rowntree and his architect wife, Diana, moved to the idyllic Essex village of Great Bardfield in 1941. Whilst living in Essex he designed the lithograph of the tractor that was to become synonymous with rural life for a whole generation of schoolchildren as one of the iconic series of School Prints, which also forms part of Pallant House Gallery's collection. The exhibition places Rowntree's work

in the wider context of Pallant House Gallery's collection of Modern British art, including abstract and Pop artists of the 1950s and 60s with whom he taught at the Royal College of Art and Newcastle University.

We are especially grateful to Moore-Gwyn Fine Art and Liss Llewellyn Fine Art, not only for initiating this project and curating the exhibition in Saffron Walden and Chichester, but also for publishing such an exceptional survey of Rowntree's many-faceted work, which will delight and enthuse new audiences far beyond the boundaries of Essex or West Sussex.

David Oelman
Chairman, The Fry Art Gallery

Simon Martin
Artistic Director, Pallant House Gallery

Fig. 1 *Study for the Freedom Mural for the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion, Festival of Britain, 1951*, oil on card, 10.2 x 71.8 cm, private collection.

Kenneth Rowntree has always been highly regarded by those familiar with his work. The essays in this catalogue, which embrace new research and scholarship, reveal him to be an artist of great scope and variety. His early work reflects the inspiration and creative dialogue that came out of his friendship with Eric Ravilious (1903–1942) on account of whom Rowntree moved to Great Bardfield during the 1940s. During this period he was particularly preoccupied with Kenneth Clark's *Recording Britain* project.

At the end of the war he joined the teaching staff at the Royal College of Art. In 1951 he was commissioned to undertake murals for the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion for the Festival of Britain. As Professor of Fine Art in Newcastle (1959–1980) he was at the epicentre of an important northern school of modernism that revolved around his friends Victor Pasmore (1908–1988) and Richard Hamilton (1922–2011). Even in retirement, his work, in its return to figuration from abstraction, displays his consistent qualities of humour and inventiveness. Rowntree's oeuvre is both influenced by and anticipates a wide variety of

artistic styles, from Ravilious to David Hockney, from the Euston Road School to the Dadaism of Kurt Schwitters. His work, however, remains unmistakably his own.

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the centenary of Rowntree's birth, and accompanies exhibitions at The Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden and Pallant House, Chichester. This is the first substantial reassessment of Rowntree's work since John Milner's monograph (2002). It is hoped that this current initiative will contribute further to ensuring Rowntree the significant place he deserves within the history of 20th century British art.

We are grateful to David Oelman, Simon Martin and their respective fellow trustees and staff at The Fry Art Gallery and Pallant House Gallery for their enthusiasm and support in hosting the exhibition. We are additionally grateful to Sasha and Bonamy Devas, without whom this project would never have come to fruition.

Harry Moore-Gwyn
Paul Liss
Sacha Llewellyn

HARRY MOORE-GWYN
MOORE-GWYN FINE ART



PALLANT
HOUSE
GALLERY



Fig. 2 *Cornish Landscape*, 1952,
oil on board, 37.5 by 44.7 cm,
Tate (TO3934)

Kenneth Rowntree: A Strange Simplicity

Alexandra Harris

One of the most appealing British artists of the mid-twentieth century, Kenneth Rowntree knew how to tease, please and baffle, how to communicate joy without complacency, how to charm without any hint of preciousness. His pictures of ordinary English streets and fields, back-rooms of pubs, churches in Mexico and weathervanes in Nantucket are deeply satisfying works of art which point out new things in the world.

He had an unerring feel for strange yet satisfying compositions in which everything is idiosyncratically alive and at the same time settled, iconic, and complete. He made big things small (York Minster a child's building-block left on the horizon) and small things big (a tea-pot turned, improbably, into a Byzantine basilica). His colouring, in all its versatility, is pitch-perfect – from the mellow

luminosity of his watercolours to the ludo-board reds and greens of his murals or the rich flash of electric blue which tells us the quality of the moonlight as it falls on a dormer window in Northumberland.

Twelve years younger than John Piper, Edward Bawden, and Eric Ravilious (who became a friend), Rowntree had the advantage of knowing and responding to the work of a remarkable generation of artist-designers who opened new possibilities in English art. He also had the challenge of making his own way among these strong influences and, in the 1960s and 1970s, of bringing his love of places and solid objects to bear on the new kinds of contemporary art he enthusiastically embraced.

Though he kept returning to the same motifs (transforming them so that visual rhymes appear across the gaps between pictures), and though his work was remarkably coherent across a long career, his range was tremendous. He was an English vernacular painter of platforms, rail-signals, tractors, leaning telegraph poles. He was a modernist designer who sat at an Isokon table orchestrating minimal forms; he was an international abstract artist; he was an intrepid world traveller whose pictures were as likely to include a koala bear as a Dorset hill figure. His way of seeing may have been singular but it was also generously expansive.

Rowntree enjoyed looking at things straight-on: the white shape of a Welsh farmhouse between hedged fields, or a rust-red Cornish gate right in front of us, framing a





Cat. 1

Toy Boat at Selsey, 1956

Oil and gouache, 61.4 by 76.5 cm

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*,
Lund Humphries, 2002, p.66, illustrated (pl.62)

Exhibited: Tyne and Wear Museums, *Kenneth
Rowntree: paintings, drawings and collages*,
December 1976 – January 1977, cat no.99

The Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden (Acc. No. 715)

Cat. 2

Nantucket, 1959

A projected design for Vogue

Oil with collage, 32 by 24 cm

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*,
Lund Humphries, 2002, p.56, illustrated (pl.50)

Private Collection





Fig. 3 *View from the hotel of the Gyfarllwyd Falls, Devil's Bridge (Cardiganshire)* from *A Prospect of Wales* (1949), National Library of Wales.

Cornish cow on the other side. If he put a jug on the table he had no qualms about putting it firmly in the centre. Faithful to the four-square practicality of earlier folk painters, he often brought the wall of a building flat up against the picture plane. He liked toy boats because they were so perfectly boat-like, and he decorated his blue skies with cloud-like clouds: clearly-defined cumulous puffs or white lozenges you might hold in your hand.

He had a way of making things toy-like, though the toys could be very strange. What, for instance, is that 'mobile object' on a tripod that he painted in 1948? It appears to be something between a model plane with a large propeller and an orrery doubling as a weather-vane. Alexander Calder would make us wonder at the mobile shapes; Rowntree puts it there as if it's a perfectly normal thing to find in a field, with a cow grazing quietly in the distance under a splendid evening sun.

'Summer Gardens, Great Bardfield' is, again, at once straightforward and odd. The lower third of the canvas is the warmly sunlit flint and brick-quoined garden wall over which

we glimpse next-door's Anderson shelter and the roof of a greenhouse two doors down. We look directly at the wall (and a row of cabbages) while also coming sideways upon gardens intended to be admired lengthways and which, in any case, we can barely see. It's the kind of crabwise view we tend to get into our neighbours' lives, and Rowntree is good with funny angles.

For every subject that he paints just-so in the centre of the canvas, another is askew or floating off the table. When anyone shows him the correct perspective he goes in the opposite direction, which is why (though he made clear his fond indebtedness to the eighteenth-century landscapists) he wrought low-key havoc with the Picturesque. He painted the famous Mynach waterfalls in Cardiganshire, much-loved and much-depicted by the Picturesque tourists who visited Hafod, but he painted them from a room at the inn across the gorge. The view from the window is only part of the picture: Rowntree painted attentively the homely patterned curtains and pelmet, the expanse of striped wallpaper, the wooden tallboy



Fig. 4 *Holiday in Sweden*, 1938, oil on canvas, 50.8 by 69.7 cm, John Milner.

(just the corner of it) and the framed sepia print above. Hundreds of other painters looked at the sublime landscape outside; Rowntree looked at it in the very human context of a hotel bedroom, comfortable and slightly worn, where you might store your pyjamas in the wooden drawer while glancing out across the ravine.

This Welsh watercolour is one of a series Rowntree made for a King Penguin book called *A Prospect of Wales* (1948). It is an unassuming publication but Rowntree's work here, as for the Recording Britain project during the war, sets him apart as one of the most distinctive modern watercolourists in the long tradition that includes Sandby, Cotman and Ravilious. The book was a tribute to that tradition, and Rowntree designed the covers complete with reinforced corners to look like the kind of portfolio an artist would bring back from extensive travels with his Claude glass. (He has a masterly touch with trompe l'oeil,

just for pleasure and with no desire to 'trompe' or trick us.) Many of Rowntree's subjects, however, were well off Gilpin's beaten track.

John Piper admired his attention to unsung corners of the areas he visited, which was significant praise from a connoisseur of in-between places. 'You always had an eye for things in the English countryside (and the Welsh – remembering Tremadoc) that needed noticing' wrote Piper: 'chapels, railway stations, odd painting of buildings and queer quoining of other buildings'. Rowntree's Welsh 'prospects' included not only the Methodist chapel at Tremadog (in Greek Revival style) but a slate fence held together with wire, a hazard warning triangle on a steep road, a wine-merchant's shop in Brecon. He noticed the raw red walls separating workers' cottages from a tip-yard in Glamorgan.

Rowntree often went 'out the back' to paint the things that weren't on show. At Simpkins, his house at Lindsell in Essex, he sat and



Cat. 3
Water Butt, 'Simpkins', 1945
 Oil on canvas, 35.8 by 45.6 cm
 Literature: John Milner, Kenneth Rowntree,
 Lund Humphries,
 2002, p.33, illustrated (pl.23)
 Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden (Acc. No. 352)



Cat. 4
Poster for the Kenneth Rowntree retrospective at the Hatton Gallery, 1980
 84 by 59 cm
 Designed by Kenneth Rowntree



Fig. 5 *Last Minute Decorations*, 1953, oil on canvas, 71.5 by 92 cm, Government Art Collection



painted the back door and the water-butt (who paints a water-butt?), bothering to record the few bricks raising the concertina-ed barrel off the weedy ground and the mesh across the window propped open for ventilation. When the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle held its retrospective of Rowntree's work in 1980, the design of the exhibition poster was based on the back-view of one of the pictures on display. The effect was both enticing and insightful, since the back was a collage of labels and stickers worthy in itself of a Rowntree water-colour, reminiscent of his book designs and formally related to his abstract constructions. Torn paper, lettering, arrows to say 'this way up' – all these were favoured constituents of his art, and the crossed pieces of tape, now that one looks at them, rhyme with a level-crossing sign, or a squared-off byzantine cross, or a propeller about to spin, or a Saltire.

In the theatre of life Rowntree liked a view backstage or into the wings, and he often found more of interest in the clear-up afterwards. Commissioned to make pictures of the Coronation in 1953, Rowntree took an interest in everything except the main event. He drew

the big cut-out letters 'E' and 'R' being unloaded from a wagon and workmen ready with their tools. A Coronation painting called 'Last Minute Decorations' shows crowds gathered along the royal route and bearskin guards keeping everything in order, but the vehicle going past with much waving and rejoicing, far from being the Gold State Coach, is a little truck carrying flowering plants and gardeners saluting with flat-caps and spades. Once the royal party had gone past, Rowntree focused on the carting away of horse dung from the Mall. These were the gently dissenting manoeuvres of a committedly Dissenting artist. His non-conformist allegiances came out clearly in the 'Freedom' mural he contributed to the Festival of Britain, a frieze of historical scenes which included Charles I 'rebuffed by the Speaker of the House' and which gave a prominent place to Milton. Yet even in his still-lives and topographies there is a radical vein.

Looking at Rowntree's chapels and sheep, it is easy to say 'how English'. And it is right to do so: his style and subject-matter were informed by his Quaker upbringing in Yorkshire, and his affection for many kinds of English

Cat. 5

***Decorations*, 1953**

Lithograph, 30.5 by 43 cm

The Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden
(Acc. No. 1520)



Fig. 6 *Taos, New Mexico*, 1959, watercolour, private collection courtesy of Abbott & Holder.

landscape showed in the range of his work for Recording Britain (Essex, Bedfordshire, Derbyshire) and his responsiveness to his various home grounds in Great Bardfield, Lindsell, Putney, Acomb and Corbridge. Even before he moved to the Tyne Valley, he was devoted to the wood engravings of Thomas Bewick, inheriting some of the same briskness, practicality and humour.

It is only part of the story, however, to describe Rowntree as a 'local' artist: he was naturally adventurous, taking every opportunity to go somewhere new. His cultural loves were as much French as English; he was at home in the French language and in a French kitchen. More exploratory were his travels in America on a Ford Foundation Fellowship in 1958–9, criss-crossing the continent from New Mexico to Georgia to New England – where he was drawn to the plain and playful puritan folk art and made delightful pictures of whale-shaped weathervanes around Cape Cod. His trips to Venice in the 1960s inspired canvases of enigmatic, velvety blackness; the city of gilded masquerade lured the Yorkshire Quaker

closer to the baroque than one might have expected. Later, in 1986, just when the young David Hockney was collaging the signs and road-markings of Route 138 in *Pearblossom Highway*, Rowntree was in Australia painting yellow diamond-shaped road-signs as bright icons in open country.

Wherever he went, Rowntree captured both the unfamiliarity of places and their relationship to things he knew. Heading into the Australian outback, he painted a road-sign as he would paint a rail signal at Clare in Suffolk or nautical markers at Swansea. Travelling on the tides of contemporary art he kept himself similarly oriented. When he made abstract constructions in the 1970s, collaging pieces of wooden tea-crate with stencilled letters, he was still the artist who loved lettering so much that he had once made meticulous watercolours of church boards where the whole 'Credo' was written out in gold-on-black. Firm in his convictions and craftsmanly in his understanding of visual sign languages, he found his own way, and it is a pleasure now to trace some of his routes.



Cat. 6

Wooden interior, 1974

Mixed media collage, 48 by 48 cm

Private Collection



Fig. 7 *The Guitar Players*, 1933
Oil on panel, 24.5 by 21 cm
Tate (NO6210)

Early Rowntree

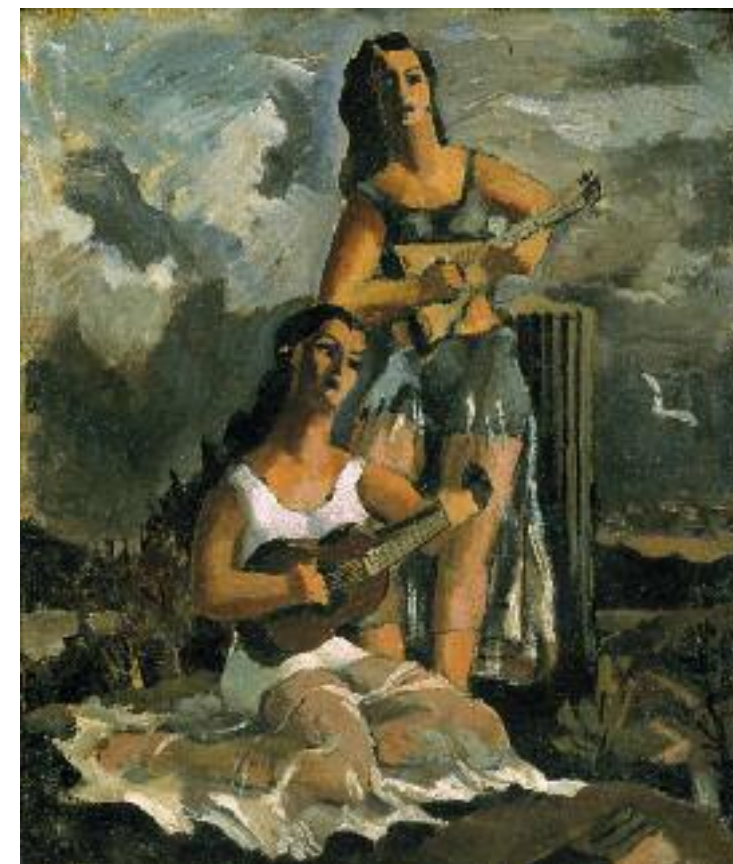
Alan Powers

Kenneth Rowntree was the youngest son of Howard Rowntree, owner of a family department store in Scarborough, and his wife Norah Priestman, an ardent amateur musician. Both his parents came of Quaker stock, and up to the age of thirteen he attended a Quaker prep school, the Downs School, Colwall, near Malvern, where W.H. Auden, a friend of the headmaster, Geoffrey Hoyland, later spent three years teaching. Rowntree

was one of several pupils at this period to be given confidence in making painting their career by the young Slade-trained art teacher, Maurice Feild.

After further years at Bootham School in York, he enrolled at the Ruskin School in Oxford for a three-year period 1932–35. There, Albert Rutherston, born in Bradford, was the head of the school, an artist now best remembered for his lightweight decorative graphics. At the Slade around 1900, however, he too had been through the mill of observational drawing and careful tonal painting, often of nudes in domestic settings. Barnett Freedman and Eric Ravilious, who were part-time teachers at the Ruskin, had been star pupils of Albert's brother, William Rothenstein, at the Royal College of Art in the mid-1920s, both highly rated as illustrators for books and advertising. To differing degrees, these artists operated across the boundary between painting and graphics/illustration, and must have provided models for Rowntree's similar form of practice.

Rutherston bought Rowntree's small oil panel, *The Guitar Players*, 1933, from a student exhibition, bequeathing it to the Tate on his death in 1952. It looks like a life room subject with the same model duplicated, slightly comic, a stormy sky added to create atmosphere, and the 'Spanish' tonality and colouring in black and brown favoured by Manet. It marks the beginning of a series of figure subjects by Rowntree, including small scale indoor and outdoor nudes, all of which appear to be based on the slender figure and dark



hair of Rowntree's future wife, Diana Buckley (they married in 1939), whom he met when she enrolled in Robert Goodden's preparatory architecture course at the Ruskin in 1934. She later described him as 'the most authentic artist in the small group of full time painting students.' This is the figure, with curly hair under curly clouds, whom we see in his 1933 self-portrait, painted at Levisham in the Vale of Pickering, where his aunt had a house that Rowntree and his family would visit regularly for summer holidays.

Rowntree found when he transferred to the Slade in 1935, to study under Randolph Schwabe, that he preferred to get on with his own work. He and Diana lived in Windmill Street in Fitzrovia, while she studied at the Architectural Association, and Rowntree made painting trips to France. Relatively few works of the 1935–39 period are currently known, but they suggest that he may have been developing several ways of working at the same time rather than a single style.

Critics started to notice his appearance in group exhibitions before the war, positioning him in the mildly progressive academic strand of painting associated with the Euston Road School, while noting a decorative and witty side of his personality that radiated pleasure in colour, light and subject matter in a manner not typical of Euston Road artists. For Anthony Blunt, then writing in the *Spectator* as a champion of 'art for the people', Rowntree was an exemplary figure, whose *Spanish Picture*, 1936 (possibly the one in the Leicester City Art Galleries collection), he praised as 'a picture and not merely a note about nature. ... The miracle is that it should achieve all this without becoming remotely academic. It seems to contain the germs of the kind of realism which is wanted at the moment – realism in the wide sense which can combine calculation with observation.' In 1938, at a mixed exhibition at Wildenstein Galleries, Blunt commended Rowntree for his approach: 'the opposite of high-brow. He does not, like the impressionist painter, limit his attention to ephemeral effects of light, nor turn green fields into a melodramatic dream country. He is content not to embellish the rather dull green landscape of Kent.'



Other artists included with Rowntree in this 'Cross-Section of English Painting' at Wildenstein were his future teaching colleague Victor Pasmore, William Coldstream and Graham Bell, the last two forming the core of the Euston Road teaching team and ethos. Representing a livelier approach from an older generation was Charles Ginner, 'in a position of fatherly tutelage' as Jan Gordon of the *Observer* described it, while Eric Newton in the *Sunday Times* noted how Ginner's paintings resembled 'the twopence coloured cardboard world of Mr. Pollock and his toy theatres'. In a Ginner such as *Flask Walk*, *Coronation Day*, 1937 (Tate), we can find many clues for later Rowntree – especially the simplicity of spatial

Fig. 8 *Self portrait aged 18*, 1933, Oil on canvas, 55 by 75 cm, private collection.



Fig. 9 *Spanish Girl*, 1935, oil on canvas, 43.7 by 33.2 cm, Leicester County Council Artworks Collection



Fig. 11 *A Polo Ground in War-time*, 1940, oil on canvas, 55.8 by 91.4 cm, The Imperial War Museum, London (IWM:ART LD 637)

composition and the delight in flags and lettering, presented head on, and an approach to using paint that was more heraldic than tonal, emphasizing the flatness of objects and the parallel picture plane, thus strengthening the two-dimensional quality of the picture as a design. Newton found Rowntree's six small paintings in this show, 'crisp and clean', with 'two refreshing qualities – decision and a sense of humour'.

One could make a connecting line from Ginner to Rowntree's oil painting *Holiday in Sweden*, 1938, (illus. page 13) which confirms his abandoning of loose brushwork to assume this more self-consciously heraldic style using flat colour. The semi-animated bathing costumes and a bottle of wine, pipe and matches on a deal table, against the poster-like colour

fields of blue sea and sky foretell a large section of Rowntree's future work. Might this also have been inspired by Christopher Wood's painting *Le Phare* 1929 (Kettles Yard), with a similar foreground still life and boats and sea beyond, shown at the big Wood retrospective at the New Burlington Galleries in the spring of 1938? Looking a few decades beyond, the euphoric palette and slightly deadpan technique of Rowntree's picture resemble the California David Hockneys of the 1970s.

Having come to the notice of Kenneth Clark, who was backing the Euston Road School as a defence against modernist tendencies, Rowntree was invited to become a War Artist early in 1940, although his status as a Conscientious Objector caused difficulty on both sides. He painted several oils for the

Fig. 10 *CEMA Canteen Concert*, *Isle of Dogs*, London E14, 1941, oil on canvas, 60.9 by 76.2 cm, The Imperial War Museum, London (IWM:ART LD 1879).

scheme early in the war, luminous in quality and quietly funny, one showing a shirt-sleeved man walking away from the polo ground at the Hurlingham Club in Fulham, which has been turned over to allotments, and a canteen full of apparently unresponsive workers on the Isle of Dogs listening to a CEMA recital. The third, *Foreign Servicemen in Hyde Park*, draws on Rowntree's Francophile streak to look like Manet's *Jardins des Tuileries* (as with Ravilious, the faces of his figures are mostly blank). Unlike these, his paintings of anti-aircraft batteries are not in the Imperial War Museum, but were described in a review by John Piper as 'impressive because not overstrained ... he manages to make these things look as if they are a part of life under unusual conditions.'

Expecting their first child and concerned about the threat of bombing, the Rowntrees moved out of Wells Coates's famous Lawn Road flats London in 1941, to a chilly but elegant house in Great Bardfield that Eric and Tirzah Ravilious found for them. Moving again a year later just outside the village that was becoming famous for its artist residents, they

stayed in the area until 1948. Rowntree had met Ravilious at the Ruskin School and they kept up friendly contact. His work can often seem close in spirit and style to Ravilious, and insofar as there was a Great Bardfield style, including Edward Bawden and the other painters there during the war, Michael Rothenstein and John Aldridge, Rowntree can be seen as part of it. Ravilious also introduced him to his friend Peggy Angus, who thought him 'a nice broad blonde boy'. Her first wallpaper was made for the Rowntree's house in Putney after the war, and the Rowntree family often stayed with her at Furlongs on the Sussex Downs.

Mural painting was an activity Rowntree had in common with Ravilious and Bawden. After an early work for the Children's Library in Scarborough, now lost, he painted panels for the home of a Scarborough couple, Jack and Yvonne Liddicott on the theme, suggested by them, of *Homage to French Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, and a photograph of these was included in the 1939 exhibition at the Tate that reviewed the status of mural painting just before the outbreak of the war.

The nineteenth century was much in vogue at this time, and Rowntree, already a dedicated Francophile, conveys it with gentle irony and detachment. The composition combines recognizable historical figures in a landscape, with a still-life assembly on a pedestal table at the centre, a composition of the kind that Rowntree repeated in post-war work for Shell publicity and calendars.

While Rowntree was less active than Ravilious in the field of illustration, printmaking and design, his black and white work, pen-drawn rather than wood engraved, has distinctive Ravilious characteristics of balancing line and mass, and similarities of subject – miniature vignettes of details that others might overlook.

In January 1940, the National Register of Artists and Designers, together with the Society of Mural Painters, exhibited designs for 'Emergency Shop Fronts and Hoardings' at the Building Centre, intended mainly to take the place of conventional blackouts, a theme suggestive of Ravilious's *High Street* lithographs. Rowntree showed at least three, combining simplified but non-literal representations of the shop's business with simple lettering. The ubiquitous Kenneth Clark made the opening speech, commending the project as a way of bringing art into everyday life. 'There is a certain florid nineteenth century touch about some of the suggestions,' wrote John Gloag in the *Listener*. Rowntree's contributions qualify, but there is no evidence that the projects were ever carried out.

Over the course of his painting life, the majority of Rowntree's work was concerned with the depiction of places, combining nature and the man-made. This strand of his work now took precedence owing to his recruitment (again as a result of Kenneth Clark's influence) to the Recording Britain scheme, for which traditional representation in watercolour or other paper-based media was required. Although he exhibited with the Royal Watercolour Society before the war, Rowntree recalled that his first two seasons in Essex for Recording Britain were 'a great self-education.' Many of his paintings show old shop fronts and similar nostalgic everyday interiors, especially churches and chapels, a



subject that ought to have appealed to Ravilious but which strangely he hardly ever attempted. They were still places in the disrupted world of the war, 'the most exciting places I had ever been in, with a feeling of being with people', as Rowntree later recalled. There are prodigies of neatness in his work, such as the gravestone inscriptions in *The Livermore Tombs, Barnston, Essex*.

The Duke's Head, Farnham Royal, a work of the period but not part of Recording Britain, has the *contre jour* early morning lighting used by Ravilious and Bawden, including the sun itself, with careful drawing, dry brush technique and spots of resist. Ravilious and Bawden's watercolour style was described by Richard Seddon as 'the textured watercolour'

Fig. 12 Designs for emergency shop fronts, 1940 from *Architectural Review*, February 1940



Cat. 7
The Duke's Head, Farnham Royal, 1940s
Signed l.r.: Kenneth Rowntree
Watercolour, 35 by 51.5 cm



Fig. 13 *Tirzah and Eric Ravilious*, 1943, oil on board, 15.9 by 23.5 cm, private collection.

on the basis of the graphic patterns they invented as shorthands for foliage and other textures. Rowntree followed their move away from the tradition of 'wet into wet' painting, but is possible that the flow of influence began to go from Rowntree to Ravilious as well. By the time the Rowntrees had settled in Essex as near neighbours in 1941, Ravilious began an unfinished watercolour of boating on the River Pant, including two figures, especially one in a pink dress, a colour 'note' he described with relish in a letter at the time, in a dark green tunnel of trees. He had never tried a spontaneously peopled scene such as this before, and it is much closer to what Rowntree was doing. In the same year, Ravilious began an outdoor tabletop still life, another Rowntree theme that was new to his work. During his leave from war artist work, Ravilious made some textile designs intended for the export market, and one based on Castle Hedingham has the kind of colours and simplification we associate with Rowntree. His small oil portrait

of Eric and his wife Tirzah presumably dates from this summer.

Rowntree's technique, as displayed in the Recording Britain paintings, was much more painterly than either Ravilious and Bawden, for he used stronger colours, no doubt stemming from his familiarity with handling oils, while retaining the sharp edges typical of their style of watercolour. The wan reproductions in the four volumes for the scheme published by Oxford University Press did him no favours.

Rowntree's group of church and chapel interiors for Recording Britain avoid the romantic chiaroscuro typical of John Piper, preferring to evoke a world of wood graining and soft distempered plaster in a flood of light. 'The artistic importance of some of his church interiors is not particularly obvious,' complained *The Times* critic in August 1943, in relation to the scheme's aspiration to the 'magnificent heritage of beauty' in Britain, but today we are likely to prefer Rowntree's vision of the ordinariness of the pub interiors and



Fig. 14 *Bathroom, Ashopton Inn*, 1940, from *Recording Britain*, watercolour, 31.7 by 47 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 15 *Interior, The Black Chapel, North End, near Dunmow*, 1942, from *Recording Britain*, watercolour, 31.7 by 47 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

little farm houses at Ashopton in Derbyshire, shortly to sink beneath the water of the Derwent Valley reservoir, to monuments or more obviously picturesque subjects.

Through Diana, Rowntree came close to the professional world of architecture at a time of excitement and change, and buildings probably assumed a greater significance in his work because of her interests, which had

originated in a childhood fascination with the qualities that made some quite ordinary buildings stand out and give pleasure. The difference between an architect and a painter's way of seeing was addressed by Rowntree in an article in the *Architectural Review* in February 1943, 'Between the Eye and the House', where he offered an explanation for his eclectic choice of subjects, driven by

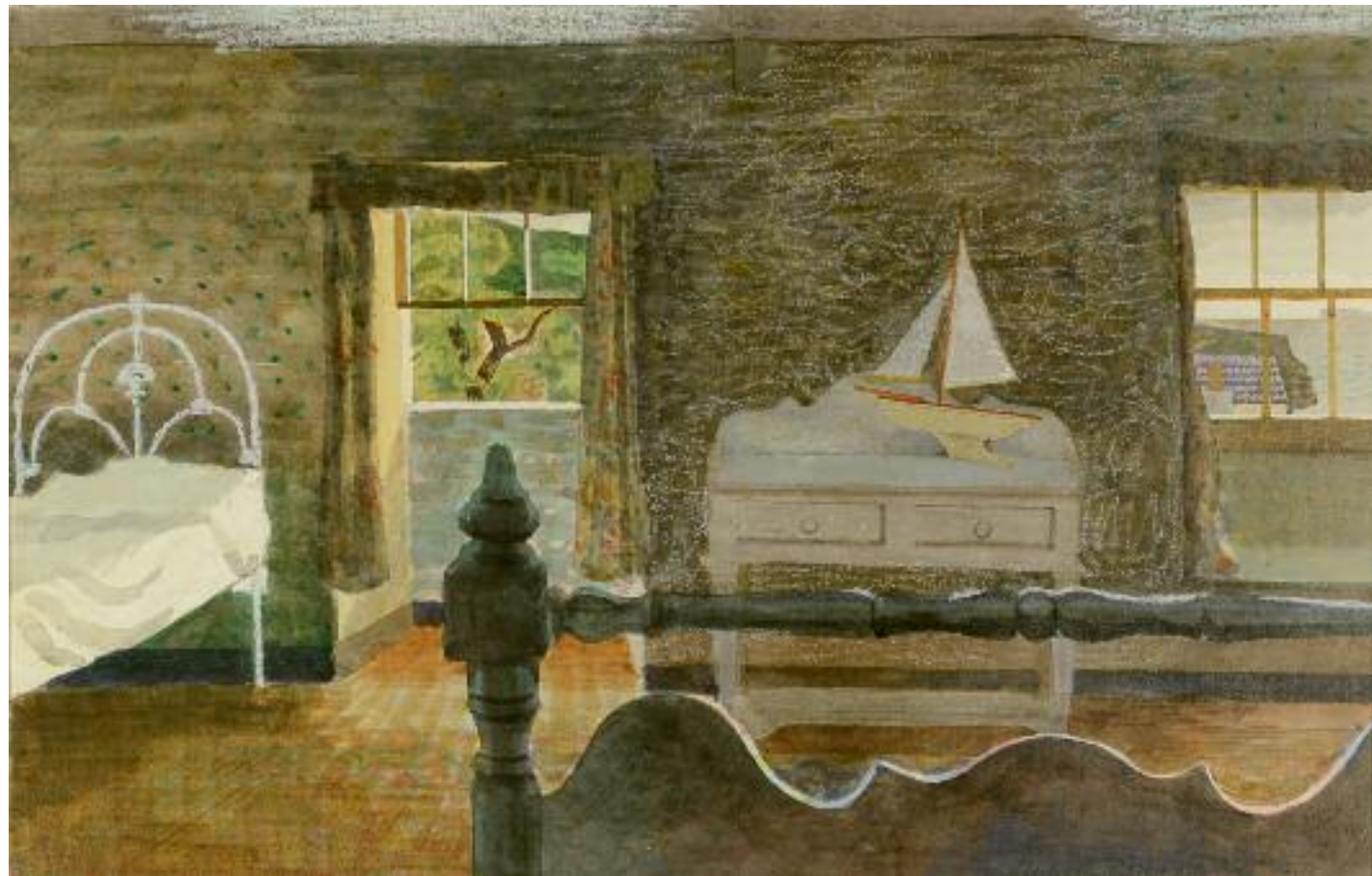


Fig. 19 Study for mural at Barclay Secondary School, Stevenage, 1949 (formerly collection of Rowntree family, present location unknown).

Cat. 8

Holiday Bedroom, Little Haven, Pembrokeshire, c. 1950

Signed l.r.: *Kenneth Rowntree*

Watercolour, 54 by 69.3 cm

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*, Lund Humphries, 2002, p.49, illustrated (pl.44)

Exhibited: Davies Memorial Gallery and Oriel 31, Welshpool, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June–October 1992, cat no.3

Private Collection

a sort of continuation of work begun for Recording Britain, while extending the range of subjects well beyond the conventional, as described here by Alexandra Harris. The watercolour *Holiday Bedroom, Little Haven, Pembrokeshire*, 1959, shows continuing visits, equally atmospheric but now looser and more varied in technique.

The new style of engagement between artists and architects also encompassed murals, and Rowntree painted a large one of sports in the stair hall at Barclay School, Stevenage, a pioneering system-built job by the architects Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardall, opened in 1949. Henry Moore's *Family Group* was placed outside the entrance, and some of the earliest tiles commissioned by Yorke from Peggy Angus are found inside. The mural is an early example of Rowntree's flatter and more abstract style of painting that began to develop ten years later – perhaps at this stage, and with his 1951 Festival of Britain mural, it helped assistants to collaborate on the work. He was also involved in the printmaking enterprises of the immediate pre- and post-war period that reached out to the public, notably 'War Hoardings' 1940. This was a black and white lithograph for the series of Everyman Prints published for sale at a shilling by the left-wing Artists International Association, of which Rowntree was a member and with whom he exhibited several times, including the themed exhibition 'For Liberty' held in the

canteen of John Lewis in Oxford Street in 1943, based on the 'Four Freedoms' of the Atlantic Charter. Rowntree's contribution was, appropriately for his Quaker background, on Freedom of Worship. Robert Radford detects a 'wry comment about religious sectarianism in Rowntree's small clerical figures each in their distinctive vestment, marking out their individual building plots.' For Brenda Rawnsley's School Prints series (to which many AIA members contributed), his lithograph *Tractor*, 1949, with its dark green field, distant hill and a tractor and plough drawn as if in elevation, was issued in a print run so large that mint copies are still on the market, and it has probably become his best known work. He also made the charming *Country Celebration* lithograph for a 1953 Coronation portfolio by staff at the Royal College of Art. For this event, Rowntree supervised colleagues and students from the Royal College in creating large-scale heraldic decorations for Parliament Square on the theme of the Commonwealth, and contributed to a privately funded scheme to record the decoration of embassies for the event, painting a charming oil showing, as Stephen Bone described it, 'a lorry laden with geraniums ploughing through the rain', with flat-hatted gardeners enjoying their ride on the back.

As the London art world went back into action at the end of the war, Rowntree appeared in mixed exhibitions with many of the same artists as in 1938. According to Eric



Cat. 9

St John's College Barge on the Isis at Oxford, c.1955

Signed I.I.: *Kenneth Rowntree*

Oil on canvas, 39.5 by 50 cm

Exhibited: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, *The Oxford Barges*, May 1956; Bear Lane Gallery, Oxford, February 1959, no.9



Fig. 20 Design for 'Landscape' mural from Mount Vernon Hospital, c.1956, oil on board, 75 by 49 cm, private collection.

Newton, who evidently wanted something different, the 11 painters in another Wildenstein mixed exhibition in January 1945 could be 'arranged from right to left, with Edward Le Bas on the right, linking up with Bonnard and Impressionism, and Kenneth Rowntree on the left, vaguely holding hands with the British tradition of illustrative painting.' This, as Newton went on to explain, was essentially the Euston Road School ten years on, and 'placid refinement is the keynote,' – a sadly

negative way of seeing Rowntree as a figure of compromise. The introductory text to a group exhibition at the City of Leicester Gallery early in 1946 by Trevor Thomas got closer to understanding the strength of his work as 'a desire to return to the primitive ... a longing for an original innocence before taste and feeling were polluted and vitiated by industrial living.' Yet while Rowntree spent much of the war painting relics of older times, he was not simply guided by nostalgia, and seldom edited out the signs of modern life when these occurred, relishing the jolt of anachronism and geometrical order they could bring. He did not pursue primitivism to the extent of breaking the conventions of scale and perspective, and his self-aware innocence should perhaps be attributed rather to a combination of personal preference and belief with a general enthusiasm for the fresh vision of folk art shared by many artist contemporaries.

This affection for innocent decoration played an active role in Rowntree's work when he painted the Oxford College Barges, originally converted from London Livery Company Thames barges into slightly baroque viewing stations for college 'bumps', but by this time rapidly decaying. The paintings were used to illustrate an article by Diana in the *Architectural Review* in July 1956, arguing for a more sensitive approach to the planning of boathouse buildings along the Isis, and shown at the Ashmolean Museum, helping to stir an effort to save the remaining barges.

When Rowntree held his first solo show at the Leicester Galleries (London) in 1946, *The Times* commented, 'he has a remarkable gift for making a cheerful and attractive composition out of commonplace objects' but 'there is not much room for subtlety in his approach.' This was surely to ignore the allure of Rowntree's combination of subject and technique, evoking the visual stimulus of things seen as surprising moments of beauty, from bright sunlight on a simple tabletop still life to a sudden shower of rain across a dark and featureless landscape. It is an epicurean enjoyment of things for their own sake, accepting them as they are and offering this quietist but sensual vision to others. Another one-man show followed at the Leicester Galleries in



Cat. 10

The Artist's Wife, 1940

Oil and gouache, 25.5 by 17.8 cm

The Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden (Acc. No. 754)

Cat. 11

***The Railway Carriage –
Blackout***

Watercolour, 30.2 by 42.7 cm

Literature: John Milner, Kenneth Rowntree,
Lund Humphries,

2002, p.28, illustrated (pl.20)

The Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden
(Accession No. 284)

1950. The next two were at Zwemmer's in 1957 and 1962. In between these two dates, Rowntree's ten-year contract as Professor of Mural Painting at the RCA finished, and he was concerned about where his income would come from next. He soon found a new job as Professor of Fine Art in Newcastle, in succession to Lawrence Gowing, his junior at the Downs School, and filled the gap at the beginning of 1959 when the Ford Foundation paid for a painting trip to the USA, ranging from New Orleans to Nantucket.

Stylistically, the break between early and late Rowntree happened around this point in the late 1950s. Reviewing his 1962 show, *The Times* favoured his 'easier' watercolours, including those from the US trip, that caught 'the spirit of the place perfectly, while filtering it through a highly stylized simplification of forms.' The critic found him 'not a natural painter in oils', however, since his work in the medium had also become increasingly stylized towards abstraction, and 'these are not very good abstracts.'

It is not hard to understand how a painter still in his early forties might not wish to be consigned to history as the follower of an approach to representation dating from before the war and which had become a cliché. In *Burning the Box of Beautiful Things*, Alex Seago has written about the stirring of a new iconoclastic attitude among students at the RCA during Rowntree's last years there that rejected the craftsmanlike values and attitudes of Great Bardfield, leading to Pop Art (although Hockney arrived just after he left). Rowntree had in fact prefigured Pop Art in several aspects of his work, but in going to Newcastle, to join his pre-war *confrère*, Victor Pasmore, he found himself in one of the centres of abstraction, choosing to take this direction through the 1960s and 70s. Rowntree managed his transition skilfully, and lines of continuity can be traced across the divide, in both the form and content of his work. The 'innocent eye' of his early painting and drawing seemed a more natural mode of expression for his personality, however.

Cat. 12
***An Oxford College Barge
on the Isis, c. 1955***
Signed l.r.: *Kenneth Rowntree*
Monochrome watercolour over
pencil and crayon, 26 by 44 cm

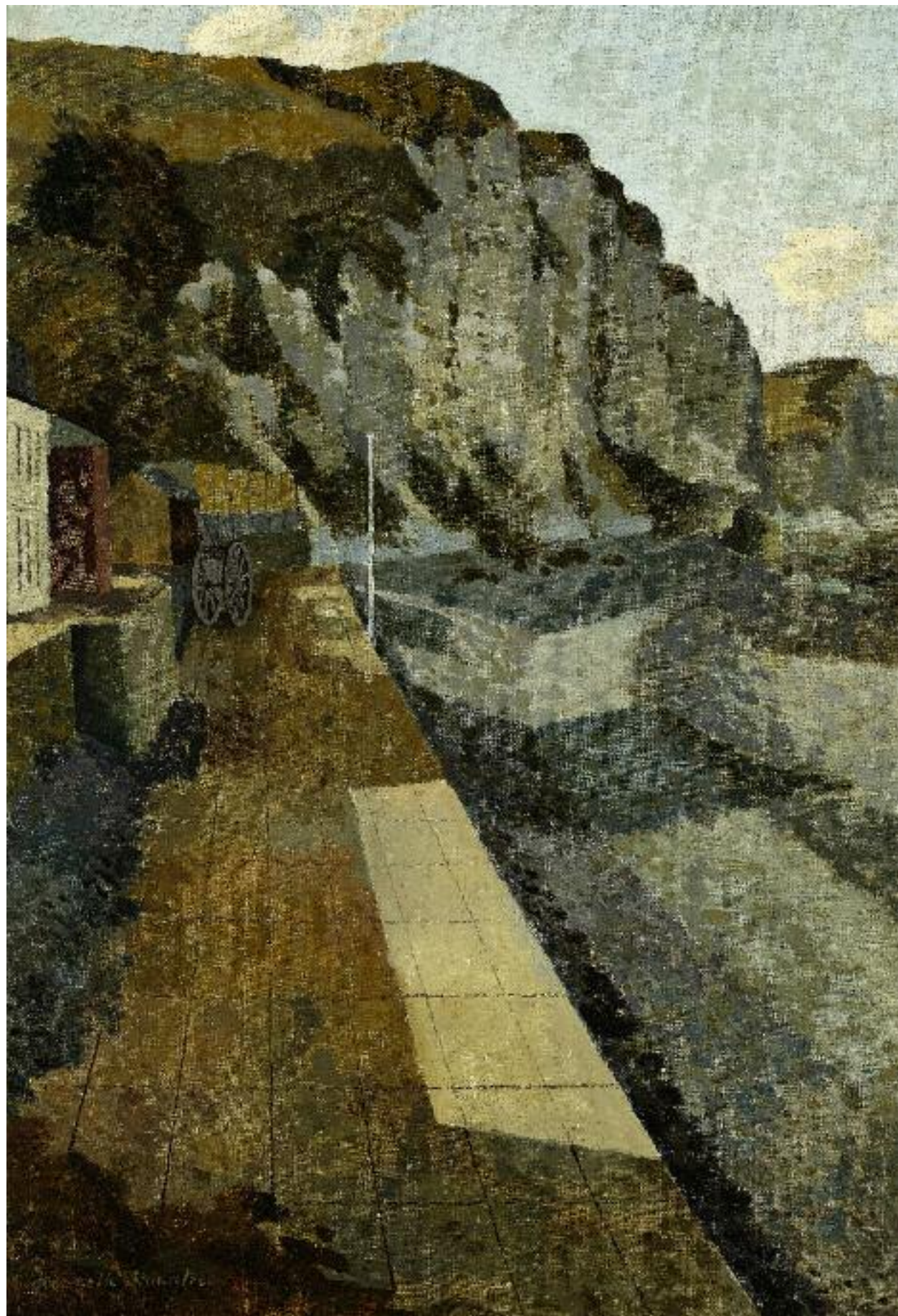




Cat. 13
Sunset at St Germain, c. 1940
 Signed l.r.: *Kenneth Rowntree* and signed
 and titled (verso)
 Oil on board, 35 by 45 cm



Cat. 14
Tram Stop and Townscape, Normandy
 Oil on board, 45.5 by 36 cm



Cat. 15

Promenade by the Cliffs

Signed I.L.: *Kenneth Rowntree*

Oil on canvas, 64 by 43 cm

Dates from the late 1930s or early 1940s.

Cat. 16

Walled Vegetable Garden, Sussex, 1940s

Watercolour, 31 by 48 cm

Private Collection



Cat. 17
Darning, c.1950
 Oil on board, 23.4 by 15.7 cm
 Private collection

Cat. 18
Evening Bather, Essex, 1947
 Oil and gouache, 47.2 by 56 cm
 The Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden (Acc. No. 769)



Cat. 19

***Train Signal at Clare, Suffolk,
1940s***

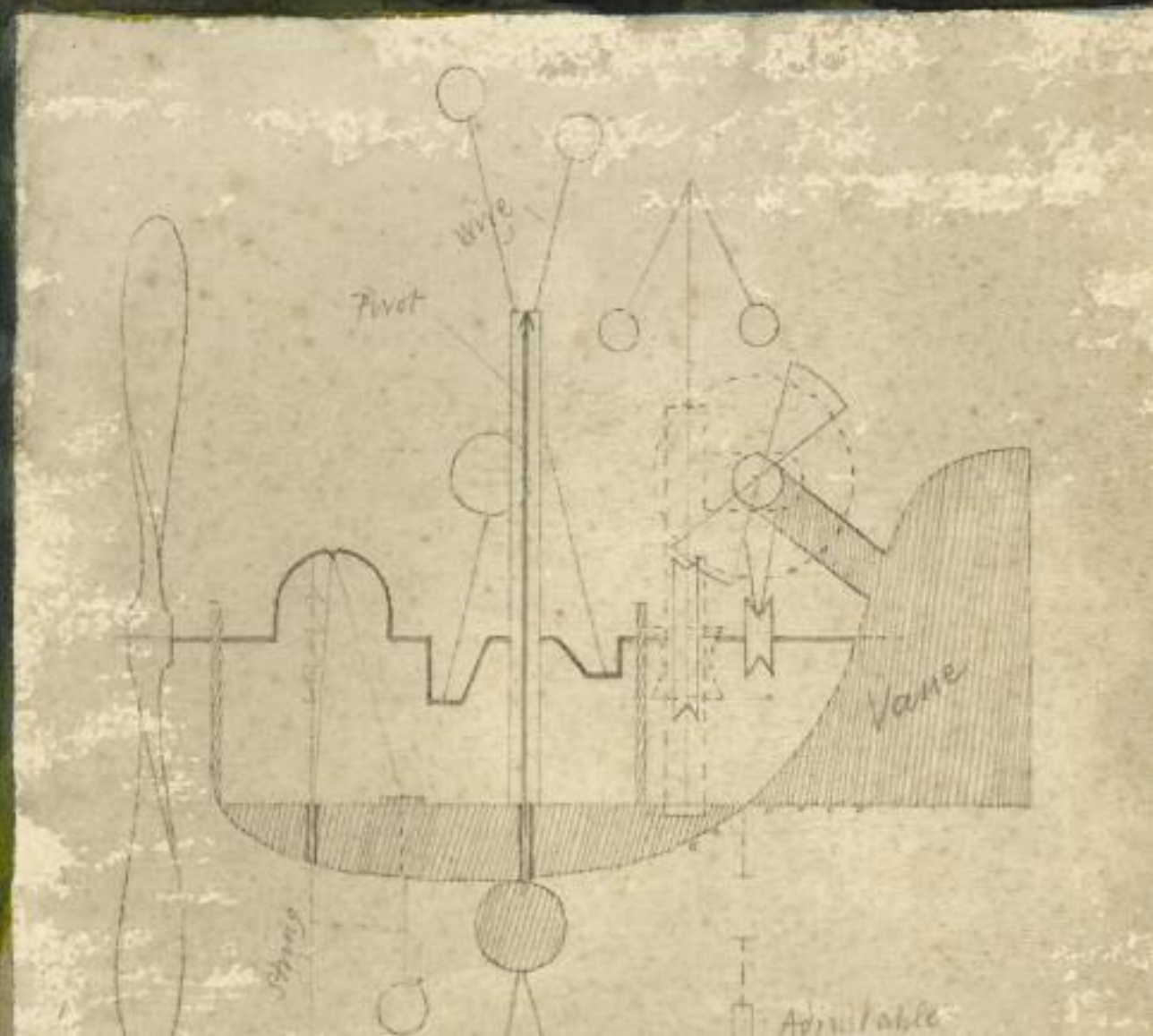
Signed with initials: *KR*
Oil on panel, 18 by 10.5 cm

Cat. 20

***Landscape with a
Garden Ornament***

Signed and dated l.l.: *Kenneth Rowntree/48*
Watercolour, 39 by 53 cm

An entry in the artist's "Watercolour" book lists this work as "Designs for a Garden Ornament 'B' Ex Pictures for Schools".





Cat. 21

Coronation Fireworks, c. 1953

Verso: a pencil sketch for a
Coronation plate design
Watercolour and gouache, 20 by 30 cm

Cat. 22

An Essex Lane, 1940s

Oil on reused panel, 46 by 30 cm

The present painting probably depicts a lane
near or around Great Bardfield, the re-used
panel also supporting a Wartime date for
the picture.





Cat. 23

Water Towers, Georgia

Signed and dated l.l.: *Kenneth Rowntree/59*

Watercolour, 39 by 58.5 cm



Cat. 24

Motel, c. 1950s

Gouache with ink, 20 by 29 cm



Cat. 25

***Still life with Water Jug
at Levisham, 1950s***

Watercolour, 39 by 57 cm

The same chair appears in a larger oil painting. *Open-Air Still-Life, Levisham*, 1954 (see Milner pp.47–48).

Cat. 26

The Schoolroom, 1940s

Signed l.r.: Kenneth Rowntree

Watercolour, 49 by 34 cm





Cat. 27
Adam with Pram, 1943
 Watercolour, 18.5 by 33.5 cm
 The Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden (Acc. No. 755)

Cat. 28
***A Family in their Garden
 near the White Cliffs, 1950s***
 Gouache, 24.5 by 14.5 cm

The present work appears to be a preliminary study for a mural painting from c. 1956, that was commissioned from Rowntree by the Centre for Cancer Treatment, Mount Vernon Hospital, Northwood, Middlesex. It is now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum (E.1-1994).





Cat. 29

***Sasha going to School
in Barnes, 1953***

Oil on board, 50 by 75 cm
Private collection



Cat. 30

Sasha skiing in Austria, 1955

Oil on panel, 35.5 by 45 cm



Design and illustration

Peyton Skipwith



Fig. 21 The Church, Watton, from Norfolk in Vision of Britain series, Paul Elek

Fig. 22 Design for packaging for Romary's Biscuits, 1952 (from *Art and Industry*, November 1952)



Kenneth Rowntree had a natural flair for design, as is clearly demonstrated by many of his still extant early paintings, so it is not surprising that this talent was given early scope in his home town of Scarborough, where his father, owner of a department store, played a prominent role in local civic life. However, apart from the mention of a mural in a local children's library details are scant and no records are known to exist. His first documented mural commission, dating from 1942, was for the British Restaurant located in the disused church of All Saints, Acton. By the mid-1930s his innate eye for design was evident in the manner in which he was able to exploit clear clean surfaces, delight in geometrical shapes and achieve the essence of his subject through ruthless simplification. As a Quaker his beliefs made him a conscientious objector, but fortunately Kenneth Clark, who admired his work, had been able to secure employment for him through the

War Artists' Advisory Committee, and his experience with the Recording Britain project – funded by the Pilgrim Trust – was reflected on the walls of All Saints. British Restaurants, at which the public could get a wholesome meal at a regulated price, came into being as the result of a government sponsored scheme designed to bolster the morale of city dwellers suffering from severe rationing, bombing raids and scarcity of fuel and other commodities. Cheerful surroundings were part of the specification, hence the call for murals. Many artists participated in this scheme but sadly, none of these murals exist today, the only records being through preliminary studies and photographs. A study for Rowntree's Acton mural survives joyfully flaunting its patriotic flags, familiar Norman church tower and smoking factory chimneys, and it is also memorialised on the cover of a wartime booklet *Art For Everybody: Britain Advances*. As his biographer, John Milner, says, his design 'retains all the pleasant freshness of a good promotional travel poster with not a tank or a battle in sight,' [John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*, Lund Humphries, 2002, p. 28], however, for the sharp-eyed habitué of All Saints, Acton, Rowntree wittily transmogrified a puff of smoke into a barrage balloon.

Acton may be the first of Rowntree's murals of which we have records but it was by no means his most important; despite further commissions, including those for the RMS. *Orcades* and *Iberia* and the Barclay School at Stevenage, this honour must go to his 1951 *Freedom's* mural for the Lion & Unicorn Pavilion



Fig. 23 Kenneth Rowntree at home in Putney, from *House and Garden*, February 1954 (photo by Michael Wickam).

Opposite
Fig. 24 Sheet of printed wallpaper, 65 by 47 cm

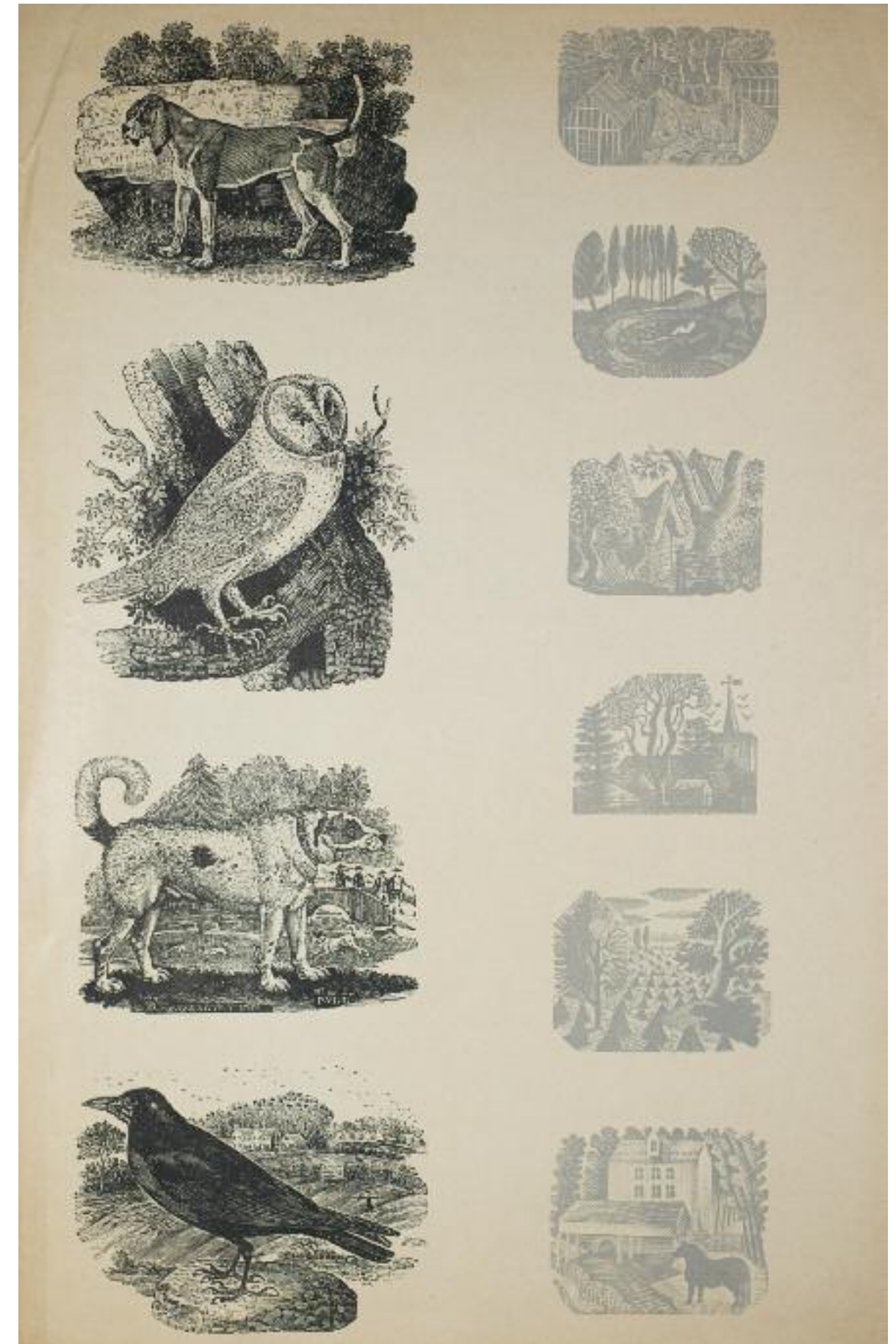
at the Festival of Britain. This was an extraordinary creation being convex in form, immensely long, semi-freestanding and supported on a series of easel-like structures rather than fixed to the wall; its subject matter was a sequence of scenes depicting historic events on the theme of 'British Freedoms', ranging from the signing of the Magna Carta to Emmeline Pankhurst and the women's suffrage movement. The Lion & Unicorn Pavilion was the creation of Professors Robert Goodden and Dick Russell and was intended to be both a celebration of Britishness and a showcase for the Royal College of Art, where Rowntree was now in charge of mural painting. The Pavilion itself, which included such quirky displays as Fred Mizen's straw Lion and Unicorn was dominated by Edward Bawden's vast *English Country Life* mural. Bawden and Mizen were wartime Essex neighbours of the Rowntrees before they left Lindsell for Putney in late autumn 1949, and *Tractor* – his Prints for Schools lithograph – may be regarded as a summation of his Essex years. It was the Rowntree's friendship with Eric and Tirzah Ravilious which had first attracted them to

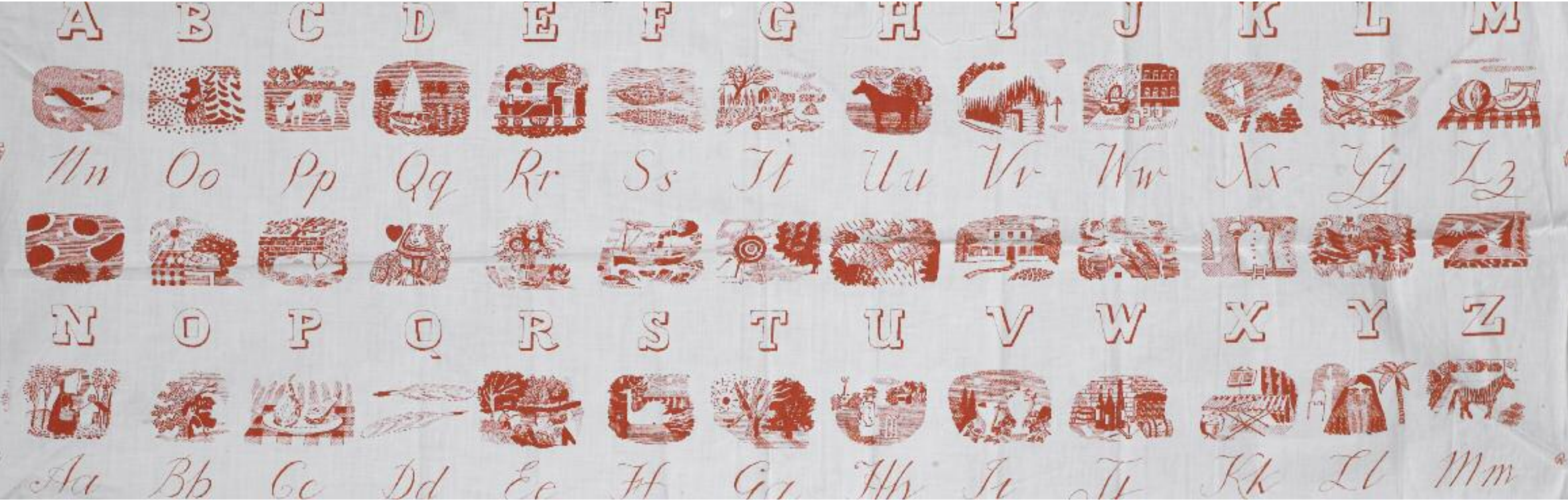
Great Bardfield at the outbreak of war, and although Eric had been killed in 1942, he too was represented in the Lion & Unicorn Pavilion, not by a work of art but by a tableau of garden tools arranged in homage to his 1939 'Garden Implements' design for Wedgwood's. *Tractor* proved to be one of the most popular exhibits when it was shown at the Victoria & Albert Museum's *Britain Can Make It* exhibition in autumn 1946.

Ravilious had been one of Rowntree's tutors at the Ruskin School, Oxford, in the early 1930s and was to remain the single most enduring influence on his design work, with the two men sharing a particular fascination for letter-forms. This fascination is evident in a number of the glazed ceramics Rowntree made whilst at the RCA and also in *Alphabet* (c. 1957) his roller-printed glazed cotton design for Edinburgh Weavers, which, with its delightful vignettes, is an unashamed homage to his mentor's pre-war Wedgwood *Alphabet* design. He paid a similar tribute to Ravilious's memory with the wallpaper he designed for his own use in the house in Ruvigny Road, Putney, to which he and Diana moved in late



Fig. 25 Alexander Fleming House (now Metro Heights), Elephant and Castle, Glass screen, 'D' Block entrance, c. 1966

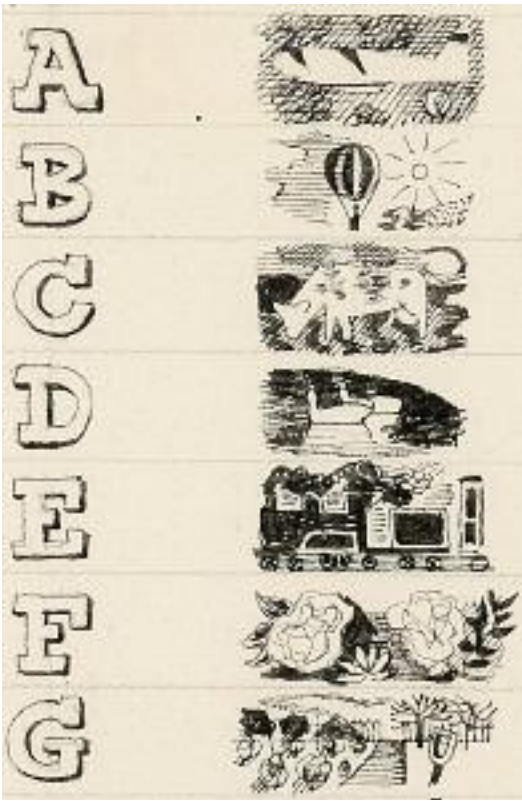




Cat. 31
Alphabet Fabric
40 by 118 cm
A length of original textile printed by
Edinburgh Weavers in 1958 and designed
by Kenneth Rowntree



Fig. 26 Drawing for Alphabet
design (and detail), c.1957.



autumn 1949, in which he juxtaposed enlarged versions of Ravilious wood engravings with engravings by the late eighteenth-century master of the genre, Thomas Bewick, thus creating an elegant eighteenth-century *papier peint* effect. Another influence on Rowntree at this time was Ben Nicholson, whose work he also greatly admired, and this is reflected in what is probably his most popular textile, *Full Measure*, a semi-abstract design of mugs, with particular emphasis on the curves of their handles; a hint of sea beyond helps convey a beguiling sense of leisure and pleasure. His other designs for Edinburgh Weavers, *Marl* and *Herba* are very different in feel just exploiting the pattern of bars of colour – yellow, orange, pink and bright green – against a dark ground.

Rowntree had a penchant for strong primary colours, a taste that was encouraged by the circle of modernist architects he and Diana numbered among their friends since their early married days when, for a short time, they lived in Wells Coates's Lawn Road flats. These architectural contacts were fostered by Diana, an architect by training who became architectural correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, and also by their friendship with Jim Richards and Peggy Angus. It was Rowntree who initially encouraged Peggy Angus to apply her lino-printing skills to wallpaper printing, and he hung her first paper, a simple design of circles inside squares printed in bright yellow, in Ruvigny Gardens as a contrast to the Ravilious-Bewick paper. Erno Goldfinger was another of their architect friends, and in the late 1960s Rowntree collaborated with him in the creation of a screen of richly coloured glass for his Ministry of Health building at Elephant & Castle in South London. It still provides a welcoming blast of colour as one enters the reception area, though the building has been converted into a block of flats and renamed Metro Central Heights.

Like several of his contemporaries, John Piper in particular, Rowntree loved painting scenes that enabled him to incorporate decorative lettering; he exploited this to the full in his Recording Britain watercolours, especially in his depiction of tombstones in the graveyard at Barnston, Essex and the interior



Fig. 27 Fabric for Edinburgh Weavers, 1957, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

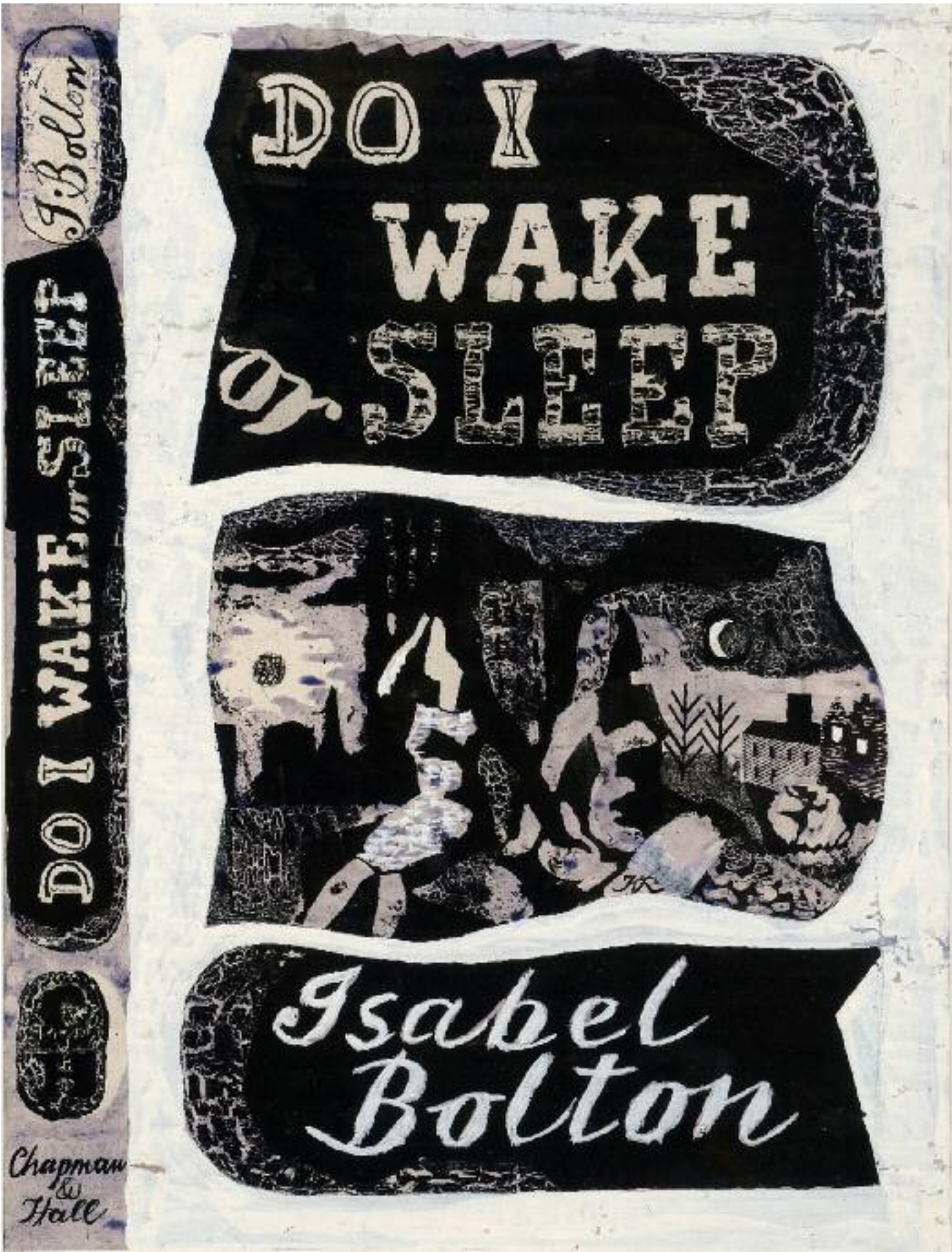
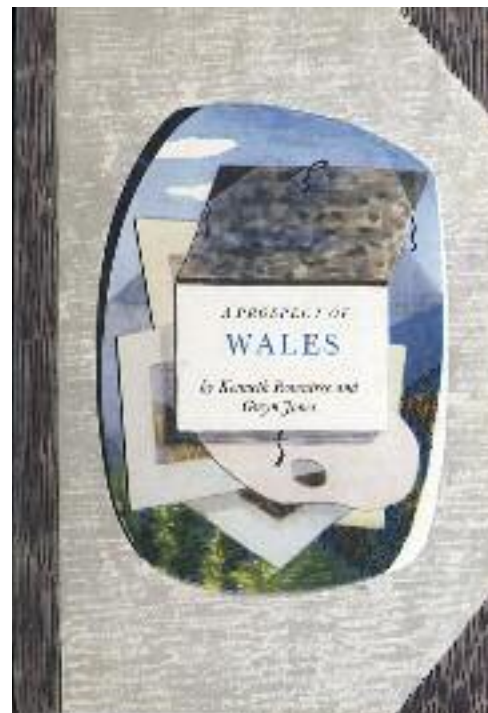
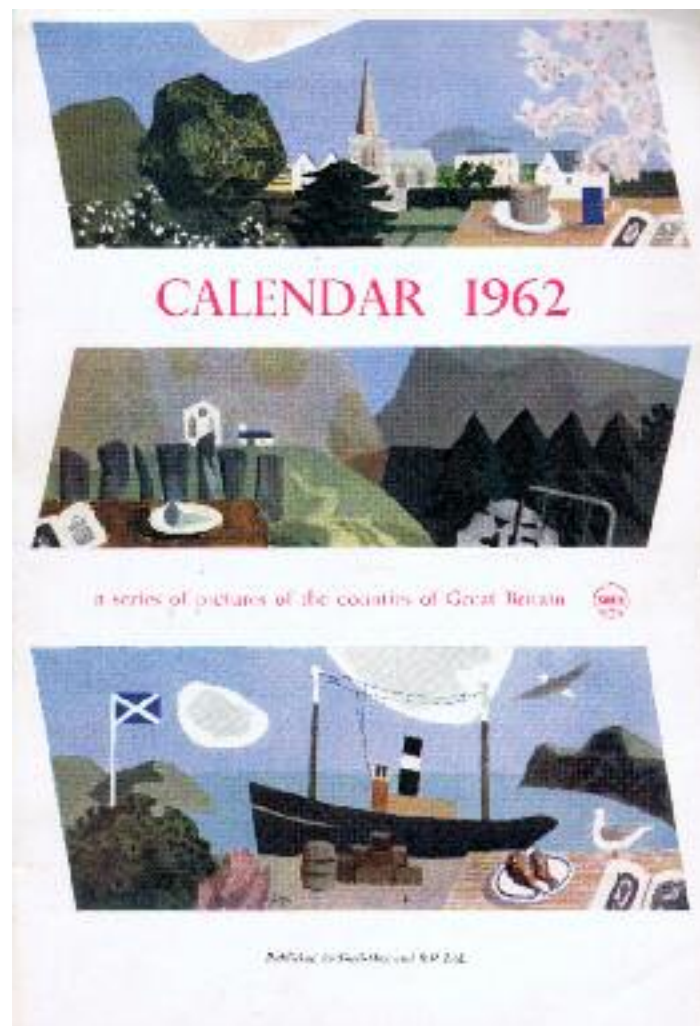


Fig. 28 Design for book jacket, 1947, 28.4 by 22 cm



of St Mary's Church, Whitby, with its great panels from the Book of Exodus – the capitals picked out in red – exhorting the congregation to have 'none other Gods but me.' In the immediate post-war years some well-placed publishers' commissions, particularly those from Collins and from Marghanita Laski at Pilot Books, enabled him to exploit his penchant for lettering; while others, too, noted his responsiveness both to subject matter and mood as reflected in such covers as the King Penguin *A Prospect of Wales*. He also received commissions from the BBC – for a Jubilee cover for *The Listener* – from Shell, and from various advertising agents, with his talent for inventiveness and playfulness in the field of graphic design achieving its apogee in his

four 1950 Vogue cover designs – *Spring*, *Summer*, *Autumn* and *Winter* – which, to the public's loss, were never used. It is in these designs above all that the sensitiveness of his aesthetic antennae is most apparent. Although both in his painting and his design work he was seldom totally original, he was always acutely aware of what was appropriate for the job and alert to every nuance of taste. When appropriate he would, with humour, tip his hat to Nicholson, Piper or Peggy Angus, make a genuflection to Ravilious or raise a glass to Surrealism, but at the same time all his designs whether for murals, textiles, advertising material, or book and magazine covers remain unmistakably and uniquely Kenneth Rowntrees.

Clockwise from above left:

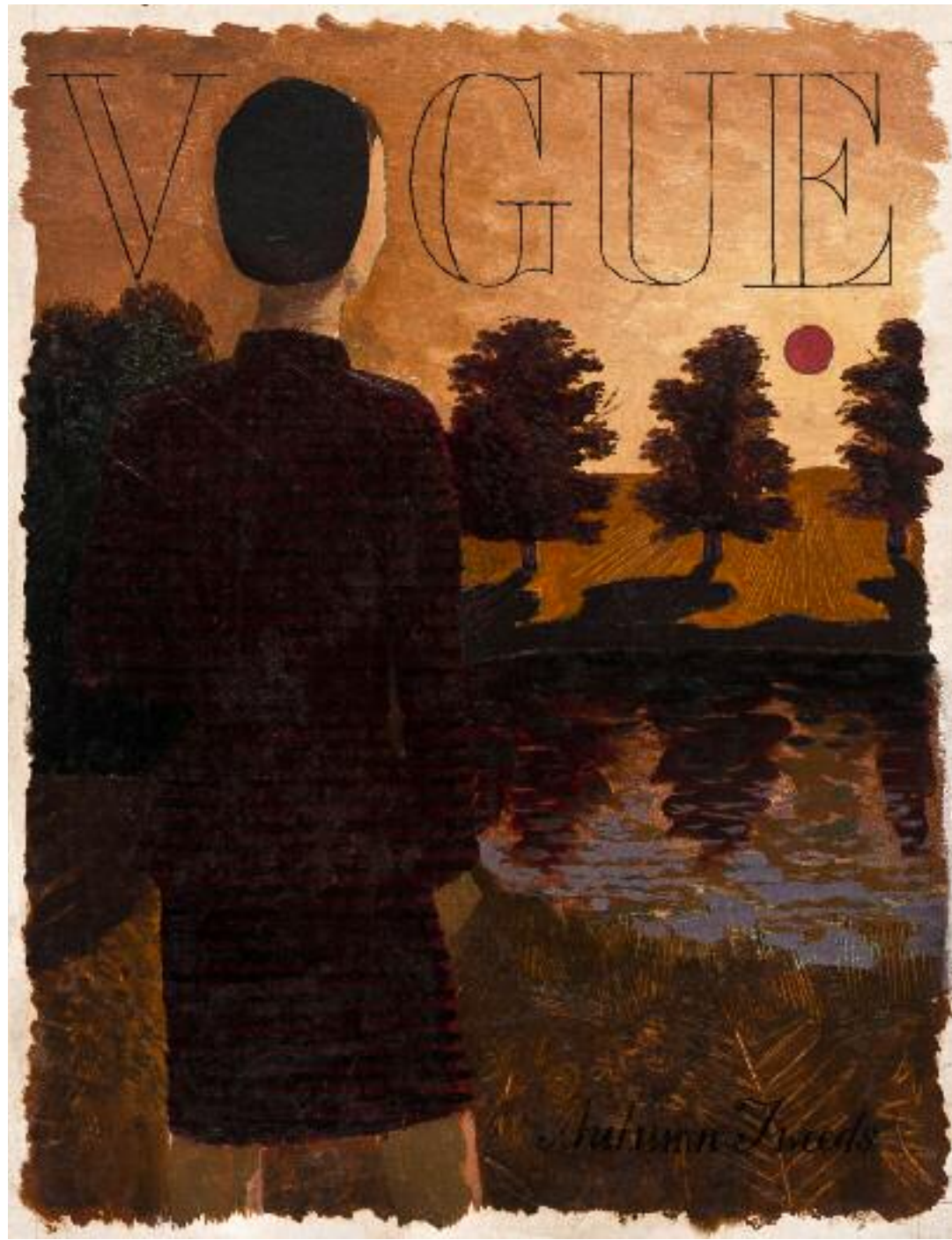
Fig. 29 Calendar, 1962, Shell-Mex and BP

Fig. 30 *A Prospect of Wales*, 1948

Fig. 31 *Pews in St Mary's Church, Whitby*, 1940, from *Recording Britain*, watercolour, 31.8 by 47 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig. 32 Tin box decorated by Kenneth Rowntree.

Fig. 33 Ring by Kenneth Rowntree.



Cat. 32

Autumn Tweeds, 1949

Cover design for Vogue.

Signed and inscribed verso.

Oil on card, 31 by 24 cm.

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*,
Lund Humphries, 2002, p.43, illustrated (pl. 33)

Cat. 33

***Preview of the Spring Salons,
c.1950***

A projected design for a Vogue cover

Signed and inscribed verso.

Oil on card, 31 by 24 cm.

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*,
Lund Humphries, 2002, p.43, illustrated (pl. 31)





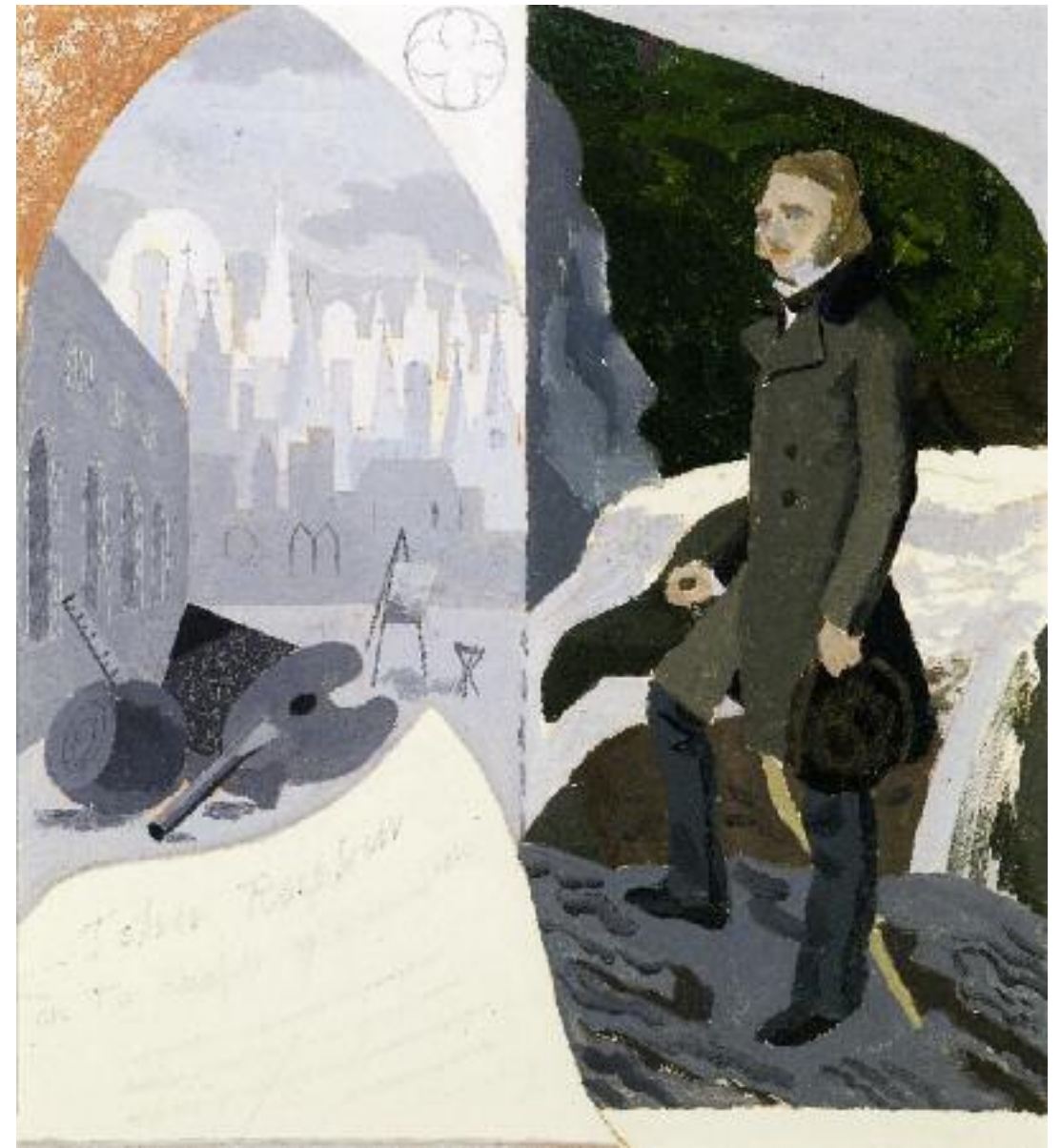
Cat. 34 (details on following pages)

***A Pair of Hand-Decorated
Ceramic Jugs***

Decorated with the initials of Kenneth Rowntree and his wife Diana respectively and illustrated with vignettes of landscapes and other scenes

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*, Lund Humphries, 2002, p.46–47





Cat. 35

***'John Ruskin', Design
for an Advertisement for
N.W. Ayers & Sons Inc.***

Inscribed: *John Ruskin on the benefits of Education*
For the series "Great Ideas of Western Man", 1960
Oil and pencil on paper, 63.5 by 38.5 cm



Cat. 38 (above left)

Homage to Verlaine (*Chanson d'Autome*)

A study for the screenprint of 1984

Gouache on clear plastic film, 58 by 51 cm

Cat. 39 (above right)

Homage to Verlaine (*Chanson d'Autome*)

A study for the screenprint of 1984

Gouache on paper, 58 by 51 cm

Cat. 40 (opposite)

Homage to Verlaine (*Chanson d'Autome*)

Signed and numbered in pencil by the artist (1984)

Screenprint on paper, 54 by 40.5 cm

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*, Lund Humphries, 2002, p. 79, illustrated (pl. 78)





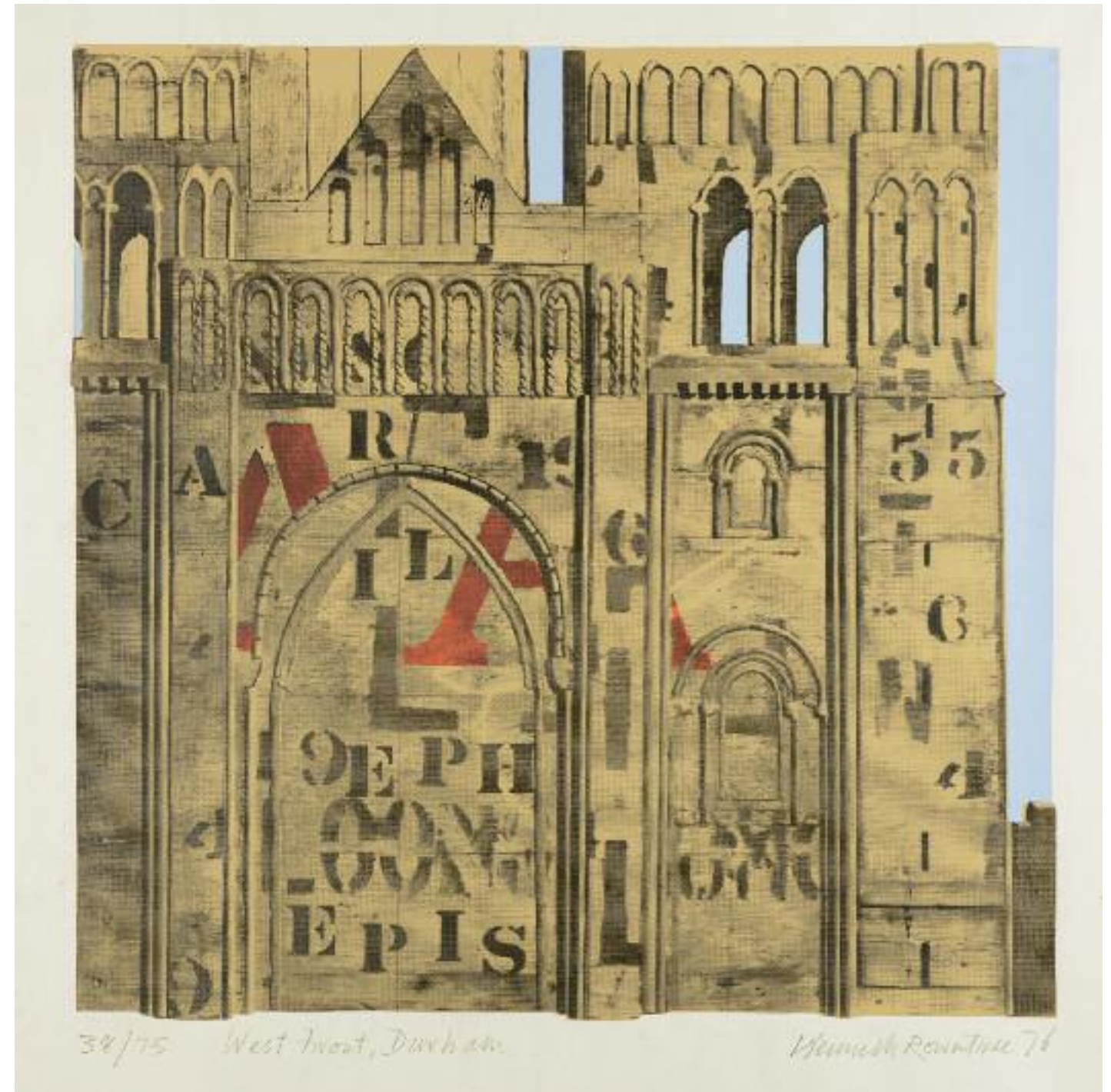
Cat. 41

***Ballymoss winning the
George V Stakes***

From a painting by Kenneth Rowntree
and John Skeaping

Colour lithograph published by Guinness and
printed by the Curwen Press, 48 by 73 cm

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*,
Lund Humphries, 2002, p.46



Cat. 42

West Front, Durham, 1976

Signed and numbered by the artist

Screenprint on paper, 48 by 49 cm



Cat. 43
Tractor in Landscape
 For the *School Prints* series, 1945
 Signed l.r. (in plate): *Kenneth Rowntree*
 Lithograph on paper, 50 by 76 cm

Cat. 44
The British Restaurant at Acton, Middlesex, 1942
 Signed and inscribed
 Watercolour, gouache and pencil on paper
 78.9 by 56.6 cm
 Literature: *Art for Everybody – Britain Advances* (British Council publication, 1943, photograph of mural on front cover); John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*, Lund Humphries, 2002, pp.28–30



Fig. 35 *Art for Everybody – Britain Advances* (British Council publication), 1943.





The Later Work

John Milner

It was evident from my first meeting with Kenneth Rowntree that going to teach at Newcastle University was going to be different and interesting. An art school in a university is a problematic idea with advantages and disadvantages. While both institutions can be intellectual as well as practical, it is not a complete match, and other countries do it differently.

At Newcastle Kenneth encountered an art school with a long history, good facilities, and the Hatton Gallery. Extensions of the building in the 1960s made this a beautiful space in which to work. The disciplines of Painting, Sculpture, Printmaking, Art History and the Gallery seemed to work together here. There were no conventional design studios, though some fabric printing and stained glass facilities were maintained. The context of a university Faculty of Arts gave it a special quality but made it seem aloof in some ways from the other good art school close by with its different structure. Like the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London it had a strong intellectual and practical history with a powerful ambition behind it. This was unapologetically dominated by the painting school, followed by sculpture and printmaking.

Yet aspects of design are frequent in Rowntree's later works, and being married to Diana Rowntree who was a designer and architect, they had numerous friends who were designers and architects. While there is no doubt that Rowntree's love of lettering referenced cubism, he equally loved curious posters, cricket and boxing match advertisements,

and many other kinds of localised printing. This also consciously introduced design elements into his work. Design was a live issue in the department of which he became Head. The magnificent studios with wonderful light and all the best facilities made it clear that the university was taking Fine Art seriously, and these hopes of it were in many ways fulfilled.

It is interesting that in the 1950s the painter Victor Pasmore, a close contact of Rowntree, played a special role in the life of the department and in Rowntree's creative work. Pasmore was a confident person who could weigh a thesis as a guide to giving it a mark. He was also instrumental in introducing a pedagogic concept of basic design into the department as part of the emergence of the Foundation Course then emerging in Leeds and elsewhere. This involved the study of natural forces, using predetermined elements to construct studies in a deliberately investigative manner. Pasmore's own work had shifted dramatically from representational painting to this new constructive approach. Moving to Newcastle Rowntree also engaged in these experimental developments. Something of the Bauhaus had crept into this teaching, not least because Bauhaus tutors such as Gropius, Breuer and others, had a strong impact in British architectural and visual culture in the late 1930s. That was a time when Mondrian and Gabo also moved to London.

But Newcastle also retained a strong ethos of life painting under Lawrence Gowing, Rowntree's predecessor there. More significantly Rowntree embraced the important

didactic role of the Foundation Course which required fundamental exploration beyond the conventional categories of painting, sculpture, and print. This was motivated not by introspective self-expression on the students' part, but developed from creative training applicable to design as much as painting. In addition the Hatton Gallery made it possible for exhibitions to be used as a creative medium. Both Pasmore and then Richard Hamilton used the gallery in this way. It could accommodate Hamilton's fascination with the visual imagery in advertising, and the artist's appraisal of the designed product, whether it be sleekly shiny car, glamorous goods, a fashion shoot or celebrities. Exhibitions could in this way also become a critical tool and a commentary.

Curiously there were certain levels at which Rowntree felt at home in all of this, especially in the element of design that it embodied. At the RCA he was working in the country's primary school of design. Diana also designed rooms sympathetic to Kenneth's paintings and constructions. Rowntree's mural at the Festival of Britain was public work that required meticulous design to create a sense of national pride through familiar cultural forms. In *Recording Britain* too there was this dimension of visual language, appropriating the historical peculiarities of churches, of market place architecture, and of curious details that spoke of local flavour and local language. There is something in this comparable with Hamilton's appropriation of newer, international, and commercial visual language.

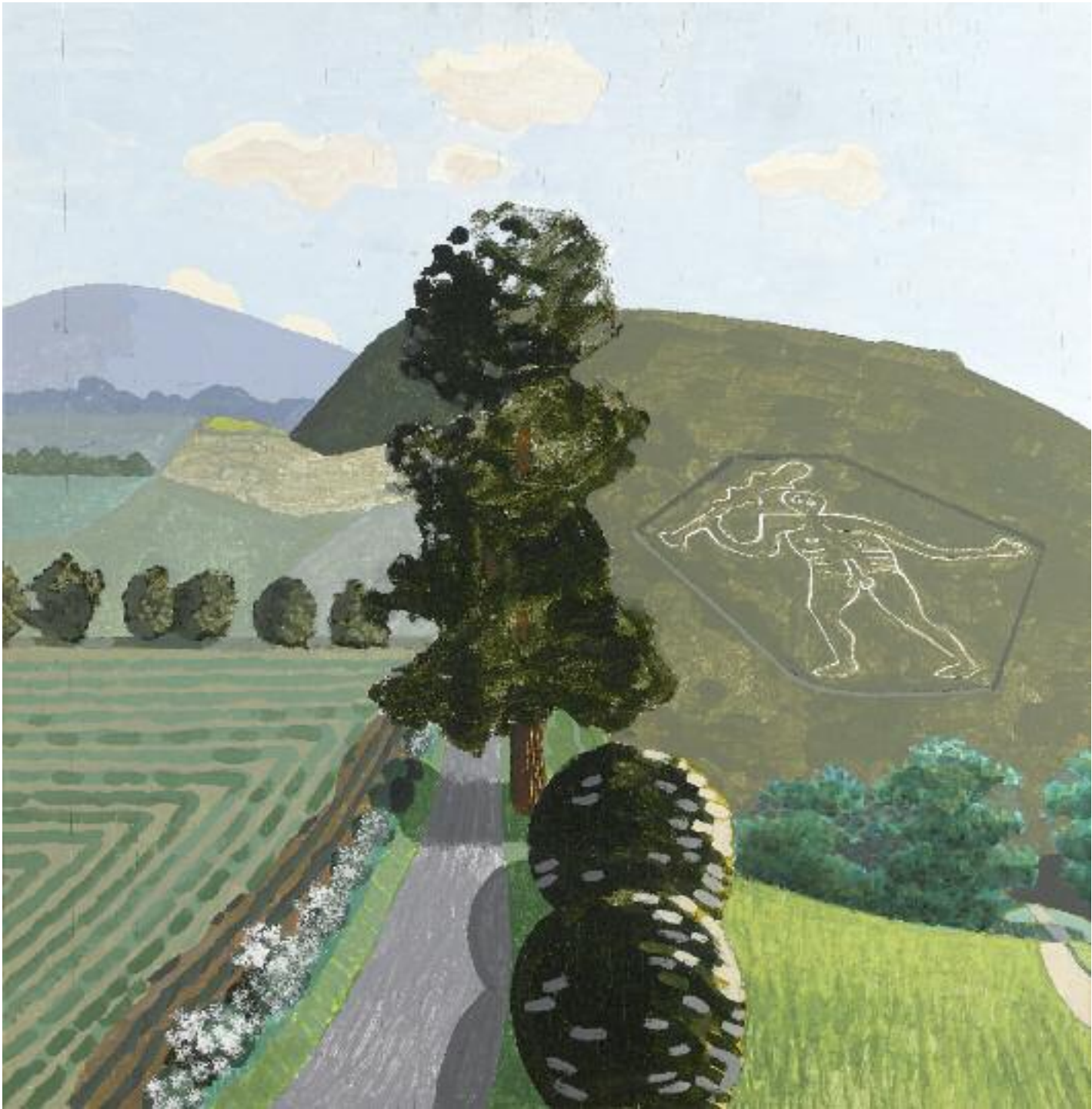
Pasmore and Hamilton both affected Rowntree's approach. In his different way Kenneth accepted the world of advertising as he accepted the world of popular culture. These attitudes had some appeal to him but he did not see himself as strategic critic of twentieth century culture like Hamilton. Clearly the Department that he ran at Newcastle was a fruitful bed of experiment and creative thought but presiding over all this was not easy. For Rowntree this was not a fairly remote provincial art school, it was a remote provincial art school with powerfully talented people working in it, including Rowntree himself. He maintained his contacts at the RCA and Slade School as external ex-

aminers, visiting lecturers, and advisers. He thrived and painted vigorously in this setting. Change was always in the air, and there are many stories that illustrate its atmosphere. On one occasion the painter and writer Quentin Bell was due to lecture. Kenneth was unable to access his room as Bell had locked the door and put up a sign on it saying 'Keep out! Professor asleep.' Another time, I heard Kenneth swearing in his grand Head of Department room: 'You bastard, you bloody thing, you ungrateful so-an-so...' It turned out that he was talking to a painting that he had wrecked by working too long on it. But this also shows that this was a place where you could work *and* paint.

Rowntree was an artist who could work with design. Most painters do not do this. It is rare now. It meant that he could work with designers, including Diana who could be a severe critic.

In London Kenneth Rowntree had been involved in public projects, including murals for war time canteens, schools, and the Festival of Britain. There was status and national recognition in all of these, and in return this encouraged a recurrent patriotic dimension in his art, though he could never be called a propagandist. With his incomparable sense of place he recorded the varied landscapes, customs, materials, accents and visual languages of Britain. Essex, Yorkshire, and Wales are recognisable at once in his paintings. That valuable public asset in post-war Britain helped to reassert identity in a damaged country. In the process Rowntree formed part of the fabric of post-war British art and design, including celebrated European emigrés in Britain. In this respect the immediately post-war years were a time of great opportunity.

His post at the Royal College of Art confirmed this, but there had long been an element of design in Rowntree's paintings. Now he steadily moved from direct observation to the depiction of ways of life, glimpsed in the style of a Yorkshire hat shop, or in the lettering inscribed in church monuments, or in the intricate patterns of brick and pebble walls of Suffolk. These repetitions, and eccentricities provided local flavour but also conjured up a sense of identity stretching back in time.



Cat. 45
***The Cerne Abbas Giant,
Dorset***
Signed and inscribed (reverse of panel)
PVA on panel, 60 by 60 cm



Cat. 46
**Woodstacks at Da Poggio,
 Umbria**
 Signed l.l.: *Kenneth Rowntree*
 Watercolour, 51.5 by 64 cm



Cat. 47
Wine Bottle Landscape
 In the artist's own frame of corks
 Mixed media, 41 by 51 cm
 Private Collection



Cat. 48
Putney Bridge Nightpiece,
1967

Oil with enamel on panel, 64 by 76 cm
Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*,
Lund Humphries, 2002, p.61
Exhibited: Davies Memorial Gallery and Oriel 31,
Welshpool, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June–October
1992, cat no.59

His work on Shell guides, for example, shows this link between place, historical legacy, and painting designed for publication. Rowntree could do it well. What he sacrificed from direct observation – his window onto the world recorded in oil paint – he made up for with a concept of his painting as a visual arena to be planned to a purpose, in which images could be borrowed or repeated in different materials, dissected and reassembled, using contrasting styles of painting, decoration, or materials in a single work. Rowntree was still recording the visual impact of the world around him, but his paintings were increasingly geometric, handled more like a board game than a window or reflection. This was more challenging to the viewer, but remained always as much visual, as literary, or intellectual. A small example lies in his name: his round trees were Rowntrees. They appear for example in *Cerne Abbas* with the startling pre-historic image of the naked Cerne Abbas Giant on the landscape behind. These subtly suggestive and evocative paintings demanded more engagement from the viewer. In *Putney Bridge: Nightpiece*, 1967, for example, a few painted discs of yellow and red are embedded in a deep black surface, part matt, but elsewhere glossy. Yellow ochre stripes are set into the black. With careful deliberation he has provided a set of clues. The discs of colour are lights in the darkness, the different surfaces of black construct the image of Putney Bridge at night, and the ochre lines depict the bus crossing the bridge with reflections below. Once you recognise the image a wealth of atmosphere emerges from the geometry.

In these works, one thing is like another, and can act as a metaphor, a poetic device more familiar in literature, but central to Rowntree's later paintings. With his painting often lying flat on the table in the studio, he assembled his elements like pieces in a game, linking textures, colours, images, lettering and many bits of materials, including glass, plastic, metal foil, acrylic paint, wood, newspaper, holes and engraved lines. This innovative strategy allowed for change, readjustment, editing, and serial variations, using painting, photography, printing, cutting and construction. The game was premeditated, but its outcome was

always a discovery. This is a situation familiar to designers. For example, at the Bauhaus students had been taught by painters and by designers, and something of this survived in England. Bauhaus tutors including Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, had been assisted in Britain by Jack Pritchard who commissioned the building of Lawn Road flats in Hampstead, itself an experiment in art, design and life-style, in which Kenneth and Diana had lived. Bauhaus principles and the RCA both introduced Rowntree to the pedagogic dimension of art: how to teach art as a serious creative and inventive activity. This was important for his next step, as in 1958 his ten year contract as Professor of Mural Painting at the Royal College of Art came to an end.

It is worth pausing at this moment to consider Rowntree's predicament. His career had public purpose and recognition. He had been employed in significant projects, and he had many creative colleagues. London offered more galleries and exhibition opportunities than elsewhere in Britain. London as the cultural centre of Britain had more buyers, more critics, more schools of art: it offered more opportunities. When Rowntree was appointed to replace Lawrence Gowing in 1959 as Professor of Fine Art at Newcastle University, he was distancing himself from immediate contact with that cosmopolitan creative network. Commuting would never fill the gap. Britain is organised this way by its history and geography.

We should ask therefore why Rowntree moved north. The Newcastle University Fine Art Department had already over the previous five years established a reputation as one of the most progressive art schools in Britain. Rowntree maintained this status. He responded well to Pasmore's forceful innovations, though one could never mistake one artist for the other. Reliefs, especially, became a major part of Rowntree's work.

Rowntree's *Shapes in Movement II*, 1958, painted and constructed around the time of his move from London, reflects these new developments. Here a square of Perspex has geometric forms applied to the reverse in brown, black and blue oil paint. The Perpex is



Cat. 49
Breton Morning, 1965

Acrylic on board, 60.5 by 56.5 cm
 Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*, Lund Humphries, 2002, p.66, illustrated (pl.62)
 Exhibited: New Art Centre, London, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June 1975, no.3; Tyne and Wear

Museums, *Kenneth Rowntree: paintings, drawings and collages*, December 1976 – January 1977, cat no.53; Davies Memorial Gallery and Oriel 31, Welshpool, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June–October 1992, cat no.55



Cat. 50
Putney Garden, 1960s

Acrylic on board, 61 by 61 cm
 Exhibited: Tyne and Wear Museums, *Kenneth Rowntree: paintings, drawings and collages*, December 1976 – January 1977, cat no.71

held above the white backing board which is visible through the clear areas of Perspex, permitting shadows and shifting viewpoint to animate the geometric forms on the picture surface. But the sense of visual observation remains important to Rowntree. This painting derives from a series based upon the great Tower in St Mark's Square in Venice. It also resembled the forms and actions of a game of snooker.

Rowntree is wittier than Pasmore and here he has introduced us to a whole set of poetic speculations and metaphors. His characteristic and lively wit pervaded the whole of his creative career and much of his conversation. It survived the change in his career, and made his work attractive, enjoyable, and humane. When he suffered the disaster of a detached retina in his later years, it was always to Rowntree his 'detached Retsina', and he recounted with hilarity his terror that the surgeon might operate on the wrong eye. Waking in fear in the night before the operation, he got out of bed, went to the bathroom with a crayon, and with deep concentration wrote on his cheek (carefully as the mirror reversed the writing left to right): "THIS ONE". After two more hours of anxiety he returned to the bathroom to write "NOT THIS ONE" on the other cheek, adding an arrow to make sure.

He could make a still-life in which two wine bottles echoed the view of Chartres cathedral, or the great relief of Durham Cathedral using the rough wood of a packing case to depict its weathered stone surface, adding a few stencilled letters to make the commercial inscriptions on the wood into evocations of Durham's great ecclesiastical history. When one shape begins to echo another and extend the associations we are entering his new way of constructing a painting.

His fascination with the peculiarities of lettering, landscapes, wall-building patterns, signs, local cake designs, doylies, and architectural details, all made him alert to the distinctly 'local' forms of other times and places. In Kenneth Rowntree's case such borrowings and appropriations were personal, poetic and witty, small in scale, and function best within the domestic interior where they could slowly reveal their full vitality, poetry and pleasure.

He had abandoned the muralists' approach to become more contemplative. He valued friendships with creative people in art, architecture, music, literature, especially poets, as well as former London colleagues. Together with Diana he was immensely hospitable, and maintained charming idiosyncrasies, keeping for example, a collection of restaurant menus as bedside reading matter. He also had numerous exhibitions, and I was lucky to be involved in some of these, but despite all this, opportunities were simply less evident and less frequent so far from London.

We can see an excellent range of his later techniques in this exhibition. In *Breton Morning* of 1965, for example, Rowntree reduced forms to perspective lines and rectangles flat on the picture surface. This is quite a challenge to the viewer though for Rowntree it represented a triumph of brevity over complexity. In the case of *Breton Morning* the diagonal edge of the white table is only slowly recognised with a muddy field painted brown beyond it under a dark cloud and glowering sky. There is perhaps a building in the shade at left, or possibly the presence of a tall figure in blue here reduced to two rectangles. As we cannot be certain, the puzzle persists.

Four-Figure II 1966, painted in acrylic on panel, is equally austere, a carefully balanced set of rectangles arranged in a format of 2x4 blocks. What may seem to be Rowntree responding to minimalist art or music, is certainly inspired by the colour and design of friends' clothing, here evoking their differences of taste, style, and personality.

Rowntree could develop collage into high relief constructions or use their surface qualities to enrich his work with their contrasting social as well as visual associations. The trapped collage relief *Di Venez* is a case in point, but in another work made after a visit to Jerusalem, Rowntree used Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew newspaper to provide a texture equivalent to the Temple walls. This evoked directly the city's ancient contested past and its continuing power as the centre of three great world religions. The same transformative eye can be seen in later still-lives in which a teapot has a cross upon its lid to form an orthodox church in *Byzantine Teapot* painted in 1990.



Cat. 51
Shapes in Movement II, 1958
Oil on two Perspex sheets, 54 by 54 cm
Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*, Lund Humphries, 2002, p.59, illustrated (pl.56)
Exhibited: Tyne and Wear Museums, *Kenneth Rowntree: paintings, drawings and collages*, December 1976 – January 1977, cat no.101; Davies Memorial Gallery and Oriel 31, Welshpool, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June–October 1992, cat no.43



Cat. 52

Jerusalem

Collage on board, 29.5 by 33 cm

Private Collection



Cat. 53

Di Venezia, 1960s

Mixed media collage, 38 by 30 cm

After his retirement in 1980 Kenneth Rowntree continued to paint, and he steadily sold paintings to people who loved their style and wit. His homes at Acomb outside Hexham, and subsequently at Corbridge on the river Tyne, were wonderful places full of bentwood furniture, paintings that he owned, including the small Ben Nicholson bought for a few pounds in his student days, a large painting by Pasmore, a painting that Sidney Nolan drew with his finger in oil paint. There were paintings by Piper and Ravillious, as well as sculptures by Quentin Bell, and objects that he simply found and treasured. Finally there were always new paintings there somewhere, and old paintings never seen before. The rooms were themselves a kind of dialogue with Diana, always lively, and Art meeting Design was certainly a factor in it. If she were particularly firm in her assertions about his work, Kenneth would defend himself gently, saying quietly to guests 'Is he here?'

His last studio was in a stone tower near Hexham in Northumberland. It was here that I saw him painting sheep onto clingfilm so that he could see in which painted field to locate them. The Tower was cold, bleak and full

of half-finished paintings. He kept many works on the go, returning to them like wonderful puzzles for which he would suddenly find the solution in a twisted wire, a piece of newspaper or outlined silhouette. Like the output of an unreliable production line his completed paintings and constructions would emerge more or less continuously and in surprising numbers.

As a result of this we have many in the current exhibition. They cover much of his career in its many phases, his move to acrylic paint from oil paint, his relief constructions, his use of lettering, even sometimes lettering built up in paint as in *Sky North Umber*. The supreme example of the visual and verbal poetry at which he excelled is the *Verlaine* lithograph made in Northumberland. He would often recite in a deep and gravelly but resonant voice Verlaine's sonorous evocation of autumn. This large silkscreen print integrates the verse, sound, colour and shape in perfect harmony.

He was a lover of what was particular and unique in whenever, whatever, or whoever was before him, and he resolved all this in a sensual and intellectual game of variations that consistently delight both eye and mind.

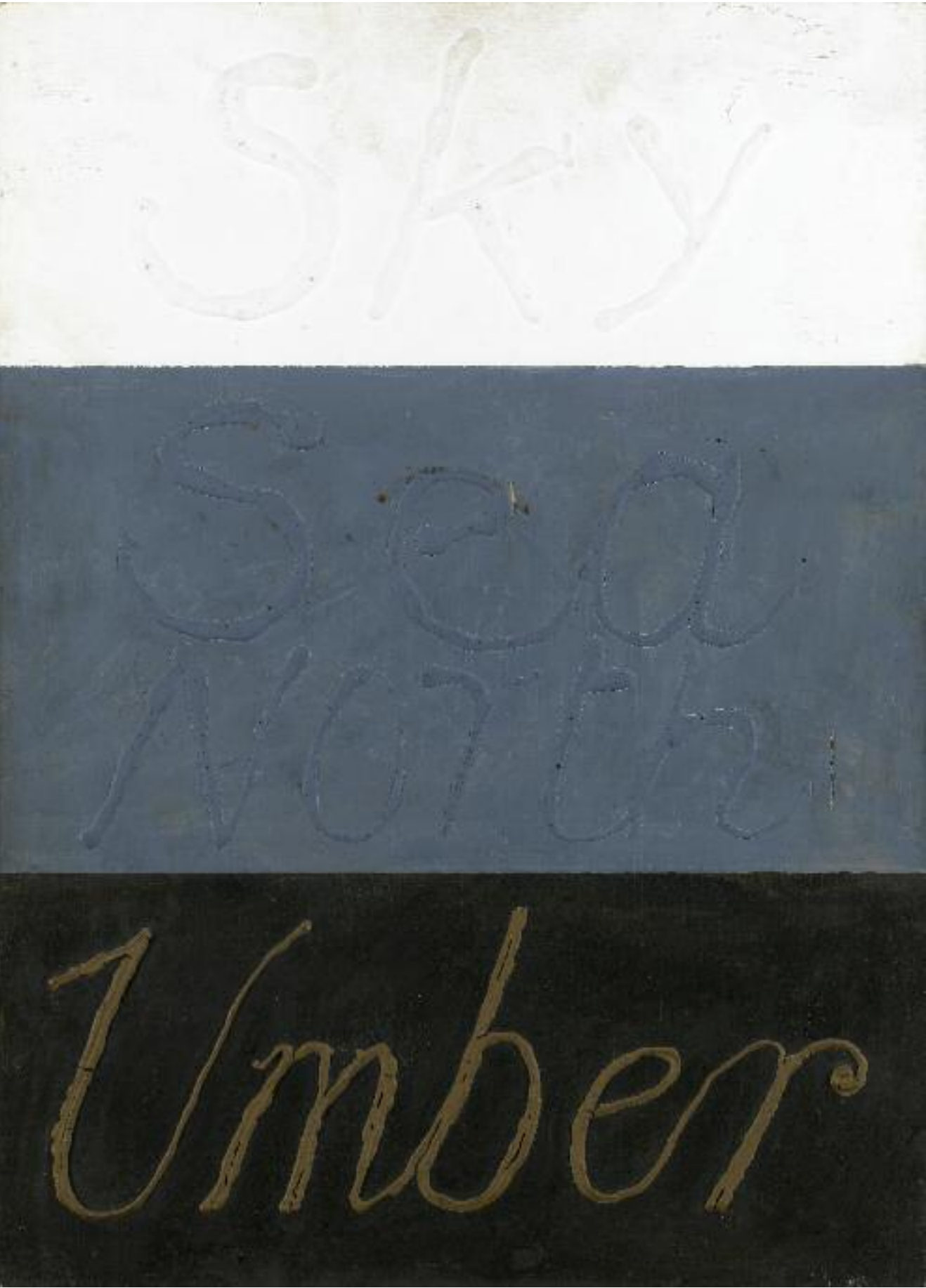
Cat. 54

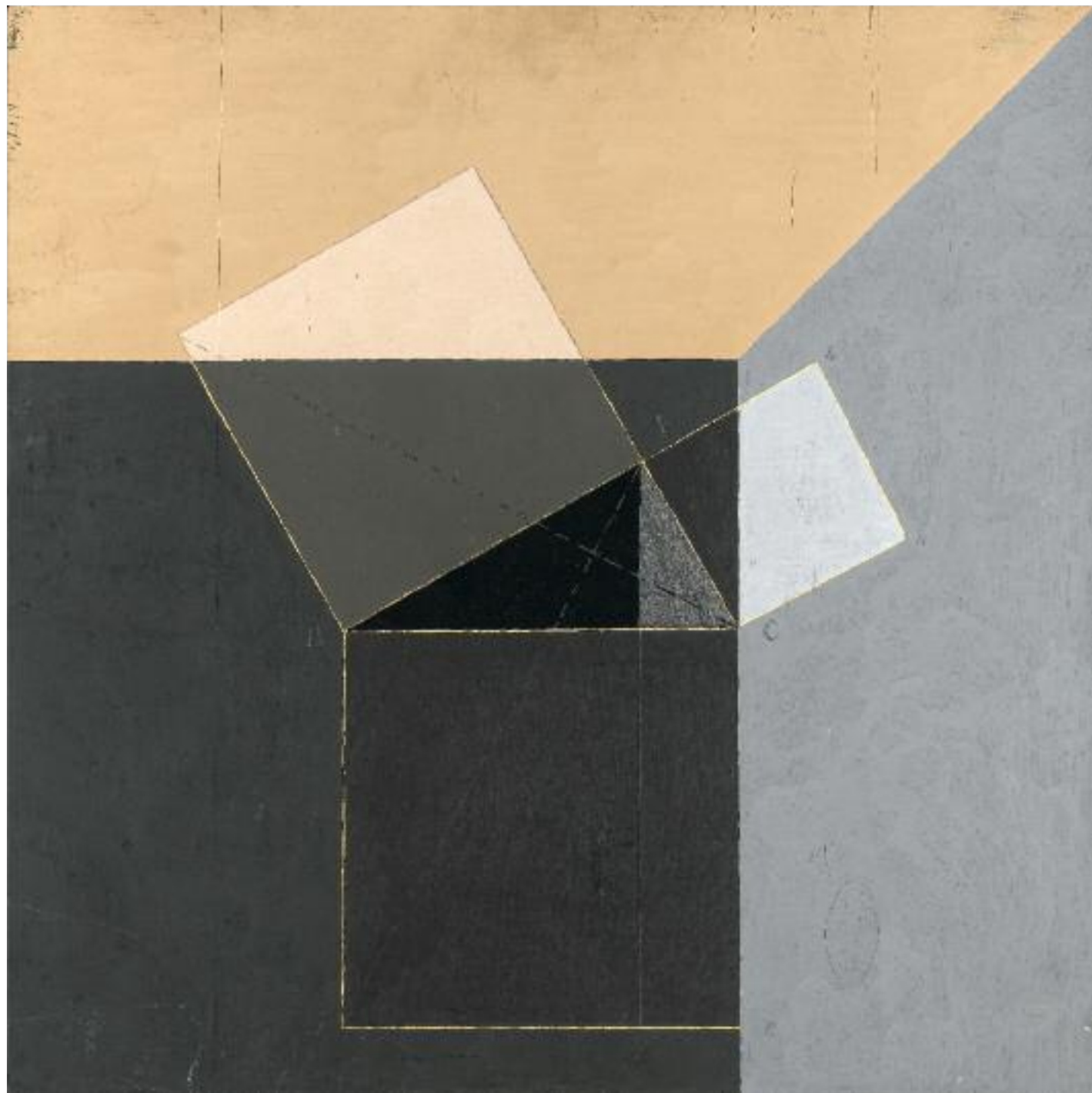
Sky, Sea, North Umber, 1981

Acrylic on board, 51 by 37 cm

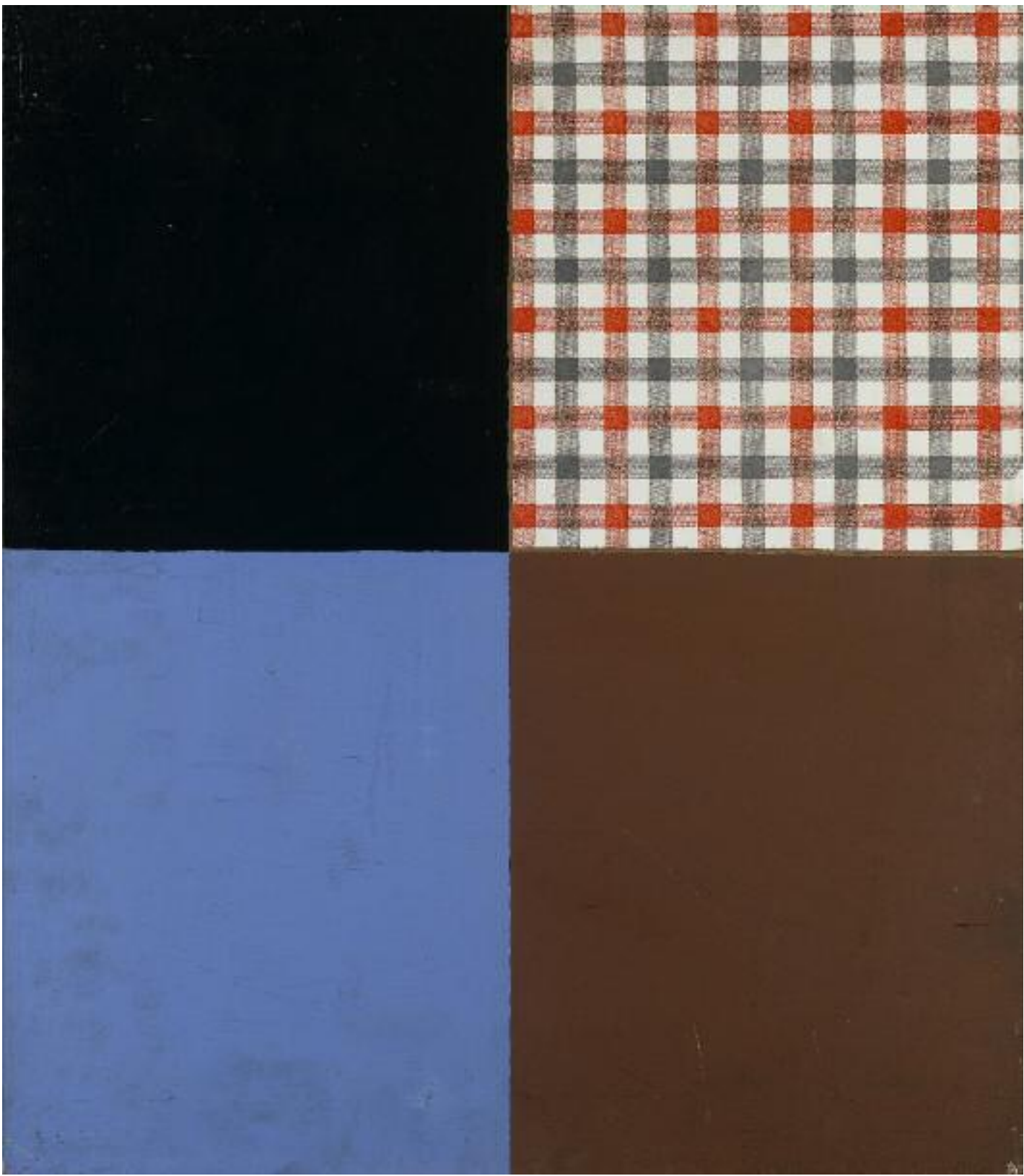
Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*, Lund Humphries, 2002, p.75, illustrated (pl.70)

Exhibited: possibly Davies Memorial Gallery and Oriel 31, Welshpool, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June–October 1992, cat no.32 (dated in error to 1952?)

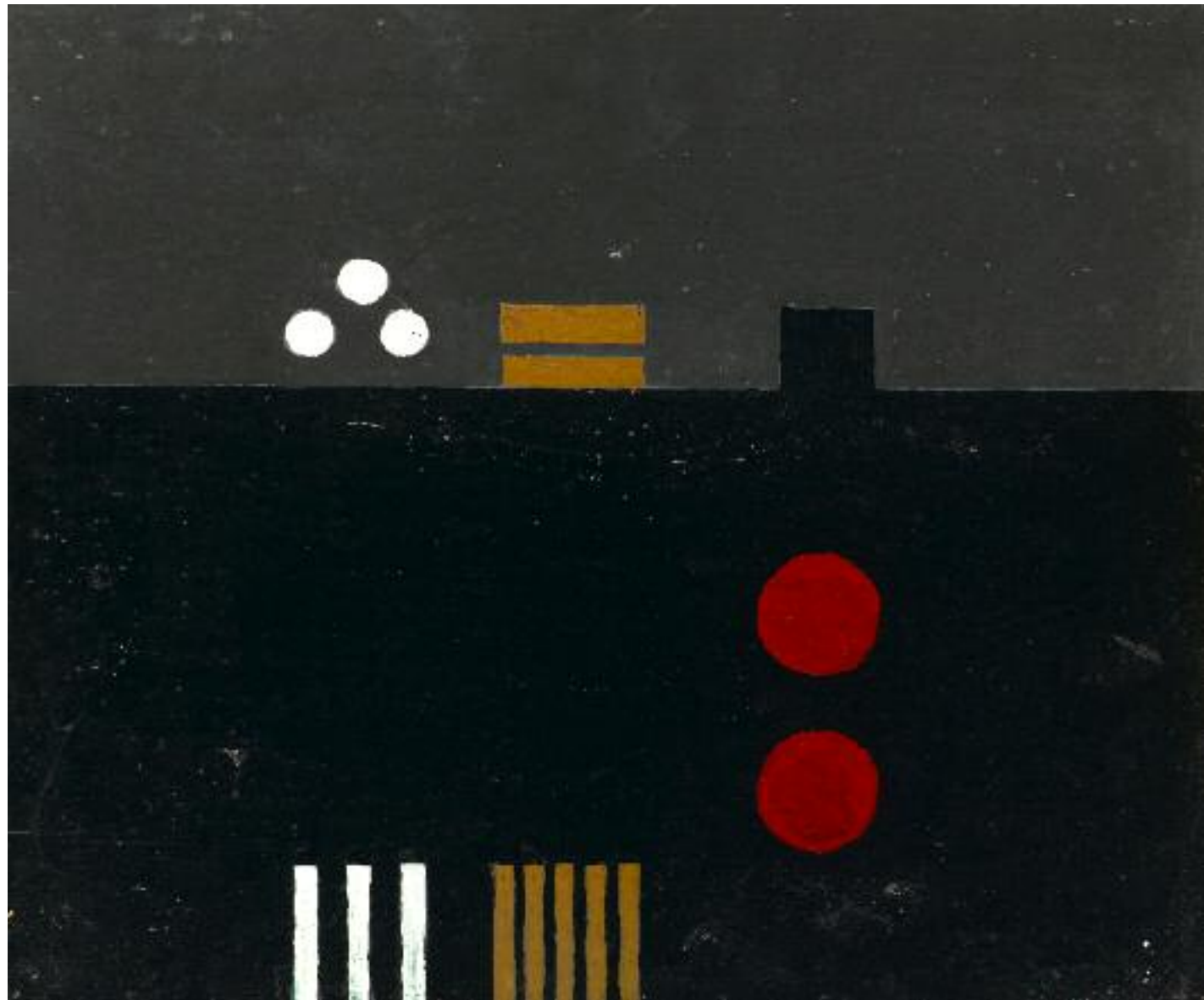




Cat. 55
Pythagoras I, 1970
 Acrylic on panel, 61 by 61 cm
 Exhibited: Davies Memorial Gallery and Oriel 31,
 Welshpool, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June–October
 1992, cat no.67



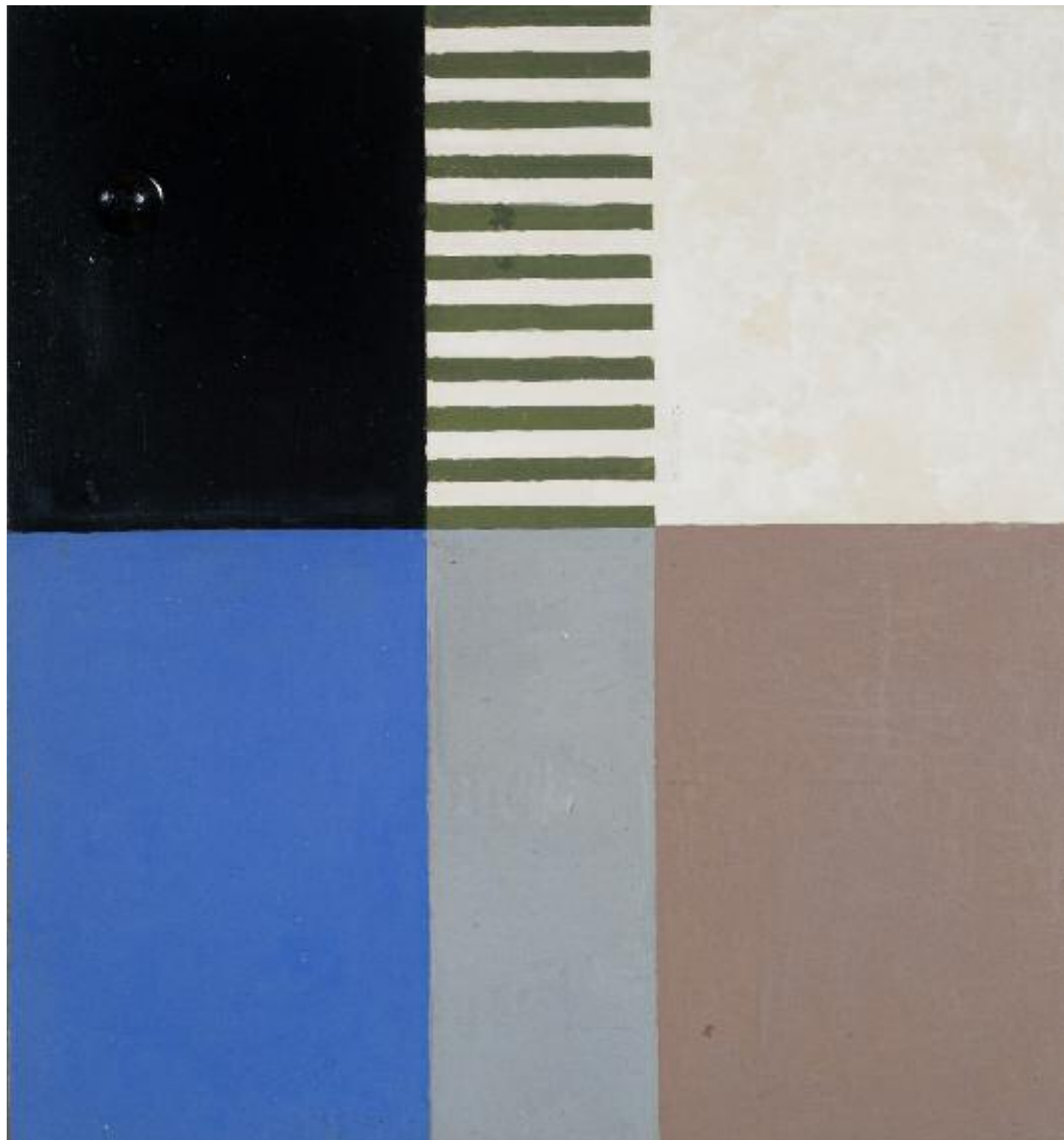
Cat. 56
Four Square
 Gloss and acrylic paint with printed
 adhesive plastic on panel, 63.5 by 56.5 cm
 Exhibited: New Art Centre, London,
Kenneth Rowntree, June 1975, no.9



Cat. 57
Putney Bridge Night Scene
 Enamel and oil, 63 by 76 cm



Cat. 58
Northumberland Barns, 1978
 Signed, inscribed and dated (1978)
 Acrylic, wood and collage, 46 by 40.5 cm



Cat. 59

Three Figures

Gloss and acrylic paint with hemispherical recess, 58.5 cm

Cat. 60

Corner of a Studio, 1960s

Inscribed on a label on the reverse

Oil, enamel and emulsion on panel, 90 by 68.5 cm





Cat. 61

Night and Day I, 1988

Acrylic with collage on board, 25 by 20 cm

Exhibited: Davies Memorial Gallery and Oriel 31, Welshpool, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June–October 1992, cat no.86

Cat. 62

Studio Window, Greece, 1960s

Watercolour, gouache and pencil, 48 by 64 cm



Cat. 63

Landscape Catalogue III,
1972

Signed, inscribed and dated on labels
on the reverse

PVA on panel, 61 by 48 cm

Exhibited: *Festival Retrospective Exhibition*,
Queen's Hall, Hexham, 1987

Cat. 64

Winter Garden Acomb

Acrylic on board, 38 by 38 cm



Cat. 65

Findochty

Signed, dated and inscribed (on reverse of board): *Findochty, Autumn/Kenneth Rowntree/1981*

Acrylic on board, 26 by 38 cm

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*, Lund Humphries, 2002, p. 74

Exhibited: Davies Memorial Gallery and Oriel 31, Welshpool, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June–October 1992, cat no. 72 (dated in error to 1978) (illustrated in catalogue)

Cat. 66

Falling Rain with Raised Flag

Acrylic on board, 32.5 by 25 cm





Cat. 67

***The Naming of Parts,
Acomb, 1987***

Acrylic, 61 by 61 cm

Literature: John Milner, *Kenneth Rowntree*,
Lund Humphries, 2002, p.79, illustrated (pl.75)

Private Collection



Cat. 68

Abstract Landscape, Acomb

Signed and dated l.r.: Kenneth Rowntree/75

Watercolour over pencil, 49.5 by 63.5 cm



Cat. 69
Voiture, 35, 1969
 Acrylic with collage on board
 50 by 38 cm
 Private Collection



Cat. 70
Homage to Verlaine
 Chalk on packing case construction, 48 by 48 cm
 Private Collection



Cat. 71

Battle of Crecy I

Signed verso and inscribed on exhibition label

Wood and collage on panel, 60 by 77 cm

Exhibited: New Art Centre, London, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June 1975, no.21; Davies Memorial Gallery and Oriel 31, Welshpool, *Kenneth Rowntree*, June–October 1992, cat no.64



Cat. 72

Carter & Co, Scarborough

Mixed media collage, 44 by 48cm

Private Collection



Fig. 36 Rodrigo Moynihan, RA,
Portrait Group, 1951.
Royal College of Art, Painting
School staff (Rowntree third
from right).

Kenneth Rowntree (1915–1997)

A Chronology

1915 – Born in Scarborough on 14 March

1932–35 – Ruskin School of Art, Oxford (winner of the prizes for life drawing and life painting).

1936–39 – Murals in Scarborough, studying at the Slade School of Art, London; Work included in exhibitions at Cooling's, Wildenstein and Leicester Galleries.

1939 – Marries Diana Buckley

1940 – Contributes to War Artists' Scheme

1941– Appointed to Recording Britain scheme. Moved to Great Bardfield

1942 – Kenneth and Diana's son Adam is born

1943 – Moved to Lindsell, Essex.

1945 – Begins series of paintings of Wales, which became *A Prospect of Wales*, published by Penguin 1948.

1946 – First one-man show at the Leicester Galleries, London

1947 – Kenneth and Diana's daughter Sasha is born. Book jacket and other designs, additional paintings for *A Prospect of Wales*. Catches polio but not permanently affected.

1948 –Illustrations for *Norfolk* and *Isle of Wight* for Vision of England series

1949 – Appointed head of mural painting at the Royal College of Art (until 1958), moving to Putney in 1950

1951 – Designs a mural for the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion at the Festival of Britain

1956 – Exhibition of Oxford Barges at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

1958–59 – Awarded a Ford Foundation Grant to travel in the United States

1959 – Takes up position as Professor of Fine Art at Durham University's Fine Art Department (later Newcastle University). Commissioning editor for Shell County series of advertisements, also used a covers for *The Shilling Guides*.

1961 – Member of National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design committee (Chairman Sir John Summerson)

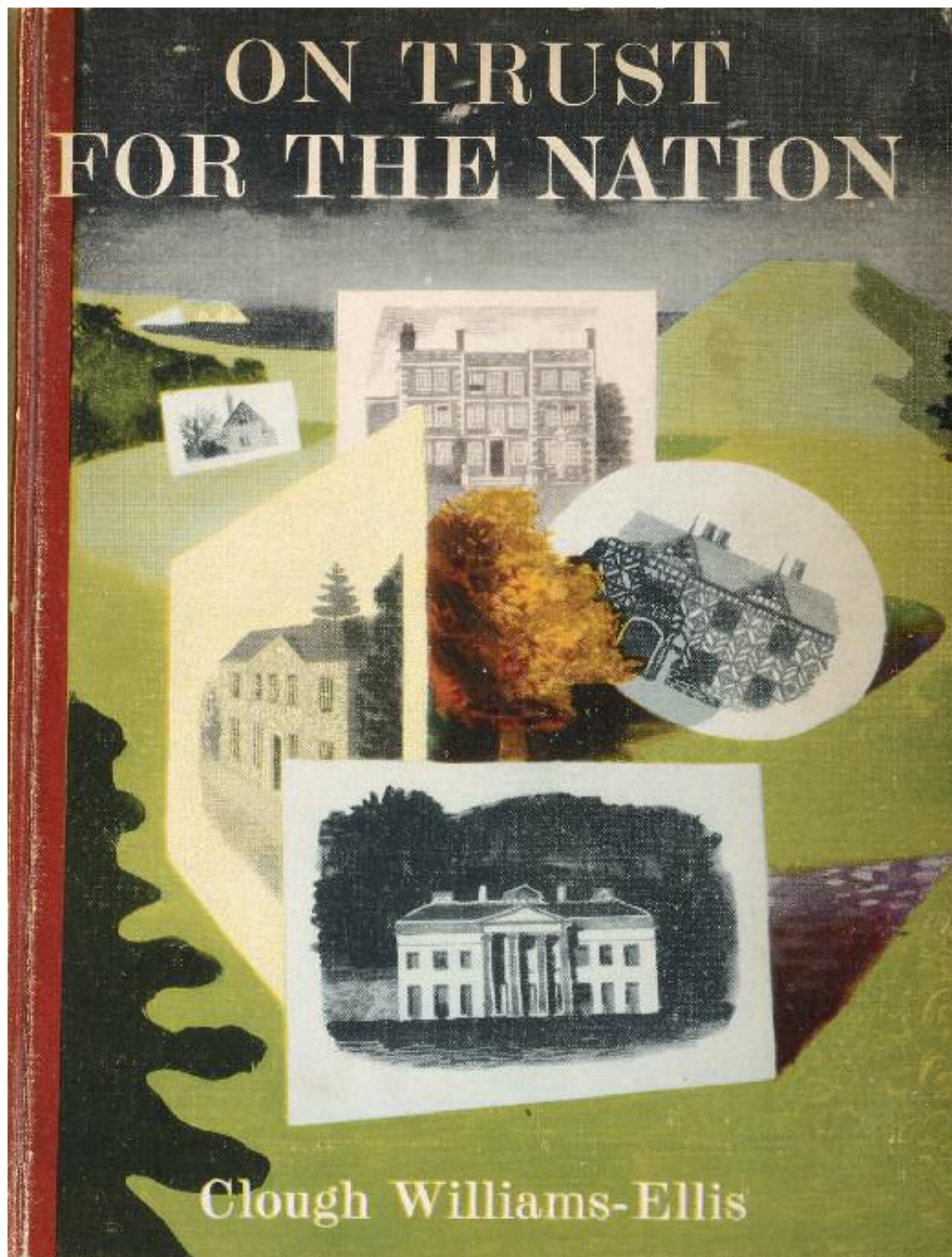
1976 – Retrospective at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

1980 – Retrospective at the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

1992 – Touring retrospective exhibition, Welshpool, Cardiff and London

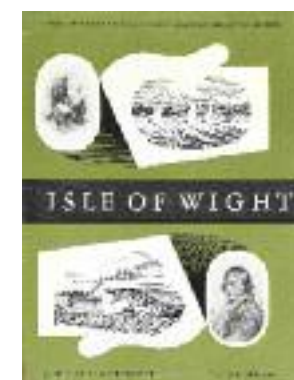
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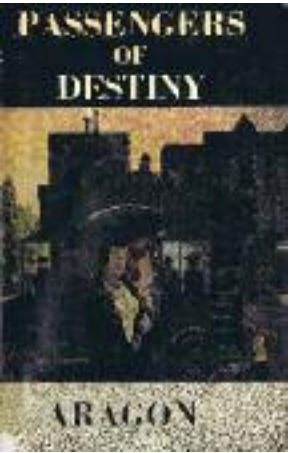
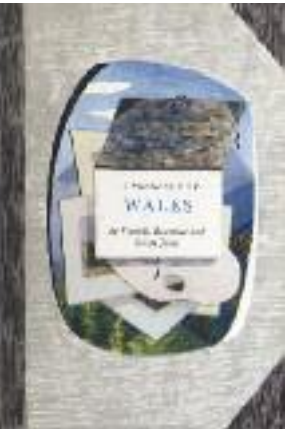
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