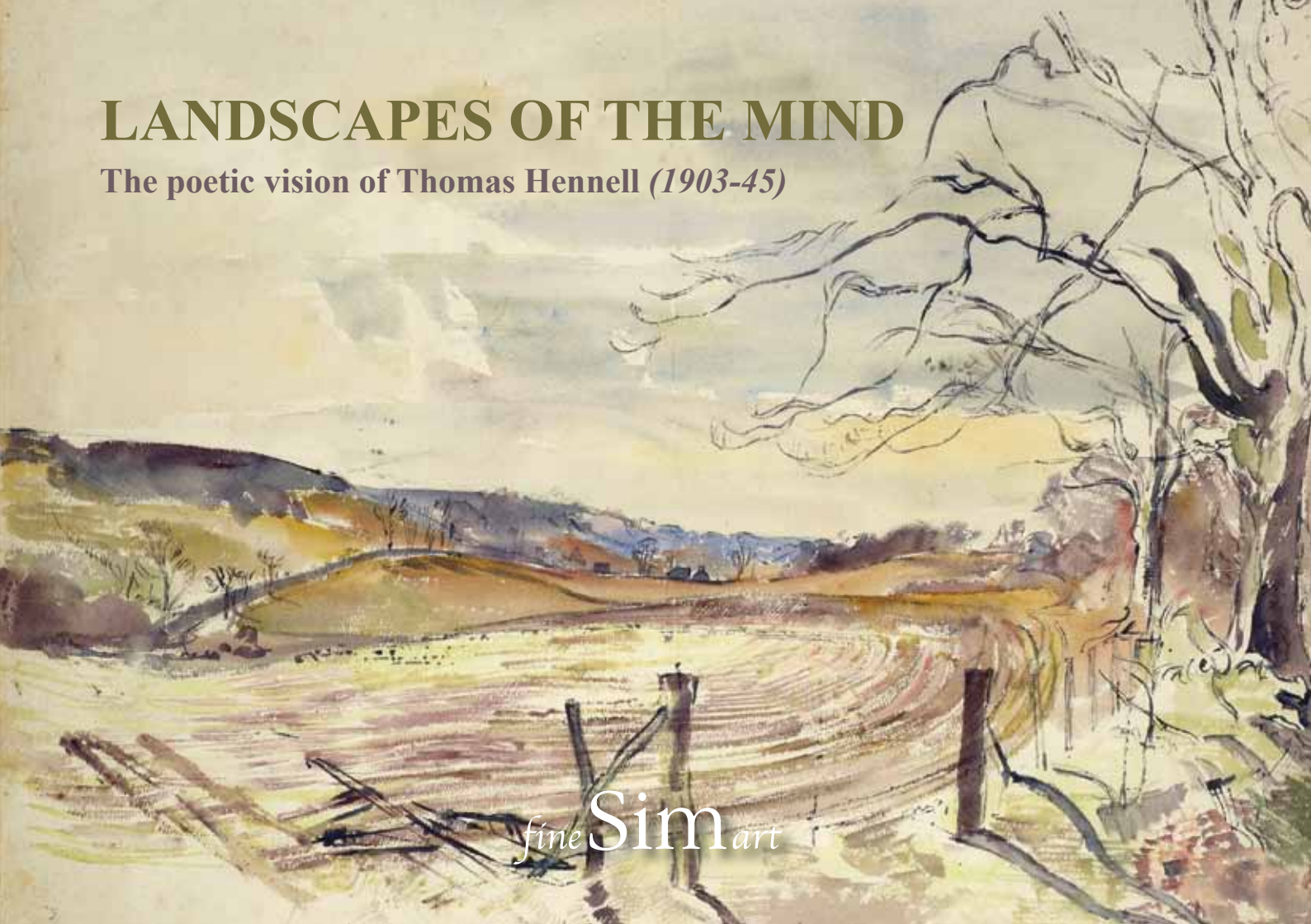


# LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND

The poetic vision of Thomas Hennell (1903-45)



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## The poetic vision of Thomas Hennell (1903-45)

Thomas Hennell, with typical self-effacement, described himself as an ‘ordinary descriptive draughtsman’. His subjects were equally modest: until his late flowering as a war artist, they consisted almost entirely of the landscapes and rapidly disappearing rural life of his native Kent.

So why does this inauspicious-sounding, old-fashioned figure, seemingly at odds with the *zeitgeist* of his own time and the currents of the modern art world, continue to inspire such interest so long after his death?

The answer lies partly in the extraordinary events that burst, like comets, into the quiet landscape of his life: firstly mental illness, which led to three years of incarceration in mental hospitals and then the cataclysm of the Second World War, which saw this retiring, vulnerable poet painter suddenly extracted - like William Boot in Evelyn Waugh’s ‘*Scoop*’ - from his little patch of Kentish earth into the major theatres of an international war.

To Hennell’s army of devotees, however, there is a lyrical quality that sets his work apart from the ordinary, regardless of whether the subject is an open field, a corn dolly or a bombed cathedral. “His paintings are the work of a poet”

*“To Hennell’s army of devotees  
there is a lyrical quality that  
sets his work apart from the  
ordinary”*

was how fellow artist and teacher, E.Owen Jennings, described it. There is an intensely serious, almost devotional, quality to Hennell’s approach to his work that envelops even his simplest landscape watercolour and somehow transforms it into a lyrical work of art.

Hennell, of course, would have averred that what was in front of him was the starting point; the object of his artistic endeavour was to unlock its essence - “there is a mystery to what is simple”, he once wrote. Nevertheless, the starting point in Hennell’s work is the reality of a scene - be it fieldworkers digging carrots or a Burmese military airfield - regardless of whether the higher objective is achieved.





Digging Carrots  
Watercolour Online CAT. 6

As Michael Macleod wrote in his perceptive biography, this means that “Even a slight & disorganised Hennell sketch announces - *this is happening.*”

Part of what draws people to Hennell is an elegiac nostalgia for the rural past, for the ‘subfusc hues’ of the English watercolour tradition, of which he seems very much a part, perhaps even its last gasp. At art school, when all around him were captivated by the fashionable modernity of Picasso and fauvism, Hennell’s nickname was ‘Turner’.

Despite his Englishness, the artist whose life story - and method - Hennell’s most closely resembles, however, is Vincent van Gogh. Both were lay preaching sons of country parsons, steeped in the language of the Bible; both lived among and recorded the lives of working people; both suffered serious episodes of



Fieldworkers against a Louring Sky  
Watercolour Online CAT. 20

*“he achieved a mastery of line & colour”*

**Harold Massingham**

mental illness; both were unlucky in love; both reached an expressive artistic peak before premature deaths around the age of 40; both were highly literate - wordsmiths in addition to their talents as artists.

Hennell's method, too, closely resembles Van Gogh's, in that they were both principally *plein air* painters, grappling urgently with the elements on a daily basis in an attempt to achieve a 'moment of vision', resorting only occasionally and reluctantly to the studio. In his essay '*In Praise of Watercolour*', Hennell wrote "the watercolour painter must invoke the spirits of earth as well as of air and water".

*"the artist whose life story most closely  
Hennell's most closely resembles is Van Gogh"*

This was a strained and onerous process, physically as well as mentally: "the sanctuary of nature is no temple of idleness", wrote Hennell in characteristically biblical fashion. With their respective histories of psychosis, neither Van Gogh nor Hennell took reality for granted.

Despite Hennell's well documented history of psychosis, there is very rarely any visual indication of madness. The vast majority of Hennell's work, even from his periods of incarceration, is based on a shared reality. In fact, his drawings of life in mental hospital are all too disturbingly

The Orator  
Oil on canvas Online CAT. 5







real, delineating the grim life therein in an acutely realistic and occasionally harshly satirical way, almost as if Hennell is an observer and has been granted a journalistic pass for the day in order to record the sick and the conditions in which they are forced to live.

Even works of imagination - in other words pictures where either the entire subject, or elements within it, are imaginary - are vanishingly rare in Hennell's oeuvre. On the few occasions that they occur or perhaps one should say survive, because there are suspicions that work of this sort was deliberately destroyed, either by the artist or his family, they hint strongly at artistic autobiography

The Wellcome Collection has one such visionary piece: a watercolour from 1935 (just after Hennell's release from hospital) showing what the curator describes as a "serene classical steersman" plying his vessel across a tempestuous, 'Turner-like' sea. His vessel contains a shackled figure that resembles William Blake's 'Urizen'. In their wake, a very human figure, like one of Hennells' farm labourers, stumbles hopelessly.

In another highly unusual and obviously self revelatory work, '*Yarmouth Sands from Memory*' (left), Hennell includes (uniquely) a self portrait,

*Yarmouth Sands from Memory* (includes self-portrait)  
Watercolour Online CAT. 10



Orchard Cottage (Hennell's home from 1935 onwards)  
Watercolour Online CAT. 07

*"I bend my narrow hope  
A frugal means to make"* Thomas Hennell, 'Hercules Seghers'



*“his paintings are the work of a poet”*

### E. Owen Jennings

for the only time in his entire career: a depiction of himself seated, sketching at the seaside. Except that this is clearly not a realistic picture of Yarmouth Sands but a dreamlike depiction of Hennell’s memory of the scene. Freud would have a field day interpreting potential meanings: light blazes from a gaudily painted tearoom with ‘Just as Mother Makes it’ written on its fascia, outside which a pavement artist sits, accompanied by the words ‘All My Own Work’ written, perhaps in sand, in front of him. Other elements include an outsized carnival head, a railway that leads nowhere and a dramatically unreal sky akin to the Northern Lights.

These works of the imagination are very much the exception in Hennell’s body of work, much of which is concentrated on the small patch of rural Kent between his father’s rectory at Ridley, where he was brought up and Orchard Cottage, near Meopham, where he lived and worked between 1935 and the end of his life. This strangely remote backwater was his equivalent of Cezanne’s Mont St Victoire, an ever-present but ever-changing backdrop for the artist’s daily battle to capture the ‘moment of vision’.

In tandem with Hennell’s work as a watercolourist came the illustrative work he produced for his own books as well as other ruralist writers, such as H.J. Massingham and



Wymondham North Mill, Norfolk  
*Reed pen Online CAT. 28*

Henry Warren. Many people consider Hennell's accurately detailed and sensitive drawings - mostly in reed pen - of farm buildings and rural crafts to be his most important work for their value as historical record.

It was this aspect of Hennell's work that led ultimately to his seemingly implausible call up as a war artist. In 1941, Kenneth Clark, the driving force behind the War Artists' Advisory Committee, recommended the purchase for the nation of a Hennell watercolour of fieldworkers. Hennell had been recruited, along with many artists, to produce work for the *Recording Britain* project, a pictorial record of a

country under threat. Its editor, Arnold Palmer had been very impressed by the assiduousness - and quality - of Hennell's work and recommended a parcel of his work for acquisition by the Committee. As a result of this, Hennell received his first commission as a war artist: to record the 1941 harvest.

The watercolours he produced at this time were in a way the apogee of his career as a landscape watercolourist, combining his profound affinity with the land - its light, colour and atmosphere - with his acute observational skills, which enabled him to focus on what exactly was changing and what remained the same. To the uninitiated, they can seem



*“We [Bawden and  
Ravilious] regarded  
him as a man of  
genius”*

**Edward Bawden**

Gypsy Boy Asleep  
Reed pen Online CAT. 31





Gypsy Encampment  
Reed pen Online CAT. 30

*“Hennell was the greatest watercolourist that  
England has produced during this century”*

**Carel Weight**



Building an Airfield, Pegu, Burma  
Watercolour Online CAT. 9





*Hennell - War Artist*



*Hennell (bottom right) laughing with art school friends and family*

Photos courtesy: 'Bethlem Museum of the Mind'



Sheep Dipping  
Watercolour Online CAT. 23





Wartime Fieldworkers Sacking Carrots (with Tent), Ridley  
*Watercolour Online CAT. 17*

like straightforward, albeit beautiful, landscape watercolours but look closer, with a countryman's eye, and all is revealed. The fieldworkers may be women, children, old men, rather than the young men called up for war; the unfamiliar tractor may have replaced the ploughman's horse; those are 'Home Guard' called upon to man the threshing machine. To the observer at a distance of eighty years, they seem like an elegy for a long-since vanished vision of a countryside, once populated by busy working families, now empty. Their purpose, as historical record, has been fulfilled.

Despite the aplomb with which he carried off this commission, Hennell's correspondence with the War Art Committee at this time has an almost comically 'Country Mouse' feel. In one letter, Hennell apologises for missing a meeting because he had promised "to pick up some bees" on the day in question (he kept working hives at Orchard Cottage). In this context, Hennell's appointment as an Official War Artist, on a six month contract 'to record aspects of the war in Iceland' (replacing his friend Eric Ravilious, who had been killed on a reconnaissance flight) seems incongruous. He had barely travelled outside England, seemed ill at ease in the modern world, and had only relatively recently recovered from a serious mental illness.

Despite this, Hennell proved himself a model war artist: the Committee found him flexible, committed and responsive; his war pictures received extremely favourable reviews from fellow artists and, most importantly, Kenneth Clark, who rated him one of the scheme's greatest successes.







*“the best of it [Hennell’s work]  
is as good as anything done by  
other English twentieth century  
watercolourists”.*

**Michael Macleod**

It should really have come as no surprise that Hennell would respond so creatively and well to fresh challenges. On those few occasions before the war when he had cause to travel, he produced some of his very best work - his drawings and watercolours of Rathcoursey House in County Cork are some of his most memorable evocations of the spirit of place. But there is no doubt that the considerable challenges of war work - figure drawing, groups of figures, complicated large scale machinery - revealed hidden depths in an already considerable talent.

As his friend, Harold Massingham, put it in his memorial tribute: “at his climax, he achieved a mastery of blended line and colour, while his colouring became...liquid, luminous and lovely”.

Rathcoursey House from Mad Dog Wood  
*Watercolour Online CAT. 15*



*[Hennell was] “one of the war art scheme’s greatest successes”*

**Meirion Harris**





Calais Nord - post D-Day 1944  
*Watercolour Online CAT. 25*

**Front Cover**

Kentish Landscape  
(possibly Darenth Valley nr Shoreham)  
*Watercolour Online CAT. 18*

**Back Cover**

Wattle & Daub Barn  
*Reed Pen Online CAT. 4*

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*View all 38 works in the ‘**Thomas Hennell Collection**’ online*

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