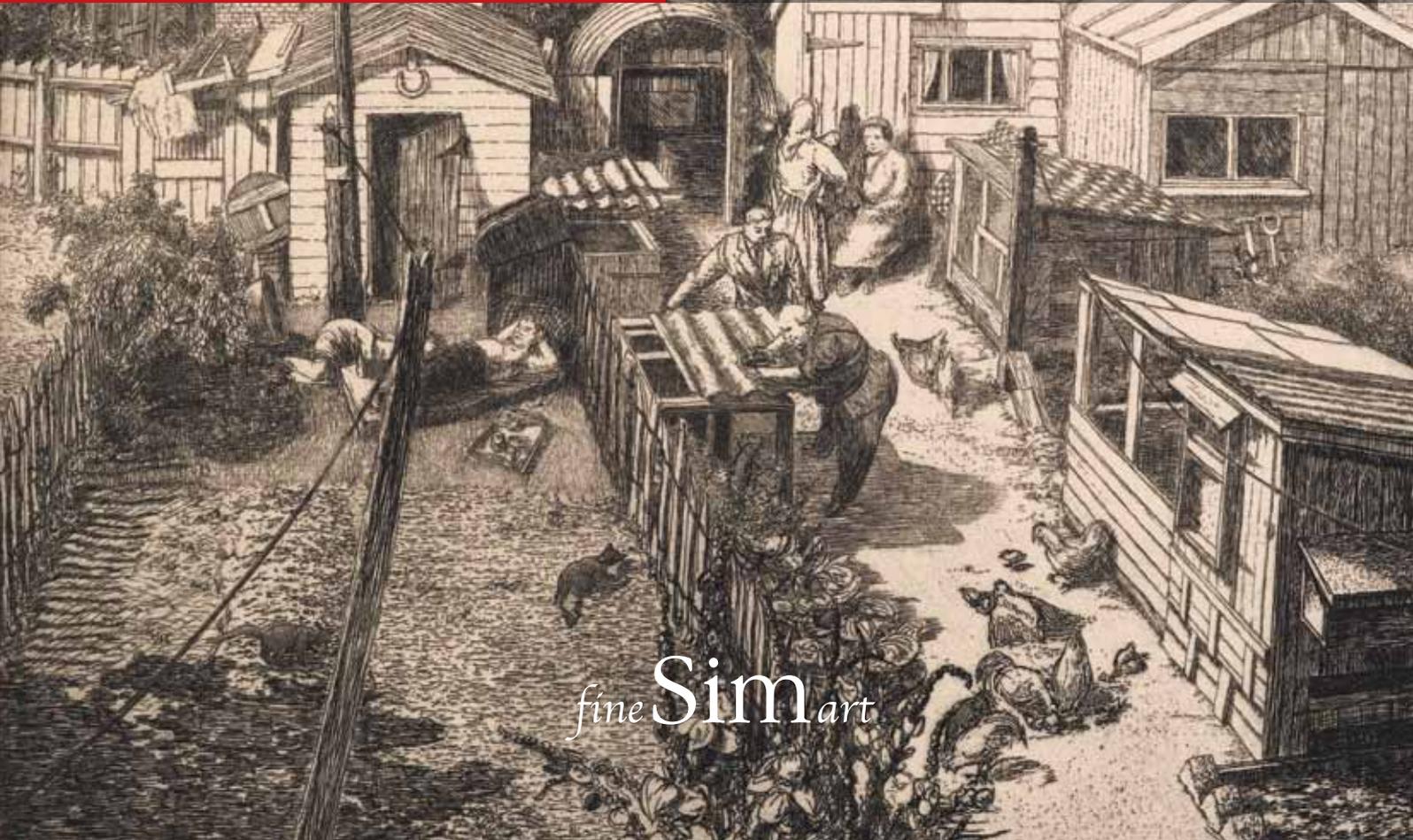


THIS HAPPY BREED

*Post-war London seen through the eyes of
re-discovered artist, R.C. Collins ARCA*



fine Sim *art*



Kew Bridge, etching CAT. 2

In memory of John Aldridge, journalist, collector & friend

It isn't often that the art world, with its remorseless sifting of wheat from chaff, misses a trick. But just occasionally, it does.

Two years ago, a long-retired commercial artist called Raymond Collins, died at the age of 87, without fanfare. Among the goods cleared from his pleasant but unexceptional house in Richmond, were a number of folios of artwork, mostly dating from the late 1940s.

Artists' estates, as they dribble onto the retail or auction market, generally fall into two categories: the over-sifted and barely marketable fragments of a known talent, or the embarrassingly complete remains of talentless unknowns. This was neither.

R.C. Collins as he signed himself, was both unknown and manifestly talented. And the works presented appeared to be his complete, surviving oeuvre.

'poignant record of respectable working class life'

After further research, it transpired that Collins had been a student at the prestigious Royal College of Art between 1948 and 1951 and before that had been educated at the Birmingham School of Art, the first municipal school of art and one of the spiritual homes of the Art & Crafts movement.

Further digging revealed that Collins was born on the 3rd June 1927 in Selly Oak, Birmingham, the son of a train driver. Like his near contemporary, Raymond Briggs (whose work Collins' output

FRONT COVER: Back gardens, etching CAT. 1

BACK COVER: Temple in the Park, etching CAT. 22



Self portrait in braces, etching CAT. 3

resembles with its painstaking and sometimes poignant record of respectable working class life) he was part of the wartime generation that took advantage of the post-war educational boom and looked beyond the blue collar work of their parents' generation.

The Royal College would have been the ultimate destination of choice for any ambitious young artist. The school had been evacuated from

London to Ambleside during the war, with students housed, bizarrely, in two large hotels – a recent exhibition commemorated this jaunt under the catchy title *'Bohemians in Exile'*. Back in London for the autumn term of 1946, there must have been a palpable sense of a new age dawning.

The college at that time was a hotbed of talent, presided over by an illustrious teaching staff of mostly active exhibiting artists - many of them returning from duty as war artists - whose names now form the bedrock of any sale of Modern British Art: from John Nash and Edward Bawden to John Minton.

A prospectus for 1948, shows an organisation brimming with talent, both young and old: in 'Sculpture', there was Frank Dobson and John Skeaping; 'Graphic Design' had no less a pair of names than Abram Games and Edward Bawden, while 'Painting' had Ruskin Spear, Carel Weight and Rodrigo Moynihan among a host of luminaries on the staff.

'Collins' forté was clearly observation of London life'

Collins was enrolled in the School of Engraving under the influential figure of Robert Austin, with no less a figure than Barnett Freedman as Visitor. Austin had been a major force in the revival of etching as an art form in the 1920s and 1930s and was revered for the fineness of his line, which recalled the Pre-Raphaelites and even Dürer in its delicacy and precision.

The influence of Austin on Collins' figure drawing is clear, particularly in his tender portraits of women, which are particularly well observed. But this was clearly not a young man who wanted to linger too long in the life class. Being able to draw figures was a means to an end.



Getting ready, chalk pastel CAT. 4



Clocking off, chalk pastel CAT. 5



Tramshed, chalk pastel CAT. 6

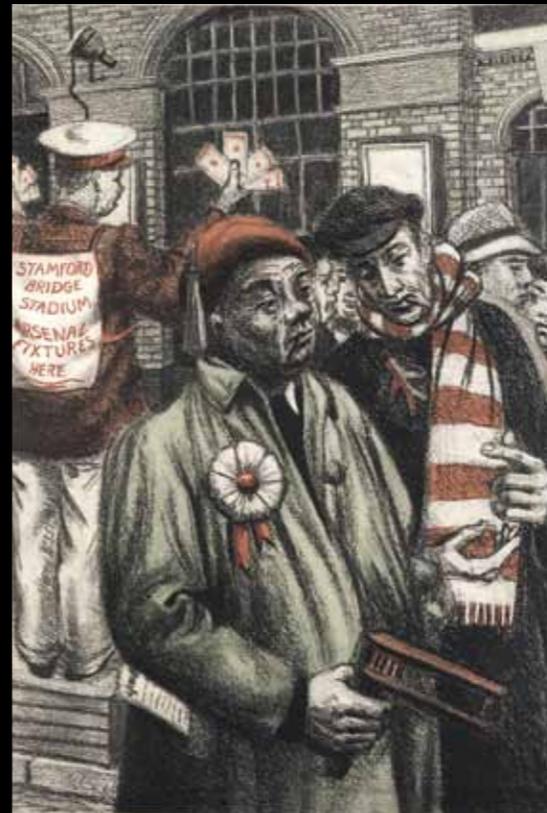
Judging from the folios, Collins's fortè was clearly observation of London life: groups of people talking in pubs, standing in queues, milling around in stations, looking in shop windows, even gurning in a hall of mirrors. He also had a voracious eye for detail; a particularly delightful pastel of an elegant young woman looking in the window of a clock shop is the culmination of dozens of individual sketches, built up into a delicious finished product.

'the capturing of period is particularly cinematic'

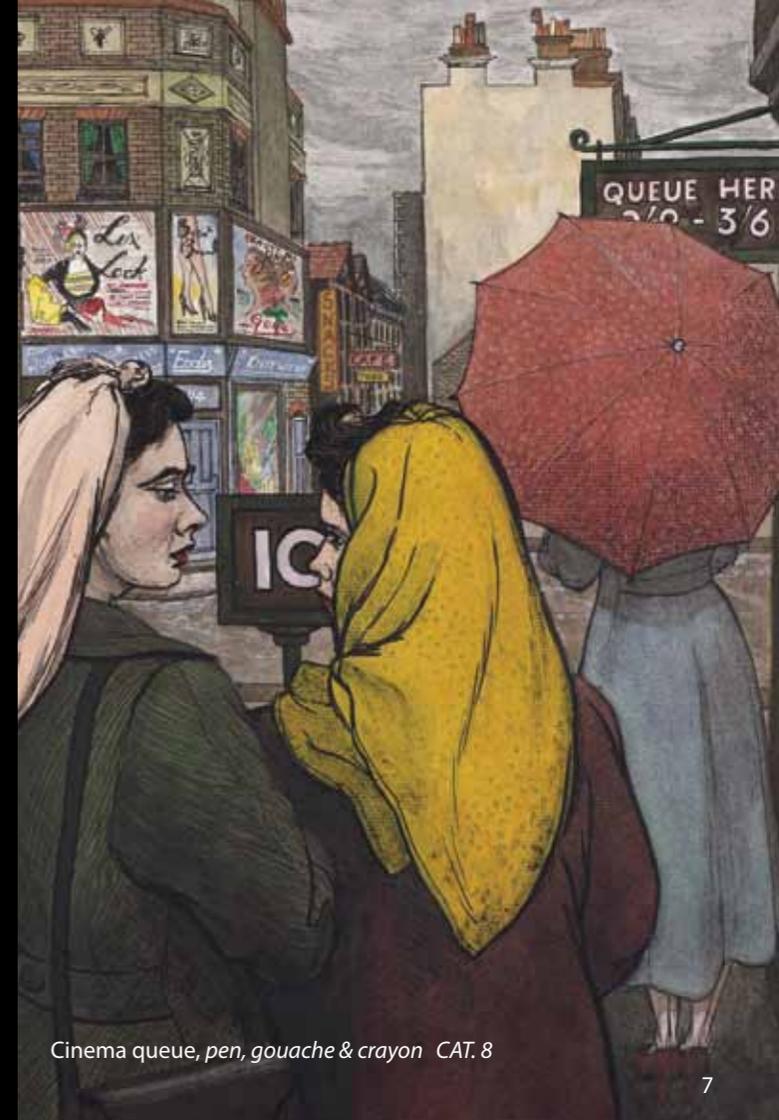
Another salient feature of Collins' work is its luscious colour, which belies the stereotype of this period, possibly derived from the prevalence of black and white film, as drab and monotone. A pair of head-scarved women wait in a cinema queue; their clothes and every detail of the advertising billboards above their heads picked out in brilliant pastel colour. Even in the workshop of a tramshed, the sparks from an oxyacetylene torch illumine the livery of the tramshed with a brilliant, Eric Kennington-like heightened realism.

The keenness and stylish wit of Collins's observation means that post-war London, in all its quotidian ordinariness, is evoked very effectively and with what has now become, with the passage of the decades, a powerful period charm: back gardens with Anderson shelters being re-purposed as chicken runs are as tellingly observed as the smart women browsing in an upmarket antique shop.

The capturing of period is particularly cinematic; the young factory workers chatting as they clock off; the young woman brushing her hair in the mirror have the atmosphere of a feature film storyboard. The overall effect is similar to that created by Noel Coward's evocation of inter-war suburban life in *'This Happy Breed'*.



Away supporters, Stamford Bridge, chalk pastel CAT. 7



Cinema queue, pen, gouache & crayon CAT. 8



Gossip, charcoal CAT. 9

It could be seen as a mystery and a sadness that such a talented young man chose not to pursue a career as an exhibiting artist - there is no record of Collins ever having exhibited or sold a picture - but clues as to why can be found in the sparse details of his life that survive. While still a student at the RCA, the 22 year old Collins was married to a Birmingham girl, June Eades, and within a year is recorded as living with his wife and new-born daughter in Fulham, a basement flat just around the corner from Stamford Bridge Football ground (a very different milieu today) giving his occupation as 'student artist'.



The Clock Shop, pen, watercolour & gouache, signed in the margin & dated July 1950 CAT. 10

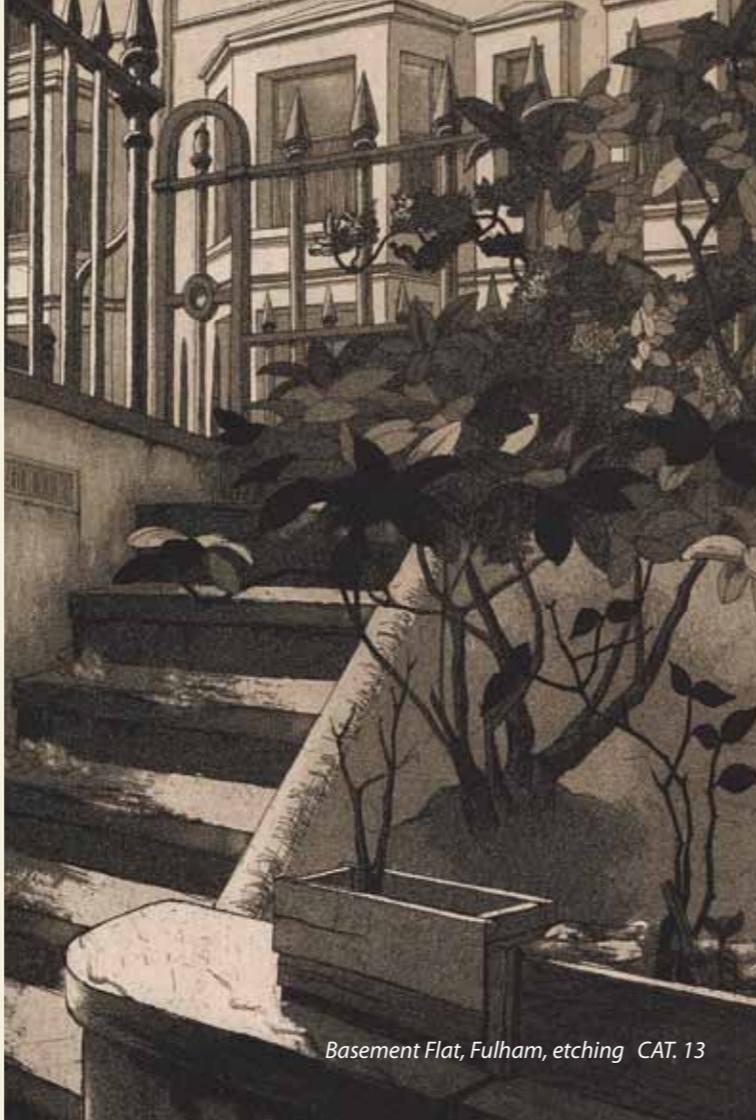


Earl's Court Tube Station, gouache CAT. 11

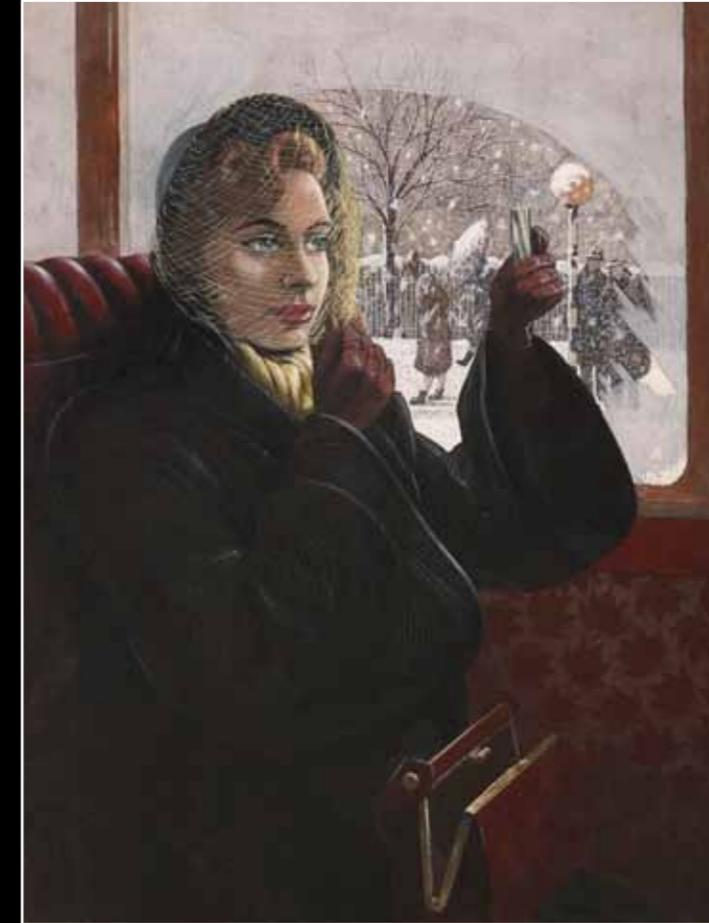


The Spare Room, etching CAT. 12

No doubt the normal exigencies of life would have been particularly pressing for a working class boy with no embedded wealth or connections to fall back on. A job as a working artist in the difficult economic climate of the late 1940s must have presented an enticing prospect compared with the vagaries of a fine art market where, increasingly, draughtsmanship counted for nothing.



Basement Flat, Fulham, etching CAT. 13



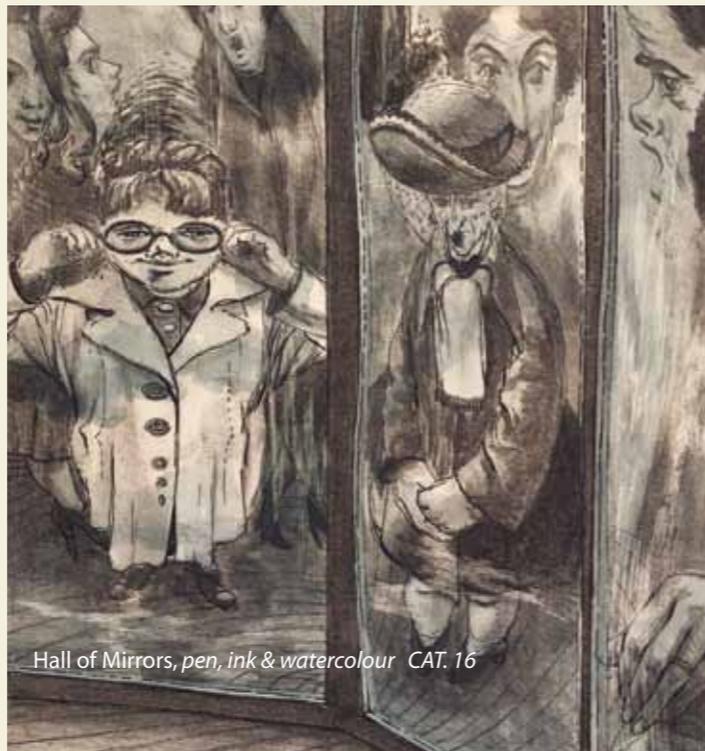
The Belisha Beacon, gouache CAT. 14



The Antique Shop, etching CAT. 15

But his luck was in and by 1955, with Collins still only 27, his occupation on the census had transmuted seamlessly into 'Commercial Artist' and the family expanded, with the addition of a son. The Royal College had done its job in the old fashioned way, training an artist to find gainful employment in the wider working world. But, sixty five years on, looking wistfully at the skilful, charming and occasionally exquisite pictures in Raymond Collins' folios, it is hard not to feel that the commercial world's gain was the art world's loss.

Andrew Sim 2017



Hall of Mirrors, pen, ink & watercolour CAT. 16

'The influence of Austin on Collins' figure drawing is clear'



West Indian Woman
Pen & Watercolour
CAT. 17



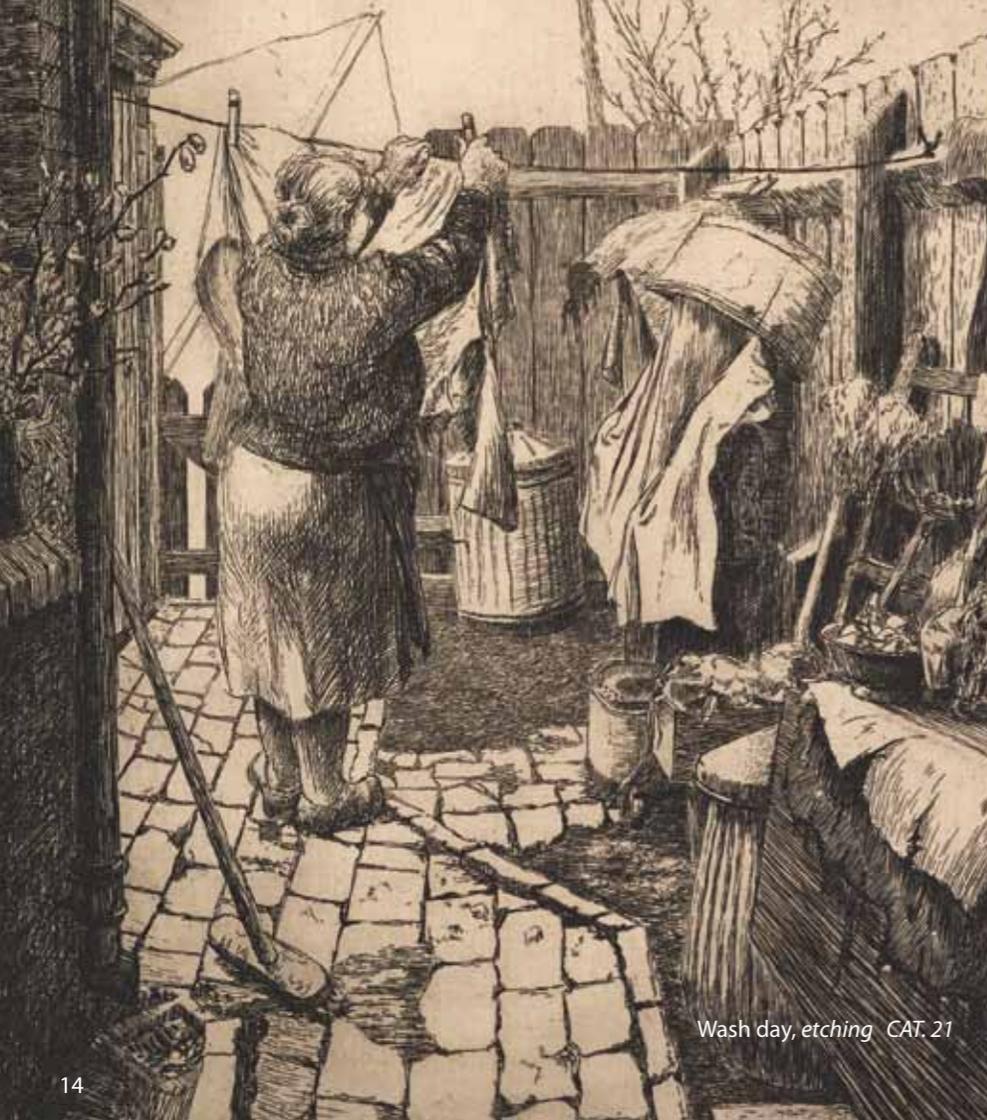
Pensive woman
Pen & watercolour
CAT. 18



Prayers
Pen
CAT. 19



A Break from Housework
Pen & watercolour
CAT. 20



Wash day, etching CAT. 21

THE COLLECTION

- CAT 1: **Back gardens**
Etching (24 x 17cm)
- CAT 2: **Kew Bridge**
Etching (15 x 18cm)
- CAT 3: **Self portrait in braces**
Etching (18 x 15cm) edition of 5
- CAT 4: **Getting ready**
Chalk pastel (42 x 32cm)
- CAT 5: **Clocking off**
Chalk pastel (34 x 42cm)
- CAT 6: **Tramshed**
Chalk pastel (44 x 30cm)
- CAT 7: **Away supporters, Stamford Bridge**
Chalk pastel (43 x 30cm)
- CAT 8: **Cinema queue**
Pen, gouache & crayon (34 x 27cm)
- CAT 9: **Gossip**
Charcoal (40 x 38cm)
- CAT 10: **The Clock Shop**
Pen, watercolour & gouache, signed in the margin & dated July 1950 (40 x 29cm)

- CAT 11: **Earls Court Tube Station**
Gouache (24 x 33cm)
- CAT 12: **The Spare Room**
Etching (14 x 14cm)
- CAT 13: **Basement Flat, Fulham**
Etching (24 x 17cm)
- CAT 14: **The Belisha Beacon**
Gouache (35 x 27cm)
- CAT 15: **The Antique Shop**
Etching (30 x 20cm)
- CAT 16: **Hall of Mirrors**
Pen, ink & watercolour (38 x 28cm)
- CAT 17: **West Indian Woman**
Pen & watercolour (44 x 21cm)
- CAT 18: **Pensive woman**
Pen & watercolour (42 x 27cm)
- CAT 19: **Prayers**
Pen (42 x 27cm)
- CAT 20: **A Break from Housework**
Pen & watercolour (50 x 33cm)
- CAT 21: **Wash day**
Etching (18 x 16cm)
- CAT 22: **Temple in the Park**
Etching (16 x 11cm)

- R.C. Collins ARCA (1927-2014)**
- Girl with fringe**
Graphite (23 x 18cm) (x2)
- The Ornamental Urn**
Etching (25 x 15cm)
- The Mind's Eye (Glamour Girls)**
Watercolour (30 x 45cm)
- Girl turning**
Pen and sepia wash (40 x 23cm)
- Middle-aged West Indian woman**
Pen (43 x 28cm)
- Girl by fireside with magazines**
Pen on blue paper (45 x 33cm)
- Resting girl with comb**
Pen on blue paper (32 x 45cm)
- Drying clothes in front of fire**
Pen on blue paper (43 x 32cm)
- Self portrait**
Graphite, signed R.C. Collins (36 x 28cm)
- Intense self portrait**
Etching (18 x 15cm) edition of 5
- Riding Girl**
Etching (22 x 15cm)
- Ages of Man fantasy**
Pen and wash (28 x 22cm)
- Old woman**
Graphite (36 x 28cm)
- Trilbys in the snow**
Gouache (33 x 43cm)
- 'Workers' Magazine mock-up**
Gouache, signed & dated 1945 (28 x 22cm)

Design & Artwork
Ant Graphics Design Services

Photography
Matthew Hollow

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Elizabeth Harvey-Lee

Contact:
Andrew & Diane Sim
Email: simfineart@btinternet.com
Phone: 07919 356150

fine **Sim art**

