

HOLDING THE LINE

The Art of the War Years



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HOLDING THE LINE

Introduction

“Isn’t war art a bit grim and repetitive?” is a typical - and understandable - reaction to being told that one is engaged in producing a catalogue of pictures relating to war. Before I started, almost accidentally at first and then enthusiastically and deliberately, to deal in war art, I might have agreed with them.

But the naysayers are wrong. War art can be profoundly beautiful and is quite extraordinarily diverse. A glance at the titles for the ‘Exhibition of National War Pictures’ at the Royal Academy in 1945 bears out the difficulty of neat categorisation: “Escape of the Zebra from the Zoo during an air raid” by Carel Weight sits adjacent to ‘Land Girls Going to Bed’ by Evelyn Dunbar; “A Bunyan-Stannard Irrigation Envelope for the Treatment of Burns” by Ethel Gabain (an image of transcendent beauty, incidentally) sits next to a more conventionally beautiful watercolour by Thomas Hennell, of a rural harvest in wartime.

Another surprising feature of war art is how much is still out there to deal in, given that so much war art was produced in harness to the war effort and subsequently portioned out to museum collections. In the few years since I’ve been dealing in this material, pictures of national importance and significance keep coming out of lofts and plan chests.

In the two previous incarnations of this annual wartime art show, a number of important pictures - and groups of pictures - have been rediscovered (see page 62). This year, the quantity and quality of work is as good as ever: we have a varied new collection of work by Thomas Hennell, including one of the last pictures the artist painted before his disappearance: a large and intensely evocative depiction of the Burmese jungle. We also have a delightful group of wartime watercolours and drawings by the fascinating and rarely-seen London artist, Grace Golden, most of whose surviving work was bequeathed to the Museum of London after her death. This is the most significant collection of her work to have come onto the market in years and is a delight for anyone interested in the look and feel of London during WWII.

One of the most striking features about dealing in the still emerging work of this period is how often really first-rate pieces appear by artists with Slade or Royal College training but little or no track record at auction. When I first saw ‘The Last Supper’ by Robert H.Lee, produced in response to his first-hand experiences of the bombing of Dresden as a prisoner-of-war, it struck

me that this was a little masterpiece, worthy of any national collection. Similarly, the wartime portraiture of Noel Ellis – a revelation to me – seems to this critic to be the equal of Eric Kennington or even, dare I say it, early Lucien Freud. It is stunningly good.

There are also some discoveries from earlier periods. At an auction recently, I was drawn to a curiously innocent-looking image of a young Guardsman in his patrol dress blues. When I removed the picture from its frame, I discovered a note taped to the back stating that the subject was “Lord Bingham, known as Pat”. It turns out that this young man - the recipient of a Military Cross while still in his teens - was to become the 6th Earl of Lucan and father the infamous, disappearing 7th Earl. For good measure, the 6th Earl was a convert to socialism and served as a minister in Attlee’s 1945 government. A photograph of him at this time shows that he retained the air of wide-eyed innocence into late middle age.



Although Lord Lucan was discovered at auction, much of the work in this catalogue has come to me privately, via the families of artists and their estates. Some of it has lain untouched and unregarded in the seventy years since it was produced, put away in trunks and plan chests like a diary or holiday snaps. This seems to have happened most often with the work of women war artists, whose post-war lives took a different turn and for whom the war assumed the character of a colourful interlude.

In the seventy years since this interment, of course, the work has assumed a very different character for the rest of us: it has acquired the charm and character that comes with age, of course, but partly because of the nature of what is being recorded and partly because of what the war brought out in the artist, the work has acquired significance and power. Looking at the very different wartime work of Eleanor Erlund Hudson and Rosemary Rutherford, for instance: the work they produced in the war was undoubtedly the highpoint of their respective careers. The war brought out the best in them.

Andrew Sim 2012

ROBERT H. LEE (1917-2007)

War had a profound effect on the life and remarkable career of Robert Lee. His father was killed at Ypres while Robert was just three, leaving him to be brought up by his mother and three sisters. After Bradford College of Art, he was awarded a place at the RCA two years before the outbreak of WWII, where he studied under Percy Horton, and was taught by visiting tutors, Nash and Ravilious, winning a scholarship for his fourth year. But before Lee could complete his studies, he was called up to fight in North Africa with the Royal Artillery, where he was taken prisoner, spending the rest of the War in a series of P.O.W. camps, stretching from Italy to Czechoslovakia. While in Germany, he witnessed first-hand the appalling effects of the Allied bombing of Dresden, which forms the inspiration for this profound and imaginative meditation.



Robert Lee on leave in Cairo, 1941



The Last Supper (Bomb Shelter) 1948 CAT. 1
Oil on Canvas

ROBERT H. LEE (1917-2007)

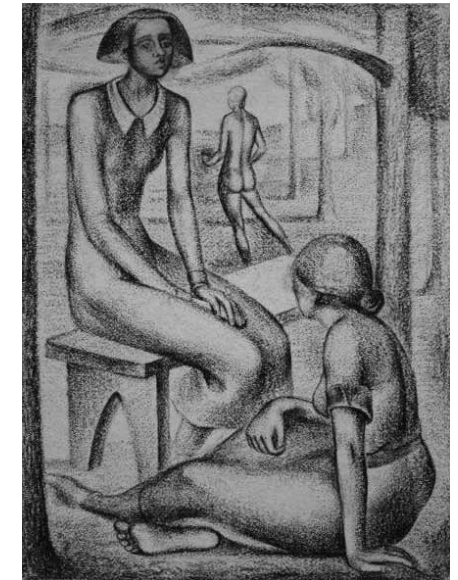
The six works illustrated here date from the late 1930s and display not only a remarkable maturity but also, in the case of 'Nicht Mehr' (Cat. 2), where bombs fall on a scene of domestic harmony, an eerie prescience, given what Lee was himself to experience in Dresden a decade later.



Nicht Mehr CAT. 2
Lithographic proof (unique)



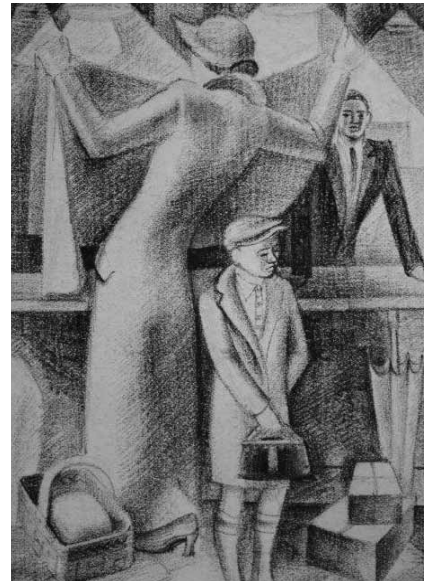
Utility Kitchen CAT. 4
Sepia Wash



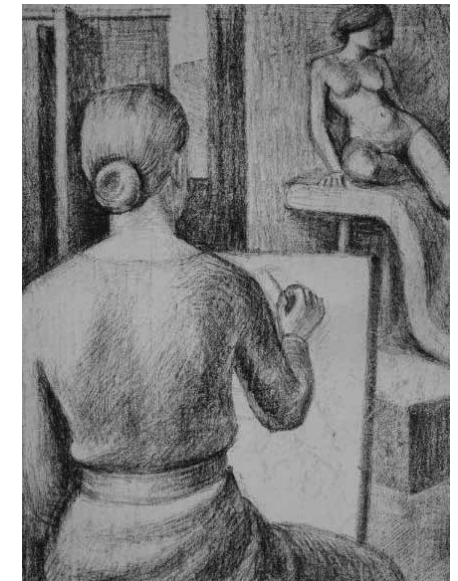
Fantasy CAT. 5
Graphite



Bowler Hat CAT. 3
Lithographic proof (unique)



The Shop CAT. 6
Graphite



Life Class CAT. 7
Graphite

The Poet as War Artist



THOMAS HENNELL R.W.S., N.E.A.C. (1903-45)

Sim Fine Art has been at the forefront of the recent revival of interest in the life and work of Thomas Hennell, staging the largest exhibition of his work for many years at the Science Museum in 2010, including a loan collection from the RAF Museum at Hendon and selling most of the significant works by the artist to have come onto the market in recent years, mostly privately sourced.

It is our belief that Hennell's work is not only historically important as a record of rural Britain at a time of upheaval and crisis but also as pure, expressive art of the highest quality. Hennell was essentially a poet artist - a troubled and visionary genius transformed by the exceptional circumstances of war into the unlikeliest of Official War Artists.

The choice collection of pictures shown here span the range of Hennell's wartime experience, from his work in the early years of the war on the Recording Britain project, through watercolours and drawings recording agricultural production for the War Artists Advisory Committee in 1942 to a final poignant depiction of the jungle into which he would ultimately disappear without trace.



Golden Valley Road, Burma CAT. 8
Watercolour, inscribed 'Golden Valley Road' and marked 'B' (for Burma) by the artist

Next Page
Thomas Hennell
'Master and Pupil' - A.S. Hartrick and Vincent Lines CAT. 9
Pen and ink, inscribed verso



'Sacking and loading potatoes', Ridley, 1942 CAT. 10
Watercolour, signed and dated



'Helping out, working the land' 1940 CAT. 11
Reed pen and watercolour dated 1940



A Gypsy Encampment, 1940 CAT. 12
Watercolour, signed and dated

NOEL ELLIS A.R.C.A. (B.1917)

This haunting and powerful pair of portraits from the War years mark the relatively little-known Ellis out as a technically gifted and thoughtful portraitist. Born in the naval town of Plymouth, Ellis studied initially at Plymouth School of Art and then the Royal College, although his studies were interrupted by the war. Ellis seems initially to have volunteered for the Auxiliary Fire Service and then to have been called up to serve in the Navy. He exhibited at the Royal Academy, the N.E.A.C. and the London Group.



The Fox Fur - Artist's Wife CAT. 13
Oil on canvas, signed and dated 1944



Self portrait in Naval Uniform CAT. 14
Oil on board