



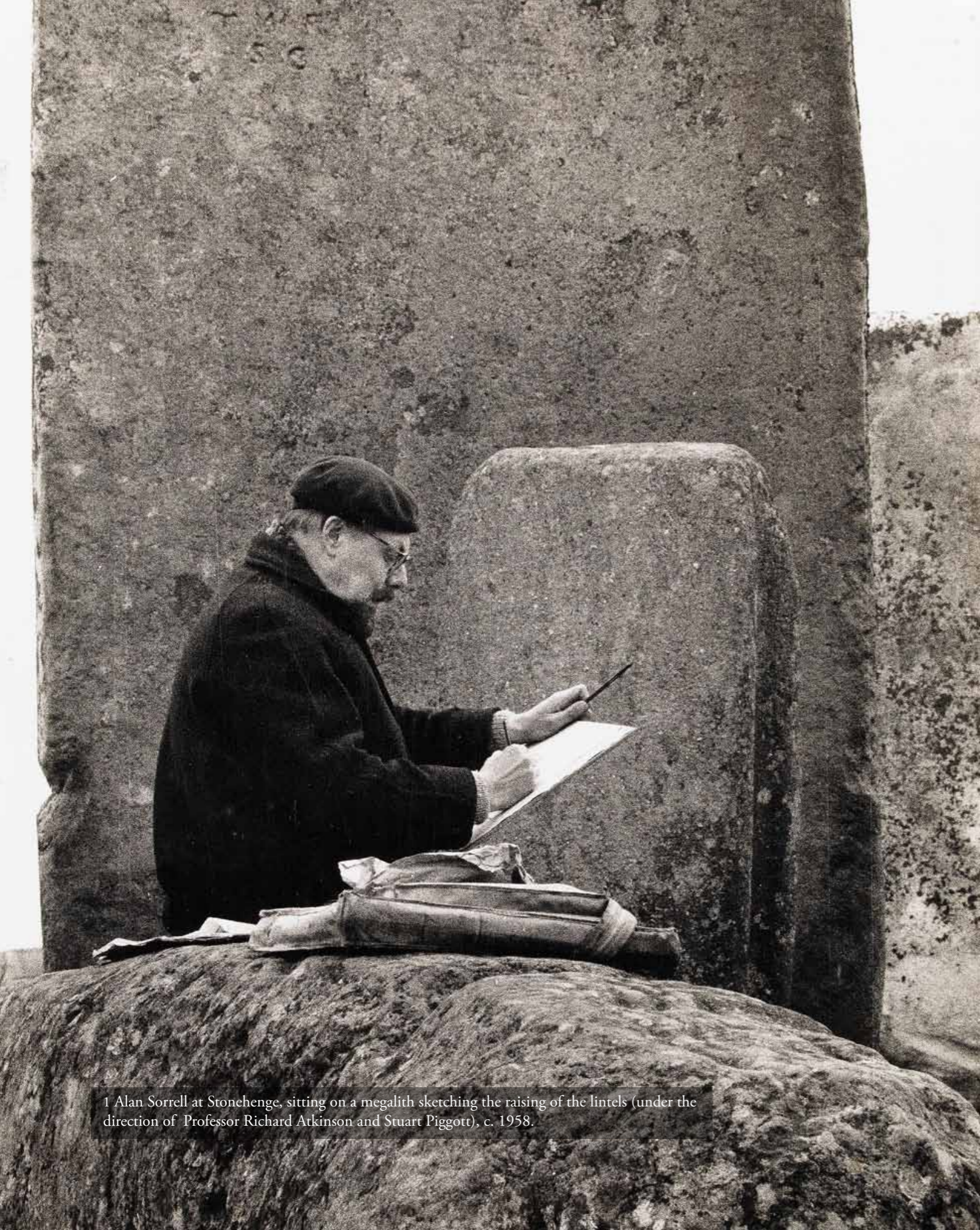
Alan Sorrell

The Life and Works of an English Neo-Romantic Artist

Edited by Sacha Llewellyn & Richard Sorrell



Alan Sorrell
(1904-1974)



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Sansom &
Company

¹ Alan Sorrell at Stonehenge, sitting on a megalith sketching the raising of the lintels (under the direction of Professor Richard Atkinson and Stuart Piggott), c. 1958.

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Preface: The Long Journey

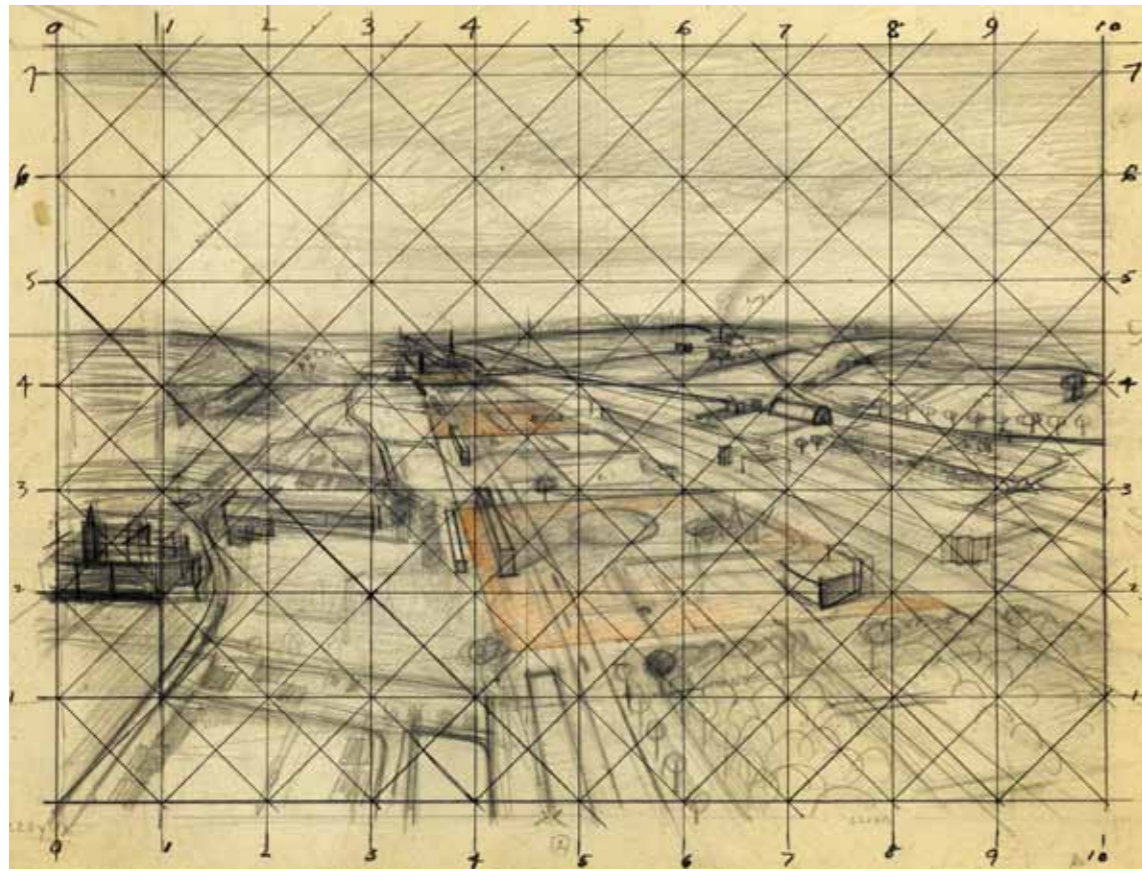
It is particularly fitting that this book should be published to coincide with the Sir John Soane's Museum's aptly titled exhibition: 'Alan Sorrell – A Life Reconstructed'. This makes it possible at last to assess the full range of Sorrell's work and the underlying poetic vision that runs through it. Comprising a series of essays the book sets out to chart Sorrell's life and achievements, as well as illustrating the range and diversity of his talents, most works having never previously been reproduced.

Alan Sorrell (1904-1974) [2] attended the Royal College of Art in the mid-1920s during a period which saw the emergence of talents such as Edward Bawden, Eric Ravilious, John Piper, Henry Moore and Barnett Freedman. This book demonstrates that though Sorrell's work has been less well documented his talent was comparable to that of artists more usually associated with the RCA's formidable reputation during the interwar years.

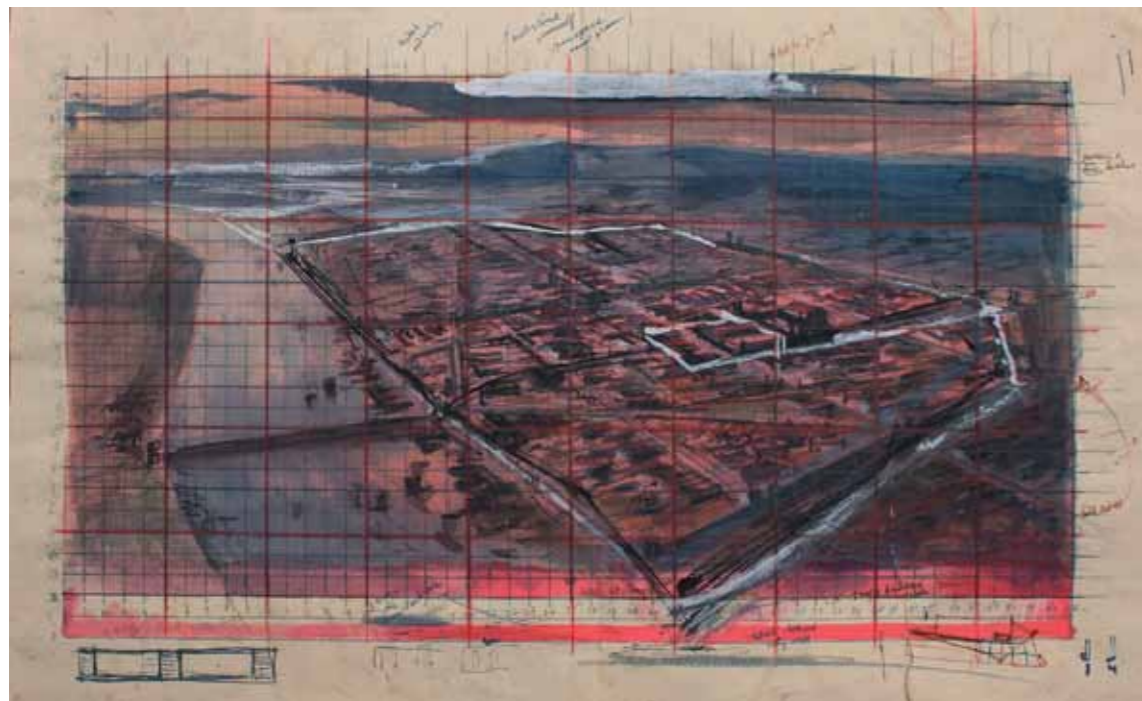
What were Sorrell's achievements and how should he be remembered by posterity? During his life Sorrell produced a vast cycle of murals (nearly 20 over a 30-year period). This publication includes a series of specially commissioned photographs which allow his achievements in this field to be more fully appreciated. When exhibited for the first time in a generation at the British Murals show organized by Liss Fine Art at The Fine Art Society (London), William Packer described Sorrell's recently rediscovered Festival of Britain mural as 'utterly enchanting' and 'quite the star of the entire show' (*The Times* 2.3.2013 p 91).

Another revelation comes in the form of Sorrell's images of the Second World War. Like many artists of the period, such as Sir Thomas Monnington, Sorrell's direct experience as an airman resulted in a new perspective – broad horizons and tilted aerial views which were to become the hallmark of his post-war reconstruction drawings. [3 & 4] Never an Official War Artist he was able to choose his subjects with relative freedom which resulted in an engaging record of daily life in wartime Britain.

Sorrell's work as a pre-war artist is relatively little known. Trained at Southend before starting to work as a commercial artist Sorrell subsequently took up a scholarship at the RCA (1924) – an association later strengthened by his period as a teacher there (1931-48). In between he spent two years at the British School at Rome on a Scholarship.



3 Sketch for *An Aerial View of a Wartime Airfield*, pencil, red pencil and ink on cardboard, squared, 29.8 x 40.5 cm (11 ¾ x 16 in.).



4 Reconstruction drawing, pencil, gouache and ink on paper, squared with notations, 31.5 x 51.5 cm (12 ¾ x 20 ¼ in.).

Almost no work survives from Sorrell's period as an RCA student other than the preparatory drawings with which he competed for his 1928 Rome Scholarship. The RCA archives for this period are much depleted (probably having been destroyed in the war), as a result of which it is hard to gain a fuller picture of this formative period of his life. An equally small body of work has survived from his two years in Rome though his early self-portrait (November 1928) [63] – a masterly fusion of nagging self-doubt and youthful self confidence – hints at the emerging power of his talent. Sorrell recorded his time at the British School at Rome in an unpublished typescript titled *Barbarians in Rome* in which he paints a vivid picture of life at the school during the years 1928-30.

Returning from Rome in 1930, Sorrell produced some very fine works: *Artist in the Campagna* (c. 1931) [20], *Appian Way* (1932) [43], *Rocky Formation at Thingvellir* (1934) [118], *The Long Journey* (1936) [5], *A Land Fit for Heroes* (1936) [44]. Sorrell's vision was born out of the Romantic British tradition exemplified by Blake, Palmer and their 20th-century disciples. *The Long Journey* exemplifies the Neo-Romantic movement which flowered during the interwar period. The narrative both engages and unsettles the viewer – the compositions suggest that more of the story is unfolding beyond the confines of the space into which the viewer peers but cannot see beyond.



5 *The Long Journey*, 1936, signed and dated, pencil, ink and gouache on paper, 37 x 52.3 cm (14 ½ x 20 ½ in.).

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CONTRIBUTORS

Paul LISS, fine art dealer and exhibition organiser. Joined Sotheby's as a Bursary student prior to working for Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox. Founded Liss Fine Art in 1991. Has curated many monographic exhibitions – Winifred Knights (1995), Thomas Monnington (1997), Charles Mahoney (1999), Robert Austin (2001), Frank Brangwyn (2006), Michael Canney (2007), Cecil Stephenson (2009), Stanley Lewis (2010), John McKenzie and Victor Moody (both 2012). Thematic catalogues include Women Artists, the art of WW1 and WW2 and the British School at Rome.

Richard SORRELL was born in 1948, the son of Alan and Elizabeth Sorrell. He trained as a painter at Walthamstow, Kingston and the Royal Academy Schools. He was elected to the Royal Watercolour Society, the Royal Society of British Artists and the New English Art Club. He was President of the Royal Watercolour Society from 2006-09. His work is in the collections of the V&A Museum, The National Trust and in many public and private collections in Britain and the USA. This book is the realisation of a lifetime's ambition to ensure that his father's work is fully appreciated by a wider public for its outstanding originality and significance within the context of 20th-century British art.

Peyton SKIPWITH, fine art consultant and author, executor to the Estate of Edward Bawden. Joined the staff of Bond Street dealers, The Fine Art Society, in 1961, retiring as deputy managing director in 2005. Has curated many exhibitions concerned with British fine and decorative arts 1880-1945 in the UK and USA. Co-author with Brian Webb of eight monographs for ACC, including Bawden, Ravilious, Paul and John Nash, McKnight Kauffer, Lovat Fraser, David Gentleman, Peter Blake and John Piper – as well as *Edward Bawden's London* (V&A Publications).

Sacha LLEWELLYN is an art historian and exhibition organiser. She studied history of art at the University of East Anglia and the Courtauld Institute of Art. In 1996 she joined Liss Fine Art as a Director. The first generation of Rome Scholars has been a focus of research resulting in exhibitions at the British School at Rome and museums in Britain. She was a major contributor to the recent Sansom and Co. book *British Murals & Decorative Painting 1920-1960*, for which she wrote chapters on Colin Gill and Winifred Knights. She is currently writing a monograph on Winifred Knights to be published in 2015. She will be guest-curating an exhibition on Winifred Knights for the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2016.

Brian FOSS has done extensive work on twentieth-century British art, on the representation of war in the visual arts, and on issues of nationalism and nationhood in British and Canadian art. His 2007 monograph *War Paint: Art, War, State and Identity in Britain 1939-1945* was shortlisted for that year's M.B. Berger Prize for British Art History, and remains the most comprehensive study of the involvement of the British state in the commissioning and purchasing of art as a record of the Second World War. He is also a specialist in Canadian art, has curated or co-curated numerous exhibitions of historical painting in Canada, and was a co-editor of *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Foss is currently Professor of Art History at Carleton University, in Ottawa.

Alan POWERS is a specialist in the history of twentieth-century British art, architecture and design and has written widely on these subjects, as well as curating exhibitions at the Design Museum, Imperial War Museum, Kettle's Yard, the Royal Academy and the De La Warr Pavilion. His interest in murals began in the 1970s, when he began to research their history, rediscovering a number of almost forgotten artists. He has a long involvement with the Twentieth Century Society and is one of the editors of its journal. He taught at the University of Greenwich School of Architecture for many years, and is now an independent scholar, teaching at NYU (London) and working on a number of writing projects.

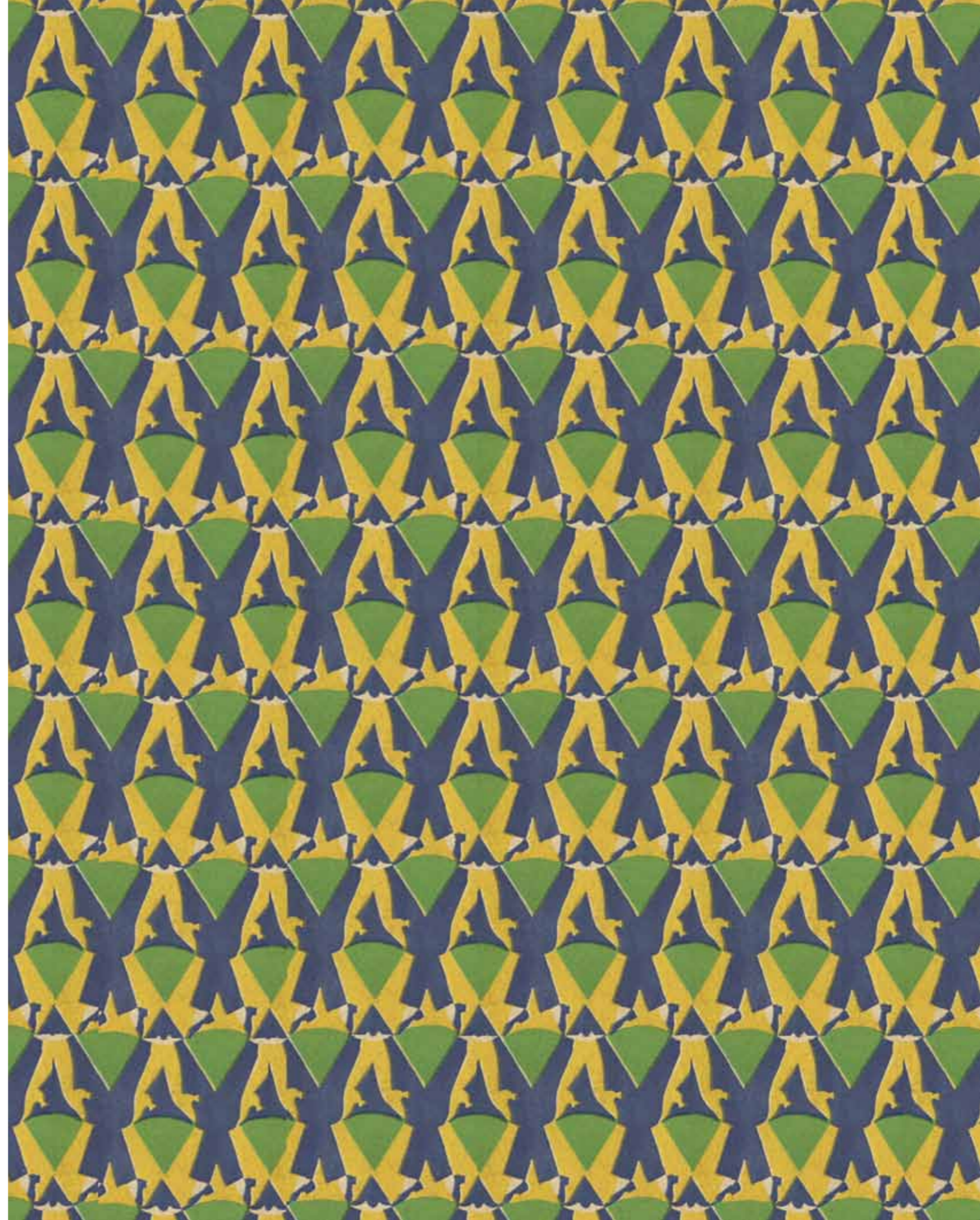
Sara PERRY is Director of Studies of Digital Heritage, Acting Director of Studies of Archaeological Information Systems, and Lecturer in Cultural Heritage Management at the University of York, UK. She has worked at the intersections of archaeology and visual anthropology for the past decade, studying the means by which archaeologists present the past to both academic and non-academic audiences – in digital forums, museums, books, magazines, exhibitions, lectures, on television, film and beyond. She sits on the board of the Society for Visual Anthropology, as well as the Histories of Archaeology Research Network, and she acts on the advisory committee of University College London's Centre for Audio-Visual Study and Practice in Archaeology.

Matthew JOHNSON is Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern University, USA. He is an archaeologist who has worked on medieval and historic landscapes, houses, castles and other buildings. He also writes on more general issues of theory and the cultural context of archaeological practice. He has published six books: the two most recent are *Ideas of Landscape*, dealing with Romanticism and the Hoskins tradition of landscape studies, and *English Houses 1300-1800: Vernacular Architecture, Social Life*.

Ian SANDERS has worked in scientific research, business and furniture design. Combining his passion for trees and interest in sculpture, he creates unique furniture from wood which he exhibits regularly in the UK. Together with his wife Julia Sorrell and brother-in-law Mark Sorrell he is responsible for the Alan Sorrell Archive. (www.alansorrellarchive.org.uk)



Alan Sorrell's watercolour box.



Alan Sorrell's vision was born out of the Romantic British tradition exemplified by Blake, Palmer and their 20th-century disciples. Through the publication of this book and the accompanying exhibition at The Sir John Soane's Museum Sorrell's importance as a major artist of the Neo-Romantic movement will at last be recognised.

Contributors:

Paul Liss
Richard Sorrell
Peyton Skipwith
Sacha Llewellyn
Brian Foss
Alan Powers
Sara Perry
Matthew Johnson
Ian Sanders

COVER:

The Artist in the Campagna,
c. 1931,
pencil, ink & watercolour
on paper,
39.5 x 57 cm (15 ½ x 22 ½ in.)




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