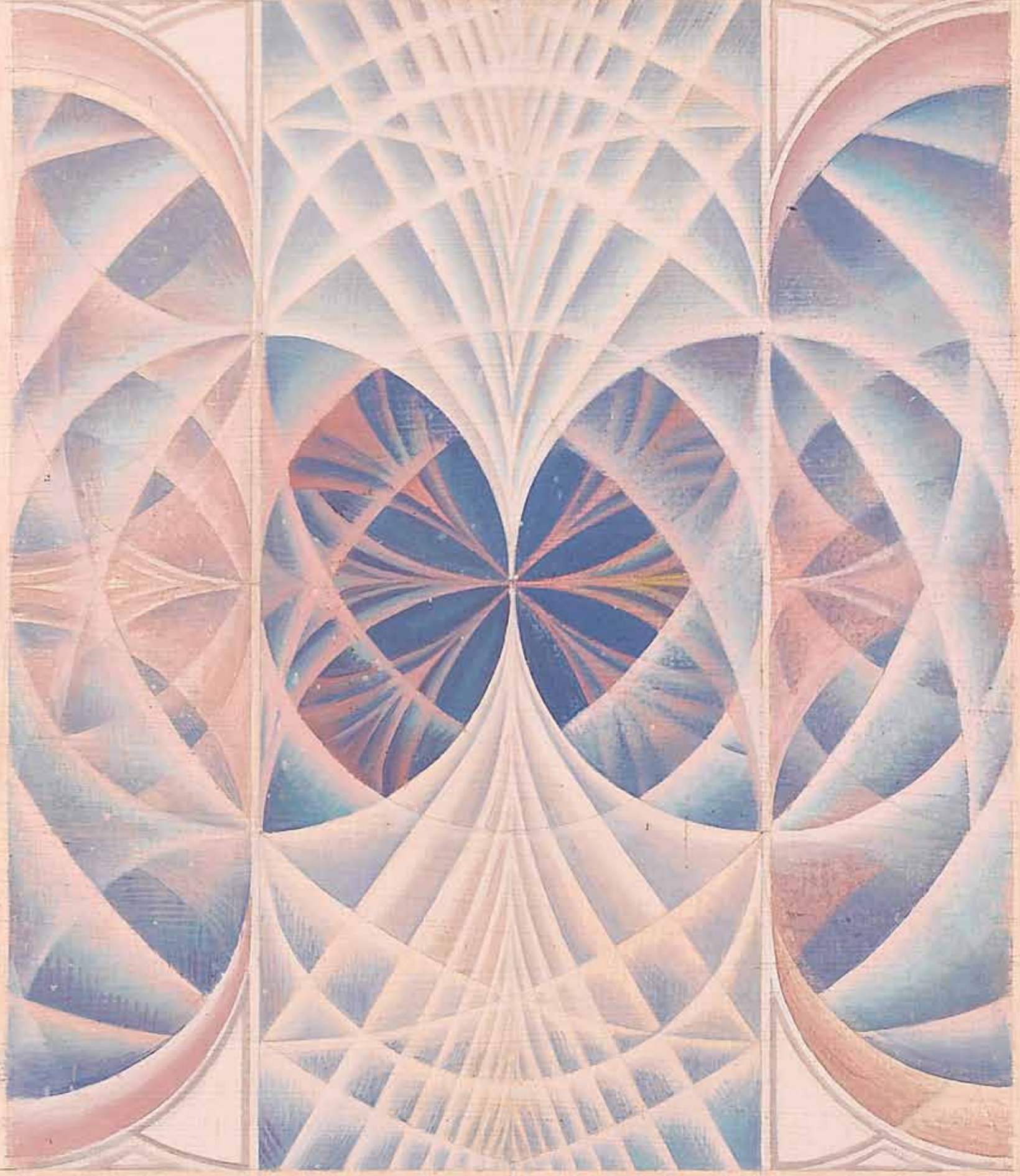




British Murals &
Decorative Painting 1920-1960



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&
Decorative Painting

1920 - 1960

Rediscoveries and New Interpretations



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Rediscoveries and New Interpretations

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For Evelina, Maude & Blanche

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Preface

Paul Liss

This book is illustrated with a series of specially commissioned photographs that record some of the least known but most remarkable mural cycles in Great Britain. In the vast majority of cases these works have previously only been reproduced in black and white if at all.

Today murals are rarely seen as the artist intended. Often they are partially obscured, especially where there has been a change of building use. Frequently works are completely covered up or painted over – examples include murals by Mary Sargent Florence, Mary Adshead, Eric Ravilious, Dora Carrington, William Roberts and Gilbert Spencer. Where murals survive they are more often than not displaced works. Historic photographs showing John Piper's *The Englishman's Home* at The Festival of Britain, *in situ* on the river side of the Homes and Gardens Pavilion on Belvedere Road, come as a revelation (see page 290); a digital reconstruction of Frank Brangwyn's *Empire* panels for The House of Lords, seen *in situ* as they were originally intended, gives a dramatically more favourable impression than their final installation in The Brangwyn Hall, Swansea. (see page 82)

Murals suffer from the anonymity of public art – central London alone boasts remarkable but little known works by Edward Bawden, Jean Cocteau, George Clausen, Edward Halliday, Alfred Kingsley Lawrence, Colin Gill, Charles Sims, William Rothenstein, Rex Whistler, D.Y. Cameron, Hans Feibusch, and Ivon Hitchens.

At a Morley College dinner in 1938 it is recorded that Sir William Rothenstein, having pointed to the Charles Mahoney murals at the back of the stage (which he declared to be 'the finest in this country since Ford Madox Brown decorated the Manchester Town Hall'), finished his speech by recalling that Max Beerbohm, looking at the same murals, 'had grown very angry: in any other country there would be a stream of people waiting to see these enchanting paintings.' (see pages 204-209) Just two years after this speech Mahoney's murals were destroyed by enemy bombing, along with the better known mural cycles of Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious in the same building. (see page 41) Ironically more often than not the vandalism has been self-inflicted. In October 1951, when the Conservative government was elected, Winston Churchill's very first instruction was to clear the South Bank of that 'three-dimensional socialist propaganda'. This sealed the fate of Keith Vaughan's epic mural *The Beginning of Time/Thesus* – considered too large to store or sell off it was destroyed. Edward Bawden's *Country Life In Britain* (see pages 246-247) for the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion fared little better – earmarked as one of the murals which should be saved for the nation it was put into a Ministry of Works store which itself was later demolished. The fate of John Armstrong's murals for the Telecinema is unknown and they are assumed to have been destroyed. (see page 285)

Thomas Monnington
Study for *Allegory*, c. 1925
(detail)
see page 171

Not all, however, is lost. The inspiration for this publication was the re-emergence of two remarkable Festival of Britain murals – by John Piper and Alan Sorrell – and two of Mary Adshead’s murals commissioned for Lord Beaverbrook’s dining room, which were previously listed as destroyed. (see pages 176-181) Likewise, Fyffe Christie’s epic *Christ Feeding the People*, for the Iona Community’s canteen in Glasgow, (see pages 88-89) re-emerged some decades after it was assumed to have been lost when removed from the building in the late 1970s. Might Edward Bawden’s *Country Life in Britain* one day re-emerge? Is it possible that John Armstrong’s Telecinema murals were removed before the first National Film theatre was demolished when the lease on the site expired? A remarkable number of important murals might still be uncovered: The Pavilion Tearoom Mural in Colwyn Bay by Mary Adshead and Eric Ravilious is in the process of being restored, having been previously painted and plastered over. Murals painted in 1912 for Bishop Creighton House, Lillie Road, include designs by William Roberts, Dora Carrington and Colin Gill which are no longer visible having been painted over after the Second World War. Gilbert Spencer’s *Scholar Gypsy*, 1957, remains obscured by a layer of paint at the University of London Students Union. Mary Sargent-Florence’s main mural cycle, at Oakham School, still survives but was panelled over in 1994.

In 1923, Eugenie Strong, Assistant Director of the British School at Rome (1909-1925), wrote to *The Times* to make an impassioned plea for ‘initiating on a generous scale the publication of ... all those mural paintings in our churches and cathedrals which have either been overlooked or forgotten for centuries or else only recently come to light again.’ This, she went on to say, was ‘not only a patriotic duty and national responsibility but would fill a deplorable gap’. So long as murals and decorative paintings are poorly documented and largely unprotected they will remain a part of Britain’s artistic heritage that is at risk. As Alan Powers points out, while high standards of conservation are imposed for works in museum collections, murals have to take their chance. There is as yet no coordinated photographic recording of murals, surely an important task following the model set by the Public Sculpture and Monuments Association and the Public Catalogue Foundation?

This book is divided into two sections. Part one seeks to define murals and decorative paintings within their historic context. Although the term ‘Decorative Painting’ has largely been written out of accounts of twentieth-century British art, it had wide currency in the first half of the century and informed the aims and aspirations of a large number of artists. Alan Powers’ survey of the major events and significant dates in mural and decorative painting describes the background out of which the mural revival of the early twentieth-century emerged and the role played by its main patrons, artists, art schools, and institutions. It offers important re-interpretations of some of the best-known schemes and draws attention to others which deserve to be better known. It argues for a more inclusive view of twentieth-century British art generally, and with it a more developed understanding of the role of murals in the lives of artists and in society during this period.

Part two of this book consists of 15 essays – written by experts in the field – which provide in-depth case studies of selected works, as well as considering the careers of specific artists as muralists. This section gives a special emphasis to murals which are less well-known and in many cases have only recently been rediscovered. Four of the case studies highlight the work of the first generation of Rome Scholars – artists who produced some of the most enduring decorative paintings of the interwar years – Colin Gill, Winifred Knights, Thomas Monnington and Edward Halliday. These essays offer a fascinating account of the role played by the British School



John Piper – *The Englishman's Home*, 1951, oil on plywood, 42 panels, each panel 159 x 119 cm (62½ x 46⅞ in.), overall size: 477 x 1547 cm (187¾ x 609 in.) see pages 292-293

at Rome immediately after the First World War in promoting mural and decorative painting. Case studies on Edward Bawden, Alan Sorrell, John Piper, John Armstrong and '60 Paintings for 51' focus on significant newly discovered works from the Festival of Britain – Alan Sorrell's mural for the Nelson Bar of the HMS *Campania* (reproduced for the first time in colour), John Piper's *The Englishman's Home*, Charles Mahoney's *The Garden*, Gilbert Spencer's *Hebridean Memory* and John Armstrong's *Storm*. Barbara Jones' *Man at Work – a century of technical and social progress* was considered by the artist to be her masterpiece and after the Turin exhibition she paid to have it repatriated. It spent the next 50 years hidden behind a studio wall and it too is reproduced in this book in colour for the first time. Of the 36 murals Jones painted during her lifetime less than ten percent of her work is extant – this is probably representative of the survival rate of murals for many artists. Charles Mahoney's murals have fared better than most – two of his three major mural schemes have survived – Brockley School and Campion Hall – but neither scheme to date has been well-documented. At the same time, the loss of the Morley College murals – his most significant early work – has undoubtedly held back public appreciation of his *oeuvre*.

As a consequence of remaining out of the public domain murals often end up being written out of the accounts of the lives of the artists who created them – notwithstanding the fact that for sheer size and scale it might be assumed that they counted amongst the most ambitious projects they ever undertook. Covering a surface area of over 800 square feet, John Piper might have been expected to employ a team of assistants to rapidly and schematically complete *The Englishman's Home* – instead he chose to paint the mural with almost no help, in his garden at Fawley Bottom, through the long and hard winter of 1950-51.

This book is not intended to be comprehensive or conclusive. It is hoped, however, that it will contribute to a debate about heritage and about murals that have been lost and murals that might still be recorded and be saved. It will hopefully serve to inspire a more inclusive account of twentieth-century British Art in which murals and decorative paintings are fully accounted for.



Colin Gill

Allegro, 1921

Sacha Llewellyn

Allegro (1921) was Colin Gill's final submission at the end of his three-year Rome Scholarship in Decorative Painting. The faculty of the British School at Rome considered it 'an able work which shows that he has made good use of his opportunities during the tenure of his scholarship'.¹ When the painting was exhibited at the Grosvenor Galleries in June 1922, the *Manchester Guardian's* critic admired 'the rhythm of the forms' and the 'gripping quality of draughtsmanship', although he doubted if anyone could follow 'the Allegory of nude and semi-nude figures and ladies with birdcages, and Italian peasants, and donkeys and children'.² While an absence of narrative content and a focus on pictorial effects was a defining quality of decorative painting at this time, this essay will show that *Allegro* was also a poetic expression of Colin Gill's own thoughts and sentiments which were bound up with idealisation and reparation in the immediate aftermath of the war.³

Colin Gill worked as an apprentice for the artist and illustrator W. H. Caffyn, before joining the Slade School of Art in 1910. In 1911 he was awarded a Slade Scholarship followed the next year by a British Institution Scholarship. He had already shown a keen interest in mural painting before joining the Slade, encouraged by his parents who allowed him to paint a 'brilliant cock-and-hen mural' around the kitchen of their farmhouse in Cudham, Kent.⁴ In 1911, Henry Tonks obtained permission to decorate the walls of Bishop Creighton House in Fulham and Colin Gill was one of six Slade students, including Dora Carrington, William Roberts and Elsie MacNaught, who took part in the scheme, producing a composition in egg-tempera on paper, which was stretched onto the walls.⁵

Colin Gill attended the Slade at a vibrant time; dressed in 'dramatic, bohemian clothes' he frequented the Café Royal, dining in the ground-floor room with his 'exalted artist friends' including Augustus John.⁶ While never formally associated with the self-styled Slade 'Neo-Primitives', Gill shared a close friendship with Mark Gertler and William Roberts.⁷ These artists, nourished by the cumulative effect of a series of important exhibitions of early Italian painting held in London before the war and Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibitions in 1910 and 1912, worked in varying degrees towards a synthesis of contemporary French and early Renaissance painting in the search for a new visual language through which modern art could be addressed.⁸ The only known painting by Gill from this period, *Flora*, 1912, shows that while he was obliquely related to this process, by resisting the more modernist experiments of his peers, his paintings came to be deemed as 'archaic in a way the others are not'.⁹ Gill, who was among the 132 exhibitors

95
Allegro, 1921,
oil on canvas,
117 x 228.5 cm
(46 x 90 in.),
private collection
(detail)



96 *Flora*, c. 1912, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 55.9 cm (30 x 22 in.)

in cities that have a future, not merely a past – one mustn't be out of things'.¹³ The Faculty would respond to this criticism by arguing that 'although a changed outlook and modern conditions may make the masterpieces of Italian Painting less directly useful to the student, he cannot fail to be stimulated and inspired by an intelligent and careful study of them'.¹⁴

Colin Gill arrived in Rome in February 1914. The studios in Lutyens' new building in the Valle Giulia had not yet been built, and finding it impossible to hire a large studio, Gill set off on a travelling expedition with the Royal College of Art's travelling scholar, Charles F. Collins, to 'discover Italian painting and Italy itself'.¹⁵ They travelled north as far as Ravenna, visiting along the way Spoleto, Assisi, Perugia, Montepulciano, Siena and Florence. Rome Scholars were encouraged to travel, particularly in their first year, for the Faculty believed that it was only by 'studying the works of the great Italian Masters in their own land and often in their original setting' that scholars could understand 'the devotion of the Great Masters to their work for its own sake and their attitude of reverence

in the Whitechapel Art Gallery's Summer Exhibition of 1914, 'Twentieth Century Art: A Review of Modern Movements', is likely to have been classified under the 'second group' of modern painters who, under the influence of Augustus John, Puvis de Chavannes and Alphonse Legros (the Slade tradition), produced 'imposing decorative design by the creation of commanding human types and appropriate attitudes and gestures'.¹⁰

In applying for the newly established Rome Scholarship in Decorative Painting, Gill was affirming his commitment to mural painting and in November 1913, he was awarded the inaugural scholarship 'on the unanimous recommendation of the Faculty'.¹¹ The three other finalists, Gerald Leslie Brockhurst, Lillian Lancaster and James Williams were all artists working within a conventional framework; the British School at Rome's appeal to classical tradition may not have attracted artists working in a more modernist idiom. Indeed, since its establishment in 1912, the question had been raised as to whether 'Rome was a suitable art centre for the environment and mental development of young British Students'.¹² Mark Gertler discouraged Dora Carrington from applying for the Scholarship in 1914, as 'one must always live



207 *The Englishman's Home* at the Festival of Britain, 1951. Courtesy of the Design Council Archive / University of Brighton Design Archives.

John Piper

The Englishman's Home, 1950-1951

David Fraser Jenkins

This out-of-doors mural was commissioned by Hugh Casson, Director of Architecture at the Festival of Britain, for the river side of the Homes and Gardens Pavilion, in a prominent place beside the main route through the Festival, Belvedere Road. It was painted on an array of forty-two plywood sheets, each about five foot by four, which must have been a daunting sight when they were installed ready-primed for painting in the former farmyard of the Pipers' house near Henley-on-Thames. There was an old wooden barn there which had recently been damaged in a fire, and while it was being re-built Piper had the mural panels set up leaning against it, with a two-storey scaffolding walkway in front. Overall, this measured about sixteen by sixty feet.

Piper knew Casson, though not particularly well, and the essentials of the commission were probably agreed in conversation. The Festival committee had first thought of getting him to paint a 'diorama of Stonehenge', but changed their minds, and requested *The Englishman's Home*. Piper recalled afterwards that Casson had asked merely for 'some kind of architectural congeries'. It seems likely that Casson was thinking of the five large paintings of Regency town buildings that Piper had made for the British Embassy in Rio de Janeiro, and which had been shown at the V&A in autumn 1949. But Piper was very well known as an architectural painter, and it is in terms of the architecture of the Festival that this mural needs to be understood, particularly as its location was in a general area, not part of some themed pavilion. The fee was to be £1,200, which was a slight reduction from the standard of 'thirty shillings a square foot'. He submitted his designs in November 1950, and painted it by the following April, probably in February, using some household paint such as Ripolin.

John Piper had tried out a design full of little incidents in several over-large prints before the war, a long *Nursery Frieze* (1936) and a *Panorama of Cheltenham*, the latter a concertina lithograph bound into *Signature* magazine in January 1940. The tricky issue in making such a thing bigger is then the sense of scale, since things that are small do not necessarily look acceptable when enlarged. A mural has to take on features of its place, and is an 'architectural painting' which is not at all the same thing as a 'painting'. Piper may



208 *The Englishman's Home*, 1951, oil on plywood, 42 panels, each panel 159 x 119 cm (62 ½ x 46 7/8 in.) Overall size: 477 x 1547 cm (187 ¾ x 609 in.)





Belfast Herring
Boat

Alan Sorrell

Working Boats from Around the British Coast, Mural of the Nelson Bar, HMS *Campania*, 1951

Alan Powers

Alan Sorrell is best known for his poetic yet accurate renderings of castles and other archaeological sites, showing them reconstructed as they might have been at a particular moment in time. Like many artists of his generation, however, he went through a phase in which he considered himself a mural painter, although his mural works are less well known.

Sorrell grew up in Southend, where he studied at the Municipal School of Art. He went to the Royal College of Art in 1924, when mural painting was still a dominating activity and in 1928 he was the winner of the Rome Scholarship in Decorative Painting.¹ His two years in Rome were probably more decisive for his future direction than for any other Rome Scholar, as here he met archaeologists on whose discoveries he later so successfully built his career.

While teaching at the RCA on his return in 1931, Sorrell offered to paint four tall panels in Southend Public Library. While he wanted to show modern life subjects, his patron, the Mayor, preferred local historical ones in real settings, so that Sorrell almost accidentally fell into his future manner, including the high viewpoint that worked so well for depicting historic sites. His notes show the depth of his preparations and research, studying all the details of buildings and ships as well as the position of the landmarks and realistic light conditions.

Sorrell wrote an account of the commission during the war, stressing his pleasure in serving the community and feeling wanted, in contrast to the pose of alienation common among recent graduates.² In following the brief, he was happy to risk the criticism of being a 'mere illustrator', and his account offers practical advice as well as honestly admitting his own anxieties and difficulties. Clearly, the first panel of *The Refitting of Admiral Blake's Fleet at Leigh* taught him a great deal about using a more varied painting technique to achieve unity in a large canvas, which he completed in time for exhibition at the Royal Academy. Taking inspiration from John Constable, it is less glacial than the work of other Rome Scholars, with a lively quality of light in the choppy sea, flying clouds and moving light.

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*Working Boats from
Around the British Coast,*
Mural of the Nelson Bar,
HMS *Campania*, 1951
(detail)



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The *Campania* exhibition ship, Festival of Britain touring exhibition: general view from Gallery deck looking at Hangar deck, 1951

Courtesy of the Architectural Press Archive / RIBA Library Photographs Collection

As Mark Sorrell, the artist's son, wrote in 1981, 'all the elements that characterize his later work are already at play in this first unconscious exercise. His ambition was still to be a mural painter, but he was already discovering that his sure strength lay as a draughtsman and this and necessity impelled him to other possibilities.'³

After war service as a model-maker in the RAF and in camouflage, Sorrell picked up his career, having been purged from the teaching staff at the RCA in 1948 by Robin Darwin. His work with archaeologists now began in earnest, including the commissions for the Ministry of Works to illustrate monuments in the care of the state as they might have been in their prime, for which he is most widely remembered. There was an interval in the early 1950s, however, when he executed several murals among them the commission for panels in the Nelson Bar of the Festival of Britain 'Sea Travelling Exhibition', on board the HMS *Campania*. The ship was laid down in 1941 as a cargo ship but converted for wartime use into an aircraft carrier. The Festival organisers were keen to reach as wide a section of the public all over Britain as possible, so the *Campania* toured different ports

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NOTE: A large majority of the works which appear in Part II – Case Studies were photographed by Glynn Clarkson

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CONTRIBUTORS

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.

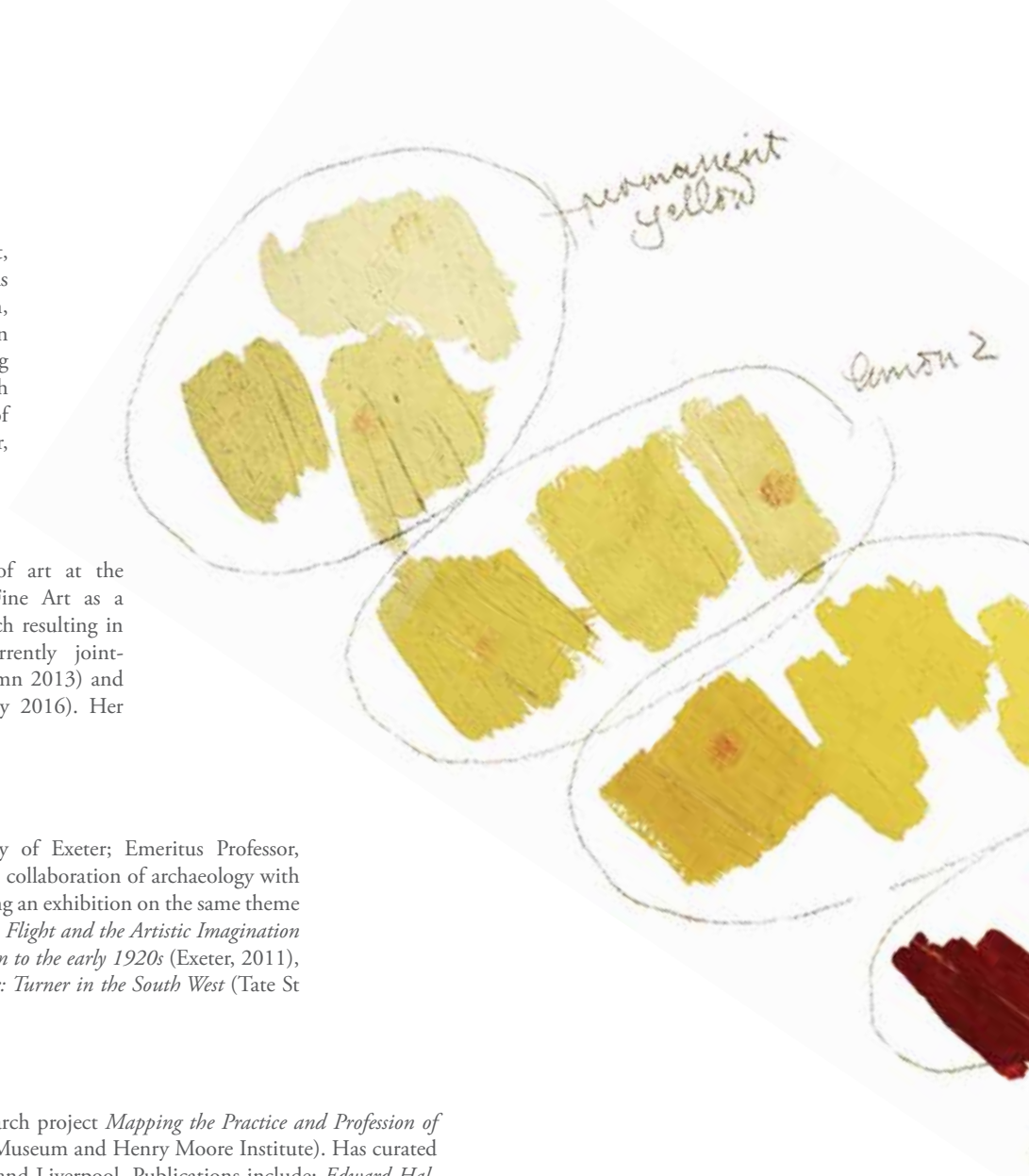
Sacha LLEWELLYN, art historian and exhibition organiser. Studied history of art at the University of East Anglia and the Courtauld Institute of Art. Joined Liss Fine Art as a Director in 1996. The first generation of Rome Scholars has been a focus of research resulting in exhibitions at the British School at Rome and museums in Britain. Currently joint-curating an exhibition on Alan Sorrell for Sir John Soane's Museum, London (autumn 2013) and curating an exhibition on Winifred Knights for Dulwich Picture Gallery (January 2016). Her monograph on Winifred Knights will be published in 2015.

Sam SMILES, Programme Director, Art History and Visual Culture, University of Exeter; Emeritus Professor, University of Plymouth. He has published widely on British art c. 1750-1950 and the collaboration of archaeology with the visual arts. He is currently completing a study of Turner's last paintings and preparing an exhibition on the same theme for Tate Britain (2014). He has curated numerous exhibitions, the most recent being: *Flight and the Artistic Imagination* (Compton Verney, 2012), *Into the Light: French and British painting from Impressionism to the early 1920s* (Exeter, 2011), *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Acquisition of Genius* (Plymouth, 2009) and *Light into Colour: Turner in the South West* (Tate St Ives, 2006).

Ann COMPTON, writer, curator, project originator and director of the digital research project *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851-1951* (Glasgow University, Victoria and Albert Museum and Henry Moore Institute). Has curated numerous exhibitions of 19th- and 20th-century British art in Cambridge, London and Liverpool. Publications include: *Edward Haldiday: Art for Life 1925-39*, Liverpool, 1997; *The Sculpture of Charles Sargeant Jagger*, 2004; and she was co-editor of *Earthly Delights: the Murals of Mary Adshead*, Liverpool, 2005. Forthcoming titles: co-editor, *Sculpture Journal*, vol 21.2 (special issue) and editor, *Garth Evans Sculpture: Beneath the Skin*, London, 2013.

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 seven monographs for ACC, including Bawden, Ravilious, Paul and John Nash, McKnight Kauffer, Lovat Fraser, David Gentleman and Peter Blake – John Piper is due out spring 2013 – as well as *Edward Bawden's London* (V&A Publications).

Libby HORNER is known for her efforts to resuscitate the fortunes of Frank Brangwyn, through exhibitions (the most recent being at the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, 2010 which won a prestigious award from the Western Art Foundation), lectures and publications (*Frank Brangwyn: Stained Glass*. A catalogue raisonné published in 2011 holds the unique distinction of being the first catalogue to be produced as a DVD, giving her the opportunity to interview experts and film the windows *in situ*). In recent years she has expanded her portfolio and having made films about John Piper and Patrick Reyntiens is now compiling a catalogue of the latter's stained glass windows and panels.



Andrew LAMBIRTH is a writer, critic and curator. He has written on art for a variety of publications including *The Sunday Times*, *Modern Painters* and *RA*, the Royal Academy magazine. Among his many books are monographs on John Armstrong, Roger Hilton, Maggi Hambling, John Hoyland, Margaret Mellis, Allen Jones, LS Lowry, David Inshaw and RB Kitaj. He is currently art critic of *The Spectator* and lives in Suffolk.

Elizabeth COHEN (née GRAFFIUS), read a BA in History of Art at the University of Cambridge between 2009 and 2012. Her third-year dissertation was entitled *The Lady Chapel Murals by Charles Mahoney at Campion Hall*, and is the basis for this essay. She was educated at the Jesuit boarding school Stonyhurst College, which is how she came to hear of the Campion Hall murals. She is now working as a teaching assistant in a primary school in London and hopes to train to become a teacher.

David FRASER JENKINS, art gallery curator at National Museum of Wales, 1969, Tate Gallery 1980, retired 2005. Has curated exhibitions of John Piper, Paul Nash, Gwen and Augustus John, Jacques Lipchitz and published extensively on modern art, especially British. He has recently completed a monograph on the art of John Piper.

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. Currently joint curating an exhibition for autumn 2013 of the work of Alan Sorrell for the Sir John Soane Museum, London.

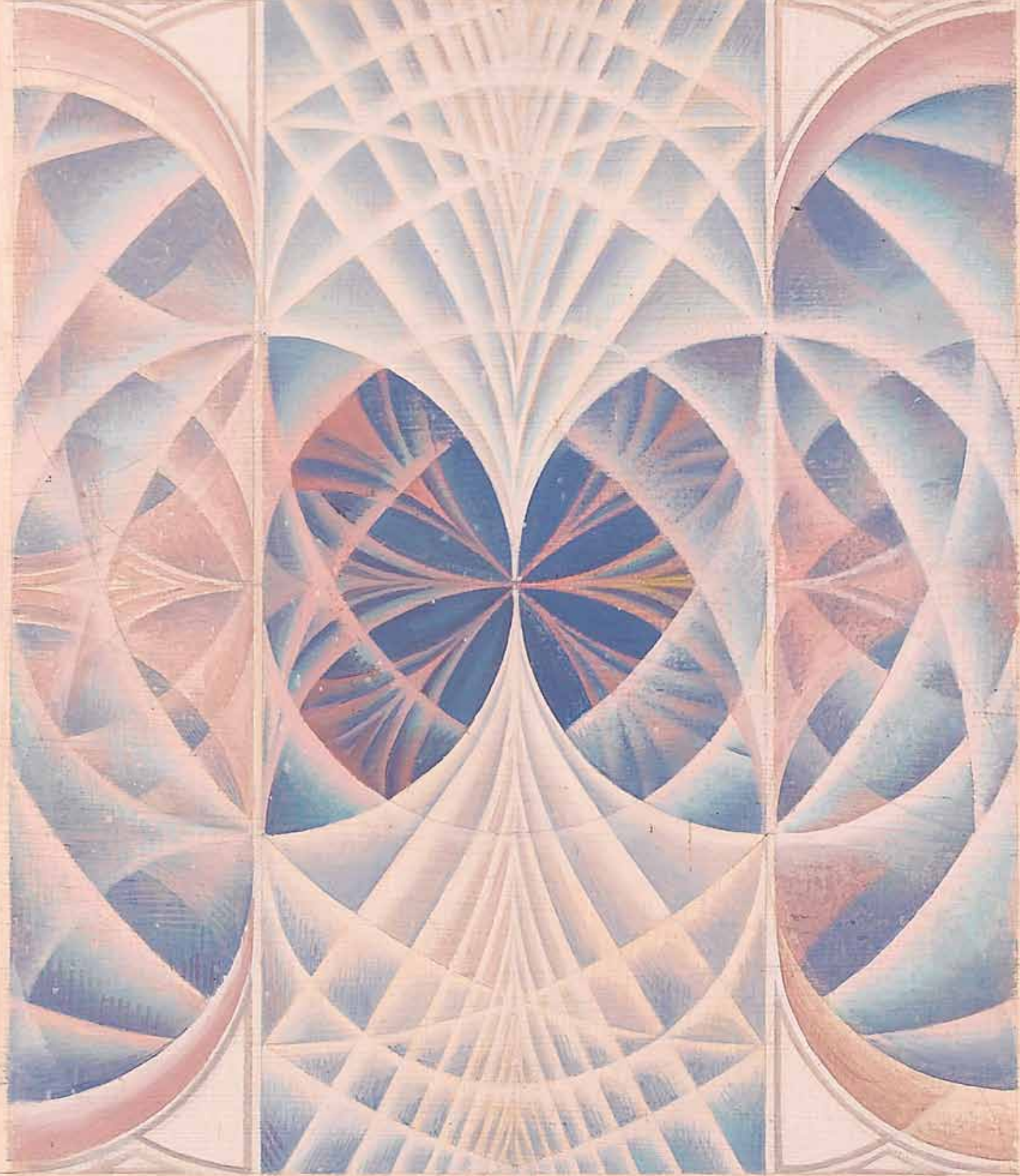
Robert UPSTONE is a Director of The Fine Art Society in London where he moved in 2010 after a long-standing career as a senior curator at the Tate. He is a well known specialist in Modern British art and has written and broadcast extensively in this area. Robert has curated several major museum exhibitions, including the survey of William Orpen held at the Imperial War Museum and National Gallery of Ireland (2005), 'Modern Painters: The Camden Town Group' at Tate Britain (2008), 'Sickert in Venice' at Dulwich Picture Gallery (2009), 'Cayley Robinson' at the National Gallery (2010) and 'The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World' at Tate Britain (2011). He is currently working on exhibitions about Barbara Hepworth and Laura Knight, and writing a book about British art and the First World War.

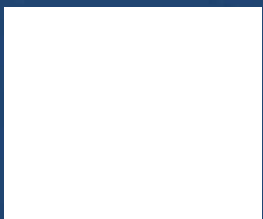
Ruth ARTMONSKY started her career as a psychologist, a director of the premier psychometric worldwide consultancy. On retirement she ran an art gallery – Artmonsky Arts – and began to write books on a variety of subjects relating to design and the graphic arts including *The School Prints* and '*A Snapper up of Unconsidered Trifles*' – a biography of Barbara Jones. Her twelfth book *Designing Women* has just been published.

David MAES, painter and printmaker from Montreal, he has been living in Europe since 1987 and exhibits regularly in France and Spain. In 2002 he and Sylvie Cavillier created *le mariage des eaux*, a small publishing firm. He designs catalogues and books in France and the UK.

Charles Mahoney's colours
for the murals at
Campion Hall,
1940s








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