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Eric Ravilious: ups and Downs

More popular than ever, the watercolours of Eric Ravilious seem to sum up mid-century England. But the secret of their appeal lies in their complex relationship with modernism



📷 Detail of *The Wilmington Giant* by Eric Ravilious. Stapleton Collection/Corbis

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Fri 29 Apr 2011 19.05 EDT

Eric Ravilious, one of the best British watercolourists of the 20th century, was the very opposite of a tortured artist. It helped perhaps that he always enjoyed acclaim, for his many book illustrations and his ceramic designs, as well as for his paintings. But it was also a matter of temperament. He loved dancing, tennis and pub games, was constantly whistling, and even in the mid-1930s found little time for politics, working up only a mild interest in the international crisis or the latest Left Book Club choice. He was, by all accounts, excellent company. "I never saw him depressed," recalled his friend from

the Royal College of Art, Douglas Percy Bliss. "Even when he fell in love - and that was frequently - he was never submerged by disappointment. Cheerfulness kept creeping in."

His delight in the world informs his work. Alan Powers, probably the greatest authority on the artist, has written that "happiness is a quality that is difficult to convey through design, but Ravilious consistently managed to generate it". And David Gentleman has remarked that Ravilious is "an easy artist to like". His woodcuts for books and vignettes for Wedgwood (the alphabet mug, the boat-race bowl), are regularly described as witty and charming. And many of his watercolours, too, attract such epithets as "friendly".

Much of his subject-matter is pastoral and unassuming, and he was a virtuoso at capturing everyday scenes and little details from English provincial life. Among the sequences of his paintings were those featuring, in his words, "lighthouses, rowing-boats, beds, beaches, greenhouses". Even when he became an official war artist, he tended to domesticate any novelty or threat - fighter planes line up harmlessly beyond a garden hedge, and barrage balloons bob cheerfully in the sky. "I enjoyed it a lot, even the bombing which is wonderful fireworks," he reported in 1940, in the midst of a grim sea battle off Norway. The following year, by this time with the RAF, he wrote home: "It was more lovely than words can say flying over the moors and the coast today in an open plane, just floating on great curly clouds and perfectly still and cool . . ."

Partly because of his likeability, and partly also because of his identification with Englishness (though his work helped to constitute the idea of Englishness with which we associate him), there is a danger that Ravilious's art could be dismissed as cosy or parochial. The possible result is that his quietly growing popularity is written off as a kind of folksy retro-chic - nostalgia for the Shell-guide 1930s, an escape to simplicity.

In fact his watercolours are never cosy and never merely pretty or tasteful. This is partly to do with his work's complicated relationship with modernism and with his training in design (at the Royal College of Art he studied in the design school). "I like definite shapes," he once wrote, and his landscapes approach the abstract in their preference for flat planes and hard lines and patterns.

He explained his love of the South Downs, which inspired perhaps his strongest watercolours, in terms of their "design" being "so beautifully

obvious". One of his finest works, *Downs in Winter* (1934), presents a bare, minimal view (Ravilious preferred the linearity of winter landscapes) - it is open ground, ploughed fields, in bleached greens and browns, and the land is cast in simple, geometrical forms: the curve of the hills, with two vertical lines provided by an agricultural roller in the foreground, and the circle of a pale sun.

Carnation House (1938), rather differently, is the study of a corridor in a greenhouse, with the lateral beams and uprights set off against the snaking and looping of a hose on the floor. The bend of the tall carnations emphasises the slight bowing of the posts, while the watering-can on the floor manages to appear both a collection of abstract shapes and something reassuring, useful, quotidian.

His paintings are often emotionally cool; the palette is restrained, the paint application light and dry, with plenty of white showing, and lots of hatching and stippling. There is a sense of detachment in them, as well as a hint of the mysterious or surreal: they are a strange combination of bleak, odd and enchanting. The watercolours are far from cosy, too, in their emptiness, and the absence of people in most of them, which can only partly be explained by Ravilious's confessed limitation when it came to drawing human figures. When people do appear, their faces are blanked out; they look like dolls or figurines.

Despite this absence, his paintings always deal in the man-made (buildings, agriculture, machines). As well as being influenced by modernism, Ravilious's work is engaged with modernity - his pastoral views are sharpened by cement pits, fencing, pylons. He wrote to his lover Helen Binyon from Furlongs, his friend Peggy Angus's South Downs cottage, with his customary brightness: "This morning we found a junkyard which looked well even in this weather so tomorrow I may go out and explore further. There are tar-engines for the winter, intense sooty black - and a 1910 gasometer, about the first of its kind, ring-straked and striped red and black with wheels on top. It is what Peggy calls the cat's whiskers."

The paintings are never wholly innocent. In *The Wilmington Giant* (1939), for instance, unmistakably a scene from deep England, the South Downs appear as a pattern of colour blocks and curves - the paint striated, in places barely applied - and the chalk figure itself is framed by dark fence posts and an axis of barbed wire.

Powers, who curated a big retrospective show at the Imperial War Museum in 2003 to mark the centenary of Ravilious's birth, has talked of

"more people than at any time in the past" being "in love" with him as an artist. There is a healthy, if small-scale, trade in vintage crockery with his designs, "giclée" reproductions of his watercolours are now easily available and there are new books, too. Selections from the artist's letters, edited by his daughter, Anne Ullman, have been published in three lavish, very expensive volumes brought out by the Fleece Press, while the Mainstone Press has just published the third in a trilogy of alluring books entitled "Ravilious in Pictures" - *A Country Life* joins *Sussex and the Downs* and *The War Paintings*. Each of the 22 watercolours reproduced per volume is accompanied by a short, convivial essay by James Russell, which provides a context for that painting, incorporating biography and social history. (The paintings from *A Country Life*, which concentrates on scenes from the years Ravilious spent in the villages of Great Bardfield and Castle Hedingham in Essex, are currently on show at the Fry Art Gallery in Saffron Walden.)

An earlier volume brought out by the Mainstone Press took as its subject *High Street*, the children's book from 1938 structured around marvellous lithographs by Ravilious of the ornate fronts of different shops and businesses. Russell, who has done much detective work tracking down people and places in the watercolours, set out to identify the location of all 24 original shops - butcher, baker and confectioner, furrier, submarine engineer (selling diving suits), the oyster bar, amusement arcade and so on (the clerical outfitter and the cheesemonger are still trading from the same premises). Copies of the original book are rare, and currently fetch £2,500.

Ravilious was himself the son of a shopkeeper. He grew up in Eastbourne, and in 1919 won a scholarship to the Eastbourne School of Art; three years later he began at the Royal College of Art, where his contemporaries included Edward Bawden, Edward Burra and Henry Moore. Paul Nash, who helped and influenced Ravilious in several ways, later said he was "fortunate in being there during an outbreak of talent". Good natured and "prepossessing in his appearance", Ravilious was known as "Rav" or "The Boy", and spent much time in the common room chatting up girls.

He immediately struck up a close friendship with Bawden; the two had similar tastes, admiring the wood engraver Thomas Bewick and the proto-modern 18th-century watercolourists John Sell Cotman and Francis Towne. (Any correspondences can be charted in the Tate's *Watercolour* exhibition.) As students, they went on a joint pilgrimage to Samuel Palmer's Shoreham. Nash encouraged Ravilious to take up wood

engraving, which enjoyed a revival in the 1920s, and he soon began to work for the small, "private presses" that flourished in the same decade, such as the Curwen Press and the Golden Cockerel Press.

In 1928 Ravilious and Bawden got their first breakthrough, a commission to paint murals for the refreshment room of the Morley Working Men's College in Lambeth. They eventually took as their theme "fantasy": "Elizabethan plays, Shakespeare, Olympian gods and goddesses, Punch and Judy, a miracle play and a doll's house - Gosh! What a riot it was!" The murals were opened by the prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, and received much attention in the press. (Ravilious was later to paint a mural of seaside scenes in the rotunda café of Morecambe's art deco Midland Hotel.)

In 1930 Ravilious married Tirzah Garwood, who was a student at Eastbourne School of Art, where he had been teaching part-time. Despite his affairs, they stayed together until his death in 1942, aged only 39. The window of their flat in Hammersmith looked out on the Thames, and the young couple would hold bathing and boat-race parties. Moved by their admiration for Palmer, Bawden and Ravilious sought a place from which to explore the countryside for likely subjects, so rented rooms in and eventually took over Brick House in Great Bardfield. The two married couples began to decorate every wall: the parlour was painted as a cane bird-cage, with birds everywhere; the bedroom was decorated as a tent, striped and draped up to a centre point. Bawden later wrote that "those few years when we lived together were idyllic" (Ravilious and Tirzah eventually moved 10 miles down the road to Castle Hedingham).

Ravilious often travelled back to the South Downs to stay at Furlongs, which Peggy Angus made into a gathering place for many artists (it's very close to Charleston, but the bohemian houses had little to do with each other). There was lots of singing by candlelight, and her Midsummer Eve parties were notorious. She was also a radical (known as "Red Angus"), active in the Artists International Association, and shared these politics with Binyon, with whom she also shared an extraordinarily decorated London flat.

Ravilious was extremely fond of Furlongs, and painted it on a number of occasions. He once said to Angus that "it was lovely to be in a place where you can spit on the floor". Of *Tea at Furlongs*, Russell writes: "the teapot and attendant mugs, bread and butter and bone-handled knives are themselves the focus of a painting that radiates light and pleasure. Only

the dark grey umbrella, raised incongruously against the sun, reminds us that this scene is set in August 1939, on the eve of war."

From Furlongs, Ravilious explored the downs and their chalk paths, relishing extreme weather and enjoying "mild hardships". "The long white roads are a temptation," he wrote. "What quests they propose! They take us away to the thin air of the future or to the underworld of the past." Nearby was Beachy Head, and its irresistible lighthouse: "an immense bar of light on the sea is splendid and must be done".

Ravilious's letters from the 1930s show some involvement with left-wing politics, though it's unclear to what extent the books were read and meetings attended in order to please Binyon. In August 1935, for instance, he tells her of going to hear "Communist sermons" in Thaxted, though he also reports eating "such a good lunch" afterwards, with Cointreau and Van der Hum. He donated pictures to raise money for the Republicans in the Spanish civil war, but also laid himself open to Bawden's teasing that, though he was supposedly a "socialist", he designed the Wedgwood coronation mug (an excuse for indulging his love of drawing fireworks). Any politics in his work comes through indirectly, as a kind of democratic sense; the country he lovingly depicts is unofficial, everyday. When stationed with the navy in Chatham, he wanted above all to paint not a heroic or grand image of conflict but the admiral's bicycle (his request was refused).

On the outbreak of war, a restless Ravilious joined the Observer Corps and manned the post on Sudbury Hill, near his home, from where he charted flights overhead. He wrote jovially: "We wear lifeboatmen's outfits against the weather and tin hats for show. It is like a Boy's Own Paper story, what with spies and passwords and all manner of nonsense."

More exciting was his assignment aboard the destroyer HMS Highlander sailing to Norway and the Arctic Circle. As a student he collected books of arctic travels, and, like so many Englishmen before and since, was fascinated by the far north. "The seas in the arctic circle are the finest blue you can imagine, an intense cerulean and sometimes almost black," he wrote to Tirzah in 1940. "It was so nice working on deck long past midnight in bright sunshine." His work moved into a different phase. According to a critic in the Times in 1940: "faced with extraordinary effects of light in Norway and equally wild silhouettes of ships against mountains; he has, as it happens, accepted these eccentric shapes without a tremor and composed a highly stylised, half-abstract pattern around them."

Just as Ravilious had always enjoyed the lines and curves of farm implements, railways and harbour constructions, he now found visual pleasure in machines of war, from submarines to screw propellers. But most thrilling of all was his discovery of flying, especially when it promised another trip to the north. Standing shaving in his house in August 1942, he told Tirzah: "I will go to Iceland, it is the promised land." He secured a post with RAF Iceland, and flew there at the end of August.

He wrote home, delighted with the world as ever, asking Tirzah if she'd like "a pair of gloves - seal skin with the fur on the back . . . I saw a splendid Narwhal horn yesterday, delicately spiralled and about six foot high . . . We flew over that mountain country that looks like craters on the moon and it looked just like those photographs the Ministry of Information gave me, with shadows very dark and striped like leaves".

He was doubtless planning another of what James Russell calls his "mesmerising topographical watercolours". But on 2 September he went out on an air-sea rescue mission in search of an aircraft lost the previous day, and the Hudson plane in which he was flying itself disappeared.

Ravilious in Essex is at the Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden, until 14 August
www.fryartgallery.org

Monographs about Ravilious are available from [The Mainstone Press](http://TheMainstonePress.com). To order, email: info@themainstonepress.com or telephone: 01362 688395.

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