

*Air: Visualising the Invisible in British Art, 1768-2017* [ISBN: 9781911408130]

## CATALOGUE OF SELECTED LOAN ARTWORKS

By **Christiana Payne**

**Joseph Wright of Derby, *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768). Oil on canvas, 183 x 244 cm. National Gallery.**

Wright's famous painting gives pictorial form to an 'experiment' that was highly topical in the eighteenth century, demonstrating the necessity of air to all human and animal life. It was first exhibited in 1768, just six years before Joseph Priestley discovered oxygen, which he initially named 'dephlogisticated air'.

The air pump has been used to extract air from the glass vessel. As the supply of oxygen declines, the bird gasps for breath and appears to die. But if the stopcock is lifted in time, a 'miracle' will occur: the bird will be brought back to life. Wright chose to depict this most dramatic moment in the demonstration. The darkness of the setting, lit only by the concealed candle and the moon outside the window, adds to the air of mystery.

The figures gathered around the table display a range of reactions to the experiment, according to their gender and age. The young girls can think only of the suffering of the bird, and need to be comforted by their father. The young woman also turns away, perhaps because she is squeamish, perhaps because she is more interested in her male companion. The young boy on the left is gripped by the suspense: will the stopcock be withdrawn in time? The old man on the right, however, is lost in thought, meditating on the philosophical implications of the demonstration.

254 words

**Robert Dighton, *A Windy Day – scene outside the shop of Bowle's, the printseller, in St Paul's Churchyard* (c. 1785). Watercolour, 32.5 x 25 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum.**

The effects of wind provided tempting material for satirical prints. In this scene in the churchyard of St Paul's Cathedral, London, fancy hats and wigs are blown up in the air, and ankles and petticoats are made visible, while a boy selling fish sprawls on the ground, his floundering fish providing another hazard for the fashionable young lady in the foreground. The older woman on the left is particularly embarrassed as the wind reveals her bald head and her rotund posterior.

The setting is the famous print shop of the Bowles family. The prints in the window themselves provide another source of amusement, as the portraits of severe-looking clergymen on the top register look down on the ribald scenes

of courtship below them. Thomas Bowles founded the family business in St Paul's Churchyard in the early eighteenth century, and was succeeded by his son and then his great-nephew, Carington Bowles, who ran the business from c.1763 until his death in 1793.

The artist, Robert Dighton (1752-1814) was a caricaturist, and also an actor, writer, collector, singer and thief – he stole a number of Rembrandt etchings from the British Museum by bribing the custodian to leave him alone in the Print Room.<sup>1</sup>

229 words

**Julius Caesar Ibbetson, *Ascent of Lunardi's Balloon from St George's Fields, London (1788-90)*. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60.6 cm. Museum of London.**

This picture is related to a painting Ibbetson exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1788, entitled 'The ascent of George Biggin, Esq., from St George's Fields, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1785'. The date given in the title confirms that the painting represented the second flight of Lunardi's second balloon: however, on this occasion Biggin was accompanied by the actress, Letitia Sage (Lunardi himself did not go up as the balloon would only bear the weight of two people). There are several surviving versions by Ibbetson of this composition, including one in the Science Museum, London and another in the Neue Pinakothek, Munich. Letitia Sage is shown in the paintings in the Science Museum and in the Neue Pinakothek, but not in this one.

According to Rotha Mary Clay, the Museum of London picture is a replica of the one shown at the Academy in 1788, now in a private collection. She believes that Ibbetson studied the reports of the balloon flight carefully, since he noted the scientific details on a paper attached to the back of the version shown at the Academy.<sup>2</sup>

The omission of Letitia Sage from both the title of the Academy work, and from the Museum of London painting, is a mystery. Balloon flights drew more attention when women were involved, and Mrs Sage is a prominent feature in Rigaud's fanciful painting of the three aeronauts, Lunardi, Biggin and Sage, together in the gondola (see p. 00).

260 words.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Hardie, *Water-colour Painting in Britain, Vol. I, The Eighteenth Century* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd), pp. 220-221.

<sup>2</sup> Rotha Mary Clay, *Julius Caesar Ibbetson* (London: Country Life Ltd., 1948), pp. 11-12.

**James Gillray, *The Bubbles of Opposition*. Published 19 July 1788. Hand-coloured etching, 35 x 22 cm. Private collection.**

Balloons and bubbles are often found in political satires of the late eighteenth century, including several by James Gillray, who became known for his biting wit, and his savage pro-Tory sentiments. This one commemorates the Westminster by-election of 1788, in which a Whig candidate, Lord John Townshend, was put up in opposition to the Tory Lord Hood. Charles James Fox, the prominent Whig who held the other Parliamentary seat for Westminster, is shown using 'Devonshire sope', that is, finances provided by the Duchess of Devonshire, to propel his political allies into the air. At the top, in the centre, is the head of the Prince of Wales, later George IV, who was a supporter of Fox.

Fox is portrayed as hirsute and obese, and his bubble-blowing activity both implies his vanity and suggests that he is manipulating his colleagues. His supporters – including the Duke of Norfolk, the Duke of Portland and Edmund Burke – are shown to be political lightweights. The head of Townshend – inscribed 'Towns END' – seems to be bursting into flames. Despite the implication in the print that Townshend's campaign is doomed to self-destruction, he eventually won the election after fifteen days of polling. It was estimated that the Whigs spent £50,000 on the election: the result was 6392 votes for Townshend, 5569 for Hood.<sup>3</sup>

234 words.

**John Constable, *Cloud Study, Hampstead, tree at right* (1821). Oil on paper laid on board, 24.1 x 29.9 cm. Royal Academy.**

In 1821 and 1822 John Constable made a series of sky studies in oil, often noting the time of day, the state of the weather and the direction and strength of the wind. This particular study has an unusually detailed inscription by the artist on the reverse: 'Hampstead, Sepr 11, 1821. 10 to 11. Morning under the sun – clouds silvery grey, on warm ground sultry. Light wind to the S. W. fine all day – but rain in the night following.'

John Thornes, a meteorologist who has made a careful study of Constable's skies, says that these notes are in 'very good' agreement with other records for the London area on that day. He comments that the painting 'shows

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, Vol VI 1784-1792, pp. 505-6.

“streets” of small cumulus clouds that are characteristic of a light westerly airstream.’<sup>4</sup>

Constable does not seem to have used his cloud studies directly for any of his landscape paintings. He was, rather, making himself familiar with the forms of clouds, and trying to understand the conditions that produced them, so that he could paint skies that were both convincing and appropriate. Unlike Turner, whose sky studies were mostly made in watercolour, Constable chose to paint his sky studies in oil, a medium that was better suited to representing the rounded volumes of his favourite clouds, the rain-bearing cumuli.

236 words

**J. M. W. Turner, *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge* (c. 1830-5). Oil on canvas, 90.5 x 121 cm. Tate.**

This unfinished painting dates from the early 1830s, and may be a preliminary idea for a response to John Constable’s *Opening of Waterloo Bridge* (Tate), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1832. Turner depicts the heart of London as obscured by mist from the river, but also by the atmospheric pollution that marked the early years of the industrial revolution. The twin funnels of the steam boat on the left belch out dark blue smoke, and the corresponding blue smoke on the right-hand side comes from the factories that occupied the south bank at this period. In Constable’s painting these factories are a dark blot on the extreme right of his canvas, but Turner makes them the main driver of his subject matter. Waterloo Bridge, and the Shot Tower to its right, look frail and ethereal in comparison.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, visitors to London, such as Flora Tristan, commented on the smoke and soot issuing from chimneys, wrapping the city in a black cloud, but the artists of the time generally ignored these effects. Turner was different. As William Rodner has shown, he responded positively to many of the visual effects of the industrial revolution. His painting is ‘a fully realized document of the new London, the metropolis of steamboats, factories, and multitudes.’<sup>5</sup>

237 words

**Samuel Palmer, *The Bright Cloud* (c. 1831-2). Indian ink and wash on card, 22.7 x 30.3 cm. Tate Britain.**

Samuel Palmer had little success in his lifetime, but was rediscovered by the Neo-Romantics in the 1820s and has been popular ever since. In his early

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<sup>4</sup> John Thornes, *John Constable’s Skies: A Fusion of Art and Science* (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 1999), p. 224.

<sup>5</sup> William S. Rodner, *J. M. W. Turner: Romantic Painter of the Industrial Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 137.

'Shoreham period', he aimed to depict landscape as a foretaste of Paradise, with an air of naïveté that recalled the early Renaissance masters.

Air is important in two senses in this sepia drawing of an idyllic scene: both in the wind instrument played by the shepherdess piping to her lover, and in the glorious rolling cloud rising up behind the trees, like a reminder of the supernatural.

Piping shepherds were a common motif in pastoral paintings that recalled a mythical golden age, and also in pastoral poetry. The bright cloud contrasts with the deep shade in the foreground and middle distance of the painting, where sleeping sheep and a hidden cottage suggest a womb-like sense of enclosure and safety.

Palmer saw clouds as a reminder of the benevolence of God towards mankind: he loved the Psalm in which it is said that the clouds 'drop fatness' onto the earth. Although his imaginative approach to clouds is often contrasted with Constable's supposedly scientific study of them, the two artists were not so far apart, both pursuing intensive study from nature in the light of a strong Christian faith.

232 words

**Edward William Cocks, *Balloon over Cliffs, Dover* (1840). Oil on canvas, 49 x 41 cm. Science Museum.**

An air balloon floats away from the cliffs of Dover towards France, watched by a small crowd of onlookers; in the distance, a parachute can be seen. This is one of a set of three paintings of balloon flights by Cocks in the Science Museum. The other two are entitled *Balloon leaving Dover* and *The Balloon over Calais*.

The paintings commemorate a famous balloon flight by Charles Green (1785-1870). On 8 November 1836, together with his passengers Robert Hollond (MP for Hastings, 1837-52) and Thomas Monck Mason, Green successfully completed the world's longest flight to date, covering an estimated 480 miles in 18 hours. The balloon flew over Dover, Calais and Liège, and landed in Weilburg, in the Duchy of Nassau, Germany. Monck Mason published an account of the flight, in which he described the various measures taken to ensure the comfort of the passengers, including provisions for two weeks, a cushion across the entire floor of the basket and a machine for warming coffee. Parachutes were used to drop letters to mayors of the towns they flew over, including Dover.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Monck Mason, *Aeronautica; or Sketches illustrative of the theory and practice of aerostation: comprising an enlarged account of the late aerial expedition to Germany* (London: F. C. Westley, 1838), pp. 31, 33, 36.

After the flight, J. W. W. Turner wrote to Hollond, saying ‘Your Excursion so occupied my mind that I dreamt of it’.<sup>7</sup> Hollond commissioned Cocks to paint six paintings recording the exploit. These remained in the Hollond family until they were sold in 1913. The artist, Edward William Cocks was active c. 1820-1843 as a scene painter at Vauxhall Gardens.<sup>8</sup>

258 words.

**David Cox, *Rhyl Sands* (c. 1850). Watercolour, 26 x 36 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum.**

David Cox was one of the most successful landscape painters of his day, working mainly in watercolour. Two of his favourite subjects involve the depiction of wind: haymaking scenes and representations of figures on the beach. He painted the latter both in large-scale oils and in smaller watercolours such as this one. With a few strokes of the brush, he gives a vivid impression of the movement of the waves and clouds, and the effects of the wind on the bulky clothing worn by the holidaymakers.

Rhyl, on the North Wales coast, was one of the seaside resorts favoured by visitors from Birmingham, Cox’s home town. The typical elements of the mid-nineteenth century seaside holiday are there: the bathing machines, the donkey rides, and the steamship on the horizon, its smoke giving a further indication of the direction of the strong wind coming off the sea. At this period the seaside was particularly valued for the health-giving effects of its fresh, bracing air. Consumptives (sufferers from tuberculosis) regularly stayed in seaside towns. The weather shown in Cox’s watercolour is far removed from the modern idea of a perfect day for the beach – it is obviously very cold as well as windy, and the strollers are well wrapped up. However, for taking the air the conditions represented were perfect.

233 words

**Atkinson Grimshaw, *The Thames by Moonlight, with Southwark Bridge, London* (1884). Oil on canvas, 72 x 127 cm. Guildhall Art Gallery.**

Late Victorian London was notorious for its air pollution. Thick yellow fogs, caused largely by domestic coal fires, appear increasingly in fiction, especially in detective novels, from the 1840s onwards. In 1881 a Smoke Abatement Exhibition in South Kensington tried, but failed, to persuade Londoners to install smokeless grates. In a story published in 1892, ‘The Doom of London’,

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<sup>7</sup> John Gage, ed., *Collected Correspondence of J. M. W. Turner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> For further information on Cocks, and on the set of balloon paintings, in ‘Art Detective’ online discussion: <https://www.artuk.org/artdetective/discussions/discussions/further-information-sought-regarding-painter-of-balloons-e-w-cocks>, accessed 9 February 2017.

Robert Barr imagined the whole population of the city dying of asphyxiation in a fog that envelops the metropolis, at a time in the future, perhaps the 1940s.<sup>9</sup> Artists, however, turned these unpleasant effects to good use in atmospheric paintings of the city.

Atkinson Grimshaw was born in Leeds and began painting in his spare time while working as a railway clerk. His first moonlight painting was done in 1867. From 1880 he made regular extended visits to London and began to paint pictures of the Thames, revelling in the smoky and foggy effects caused by factory chimneys and domestic fires, combined with mists rising from the river. In 1885 he took a studio in Chelsea, around the corner from Whistler, who also exploited the smokiness of London to artistic effect in his Nocturnes.

214 words.

**Sir John Everett Millais, *Bubbles* (1886). Oil on canvas, 107.5 x 77.5 cm. Unilever, on loan to Lady Lever Art Gallery.**

Millais's *Bubbles* has become very famous because of its use as an advertisement for Pears' soap. Originally, however, it was entitled 'A Child's World': it refers to the long tradition in European art of representing bubble-blowing as a symbol of human vanity, but also has a more positive intention, that of showing the innocent wonder of childhood.

Millais's own grandson, Willie James, then aged four, posed for the artist in a costume redolent of the clothing worn by child sitters in the portraits and 'fancy pictures' of Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Thomas Lawrence. Millais was so intent on capturing the iridescence of the soap bubble that he had a crystal sphere made specially. The first buyer of the painting was William Ingram of the *Illustrated London News*, who saw its commercial possibilities, producing it as a presentation plate in the Christmas number of the newspaper. He then sold it on to T. J. Barratt, the chairman of Pears' Soap. Reproduced with a new title and the addition of a bar of soap, the image was distributed as part of a £30,000 publicity campaign.<sup>10</sup>

In his later life, William James became an Admiral: during the Second World War he met Eric Ravilious, and recommended that he draw coastal defences in Newhaven.

231 words.

**Amy B. Atkinson, *Bubbles* (c. 1900-1907). Oil on canvas, 69.9 x 56.2 cm. Manchester City Galleries.**

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Brimblecombe, *The Big Smoke: A History of Air Pollution in London since Medieval Times* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 116, 125, 127-8.

<sup>10</sup> Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith, *Millais* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 184

The traditional meaning of bubble-blowing as an emblem of human vanity is only marginally hinted at in this charming scene. The size of the main bubble implies an ability to concentrate, perhaps a good portent for the girl's character in later life, and the care with which she holds it gives a sense of stillness to the painting.

Light, shadows and reflections are sensitively observed, and a subtle range of colours is used to denote the white tablecloth, white clothing and grey walls and floor. The addition of pinks and oranges in the tablecloth and patch of light on the floor suggest the warmth of a spring or summer day. These warm tones are picked up again in the flowers and the saucer on the table. The interior is a simple one, yet the tablecloth and vase imply a degree of material comfort. A few objects, including the skipping rope on the floor, are carefully placed to make a harmonious composition.

The painting is reminiscent of the work of Elizabeth Forbes, Frank Bramley and other members of the Newlyn School. It can be compared, for example, to Forbes' *School is Out* (1889, Penlee House Gallery and Museum, Penzance). In 1892 Atkinson herself exhibited a painting entitled *School's Over!* At the Royal Academy (no. 141). She also showed regularly at the Society of Women Artists, where a *Bubbles* (perhaps this painting) was listed for 1900 (no. 358), priced at £16.

255 words

**Frank Dobson, *The Balloon Apron* (1918). Oil on canvas, 76.5 x 102 cm. Imperial War Museum.**

Although there were isolated instances of aerial bombardment before 1914, it was in the First World War of 1914-18 that the skies first became a regular source of terror. Barrage balloons had been suggested as a defence against bombers before the war, but it was only in late 1916 that they were put in place to the east of London, forming a fifty-mile long series of 'aprons'. These were sausage-shaped balloons, made of rubberized cotton and filled with hydrogen. They were sent up in the evening and tethered in groups of three at between 7,000 and 10,000 feet, to protect towns and factories from bombing. They forced enemy aircraft to fly higher, making them more vulnerable to attack.

Charles Foulkes, secretary and curator of the Imperial War Museum, suggested that Frank Dobson paint the barrage balloons protecting Kynoch's Factory, on Canvey Island, one of the leading suppliers of ammunition and explosives during the war.

Dobson's painting dramatizes the contrast between the factory chimneys pouring out smoke into the evening sky, and the peaceful, traditional scene of trees, ploughed fields and sparkling river in the foreground. However, he has made the barrage balloons rather small and relatively inconspicuous. As a result of this and his modernist style, the Air Force committee disapproved of



the painting, and the plan for a second painting of a similar subject was dropped.<sup>11</sup>

243 words.

**Ernest Townsend, *Balloons* (c. 1920). Oil on canvas, 74.9 x 62.9 cm. Derby Museum and Art Gallery.**

A large man, presumably an itinerant street seller of balloons, holds up the pole to which his wares are attached. His diminutive, elderly wife apparently has the unenviable task of blowing up the balloons for him: she looks as if she has run out of breath, and her green balloon is growing only very slowly. The bright, buoyant balloons provide a poignant contrast with the old couple, suggesting the hard work that lay behind these children's playthings.

Ernest Townsend was a painter of portraits and genre scenes, who grew up in Derby. He trained at the Royal Academy Schools in London from 1902 to 1907, alongside Laura Knight and Augustus John, but later returned to live in his home town. This painting is probably connected to one of his Royal Academy exhibits, *The Balloon Man* (1919) or *A Balloon Shop* (1927).

His portrait sitters included many Derby notables, and also Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty, a painting that hangs in the National Liberal Club. During World War Two, he was commissioned to design camouflage for the Rolls-Royce aircraft engine factories in Derby.

203 words

**William Roberts, *The Port of London* (c. 1920-3). Oil on canvas, 53.3 x 74.8 cm. Tate Britain.**

This painting, with its smoking factory chimneys and funnels, vividly suggests the effect on the air of industrial pollution in the early twentieth century. A lurid, unnatural light is cast on the surface of the Thames, contrasted with the harsh blacks and browns of the men, buildings and ships silhouetted against the water.

William Roberts trained at the Slade alongside Christopher Nevinson, Dora Carrington and Paul Nash. In his early career he was attracted to abstraction and Cubism, and he exhibited with the Vorticists in 1915. In 1916, however, he joined up, and thereafter he was on active service until the end of the First World War in 1918. Given commissions for war paintings that demanded a realist style, he moved away from abstraction, believing that an artist had a moral responsibility to record the world around him. Back in London, he would take lengthy daily walks around his neighbourhood, and he produced many

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<sup>11</sup> Imperial War Museum website:

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/7533>, accessed 10 February 2017, and <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1050000279>, accessed 10 February 2017.

paintings of London life, with figures engaged in communal social activity. This painting was exhibited as “River Scene’ in his first one-man show, at the Chenil Gallery in 1923.<sup>12</sup>

202 words

**Dora Carrington, *Spanish Boy, the Accordion Player* (c. 1924). Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 50.8 cm. The Higgins Art Gallery and Museum, Bedford.**

Dora Carrington always wished to be known by her surname alone, to avoid being stigmatized as a woman artist. Unfortunately, the existence of other artists with the same surname (Leonora and Noel) now makes this difficult. From 1910 she studied at the Slade alongside Christopher Nevinson, who once warned her that she had ‘a bloody struggle’ ahead of her because of ‘that vile dead wall of prejudice & hatred against a woman or still worse that superficial summing out of your work as “too clever” that so-called people of taste are addicted to.’<sup>13</sup> Her close associates included John and Paul Nash, Roger Fry, and Lytton Strachey, who became her partner.

After the First World War Carrington went to Paris and Madrid and studied her favourite Old Masters in the original. She particularly admired Goya, El Greco, Titian and Giorgione, and she loved painting portraits. There is a long tradition in European art of representing musicians, either in portraits or in genre paintings, whose faces indicate the concentration and reverie that arise from listening to and playing music.

*Spanish Boy, The Accordion Player* was painted when Carrington was staying with her lover, Gerald Brenan, in Andalucia, and the setting is Brenan’s dining room, where musical gatherings were often held in the evenings. The accordion is an aerophone, that is, a musical instrument that produces sound primarily by causing a body of air to vibrate.

256 words

**Elizabeth Armstrong Forbes, *Pied Piper, Allegory of Spring*. Pastel on paper, 63.5 x 109.2 cm. Private collection.**

The well-known story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin emphasizes the power of music: having been hired to charm the rats out of the city, he does the same with the children when the townsfolk refuse to pay his fee. Elizabeth Forbes painted at least two paintings on this theme. The larger of the two (private collection) shows the sinister-looking piper heading off into a dark cave with a

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Heard, *William Roberts 1895-1980* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Hatton Gallery, 2004), p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Jane Hill, *The Art of Dora Carrington* (London: The Herbert Press, 1994), p. 12.

cluster of children behind him.<sup>14</sup> In this painting, however, the subject is a pretext for a charming picture of childhood innocence: four young girls follow a piping boy across a freshly ploughed field, holding primroses and apple blossom.

Forbes painted many pictures of children, enjoying the subtle light and colouring effects that could be achieved with watercolour, gouache, or, as in this case, pastel. If the boy is a portrait of her son Alec, the painting may date from around 1903, when he would have been ten years old.

175 words

**Eric Ravilious, *Barrage Balloons* (1940). Watercolour on paper. Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne.**

Eric Ravilious, too old for active service, joined the Royal Observer Corps on the outbreak of war in September 1939. In December of that year he was selected to be an official war artist, and was attached to the Admiralty and then to the Royal Air Force. He painted several watercolours of the barrage balloons that were being raised to protect British cities and ports in the early years of the war. Unlike Frank Dobson, he painted the balloons from close to, giving them the appearance of giant fish floating in the sky.

Ravilious evidently found the barrage balloons beautiful. In October 1939 he wrote from Castle Hedingham in Essex: 'The balloons were a fine sight. We get an occasional one drifting over the post very high up like a threepenny bit. They are shot down or blow over to Sweden.'<sup>15</sup> Later that month he was in London and write to his father 'the balloons are lovely'.<sup>16</sup>

This watercolour was probably made in Sheerness, where Ravilious was stationed in March 1940.

183 words

**Richard Eurich, *Air Fight over Portland* (1940). Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 101.9 cm. Imperial War Museum.**

In November 1940 Eurich was commissioned by the War Artists Advisory Committee to paint a picture of a recent air raid over Portland. He wrote to the Secretary of the Committee, describing the event and his treatment of the subject:

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<sup>14</sup> Illustrated in Judith Cook, Melissa Hardie and Christiana Payne, *Singing from the Walls: The Life and Art of Elizabeth Forbes* (Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2000), p. 130.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Cecilia Dunbar Kilburn, 23 October 1939. Anne Ullmann, ed., *Ravilious at War: The Complete Work of Eric Ravilious, September 1939-September 1942* (Upper Denby: The Fleece Press, 2002), p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

... over forty German planes were brought down in quite a short action. ... Chesil Beach, joining the island to the mainland, comes running in from the right with the railway running alongside. Unfortunately, from my point of view, very few warships are there, just a destroyer or two as shown. The bombers are coming up through the thick low cloud protected by fighters only just visible over them. Our fighters have already dived through them, shot some down and others being scattered are being chased, one bomber has come down in the roads (I don't know if this is strictly accurate!) Two of the crew coming down by parachutes – the white markings in the higher altitudes are of course the fighters at work ...<sup>17</sup>

As the artist himself realized, the result is not a dry documentary painting of an air raid. Instead, Eurich (who had great admiration for J. M. W. Turner) has focused on the drama of the sky and sea – the contrails, clouds and stricken aircraft make an abstract pattern that is satisfying to the eye, while the waves beneath provide an answering rhythm of their own.

247 words

**Roy Anthony Nockolds, *Stalking the Night Raider* (1941). Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.2 cm. Imperial War Museum**

This painting was purchased by the War Artists Advisory Committee. It shows an unusual effect: an interceptor aircraft, of the type known as the Boulton Paul Defiant, is tracking a German bomber. The Defiant had a turret behind the cockpit, which could fire guns sideways. It was especially effective at night, less so during the day as it had no forward-facing guns. Below the plane, the beams of two searchlights light up the sky.

The plane is sandwiched between two manifestations of great beauty in the natural world. A full moon is obscured by the clouds of a mackerel sky, spreading its luminescence over their fleecy forms. The aerial view of the earth below shows a calm, moonlit sea and the bright thread of a winding river.

The artist, Roy Anthony Nockolds, made a name for himself as an illustrator of motoring subjects in the 1920s. During the Second World War, in addition to painting, he designed propaganda posters and produced schemes for camouflaging aircraft at night.

185 words

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to E. M. O'R. Dickey, 18 January 1941, cited in Nicholas Usherwood, *Richard Eurich: from Dunkirk to D-Day* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1991), pp. 17-20.

**Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *Battlefields of Britain* (1942). Oil on canvas, 122 x 184 cm. Government Art Collection.**

Nevinson, who had become well known as a war artist in the First World War, began a series of works entitled *The Battlefields of Britain* in 1942. Their collective title refers to the aerial warfare of the Battle of Britain of July-October 1940, given its name by Winston Churchill in June 1940, when he represented the efforts to combat German bombing as an epic struggle to preserve Christian civilization.

This painting was shown at the Royal Academy in 1942 as *Opus IV: Where Never Lark or Even Eagle Flew*. The original title refers to the famous poem by John Gillespie Magee, 'High Flight.' Magee, who served with the Canadian Air Force, had died in a mid-air collision in 1941, aged only 19. Part of his poem reads as follows:

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds ...

I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark or even eagle flew –  
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Nevinson presented this painting to Winston Churchill as a gift for the Nation in October 1942. Churchill wrote to thank him for the gift and said 'I am sure the young men who are fighting regard you as part of the England they defend.'<sup>18</sup>

257 words

**Laurence Stephen Lowry, *Industrial City* (1948). Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.2 cm. British Council.**

Lowry became famous for his renditions of northern industrial cities, in which factory chimneys belch out black smoke, and small figures, like automata, scuttle back and forth along the streets, feeling that they are free although in reality they are not. Rows of terraced houses, also with smoking chimneys, take up all the rest of the available space, broken up only by stretches of dirty-looking water. Most of his townscapes have no parks, gardens or street trees, and he rarely used green, restricting his palette to black, red, blue, yellow and white. His horizons are high and his skies are generally grey, implying that the

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<sup>18</sup> Winston Churchill to C. R. W. Nevinson  
, 7 October 1942, Churchill Archive, Cambridge University, CHAR 2/458. Cited in Michael J. Walsh, *Hanging a Rebel: The Life of C. R. W. Nevinson* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2008), p. 298.

air is thick with industrial pollution. Lowry was inspired by the streets of Manchester and Salford, but his paintings are rarely of any particular place. He himself said he worked from memory, and he called his paintings dreamscapes.

This dystopian vision reflects the reality in many parts of Britain prior to the Clean Air Acts, the first of which was passed in 1956, after the great London smog of 1952, which lasted for five days and led to four thousand more deaths than usual. The move away from the burning of coal, both in domestic fires and in industry, has reduced air pollution since Lowry's time, but ironically the streets in his paintings are free of the motor vehicles which are now a major cause of poor air quality.

249 words

**Peter Lanyon, *Backing Wind* (1961). 121.9 x 152.4 cm. British Council Collection.**

Peter Lanyon took up gliding in 1959, and produced a series of paintings that aimed to convey the sense of shifting perspectives and immersion in the air that he experienced while airborne. The idea of movement was an integral part of these paintings, as he emphasized in an interview he gave in 1962:

A painter's business is to understand space – the ambient thing around us. I don't mean the old approach to landscape – sitting in one place and taking in the view, as you get in traditional painting. What I'm concerned with is moving around in this space and trying to describe it. That's one reason I go in for fast motor-racing, cliff-climbing and gliding – gliding particularly: I like using actual air currents; I feel like I'm getting to the root of the matter.<sup>19</sup>

This is one of his 'late weather pictures', they are not gliding pictures as such, but they are informed by the understanding of wind and weather that he had acquired through his flights. A backing wind is one that blows counter-clockwise to the direction of the wind below, causing a sensation of falling. This may explain the dark colours at the centre of this work.<sup>20</sup>

211 words

**Edward Seago**

Edward Seago had a special interest in the sky, and great admiration for Constable, whom he described as 'the supreme master of landscape painting

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<sup>19</sup> 'Peter Lanyon talking', recorded by W. J. Weatherby, *The Guardian*, 17 May 1962, p. 8, cited by Sam Smiles in Toby Treves and Barnaby Wright, eds., *Soaring Flight: Peter Lanyon's Gliding Paintings* (London: Courtauld Gallery in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2015), p. 83.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 134.

in terms of atmosphere and light.<sup>21</sup> As a young man, because of a heart condition Seago had periods of enforced inactivity when he would lie outside in a wicker chair watching the clouds overhead. Later in life, he recalled how he 'watched eagerly for the different formations' which he had learned by heart, and how he used his first box of oil paints to paint the sky, producing half a dozen panels in a day, with the time pencilled on each one.<sup>22</sup>

Having longed to learn to fly, he finally did so in the 1940s, when he was able to make studies of the clouds from a viewpoint that was never available to Constable. He described how he painted from an aircraft:

Several times I have painted from an aeroplane, from an open cockpit and from a cabin machine. On the last occasion I was in a transport aircraft flying over Southern Italy. There was fine cloud formation in patches, mostly strato-cumulus and cirrus up above. I made an oil sketch at 5,000 feet on the only panel I had with me, and I wished that I had several more.<sup>23</sup>

This painting is the result of a similar exploit.

225 words.

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<sup>21</sup> Edward Seago, *A Canvas to Cover* (London: Collins, 1947), p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 56-7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.