

Artists on Hennell

"We [Bawden and Ravilious] regarded him as a man of genius"

Edward Bawden, speaking of his and Eric Ravilious's attitudes to their friend.

"The best of it [Hennell's work] is as good as anything done by other English 20th Century watercolourists"

Michael Macleod, Hennell's biographer

"I have no doubt that Thomas Hennell was the greatest English watercolourist that England has produced during this century"

Prof Carel Weight, painter and teacher

Hennell on Art

"We look, in landscape painting, not primarily for a rationalised statement, nor for a description of fact but for the moment of vision."

"Watercolour is the most lovely, delicate and flower-like of all ways of painting."

"I don't need to be told that a row of men lining up with their cups and mess tins when the mess-corporal shouts 'Come and get it' – is as fine a subject as a good drawing needs."

Thomas Hennell



Norfolk Reed Cutting, watercolour



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Moments of Vision



'Lime and Frost' Watercolour Dated 1942

Thomas Hennell RWS NEAC
1903 - 1945

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"The greatest water-colourist that England has produced this century"

Prof Carel Weight, CBE RA

The greatest 20th Century watercolourist? A bold claim, perhaps, but typical of the language used by the passionate devotees of an artist who cuts an enigmatic figure in the still unsettled panorama of 20th Century British art. For every ten people who know the work of Eric Ravilious, perhaps one will recognise the name of his friend, 'Tom Hennell' – anthologised poet, rural visionary and, in his last, great burst of harnessed creativity, war artist.

Carel Weight also believed that although Hennell lived through and recorded the most traumatic events of his turbulent century, he was, in spirit, the descendant of Constable, Cox and Samuel Palmer. The last great painter, in fact, of England's watercolour tradition.

The English Van Gogh

Others liken Hennell's expressive *alla prima* watercolours, produced on the spot in a spirit of passionate engagement with nature, and which often bear the physical marks of the weather conditions in which they were produced, to Van Gogh. Hennell, like Van Gogh, struggled with serious mental illness – in his case, schizophrenia – but, unlike the Dutchman, overcame his affliction through art. Nature and, particularly the study of man's working relationship with the land, formed a significant part of Hennell's process of recovery and self-discovery.



'Patients exercising at Claybury Hospital' Dated 1935

Hennell's depictions of the people of a vanishing agricultural society: farmers, gypsies, labourers, and the landscapes in which they lived and worked, have an emblematic, devotional quality that sets him apart from most twentieth century British art. The potato fields, barns and wartime ruins of Hennell's art are undeniably real places but somehow transformed – just like a Van Gogh cornfield or a Bruegel farmyard – into landscapes of the mind and spirit. Hennell's drawings and watercolours could be construed as old-fashioned – in the sense that they are rooted in a time, a place and a tradition – but they are also elemental and eternal.

Andrew Sim 2010



Thomas Hennell - A Brief Life

- 1903 Born - Ridley in Kent
- 1915-21 Bradfield School, Berkshire
- 1921-5 Art student at Regent Street Polytechnic
- 1929-30 Art teacher in Bath
- 1930 Became full-time painter
- 1931 Met Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious
- 1932-5 Mental Illness. Treated for Schizophrenia. Discharged 1935
- 1936 Moved to Orchard Cottage – resumption of life as artist/poet
Faber book of Poems published – Illustrated by Ravilious
- 1938 'The Witnesses' published – autobiographical account of mental illness. Elected ARWS
- 1940 Began work on 'Recording Britain' project
- 1941 First War Artists' Advisory Committee commission – to record the landscape in wartime
- 1942 Full member of RWS
- 1943 Replaced Ravilious (missing in action) as a war artist in Iceland
- 1944 In France and Holland with Allied Forces. Iceland pictures shown at the National Gallery
- 1945 Travelled to India and the Far East (Burma and the East Indies) with the RAF. In November that year he went missing, kidnapped by Indonesian Separatists and presumed killed

