

Press Release 2020



Drawn to Nature: Gilbert White and the Artists 11 March – 28 June 2020

Pallant House Gallery is delighted to announce an exhibition of artworks depicting Britain's animals, birds and natural life to mark the 300th anniversary of the birth of 'Britain's first ecologist' Gilbert White of Selborne. Featuring works by artists including Thomas Bewick, Eric Ravilious, Clare Leighton, Gertrude Hermes and John Piper, it highlights the natural life under threat as we face a climate emergency.

The parson-naturalist the Rev. Gilbert White (1720 – 1793) recorded his observations about the natural life in the Hampshire village of Selborne in a series of letters which formed his famous book *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*. White has been described as 'the first ecologist' as he believed in studying creatures in the wild rather than dead specimens: he made the first field observations to prove the existence of three kinds of leaf-warblers: the chiff-chaff, the willow-warbler and the wood-warbler – and he also discovered and named the harvest-mouse and the noctule bat. It made a deep impression on Charles Darwin who made a pilgrimage to Selborne before setting off on his famous Beagle voyage and Sir David Attenborough has described White as a man 'in total harmony with his world'.

White's *Natural History* was an immediate success when it was first published in 1789 and has never been out of print since: with over 300



Eric Ravilious, The Tortoise in the Kitchen Garden from 'The Writings of Gilbert White of Selborne', ed., H.J. Massingham (London, The Nonsuch Press, 1938), Private Collection

editions, it is believed to be the fourth most-published book in English, after the Bible, the works of Shakespeare and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Poets such as WH Auden, John Clare, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge have admired his poetic use of language, whilst Virginia Woolf declared how, 'By some apparently unconscious device of the author has a door left open, through which we hear distant sounds, a dog barking, cart-wheels creaking.'

The first edition was illustrated with landscape engravings after the Swiss landscape artist Samuel Hieronymous Grimm (1733-1794) and since then numerous British artists have been inspired by White's book. In his *A History of British Birds*, published in 1797, the celebrated wood-engraver Thomas Bewick (1753-1828)

For all PRESS enquiries please contact:

Sarah St. Amand, Rees & Co +44 (0)20 3137 8776 / sarah@reesandco.com

presented a list of nineteen birds which were 'chiefly selected from Mr. White's Natural History of Selborne, and are arranged nearly in the order of their appearing'. In turn, several of his vignettes were later copied as headpieces and tailpieces for the 4th edition of White's book, published in 1875. White and Bewick shared an affinity of approach: both were recorders of the minutiae of country life and precise observers of birds and animals, the parson in prose and the artist in his carefully crafted illustrations. Bewick is widely acknowledged as the founding father of British wood-engraving – his birds and animals were an important influence in the 1920s and 30s on printmakers included in the exhibition: Eric Fitch Daghish, Gertrude Hermes, Clare Leighton, Agnes Miller-Parker, Clare Oldham. Whilst these artists used wood-engraving to extraordinary effect to convey the details of individual creatures, Eric Ravilious (1903-1942) created timeless images of country life. He admired White's poetic turn-of-phrase and wrote to his friend Helen Binyon in January 1936, 'The 'History of Selborne' is a grand book and I read it every minute I can spare from engraving and other jobs. - 'There are bustards on the wide downs near Brighthelmstone'. Isn't that a beautiful statement?'

The interaction of man with nature drew the attention of several artists, from an amusing image of ladies 'of a peculiar taste' who had taken a liking to a toad by John Nash (1893-1977), to Ravilious' comic scene of White measuring a moose which belonged to the Duke of Richmond in a greenhouse at Goodwood, where it had gone putrid after its death. Ravilious also showed White in his garden watching his pet tortoise Timothy, whom he had inherited from his Aunt Snookes. So celebrated is Timothy that he was the subject of the poet Sylvia Townsend Warner's book *Portrait of a Tortoise* and a novel written in the first person by Verlyn Klinkenborg. After his death Timothy was found to be female,

and his shell is now in the Natural History Museum.

The exhibition at Pallant House Gallery will reveal these artworks – many usually hidden within the pages of books – showing original prints, blocks and rare first editions of the books. Highlights include watercolour studies of Selborne Church by John Piper, Eric Ravilious' much-loved wood-engravings of country life (1938) and the hand-coloured proofs for John Nash's limited edition (1972) on loan from Gilbert White's House. Alongside the presentation of historic images from the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, a group of contemporary artists and printmakers including Mark Hearld, Angie Lewin and Ed Kluz have been invited to create new responses to Gilbert White's writings.

Simon Martin, Director of Pallant House Gallery has said: *'In 2020 we are facing extraordinary environmental challenges, including forest fires in Australia and the Amazon. The exhibition at Pallant House Gallery dedicated to the ecologist Gilbert White and the artists he has inspired provides a timely opportunity to consider his important lessons about looking to the natural life on our doorstep and preserving it for all mankind. It is great to be presenting such beautiful depictions of birds and animals by some of Britain's finest artists and illustrators, and to see that White's message is still powerfully resonant 300 years after his birth.'*

The exhibition is part of a series of events marking the tercentenary of Gilbert White's birth, including an exhibition at Gilbert White's House in Selborne on 'Gilbert White around the World' (January to June 28th 2020) and a GW300 exhibition (July to December 2020), and events at the National History Museum in London.

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Notes to editors:

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2020 is also the Centenary of the Society of Wood Engravers of which several of the artists in the exhibition were members.

About Pallant House Gallery:

Pallant House Gallery in Chichester is a leading UK museum that stimulates new ways of thinking about British art from 1900 to now. As well as an original and critically-acclaimed exhibition programme and a public programme with inclusion at its heart, the gallery houses one of the best collections of Modern British art in the country - all within a distinctive setting of an 18th century townhouse and a 21st century gallery.

Opening Hours

Tuesday – Saturday: 10am – 5pm (excl.
Thursday: 10am – 8pm)
Sundays/Bank Holidays: 11am – 5pm
Mondays: Closed