

Elisabeth Collins

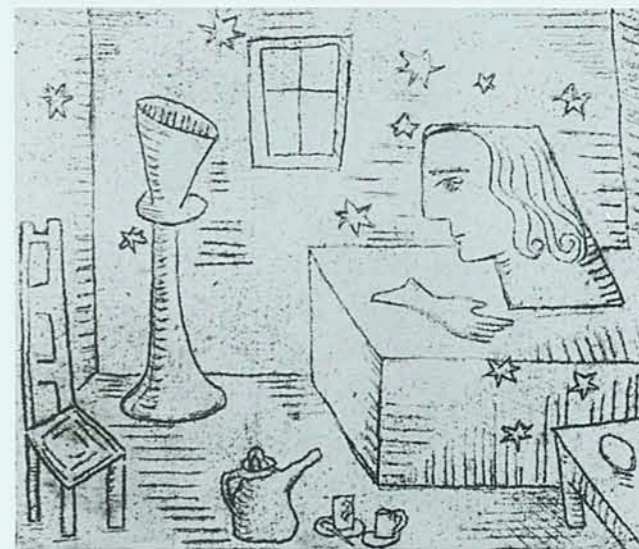


England & co

Elisabeth Collins

Paintings 1936–1996

14 September–5 October 1996



Cover; 48. Magician with
Manuscript c1995/6
Mixed media 4³/₄ x 3³/₄

Above; 6. Magical Etching 1939
Etching 3¹/₂ x 4 (image)

England & co

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21. Head c1970
Gouache and mixed media 10³/₄ x 9¹/₂



24. Meeting in the Snow c1970
Gouache on card 16¹/₂ x 14

Introduction

Asked why she has not practised consistently as a painter throughout her life, Elisabeth Collins answers immediately with spontaneous certainty, 'Living and people come first.' There is a vital paradox here, since her paintings and drawings - made often during brief, concentrated periods - are chiefly about people and a mysterious consciousness of being alive here and now. She finds people nowadays, on the whole, 'much more open than they used to be. There is something about this age' she says, 'a great freedom between people.' Personal freedom and a concomitant 'freedom between people' have always been the ground of her art; its intuitive, exploratory lyricism grows assuredly with the years.

Trained as a sculptor at Leeds School of Art and then at the Royal College (which she

left in 1931, marrying Cecil Collins soon after), she made many paintings and drawings at Dartington Hall in Devon from the late 1930s onwards to the end of the War, when she and Cecil lived nearby. In early works on paper made there and later in Cambridge, gouache is laid in flat swathes within expansive, sturdily determined and often sculp-

turely rounded outlines. In one picture of a young man seated at a table, perspective has the delightfully naive simplicity that we associate with the fairy-tale-like, heightenings of reality characteristic of the Russians Chagall, Larionov and Goncharova, and of the Englishman Christopher Wood (who is paid homage to in another picture of a harbour scene). The small round table here both organically echoes and resembles the form of a tree in the background. The dark colours - notably the blues and blacks of the young man's angular form - evoke a brooding, moody note rarer in Elisabeth's later works. However, the intermingling yellows, pinks and whites, bounded by grey, of his face, presage the subtle colour modulations of later portraits.

Solitary, ruminative, vulnerable and open in spirit - these words describe the subjects of two early gouaches, one of a Fool in cornet-hat surreally seated in a chair in a landscape (more haunted perhaps, less full of sparkling gaiety that some of Cecil's Fools), the other of a woman reclining easily in a window nook. The expressions on both their faces have a wondering, searching, waiting look, the 'anxious and visionary' visage that Elisabeth herself notes in other artists and in poets.

It has been over the last twenty years or so, while living in London, that Elisabeth's quest towards self-recognition has flourished and intensified. This is apparent in the many, extremely varied portraits she has painted. She describes these as 'aspects of oneself, they're

not trying to be of somebody else. Some are taken from the mirror.' This interior search through mirroring exterior nuance has happened only because the artist has been able to abandon any tendency towards conventional, solidified self-identity and any preconceptions about herself. Hence the marvellously fluid freshness and clarity of these self-characterisations, each representing a totally unique person seen and created anew. 'In each face,' she says 'you strike what is the chief message or feeling, as you do when you're talking to people. It's important to keep clear the channels of understanding.' Dignity, the wisdom and beauty of age, youth's buoyancy, serene amusement, sorrow and ecstasy etc. - a different, often quite ineffable 'chief message or feeling' predominates in each portrait.

Fluidity and multi-layering of identity are matched by the literal, painterly process. The artist delights in what she calls 'wonderful colours you can get by layering by accident - and not by accident. You wait and let colours settle, and often all sorts of things emerge.'

The colour and mark-making in these heads is sometimes reminiscent of that of Redon, of Rouault and of Cecil Collins too but each has its own perfume, its own polyphony, its own particularity - one of lucent sweetness (without a trace of sentimentality), a kind of innocent grace. Each face is landscape and skyscape - with amazing, interpenetrating (yet never harsh) admixtures of tones and colours. Complexities of colour, texture and unselfconsciously symbolic imagery allow the viewer 'to

go right into a painting,' (as Cecil Collins once said about contemplative painting in general, 'so that they enter a world in which more and more experiences are unfolded.' In

one of Elisabeth's portraits, 'Summer', small, white orbs so freely painted in the golden hair are identifiable as flowers; small brown orbs as unaffectedly delineated around the neck are surely jewellery. Both flowers and jewellery, in form reflecting the subject's eyes, accentuate the picture's visionary aspect.

Some of these portrait heads are tiny, painted on little, uneven-edged scraps of paper. One shows a minute figure in profile, praying. Another shows transfixing, purplish-blue features (neither palpably male or female) emerging with Giorgione-like ambiguity from a delicate, unfixed background void made up of a wash of mixed, pale colours. Looking at this picture, the viewer senses the mystery of who we truly are, receives a sudden moving illumination of the face (as some mystics have described it) we wore before we were born.

Philip Vann

7. The Fool
c1940
Pencil and ink
20 x 15



8. A Wild Surmise
c1940
Ink 15 x 20



32. The Gift ii c1990
Mixed media 11 x 8 1/2



20. Greek Woman c1970
Mixed media on board 6 1/2 x 5 1/4

Catalogue

Sizes in inches, height x width.
All works are on paper unless
otherwise indicated

1. **Boy in a Café** c1935
Gouache 16 x 10³/₄
2. **Sailors and Girls** (Homage to Christopher Wood) c1936
Gouache 14 x 20¹/₂
3. **Landscape Woman** c1936
Gouache and watercolour
22 x 12
4. **Fool Thinking in a Landscape** c1938
Gouache 15 x 20
5. **All at the Opera** c1938
Gouache 15 x 19
6. **Magical Etching** 1939
Etching 3¹/₂ x 4 (image)
7. **The Fool** c1940
Pencil and ink 20 x 15
8. **A Wild Surmise** c1940
Ink 15 x 20
9. **The Dream** c1940
Ink 15 x 20
10. **Self Portrait** c1940
Pencil 15¹/₄ x 14³/₄
11. **Magic Landscape at Night** c1940s
Pencil 9³/₄ x 14¹/₂
12. **Plans for a Play** c1945
Ink and watercolour 8³/₄ x 10³/₄
13. **Woman Reading** c1946
Ink and gouache 9¹/₄ x 12
14. **Women and Water** c1946
Mixed media (laid on card)
10 x 15
15. **Praying in the Tent** c1949
Mixed media 11¹/₄ x 8³/₄
16. **Girl with a Book** 1949
Gouache 10 x 6¹/₂ (Signed Frances Belmont)
17. **An Angel with Myself** c1965
Mixed media 11¹/₄ x 8³/₄
18. **A Big Greeting** 1967
Mixed media 14 x 10
19. **Angel Carrying the World** c1970
Pencil (laid on card) 14 x 10
20. **Greek Woman** c1970
Mixed media on board
6¹/₂ x 5¹/₄
21. **Head** c1970
Gouache and mixed media
10³/₄ x 9¹/₂
22. **Listening Woman** c1970
Mixed media on card 21¹/₂ x 16¹/₄
23. **Finding the Burning Bush** c1970
Gouache and ink 11 x 8
24. **Meeting in the Snow** c1970
Gouache on card 16¹/₂ x 14
25. **Passing By** c1980
Mixed media on card 12¹/₂ x 8¹/₄
26. **Prince with Blue Flower** c1980
Gouache and mixed media
14 x 9¹/₂
27. **Angels** c1980
Mixed media 10 x 8¹/₂
28. **Portrait** 1982
Mixed media 11¹/₂ x 9¹/₄
29. **The Greeting** 1982
Mixed media 10³/₄ x 8¹/₄
30. **The Gift i** c1985
Mixed media on card 11 x 6
31. **Woman with Flowers** c1989
Mixed media 11 x 8¹/₄
32. **The Gift ii** c1990
Mixed media 11 x 8¹/₂
33. **Snow Scene** c1990
Mixed media 4 x 5¹/₂
34. **Little Elegant One** 1992
Mixed media 10¹/₂ x 8
35. **Head of a Nun** c1993
Gouache and watercolour
5¹/₂ x 5¹/₂
36. **Blue Head** c1994
Mixed media 6¹/₂ x 5¹/₂
37. **Yellow on White** c1994
Oil and charcoal on board 10 x 7
38. **Woman With Flowers in Her Hair** c1994
Mixed media 11³/₄ x 8¹/₄
39. **Messenger** c1994
Mixed media (laid on board)
9 x 11¹/₄
40. **Thinking** c1995
Mixed media 9¹/₄ x 8
41. **Hello** c1995
Mixed media (laid on board)
10 x 7¹/₂
42. **Finding the Blue Flower** 1995
Mixed media 9¹/₂ x 7
43. **Boy** c1995
Mixed media 11 x 8³/₄
44. **Angel at Night** c1995
Mixed media 7¹/₄ x 10
45. **Woman with Altar Lamp** c1995
Mixed media on board 10³/₄ x 6
46. **Man Walking with his Dog** 1995
Mixed media on card 10 x 7
47. **Fool with Lyre** c1995
Gouache 6¹/₂ x 4¹/₂
48. **Magician with Manuscript** c1995/6
Mixed media 4³/₄ x 3³/₄