

Keeley Weston

2104434

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

Illustration

Alice Samuel

Word count: 2529

Question 5: From the research strand of lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests and construct a 2500-word essay.

An Exploration and Examination of Select Works from the Artist Eric Ravilious

The work of the artist Eric Ravilious is something that holds rather a fascination for me. Relatively well known during his lifetime, with a successful career in printmaking for publications and a prolific war artist, and yet after his death he seemed to fade from the public consciousness until his works were rediscovered some 30 years later. In the film '*Drawn to War*' (2022) it was revealed that 'the work he left when he died was stored by his great friend Edward Bawden underneath a bed in his home in Great Bardfield until restored to his three children in 1972' (Powers, 2022). Since the rediscovery of his work, Ravilious is now recognised as an important figure of the period, but his work is still often dismissed as being light, pastoral and

‘quintessentially English’ (Love, 2019). While his work is rather picturesque, and rather ‘English’ it also carries a slightly uncanny tone. His paintings are often entirely lacking any form of life, and people, when present are often more of a suggestion than the focal point. However, my interest in his work lies more in the manner in which he used paint in his watercolours. This is something I believe was heavily influenced by his work as a wood engraver, which he was acknowledged during his lifetime to be a master of. I am also interested in how his work serves as a record of the turbulent times in which it was made.

In his early career Ravilious was best known for his precise wood engravings. His work was notable for his masterful use of mark making, particularly crosshatching and line, to add depth and tone into what is a black and white medium, which he produced on a rather tiny scale. ‘His engravings produced for London Transport’s Country Walks booklets ... are apparently simple evocations of place, but ... simply fizz with graphic ingenuity within the limits of the medium he understood so well.’ (Powers, 2022). It comes then as little surprise that his work was in high demand, and he developed a habit of re-cycling his pieces, and ‘woodcuts for paid trade became watercolours for his own exhibitions’. (Cantus, 2020). Working between these two mediums, is arguably the reason his painted work takes on the quality that it does. The structural building of colour, largely through the use of line, in his watercolours creates an effect that is wholly reminiscent of the woodblock prints he began with. He was ‘an artist who used watercolour in inventive ways, creating pattern and texture there hadn’t really been seen before’ (Russell, 2015c) and as his work developed over time that becomes more clear.



Figure 1: *Two Cows / Pony by a Mill* (Ravilious, 1936)

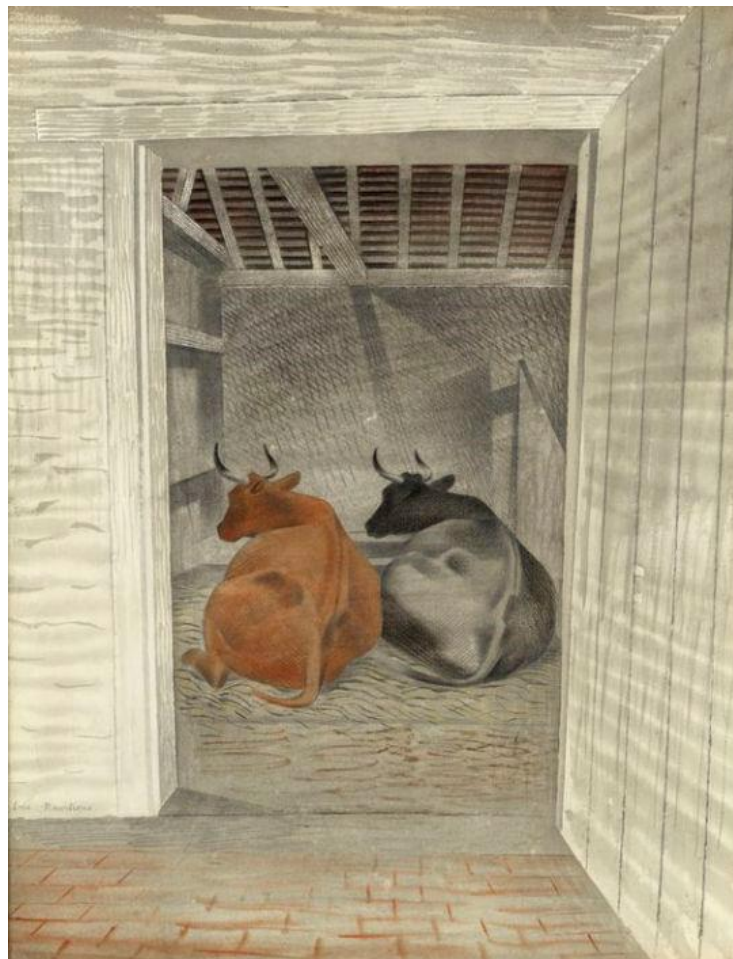


Figure 2: *Two Cows* (Ravilious, 1936)

A nice example of this recycling is shown in Figures 1 and 2, in which he has used one of the cows from the print, duplicated it and moved the setting inside. But it is undeniably the same cow that is present in the print. The shading here particularly in the back wall of the barn, is rather characteristic of his work, although not as developed as it becomes in later pieces.

The other major influence that comes through in his painting from printmaking, is the way Ravilious depicts light. 'Throughout his career Ravilious was fascinated by light, the effects of light. His favourite time of day as an artist was the very early morning, he would get up before dawn, preferably in the winter and watch the sun rise and capture that cool luminous quality of the light in the early morning'. (Russell, 2015b). This is more notable in his land and seascapes, such as Figure 3.



Figure 3: *Cuckmere Haven* (Ravilious, 1939)

'Cuckmere haven' is a strong example of both his use of light, and line, to enhance his work. The framing of the darker hatching in both the left of the sky and in the left foreground draw the eye in, to follow along the winding path of the water towards the blue horizon line in the distance. This heightens the sense of depth in the painting and the scale of the landscape. It is understandably one of his more popular works (Towner Gallery, n.d.). On a larger scale you can clearly see the careful building of colour throughout the picture, with most of the lines following the contours of the water. The water itself hardly seems like water, twisting through the centre of a carefully worked landscape, bright, harsh and entirely white, it could almost be carved into the chalk. It stands in strong contrast to the texture and tone through the rest of the painting.

The fencing running along the hillside to the left also represents a theme present in his works, 'a real trademark both from the 19th century watercolourist and particularly from him of something modern in the foreground to act as a foil for the timeless landscape that was beyond' (Dawson, 2021). In this painting it is a subtle detail and does not distract from the wider landscape around it, unlike some of his other works, such as Figure 5, wherein the fencing dominates the scene.



Figure 4: *The Vale of the White Horse* (Ravilious, 1939)

During the interwar period the Downs and wider English countryside became synonymous with freedom. Ravilious along with so many others escaped into this

'pure kingdom of grass and sky' (Russell, 2013), where he began to create a great number of landscapes. It is for these that he is best known today. Ravilious himself believed that this landscape had changed his entire outlook on painting (Coffey, 2021) and spent a great deal of time walking the countryside working.

With the second world war on the horizon, people feared for the safety of historic landscapes: 'Just as the first world war has catalysed the rediscovery of the English landscape, the coming of the second prompted fears over its destruction. '(Love, 2021) It is in this context that Ravilious began his collection of chalk hill figure paintings, created for a book that had to be put aside at the outbreak of war. In traversing the downlands to paint the chalk figures, Ravilious's activities paralleled the state-sponsored recording Britain project to which many of his friends contributed, a project that aimed at preserving in paint the beauty of the English countryside for fear of bombing or invasion' (Love, 2021).

For the collection, he created a set of six paintings of five hill figures. Four are depictions of White Horses. 'Chalk Figure Nr Weymouth' which shows the Osmington White Horse. 'Westbury Horse' and 'Train Landscape' which both depict the Westbury White Horse, but from very different perspectives. One from the brow of the hill looking over the landscape as a train passes, the other from the train going by. Finally, Figure 4 'The Vale of the White Horse'. This horse is believed to be the oldest surviving chalk figure in Britain, located at Uffington, and was the subject of much debate at the time Ravilious was working. The last two paintings in the collection were both human figures, 'Wilmington Giant', which depicts the Long Man of Wilmington, and Figure 5, 'The Cerne Abbas Giant'. Of this collection it is Figures 4 and 5 that stand apart from the set, but for very different reasons.

The way Ravilious chose to depict the Uffington White Horse is rather atypical of his work, in that it is missing any sort of modern detail to act as a foil for the landscape. It's just rolling green up to the harsh white swoop of the Uffington horse and it feels less tame and orderly than the other White Horse paintings in the collection.

'The vale of the white horse stands alone among the horses for its ferocity and vitality, conveyed by Ravilious's departure from the conventional viewpoints evidenced in these other works. We are no longer safely on a train or at the foot of a hill; there are no signs of human life here, and we are stranded upon the hilltop in the driving rain. The Uffington white horse itself is curiously diminutive, a visual trick Ravilious also employed when depicting the chalk giants, and its naturally abstracted form here is pushed close to the point of pictorial illegibility.' (Love, 2021).

As a record of the White Horse, it is an interesting choice. It is almost pushed out of view on the brow of the hill, and the focus seems to be more on the drape of the land than anything else. 'He brings it to life in a curious graphic way. The hill itself has a kind of sculptural quality' (Russell, 2015a). The combined effect of the pouring rain and these rolling hills creates an almost tangible sense of place.



Figure 5: *The Cerne Abbas Giant* (Ravilious, 1939)

The Cerne Abbas Giant feels as though it must have been the last in this series of works. Tonally it is miles away from the Westbury horse paintings, with their vibrant greens and trains, it also feels very distant from the imposing mass of the hill in 'The Vale of the White Horse'. 'In fact, the second world war had already begun when this work was painted. All over Britain chalk hill figures were being turfed over to deter enemy navigators from using them as landmarks to navigate by'. (Russell, 2015a). Instead, the Cerne Abbas Giant looms in the distance, chalk a bloody red. Perhaps an artistic choice, or maybe an attempt to hide the chalk with the red soil of the area, which we can see in the foreground. He seems almost inconsequential, an afterthought in the face of the barbed wire fencing cutting through the centre of the

image. The land around is washed out into muted greens and browns. There is a sense of hostility to the image, the combination of the figure itself, its colour, and the barbed fencing recalls the controversial paintings produced by his friend and mentor Paul Nash during the First World War, 'We Are Making a New World' (1918) or perhaps 'The Menin Road' (1919). It is as if Ravilious has brought the violence of the conflict into the heart of Britain. The fencing itself also represents a near constant in Ravilious's work, the juxtaposition of an ancient natural landscape with its modern foil, although it is a far cry from the unobtrusive fencing found in Figure 3.

The hills behind seem almost to blend into a gloomy overcast sky, further washing out the painting. This landscape that had brought him so much joy almost appears to be fading before our eyes. 'It is likely no mistake that the threats to the two giants and the Uffington horse are all expressed meteorologically, in looming clouds or driving rain – the chalk figures were, after all, covered up precisely because of imagined threats from above in the form of enemy bombers' (Love, 2021). It is amidst all of these reminders of violence, and besieged from above, that the Cerne Abbas Giant stands. A clear depiction of the fears that gripped the country at the outbreak of war for a second time.

By the start of 1940 Ravilious was already a salaried war artist, and he spent the next two years moving from various boats and dockyards, to submarines, to RAF bases across the UK and Norway.

His war paintings are interesting as they differ from a lot of art produced in the period, they generally don't include people, and when they do the people are rarely the focus of the work. The approach he took to painting hadn't changed, 'The joy he took from the lines and curves of fences, railways and the clean shapes of the south

downs he merely transposed to the forms of machines of war' (Williams, 2019).

While other artists were documenting the horror of their surroundings and the viscera of war, Ravilious seems to have concentrated more on the minutiae of everyday life.

Painting the empty rooms people worked in, domestic routines, sick bays, and machinery. 'Unlike piper and Nash, Ravilious's war art avoided devastation and

suffering. This absence, Powers suggests, evinces Ravilious's refusal to invest

strong emotion into his work.' (Lepine, 2014). While I will agree that his work does

avoid showing suffering and devastation, Ravilious was rarely on the frontlines of

conflict, being based primarily on boats and at RAF bases. We know from his letters

that he did find his work rather thrilling and felt some conflict about enjoying the

experience (Williams, 2019). He also had a fascination with planes and light, and

they often take centre stage in his pictures. This distance from the violence is an

interesting development from the fears present in Figure 5, but it is why his work is

able to provide the unique perspective it does. D'Silva (2022) quotes Ai Weiwei as

saying, 'Eric Ravilious's works "[which] give us an almost Surrealist sense

because of their calmness and a kind of a detached angle of an observer.' Which

was the role he played.



Figure 6: *Ships Screw on a Railway Truck* (Ravilious, 1940)

Figure 6 is an interesting painting from his wartime work. A clear example of Ravilious' focus on minutiae, it shows a large yellow screw on a railway truck in the foreground of a snowy scene. Footprints in the snow and overlapping track marks indicate that this scene was recently a hive of activity but now it is devoid of life. It is slightly surreal, the clarity of the screw and truck, and the ghostly snowscape behind. It is in the simplification of details that Ravilious uses abstraction, 'As Frances Spalding has asserted, Ravilious deployed abstraction not to obscure or avoid nature, but to 'refine and distil' his depiction of the natural world' (Lepine, 2014) and while not to as much of an extent in other works, it does seem to be present here.

This painting is interesting as it hints at the direction Ravilious was starting to turn towards in his work. The cross hatching linework of his early wood engraving is present in little more than the screw, while the slight abstraction of the railway truck, trees and elements of the background introduce a different approach to painting. As the war progressed, he did seem to experiment more with abstraction, however we shall never find out what direction his work could have taken. Ravilious died in September of 1942 when his plane went missing in Iceland.

To conclude, coming to watercolour painting after having mastered wood engraving gave Ravilious a unique approach, which gave his work that 'curious graphic quality' referred to by James Russell (2015a). With printmaking you have to hold such a careful consideration of light and tone as you work, lest you ruin the whole block, and I do think you can see that consideration come through in almost all of the paintings Ravilious produced. Combined with 'an uncanny sense of the visual possibilities in a landscape' (Russell, 2013), it culminated in a beautiful visual record of the events and turmoil of the landscape and times in which Ravilious lived, which we are very lucky to still have with us today.

Figure list

Figure 1: Ravilious, E (1936) *Two Cows / Pony by a Mill*. [wood engraving]. Available at:

<https://inexpensiveprogress.com/1009/a-journey-of-london-transport-with-eric-ravilious/>

(Accessed: 23 November 2023)

Figure 2: Ravilious, E (1936) *Two Cows*. [watercolour painting]. The Fry Gallery. Available at:

<https://inexpensiveprogress.com/1009/a-journey-of-london-transport-with-eric-ravilious/>

(Accessed: 23 November 2023)

Figure 3: Ravilious, E (1939) *Cuckmere Haven* [watercolour painting]. The Towner Gallery.

Available at: <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/artist-eric-ravilious-and-the-beauty-of-winter/eric-ravilious-cuckmere-haven-1939-towner-art-gallery-eastbourne/>

(Accessed: 25 November 2023)

Figure 4: Ravilious, E (1939) *The vale of the White Horse* [watercolour painting]. The Tate.

Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/ravilious-the-vale-of-the-white-horse-n05164>

(Accessed: 25 November 2023)

Figure 5: Ravilious, E (1939) *The Cerne Abbas Giant* [watercolour painting]. Private Collection. Available at: - <https://celluloidwickerman.com/2017/09/18/responses-eric-ravilious-cerne-abbas-giant-1939/>

(Accessed: 25 November 2023)

Figure 6: Ravilious, E (1940) *Ships Screw on a Railway Truck* [watercolour painting]. Ashmolean Museum. Available at: <https://jamesrussellontheweb.blogspot.com/2015/08/reflections-on-ravilious-at-dulwich.html>

(Accessed: 26 November 2023)

Bibliography

Cantus, R (2020) *Eric Ravilious – Designs for London Transport’s Green Line (Documentary)*. Available at: <https://inexpensiveprogress.com/1009/a-journey-of-london-transport-with-eric-ravilious/>

(Accessed: 25 November 2023)

Coffey, H (2021) ‘Artist Eric Ravilious and the Beauty of Winter’, *South Downs National Park*. 14 January. Available at: <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/artist-eric-ravilious-and-the-beauty-of-winter/>

(Accessed: 29 November 2023)

Dawson, D (2021) *Ravilious in Wiltshire*. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmUJwsW4Bz8>

(Accessed: 20 November 2023)

Dulwich Picture Gallery (2015) *Ravilious: Large Print Guide*. Available at:

<https://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/media/5784/ravilious-large-print-guide.pdf>

(Accessed: 26 November 2023)

D'Silva, B (2022) 'Eric Ravilious: A very British vision of war?' *BBC*, 6 July. Available at:

<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20220705-eric-ravilious-the-man-who-painted-while-bombs-fell>

(Accessed: 22 November 2023)

Lepine, A (2014) 'Eric Ravilious: Artist and Designer. By Alan Powers' *The Burlington Magazine*, May, p.322-323. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24241720>

(Accessed: 24 November 2023)

Love, S (2019) 'Eric Ravilious, Tennis and Englishness' *Artuk*, 25 March. Available at:

<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/eric-ravilious-tennis-and-englishness>

(Accessed: 29 November 2023)

Love, S (2021) *The Magic of the Downs: Englishness in Crises in Eric Ravilious's Chalk Figure Paintings*. University of Yorkshire. Available at: <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/192296/>

(Accessed: 24 November 2023)

Powers, A (2022) 'The Real and Romantic: The Life and Work of Eric Ravilious' *ArtUK*, 14 July. Available at: <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/the-real-and-romantic-the-life-and-work-of-eric-ravilious>

(Accessed: 24 November 2023)

Russell, J (2013) *Eric Ravilious: Chalk Paths* 3 May. Available at: <https://jamesrussellontheweb.blogspot.com/2013/05/eric-ravilious-chalk-paths.html>

(Accessed: 26 November 2023)

Russell, J (2015a) *Eric Ravilious, The Westbury Horse, 1939 | Ravilious*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ki6gAgywb8w>

(Accessed: 19 November 2023)

Russell, J (2015b) *Eric Ravilious, darkness and light / Ravilious*. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-OdePVsdKc>

(Accessed: 19 November 2023)

Russell, J (2015c) *Eric Ravilious and place / Ravilious*. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7Hnp9D1jhw>

(Accessed: 19 November 2023)

Towner Gallery (n.d.) *Eric Ravilious Cuckmere Haven (1939) – Limited Edition Giclee Print*.

Available at: <https://shop.townereastbourne.org.uk/products/eric-ravilious-cuckmere-haven>

(Accessed: 29 November 2023)

Williams, A (2019) *LETTERS HOME, A SHORT FILM ON ERIC RAVILIOUS*. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiTwUargweo>

(Accessed: 19 November 2023)