

A Monochromatic World

Notes in preparation for *Graham Crowley: I Paint Shadows*
The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool 2025

WHEN I WAS APPLYING for the John Moores Painting Prize in 2023, I wrote in my statement about the importance of luminosity in painting and painting’s remarkable duality. I also alluded briefly to issues of class and curiosity; aspects of cultural determinism.

I think of painting as a balancing act between the painting as ‘its own object’ and the sense of otherness brought about by the long established ‘mechanics’ of illusion. Painting as synthesis.

Painting is a discourse. It’s essentially an extension of mind. I’ve come to regard painting as a post-conceptual pursuit; meaning that contemporary painting must by its very nature acknowledge the legacy and impact of conceptual art.

I’ve always been fascinated by images, all manner of images – anything and everything two dimensional, particularly the graphic – worlds of constructed appearance and illusion that involve a myriad of conventions; or more correctly, language, whether that be a technical diagram like those wonderful ‘cut-away’ drawings by the technical illustrator Lawrie Watt*. As a boy I became intrigued by his illustrations. They frequently appeared in The Autocar, a weekly magazine that my grandfather would occasionally give me. In the days before CGI there was what was referred to as an ‘artist’s impression’. These were found in newspapers, brochures and journals.



to as ‘time for reading’ – let alone anything like ‘art’. I was probably 16 when I first visited an art gallery or museum.

My pursuits when not at school were limited. If memory serves me, they were either an occasional comic, that meant The Beano, The Beezer, The Topper and the rather more staid Boys’ Own Paper. Otherwise it was my stamp collection. It’s hard to imagine now, but like many other children who grew up shortly after the Second World War, during the years of austerity in the bomb ravaged east end of London, I had to ‘make my own entertainment’. Imagination was it’s own reward. I learnt that the safest place to ‘play’ was in my head. The world as it was represented was monochromatic. Tonal. In retrospect, it seems as if I’d been living in the shadows.

This is probably also why I find the vignette so fascinating and why it has found its way into my work. The vignette was a well-established device or convention in the world of publishing, both in literature and illustration. It would invariably involve a monochromatic engraving and therefore tonal. Popularised in the 18th and 19th centuries with the proliferation of print and the subsequent expansion in literacy, particularly in the mid 19th century, due in part to Rowland Hill’s penny post (ie the Penny Black). We come back to the wider significance of the postage stamp and stamp collecting. Growing up in the 1950s there were few pursuits and diversions and the most popular of hobbies (as they were quaintly known) was stamp collecting.

Now, over half a century later, I have an interest in what’s referred to as philatelic history. Things referred to as dead letters, cinderella stamps** and phantoms**. Many of which feature remarkable artwork and design. The stamps are part of a larger collection of printed ephemera ranging from American comics from the 1920s and 30s to a Festival of Britain Guide from 1953, to give just a few examples.

I love discovering new, unfamiliar things. One in particular that comes to mind is a duotone cartoon strip from 1910, published briefly and rapidly suppressed in the New York Herald. It was called ‘The Wiggle-Much’ drawn and written by Herbert Crowley (track it down) which has been described by Dan Nadel in his fascinating book *Art Out Of Time* as the strangest comic strip that ever existed. It’s the sort of thing



I found it utterly fascinating and would study these images at great length. This was how I learnt, in a piecemeal and rather home-spun way, about what was charmingly referred to as the ‘wider world’. Growing up as a child in a working class family in the early 1950s also meant that access to books was limited. My parents didn’t have what they referred

that unless you’d seen it, you wouldn’t believe it.

What now fascinates me are American post civil war revenue stamps introduced by Abraham Lincoln in the late 1860s. These remain some of the most exquisite examples of engraving and printing. They too employ the vignette and they remain obscure and relatively uncelebrated examples of applied or vernacular art.

One major turning point was probably the discovery of Jenny Uglow’s remarkable biography of the 19th century engraver Thomas Bewick – Nature’s Engraver. An account of a broadly self taught, working class artist who came to be regarded as ‘the father of the environmental movement’. His use of the vignette is well documented.

Vignettes have come to epitomise lost worlds. They seem to represent a sense of continuity and stability that seems absent today. Bewick’s most famous work, *Bewick’s History of British Birds* published in 1797 and 1804 became so ubiquitous that it featured conspicuously in Charlotte Brontë’s novel Jane Eyre; as a missile, a comforter and an inspiration. As Jane, amongst many other things, is an aspiring painter.

These discrete, often thematic little compositions have long been a source of fascination, particularly the way in which their subject matter is isolated and simultaneously dissolving in an unreal manner. I think they were originally intended to epitomise but they’re now objects of curiosity that engender contemplation.

Bearing all that in mind, the idea of something as seemingly unremarkable as a place of work or even a spare room becoming suitable subject matter for a painting seems counter intuitive – if not downright incongruous; a prejudice born out of what can only be ascribed to cultural determinism – if not snobbery.

As a self-confessed contrarian and driven by constant attempts at counter intuitive thinking the aforementioned incongruity coupled with the checkered history of the vignette, has a strange almost perverse appeal. Driven most probably by the fact that it has long fallen out of favour or should that be fashion?

Vignettes would often feature subject matter treated in such a way that to our eyes appears jingoistic, nostalgic and strangely emblematic, often all three, projecting a false sense of reality. In short – perplexing and archaic.

Probably the most significant aspects of the post war period was the advent of television. I was about three years old when I started watching – children’s television was limited to one hour, five days a week. The reason that I (as a child in a working class family) got to watch television at all was because my father had worked as a technician on radar during the war and had acquired the technical ability to build our own television, complete with nine-inch screen and a gigantic ‘walnut’ cabinet. I watched alone and in silence, absorbing everything.

“Spot was a very kind dog” – The Wooden Tops, *Watch With Mother*, BBC 1955/56. Some things you never forget. Probably because of the genteel anthropomorphism. I see creativity almost everywhere, although I sometimes struggle to see it in art.

Graham Crowley – November 2024

**Watts My Line*. A book about Lawrie Watts’ drawings written by David Dixon, published in 2006.

***Cinderellas & phantoms*. These are two distinct ‘sub-species’ of philately. The first refers to any stamp except a postage stamp. That means savings stamps, revenue stamps and commemorative or promotional labels. The second group is much more esoteric. These are stamps that are bogus, created to deceive collectors in the late 19th century. They are not forgeries – but fictions. See *Philatelic Phantoms* by Fred Melville published in 1923. Utterly niche.

