

books

Mother of invention, tastemakers' temples, de luxe dominion, D'Ora's aura



HORNET AND WILD ROSE: THE ART OF TIRZAH GARWOOD (by Anne Ullmann; The Fleece Press, rrp £242) In a more equal world, Tirzah Garwood would be celebrated as one of the most innovative and accomplished artists of 20th-century British art. Yet after she died aged 42, her star faded almost without a trace, her extraordinary talent eclipsed by that of her husband, the watercolourist Eric Ravilious. Almost 70 years after her death, in this impeccably researched and moving account, Anne Ullmann sets out to recover her mother's career and write her back into the story of art.

Garwood was born in Gillingham, Kent, to a wealthy upper-middle-class family. At the age of 17, she enrolled at Eastbourne School of Art where, under the instruction of her handsome young tutor Eric Ravilious, she excelled in wood engraving. Her satirical woodcuts of bourgeois life in 1920s Britain explored themes such as high-spirited bathers on Eastbourne beach, chattering schoolgirls and plump ladies window-shopping in Kensington. By 1927, she was already exhibiting and attracting attention for her work, and received prestigious commissions from, among others, the BBC and the Curwen Press.

In 1930, Garwood and Ravilious married, moving the following year to the village of Great Bardfield in Essex where they became part of an artistic community. A 'long silence' then ensued in which Garwood largely sacrificed her own career to help forward her husband's. Acting as Ravilious's assistant, her time taken up with children and domestic life, Garwood articulated her frustration in a letter to a friend: 'I hope you won't stop painting because of being married. I always regret that.' As a way of supplementing their income, how-

ever, Garwood did produce some highly original and delicate marbled papers for use as bookbinding and interior furnishings, as well as wood-engraved patterns for endpapers. Some of the latter, previously credited to Ravilious, are shown to be by Garwood, quashing any idea of an exclusively student/master relationship.

In 1942 Garwood's life took a cruel turn. She was diagnosed with breast cancer and in September became a war widow when Ravilious died on an ill-fated air/sea rescue mission in Iceland. The last nine years of her life, despite being marked by long periods of ill health, were in many ways her most creative. Fascinated by the picturesque shops and houses in the villages of Essex and East Anglia, she produced a series of 'portraits of houses' using a mixture of print, paint and collage, some constructed into 3D models that were then placed within shallow box frames. These distinctive works, too easily characterised as charming, are, in terms of originality and visual audacity, among the most remarkable creations of any mid-century British artist. A similar spirit can be found in many of the 30 oil paintings produced by Garwood at this time, depicting dreamlike landscapes inhabited by birds, insects, dolls and toys.

For an artist fascinated by paper and pattern, Garwood would have been delighted to have her life and work published by the Fleece Press, bound here in one of her loveliest marbled papers and sumptuously issued in a limited edition of 475. She is out of copyright in 2021. This book will hopefully give way to more readily affordable publications, celebrating the artist and ensuring the visibility she deserves. ■ SACHA LLEWELLYN is a writer and curator specialising in 20th-century women artists ▷

