



James Reeve

*el último tango*



Printed to accompany the exhibition held to celebrate the life and work of James Reeve (1939-2024),  
and the first showing of his final canvases and rediscovered works on paper at

## The Mount Without, Bristol, 26 May 2025

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For continuing information on James Reeve's life and work, please visit [www.jamesreeve.art](http://www.jamesreeve.art)

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# Foreword

Alexander Waugh

James' art was absolutely everything to him. He woke up early in the morning and started painting and went on and painted, and painted and painted. James was slightly confused between what is reality and what is fantasy and there, I think, *there* you've got his genius. You find exactly the same in all Shakespeare – the idea that, as Hamlet says, "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams". This idea of a confusion between what is dream and what is, was very deep within James. It comes out in his pictures and connects us to the spiritual world which James was very much part of, though he didn't necessarily talk about it.

During the last series of paintings, Eliza and I had the honour of seeing his paintings 'come out'. James would invite us to what he called the *vernissage*: the final putting on of the varnish. We always had a very happy meal and then went through and saw the painting which was sitting on an easel. And I remember always being deeply moved.

James never, I don't think, planned his paintings – he just started and was guided; and I do believe that he was guided from the heavens as well as from earth. What he showed in his works was the totality of all things – that all is one and that all is at the same time, Eternal. This takes us right back to the philosophies of Pythagorou in 500 BC – the idea that the artist is in fact the hero. When we look at James' art in years to come, we are not just going to look at the brush marks that he put on the canvas – we will actually be able to commune directly with his soul and learn from that.

It doesn't matter a thing that James wasn't really recognised in his lifetime because those works will survive, and he will survive; and we can love him through them. And those who were exceptionally lucky to know him, love him through the memories of his generosity, his warmth, his sweetness and his kindness to us all.

*Adapted from the eulogy given at James' Memorial Service, Dulverton, 21 June 2024*



James in his studio at Upper Lodge, Dulverton, working on *The Zoo* (Cat. no. 8), February 2019

# el último tango

by Thomas Ash

James Reeve was a distinguished narrative painter whose dedication to art resounds in the meticulousness of his technique and the abundant invention of his work. His paintings are the product of both a mastery and a devotion to his medium that bring to mind artists of the Renaissance. The array of incident and the unstinting richness of detail, beautifully rendered through delicate, graphic treatment of the medium, intrigue his audience, luring them to study the absorbing subject-matter. Whether the content is cheerful or poignant, a strand of empathy towards his fellow-man weaves throughout all his paintings. Reeve was drawn to the natural and human worlds alike and, hungry for adventure and experience, he journeyed far and wide to gather material. Here we present a group of paintings that spans five continents and testifies to his constant fascination with human life in all its myriad forms. Yet his work is far from mere testimony. It constitutes a unique blend of chronicle and imagination in which the chief ingredients are wit, observation and reverie.

The thoroughly international subjects and sources of Reeve's painting belie his archetypal English upbringing and education. This background gave him values and manners that have helped him through many an escapade during his richly varied life. Reeve was brought up in rural Devon in the 1940s in a wholly sylvan setting. His home was a Georgian house with a bountiful garden through which ran a river, and he

recalled the joy - inconceivable to most modern-day children - of being allowed to roam and explore the countryside at will with little fear of danger, either automotive or human. At the age of six he was wrenched from this utopian-sounding existence and sent to prep school in far-off Berkshire. From the age of twelve he was a pupil of Rugby School, a prestigious yet severe institution, and at that time totally ill-suited to the artistically-inclined Reeve. Nevertheless, he won a scholarship in modern languages to Magdalen College, Oxford, matriculating in 1958. This was where the mould broke, for, as he put it, 'I abandoned the University after three months, "to paint"'.<sup>1</sup>

His first destination was Florence where he arrived in 1959, barely out of his teens, yet thrilled to find himself living in the crucible of the Renaissance. Equipped with a little Italian, a letter of introduction and, above all, an exceptionally keen eye for the comic frailties of humanity, he steeped himself in the artistic possessions of the city of Uccello, Gentile da Fabriano and Pisanello. His stay lasted some four years, during which time his paintings were exhibited at the British Institute. Accepted into both Florentine and expatriate society, he supplemented his modest allowance by painting portraits. He also honed his skills as a still-life painter, producing studies of whatever joint, bone or entrail should catch his eye at a Florentine food market. Thus he nurtured his brilliant facility as a draughtsman of nature. Reeve later reflected that his time in Florence was, 'for all its oddity, a good

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<sup>1</sup> J. Reeve, *Travels of a Painter*, Norwich, 2020, p. 12.

apprenticeship',<sup>2</sup> but in 1963 he moved to Madrid to embark on several years' study at the Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando.

In an age of radicalism, both artistic and political, the curriculum of the Franco-era Madrid Academy remained deeply traditional. It was the only academy in Europe 'run upon lines that Vesalius would have approved',<sup>3</sup> Reeve remarked, evoking the great sixteenth-century anatomist. While the currents of the avant-garde surged to embrace abstraction, expressionism and conceptualism, Reeve joined this conservative institution where he studied anatomy and life-drawing and was encouraged to copy masterpieces in the Prado. Established in the eighteenth century, the Academia de Bellas Artes remained a formidable institution that in the twentieth century not only provided tuition to Picasso and Dalí, but also spawned generations of representative, figurative painters. Channelling the legacy of Velasquez and Zurbaran, the Academia of the 1950s and '60s was the crucible for the Madrid School of Realism, a group of painters who focused on scenes and objects from every-day life, albeit with a raw documentary character altogether foreign to Reeve's own style. Among them were Antonio Lopez (b. 1936), Isabel Quintanilla (1938 – 2017) and Lucio Munoz (b. 1929).

During the five years in which he lived in Madrid, Reeve delighted in the sheer sensuous abundance of that sun-soaked city. He was fascinated by the Spanish taste for the macabre and grotesque, and his memoirs contain many such incidents. Perhaps the most remarkable tells of how he joined a circus to recruit young dwarfs from the poor and remote villages of old

Castille. Many of them, lured by the possibility of glamour and generous pay, would later volunteer for the perilous spectacle of facing a young bull in the *plaza de toros*. During these years, Reeve also developed an admiration for the aesthetic richness of the Catholic church, even spending two years as a novice monk in the enclosed order of the Jeronimites at a medieval monastery in Seville. He recalled how he was asked to ferry to their Mother House in Cordoba some skulls, discovered during repair-work, of monks who had died of the Plague several hundred years earlier. The back doors of his decrepit van came loose and the skulls spilt onto the road. He retrieved them, and two remained among the accoutrements of his studio until his death. Reeve was a superb linguist and became proficient in Spanish. Together with his experience of Hispanic customs and culture, this would serve him well when he moved to Mexico in 1985.

Mexico was to be Reeve's home - and its people, its architecture, its flora and fauna to be his muses - for two decades. For the first fifteen years or so he lived in Xilitla, a village high in the cloud forest of central Mexico, then a remote place where he found himself to be the only foreigner. He also discovered, after he settled there, that it had been the Mexican home of Edward James, a great collector and patron of the Surrealists, who established a garden decorated with immense cement sculptures of the native flora of the area that survives to this day. Reeve built a house here, formed a considerable garden of his own and lived in a style part-vernacular, part-English, with a macaw parrot for company. Ever curious about his fellow-man, he became friendly with the locals who

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

were in turn intrigued by the presence in their village of this English painter. He abandoned his home only when the atmosphere of the area was changed by the arrival of warring factions of drug barons, with no compunction about murdering any suspicious alien presence.

Among the paintings in the present body of work, *Novitiate Dominican Nuns in their Orange Orchard* (cat. no. 5) was directly inspired by Reeve's time in Xilitla. He was an excellent cook and often deployed this skill to establish an alliance in some remote corner of the world. In this case, he wished to befriend the nuns of a local convent whose portraits he hoped to paint. The making of marmalade was among his culinary repertoire, thanks to a recipe remembered from his childhood which requires a particular variety of bitter orange. In the convent there was an orchard growing this very fruit, and he proposed to the Mother Superior that he would help the nuns to produce a great quantity of marmalade to raise money for the convent. She enthusiastically agreed and the painting describes, albeit with the poetic inclusion of skeletons and skulls, the nuns filling baskets from the orchard. The appearance in the painting of the seraphim-like nuns suspended among the trees further recalls visions they described to him that included the sight of 'the Virgin astride a butterfly in the orange orchard' (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> Regrettably the marmalade enterprise was frustrated by the want of jars of the correct size in which to distribute their delicious produce.



1. Cat. 5 detail.

Other paintings inspired by Mexico include *Still Life with Artichokes* (cat. no. 9), in which the branches of pine trees that frame the view like stage-curtains are hung with skeleton figurines: traditional decorations for the annual Day of the Dead festival. Whereas in European art, the fleshless human form may serve as a *memento mori*, the traditional reminder of the dangers of vanity and the proximity of bodily oblivion, in Mexican folk culture its overtones are often more frivolous. The skeleton was a pervasive image in the arts in Mexico before the arrival of Christianity, giving it a unique significance in the vernacular culture.<sup>5</sup> Death is no doubt regarded in Mexico with the same trepidation as in any country. Yet the skeleton belongs to the mocking and humorous attitude through which many Mexicans reconcile themselves to death and accept the ultimate fate that awaits us all. Reeve reiterated his subversive attitude towards the macabre in another painting, *Hotel Swimming Pool, Mexico* (cat. no. 13), in which the patrons of this

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> See S. Brandes, 'Iconography in Mexico's Day of the Dead : Origins and Meaning', *Ethnohistory*, vo. 45, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 189 ff.



establishment have become skeletons. While some recline in the sunshine, others frolic happily in the water and one prepares to jump in and join them. The skeletons have a decidedly hallucinatory character and seem to belong to the dream-world inhabited by the Surrealists. This was a form of artistic expression that found fertile ground in Mexico, the country André Breton called ‘the surrealist place “par excellence”’. One such artist, Frida Kahlo, adopted the skeleton as an emblem of her mortality and a symbol of the bodily mutilation inflicted by the numerous operations undertaken on her spine as a consequence of a near-fatal bus accident during her teens. She installed a skeleton above her bed, an image that she appropriated in her painting, *The Dream* (fig. 2).



2. Frida Kahlo, *The Dream*. 1940.

Moving to Mexico City in about 1996, Reeve was delighted by what he calls the ‘unruly squalor and surreal eccentricity’ of this immense city.<sup>6</sup> A motif that recurs frequently in his descriptions of the Mexican metropolis, written and painted, is that of communal pastimes. Among these are *el Danzón* in the Ciudadela park, chess in the Chapultepec garden



3. Cat. 12 detail.



4. Cat. 3 detail.

and all kinds of street gatherings: market trading, political protest, a wedding, somebody taken ill. He delighted in sentiment easily missed in the jumble of experience that accompanies such assemblies: the solitary woman who hovers beside the twirling couples, hoping someone will ask to be her dancing partner (fig. 3); the school-teacher reading from a guidebook beside a colossal antique head while school-children play hide-and-seek amongst the artefacts (fig. 4).

Reeve’s paintings of Mexico City capture the joy, comedy and tragedy of human existence as they are exposed with startling frankness by the life of that metropolis. They tenderly explore the vulnerability of a single life as it contends with its destiny, a struggle symbolised by the diminutive scale of the figures relative to the overwhelming presence of their surroundings. Meanwhile his delight in the absurdities of life heightens the pathos of his narrative paintings. Incidents such as the band playing in a vast yet almost deserted glass-house, their principal audience the orchids themselves, remind us

<sup>6</sup> J. Reeve, *Travels of a Painter*, Norwich, 2020, p. 293.



of Reeve's eye for humour and poignancy. Likewise the solitary soldier in the park, whose back is turned to the intent dancers. His memoirs contain plentiful reminiscences of the years he spent living in Mexico City that proclaim his wit, observational powers and kindness. For inspiration he explored the city's older and seedier districts, painting prostitutes, prisoners and policemen against a background crowded with eclectic architecture from the city's heyday, much of it shown in a state of romantic decay. Threat and hostility evidently held no interest for Reeve, and the mood of these paintings is ever playful. This is in spite of the tribulations he witnessed among the inhabitants of the city and some frightening incidents that he himself experienced there.

Mexico may have been the locale of many of Reeve's exotic subjects, but it was by no means the only one. As soon as he was old enough, he embarked on the life of the painter-traveller, first as a student of painting in Florence and Madrid, and later as an artist in some of the most remote locations on the planet. In the present group of paintings, these subjects are perhaps best represented by *Village Square, N. Yemen* (cat no. 7), a compelling account of what met Reeve's eye during his travels in this little-visited region. In this painting it is the flora, fauna and the distinctive Yemeni architecture that immediately command the viewer's attention. Yet, like many great traveller-artists, Reeve identifies evocative details that are mundane to the locals but illuminating for those of us who are unfamiliar with the area. These include: a tree that shelters a man in its shade and a snake in its branches (fig. 5); a man kneeling prostrate before an outdoor altar; the copious animal population of the village, including camels and mules employed for carriage, while the only sign of mechanical



Cat. 7 detail.

transportation – a single, abandoned car – possesses no wheels.

Reeve liked to travel alone, often trusting to the people he met for his board and lodging. He remarked that, if you arrive alone, 'things will happen' that will provide the artist with inspiration and succour. He chose his destinations based on where he wished to paint, and without regard for his comfort, safety or society. He regretted the extent of modern-day tourism, which has undermined some of the romance of travel and of place. Presented with the choice between comfortable civilisation and shabby decay, he often opted for the latter, convinced that they will provide better subjects for his painting. When staying in Oonadatta in the Australian outback, the inspiration for *Simpson Desert Landscape* (cat no. 6), he was invited by friends to their comfortable homestead nearby. He recalled: 'I suspect their immaculately gleaming corrugated-iron, no spot of rust, would not inspire me, and the great comfort and exquisite cellar would spoil me for a return to Shanty-Town.' Instead,

he caught the overnight bus to the village of Marree, 'in search of more Desolation.... [But] to struggle over the red stones and to sit amongst the filth of the usual rubbish-dumps under a burning sun, called for Stamina which was fast failing me'.<sup>7</sup>

As a traveller, Reeve possessed a charming mixture of ingenuity and unworldliness. What other individual could, on the one hand, oversee the construction of his own house in the Mexican cloud-forest, even personally delivering the necessary timbers, but on the other undertake to raise money through the manufacture and sale of vast quantities of marmalade, only to discover there were no suitable jars in which to distribute it. In Mexico City, there was a rare instance of Reeve adapting his appearance in accordance with local customs. Tiring of the intrusive and sometimes violent attentions paid to him as an Englishman and a painter, on occasion he dressed as a local priest to ensure his safety, the clergy retaining a near-universal respect in Mexico even among the more dangerous elements of society.<sup>8</sup> At other times we may imagine him dressed more conventionally in the garb of an English artist abroad, like the painter at work in the galleries of *Roman and Greek Museum* (fig. 6). Seated on a travelling stool, he wears a straw hat, red neckerchief and striking bright blue shoes. Reeve's signature on the figure's drawing board, 'Reeve 2021', bears out the identification of a self-portrait.



6. Cat. 3 detail.

Reeve's resourcefulness and insouciance are apt characteristics for a latter-day member of the long tradition of travelling artists. The history of this branch of the arts may be traced at least as far back as the fifteenth century, when painters were employed to accompany diplomatic and military missions. An early instance was Gentile Bellini, who was selected by the Venetian state to work at the court of Sultan Mehmet II in Constantinople in 1479-81. Artists were also commissioned to join scientific expeditions. Perhaps the first campaign to examine the flora and fauna of an exotic location was led by Francisco Hernández in Mexico in 1571-76, resulting in fifteen volumes of descriptions and illustrations of plants and animals. The English artist John White made five journeys across the Atlantic in the late sixteenth century, participating in Sir Walter Raleigh's efforts to establish a colony in Virginia in the 1580s.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 146-48.

<sup>8</sup> James Reeve. *An English Painter in Mexico*, Mexico City, 2005, p. 82.

As well as acting as a cartographer, he drew specimens of nature and produced a record of the inhabitants and customs of indigenous peoples, many of which are now in the British Museum.

During the Enlightenment, it became increasingly common for artists to join scientific and archaeological expeditions. Sydney Parkinson, William Hodges and John Webber, for instance, sailed on Captain Cook's voyages of exploration of the 1770s. At around the same time, artists were also employed to accompany Grand Tourists, a minority of whom ventured beyond the bounds of France and Italy to explore Spain, North Africa and the Near East. The independent itinerant painter first emerged in the nineteenth century. Encouraged by the colonial expansion of western powers and also by improved faster and easier travel, artists became increasingly adventurous, travelling further, often alone, in search of anthropological and geographical exotica. Scholarly enquiry continued to provoke an artistic response, for example in the topographic and botanical watercolours of John Ruskin from his travels in Europe. The Orientalists were mainly British and French artists who travelled to the Islamic countries around the Mediterranean to paint romanticised depictions of landscape, architecture and traditional ways of life. Edward Lear was perhaps the consummate example of the itinerant painter of the period. At about the age of twenty-five he went to Rome, and henceforth he spent most of his life abroad and great periods of it travelling. He reached locations as remote and distant as Albania, Ceylon and Palestine, always sketching as he went.

In the twentieth century, as international travel became somewhat safer and more convenient,

topographical painting was a genre undertaken more often at home rather than overseas by the likes of John Piper and Eric Ravilious. It was under the dangers of armed conflict that peripatetic painting and drawing flourished again, notably by the three hundred or so artists commissioned during the Second World War by the War Artists' Advisory Committee in Britain. Among them were Edward Bawden, who travelled in Ethiopia and Iraq, Edward Ardizzone in Egypt, Thomas Hennell in Burma and Anthony Gross who painted shipping at Aden on the Yemeni coast.

In times both of war and of peace, the practical requirements of painting and travelling have always been difficult to reconcile with each other. Reeve would surely recognise the enduring challenge for the itinerant painter of balancing the desire for exotic inspiration against practical considerations of safety and access. Among the daring traveller-painters of the nineteenth century, tales abound of struggles with disease and plagues of insects. During their long-distance campaigns, the Orientalists faced attack by brigands, risked offending local customs and, when making topographical sketches, invited accusations of spying. It was usually impractical to produce finished paintings in these far-flung locations, so artists relied on sketches and souvenirs to work up completed oils at home. Reeve's own memoirs are full of tales of the discomfort and peril he has experienced when travelling in pursuit of the painter's vocation. He recalled being imprisoned in a bamboo cage by pygmies in the Congo; being stoned by school-children in Jordan; contracting a severe case of Brucellosis from drinking unpasteurised goat's milk in the monastery in Segovia and, it seems, braving filthy lavatories almost everywhere he has travelled.



The painstaking technique through which Reeve produced his work would make it impossible for him to paint without the facilities of a studio, so he generally worked in watercolour and pencil when travelling, working up oils after his return. Each painting took him many months to complete, a statement that is unsurprising when one observes the extraordinary level of detail in every component of the composition. Reeve enlivens background space through an intricate pointillist texture that lends tangible form to grounds, walls and skies and conveys an impression of shifting light. He handles his medium with the utmost delicacy, working with minute sable brushes to ensure he defines even the tiniest component of his subject-matter. Each face, costume, gesture, leaf, flower and fruit is exhaustively described, providing endless interest. In this respect, Reeve's painting recalls the advice of John Ruskin, followed by the Pre-Raphaelite painters, that artists should 'go to nature in singleness of heart... rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth.'<sup>9</sup>

Reeve's paintings overflow with incident and detail, and yet remain scrupulously organised, each one composed according to a rigid compositional matrix. Packed with beautifully handled minutiae, and steeped in colour, they resemble a page of a magnificent medieval manuscript. Reeve's meticulous handling of even the most miniscule component of the image recalls the exquisite illuminations of Psalters, Bibles and Books of Hours. Speaking of his tireless perfectionism, Reeve recalled the care, and the time, he took to capture the curtains that frame



Cat. 4 detail.

the composition of *Twilight, Marrakesh* (cat no. 4). Woven with an elaborate paisley pattern and trimmed with a delicate fringe (fig. 7), these draperies proclaim his mastery of the brush and remind us that he undertook the entirety of the canvas alone, no matter how time-consuming the subject.

Such qualities are entirely contrary to the broad thrust of modern art since Impressionism. Reeve was not

<sup>9</sup> J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters. I*, f.p. 1847, chapter 3, section 21.

afraid to chart his own path, but it is perhaps in keeping with the hallucinatory qualities of some of his subject-matter that some Surrealist painters adopted an equally mimetic style. Among them, Reeve's style bears comparison with that of the Mexican surrealist Remedios Varo (1908 – 1963), who described deeply mystical narratives in a manner that alludes to the techniques of the Italian and Northern Renaissance (fig. 8). Varo was brought up in Madrid in the 1910s and '20s and studied in Barcelona and Paris in the 1930s before emigrating to Mexico in 1941. Parallels between the painting of Varo and Reeve reflect testimony to both artists having come under the influence of a combination of European and Mexican art, albeit several decades apart.



8. Varo, *The Juggler (The Magician)*, 1956.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Reeve held the natural world in high affection, as is evident from his tender depictions of flora and fauna, which in his imagery never appear remotely threatening. He possessed a special interest in botany, and the briefest glance at his work reveals his deep knowledge of the subject, a skill he attributed to the tuition of his father. Almost all the paintings in the present collection contain intricate depictions of flora

and fauna that reflect his close study of nature. This is most apparent in *The Last Tango in the Orchid House, Mexico City*, in which the superb collection of tropical flowers in this precious glass-house, which apparently are continuously in bloom, occupies at least half the canvas, dwarfing the titular subject of the painting. Here Reeve's practice finds yet another parallel with the history of travel painting, for drawing wildlife and plant-life were among the responsibilities of expedition artists as early as the sixteenth century. Such records made invaluable contributions to the study of zoology and botany. They also commemorate the discovery of many species, such as Sydney Parkinson's drawings of the kangaroos identified and classified by Joseph Banks at Botany Bay in Australia during Cook's first voyage of exploration.

It must also have contributed to the acuity of Reeve's eye as a traveller-painter that he never truly 'went native', even during the many years he spent in Mexico. Consequently, he has observed his surroundings from the position of an outsider, putting him in a more dispassionate position. Notwithstanding his talent for learning foreign languages, he behaved as the archetypal Englishman, carrying with him his upbringing of gentlemanly benevolence – sometimes together with a few material trappings of home – wherever he went. When living in Xilitla he brought with him some silver, 'an absurd act of defiance against the primitive', and 'even sometimes changed into dinner-jacket supping alone by candlelight to keep at bay the peasants (and some villagers) who occasionally crept down to peep through the shutters in disbelief.'<sup>10</sup> This recalls the habits of the artist Frederick Goodall, who rented an old house in Cairo

<sup>10</sup> J. Reeve, *Travels of a Painter*, Norwich, 2020, p. 248.

but remained resolutely British in his behaviour. Spending the Christmas of 1858 in Cairo, he attempted to make a Christmas pudding that he shared with his fellow-artist, Carl Haag, who thanked him for 'having reminded him so appropriately of Old England'.<sup>11</sup> Other British artists settled for a long period in their country of choice, adopting local customs and 'exchanging their top hats for turbans and their boots for slippers'.<sup>12</sup> David Roberts, a consummate painter of the architectural heritage of the Near East, adopted Arab dress and shaved his facial hair in order to be granted permission to sketch inside mosques. Returning to his native Scotland, he was portrayed by David Ramsay Hay in the Arab clothes he bought in Cairo (now National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh).

Reeve's paintings presented here are not slavish illustrations of scenes he witnessed, but rather imaginative blends of the places and people he encountered in his travels. Some are poetic inventions inspired by his acquaintances and their predilections, for example *Novitiate Dominican Nuns in their Orange Orchard* (cat no. 5), while others are responses to actual events. All are observed with an empathetic eye that ensures that they are faithful to the character of the subject-matter. This is exemplified by the affection with which he depicts the audience and performers alike in *Travelling Circus, Mexico* (figs 9-10). The variety of incident in this painting is delightful: the children dashing from one side-show to the next, while others stare fixedly at a gorilla; an elderly gentleman with hat, jacket and walking



Cat. 11 detail.



10. Cat. 11 detail.

stick watching clowns, and a lady wheeled by her nurse to look at a leopard; a group of miscreants climbing in unnoticed over a broken fence. Meanwhile among the staff we see: figures pushing barrows filled with meat and others feeding it to the animals; masked dwarfs perform alongside older members of the troupe, one carried in the trunk of an elephant while another joins a couple on stilts. The circus-master, dressed in his flamboyant tails-jacket and holding a whip behind his back, stands at the entrance to the tent, waiting to greet his audience. This painting is rich in humour while mockery and disdain are entirely absent. The meticulous detail in which he

<sup>11</sup> Haag quoted in M. Jacobs, *The Painted Voyage. Art, Travel and Exploration 1564 – 1875*, London, 1995, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> P. Julian, *The Orientalists*, Oxford, 1977, pp. 47 & 135.



renders his observations also conveys his fondness for the subjects of his paintings.

As a traveller-painter, Reeve's fidelity to the spirit and character of his subject-matter is in contrast to the tendency of many among his predecessors to search for preconceived visions of the exotic and produce stereotyped images that matched their expectations and those of their audience. Landscapes were matched to classicising ideals represented by the paintings of Claude Lorraine and Salvator Rosa, while the people of distant lands were often conceived in terms of the 'noble savage'. William Hodges, as the draughtsman on Captain Cook's second voyage (1772-75), produced spontaneous and naturalistic landscape paintings and portraits of indigenous islanders. On the other hand, his depictions of India, where he travelled during the 1780s, were sometimes influenced by contemporary conventions of European painting so that they suggest an Arcadian vision of classical Italy. In *View of the Ghats at Benares* (1787), his diploma piece for the Royal Academy, Hodges rearranged architectural landmarks of the town in accordance with Reynolds's advice to generalise and idealise nature in the manner of Claude. In some works he even sought to suggest broad similarities between Indian architecture and that of ancient Greece and Rome, reflecting contemporary investigations of distant cultures by comparison with classical civilisation in Europe.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Reeve's paintings possess an authenticity thanks to his willingness to appreciate on their own terms differences of custom and scenery in far-off places. Reeve's evident affection for the protagonists in his



11. Chinnery, *Chinese Street Scene with Figures*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

paintings, and his fascination with their day-to-day lives, finds closer comparison with the London-born artist, George Chinnery (1774 – 1852). This remarkable individual left Britain, never to return, in his late twenties. He lived in Madras, Dacca and Calcutta between 1802 and 1825, when finally he settled in Macao. Chinnery made his living from portraiture but, as one patron observed, 'he likes landscape painting a thousand times better than portrait painting.'<sup>14</sup> He evidently took particular pleasure in depicting scenes of day-to-day life in Bengal villages and Chinese streets and harbours. He paid no special attention to grandiose civic or religious monuments, and instead concentrated on modest dwellings, factories, boats, figures and animals. Visiting Whampoa circa 1827, where cargo bound for Canton was unloaded from 'East Indiamen', he ignored the fine sight of the anchorage, previously

<sup>13</sup> See *William Hodges 1744 -1797: the Art of Exploration* (exhib. cat., National Maritime Museum and other venue), New Haven and London, 2004, pp. 51, 169 & 183.

<sup>14</sup> General Sir Edward Paget (1825) quoted in P. Conner, *George Chinnery. 1774 – 1852. Artist of India and the China Coast*, p. 129.

depicted by such topographical painters as the Daniell brothers and William Huggins, and instead depicted pagodas on the land and junks on the water. When painting a cityscape, Chinnery often included people engaged in their daily work, such as farmers, fishermen or traders (fig. 11). He made innumerable drawings from life of labourers and animals, many of which he later incorporated into oil paintings. These works constitute a remarkable record of the occupations, costumes, social interactions and environment in these distant lands as he witnessed them.

Like Reeve's paintings, Chinnery's drawings proclaim his complete commitment to the scenery and inhabitants of his chosen locale. Reeve also has in common with Chinnery a superb talent for accurate drawing of figures engaged in everyday tasks and activities (fig. 12). The work of both artists reflects a conviction that a truthful likeness was necessary to producing an authentic depiction of their subject-matter, and that this was dependent on the detailed observation of day-to-day activity. Chinnery never returned to his native city of London, and his depictions of his adopted country, like Reeve's of Mexico, testify to a delight in the customs and habits of the populace of a country far from where he was born. There is not a hint of condescension in this work, which rather is characterised by deep understanding of, and affection for, the local populace.

We have observed that, as an artist, Reeve came of



12. Cat. 1 detail.

age in Florence and received his formal education as a painter in Madrid. In these cities he had the enviable opportunity to study at length the masterpieces of Italian and Flemish painters of the early Renaissance that evidently impressed him deeply. In his memoirs, Reeve describes his ecstatic response to the treasures he found in Italy:

'In Florence, at the age of 20, although the works of Gentile da Fabriano, Pisanello, Piero della Francesca, Paolo Uccello... described an ecstasy that was Heaven, I was led astray from their narrative of Sanctity by the be-jewelled and gilded intricacy of the painting, and the haunting setting of ochres and pale pinks and sage greens of the Umbrian landscapes that illustrate the stories of the holy saints and martyrs.'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> J. Reeve, *Travels of a Painter*, Norwich, 2020, p. 57.



13. Duccio, *Rucellai Madonna*, c. 1285.  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

The lasting impact of Reeve's wanderings in the Uffizi are apparent in the present collection of his work. The composition of several of the paintings brings to mind the freedom with which Italian artists of the early Renaissance handled space, perspective and scale. Reeve likewise emphasises surface pattern and decoration, inducing the eye to dart about the vertical and horizontal axes while admitting only minimal pictorial depth in his scenes. In *African Natural History Museum* (cat. no. 2), various exhibits are arranged in overlapping but distinct sections of the outer parts of the canvas, while the vertical axis is occupied by a peacock, by far the largest object in the painting. This recalls the format of many early Renaissance altarpieces in which the subject of veneration (like the peacock in Reeve's painting)

appears in the middle of a panel, surrounded by small images depicting companion figures or related narrative scenes, sometimes each one demarcated by a real or fictive frame (fig. 13).

In some later polyptychs, the various panels depict figures in the same environment, as though they are windows looking over the same space, although the images may not be in a logical spatial relationship with each other. In Giovanni Bellini's sublime altarpiece known as the Frari Triptych (fig. 14), the Virgin and Child occupy the apse of a church while the accompanying saints appear in neighbouring panels that seem to depict a loggia. While this is an impossible architectural cocktail, presumably conceived to illustrate the intercession of saints, Bellini has added credibility to the structure with a light source shared between the panels, the church interior being illuminated by the external loggia. The saints themselves are also part of the puzzling imagery as they are apparently far too large for the Lilliput-like space they occupy, and also out of scale



14. Giovanni Bellini, *Frari Triptych*, 1488.  
Frari, Venice.



with the Virgin and Child. Reeve's *African Natural History Museum* appropriates the same technique. Each group of objects is evidently in the same room, yet their size on the canvas is not necessarily dictated by their distance from the observer, and rather is decided by compositional or contextual considerations.

It is clear that the gallery depicted in *African Natural History Museum* is a large one. While Reeve has not defined its exact scope, its immensity is suggested by the distant portal through which a group of school children pour into the room. The viewer may peruse the canvas like a museum case that contains various distinct objects arranged side-by-side. Realising that they are in fact observing a large museum gallery well-stocked with artefacts, we use the size of the various exhibits on the canvas to judge their relative distance. The intervening space is delineated with Reeve's characteristic blue pointillist technique. The floor and walls are divided at the foot of the distant stairwell but otherwise this is an unarticulated space on which each incident is allowed to dictate its own spatial logic. This also compares to polyptychs or gold-ground paintings from early Renaissance paintings from Italy. The wealth of narrative incident in many of Reeve's paintings also echoes a technique adopted in fifteenth-century painting in which a single work illustrated separate episodes associated with a single incident. Bellini's *Assassination of Saint Peter Martyr* (fig. 15) depicts not only the brutal murder of this monk and his companion, but also the trees that bled when they were felled on the day of his canonisation a year later. Meanwhile the man resting with a flock of sheep at the right side of the canvas suggests the traditional identification of Christ as the good shepherd.



15. Giovanni Bellini, *Assassination of Saint Peter Martyr*, 1505-07. National Gallery, London.

Reeve also adopted certain practices employed in Renaissance landscape painting. In *The Zoo* (cat no. 8), the pictorial vision allows the viewer to 'see' a level of detail that would be impossible at first hand from a single vantage point (fig. 16). By tipping the perspective upwards and towards the picture plane, Reeve compresses space in the scene so that the entirety of the zoo may be explored in detail. Our eye can meander amongst its paths from cage to cage, marvelling at the plethora of exhibits and enjoying the sights of our fellow humans as they too respond to the diversity of nature. The effect recalls the composition of monumental landscapes from the



16. Cat. 8 detail.

Renaissance such as Benozzo Gozzoli's fabulous fresco, *The Procession of the Magi* (fig. 17). The scene likewise encompasses a wide area, and the spatial dynamic in this fresco is two-dimensional. This allows the artist to emphasise an array of human incident, architecture and landscape, bringing each passage of the painting close to the picture plane to please and entertain the beholder.

*The Zoo* exemplifies how Reeve constructed his compositions in distinct zones, often in the form of layers arranged one above the other. This is similar to the format of Renaissance altar paintings, which was determined by the requirement that they could be seen from a distance behind the altar and over the officiating priest. Broadly speaking, artists from north of the Alps ascribed more prominence than their Italian counterparts to landscape in the background of ecclesiastical paintings, and Reeve would have studied superb instances of this in the galleries of the Prado during his years in Madrid. One example is the *Adoration of the Magi* triptych by Hieronymus Bosch (fig. 18), in which the participants of the narrative are integrated within the landscape setting. The composition is divided into several distinct zones: the foreground; middle-ground containing horsemen charging at each other; a wilderness landscape, partly containing parched vegetation and, as in *The Zoo*, on the horizon is an imaginary city. The plethora of humorous *genre* incidents, such as the rustic characters clambering onto the roof of the barn to watch the *magi* as they pay homage to the Christ child, would surely delight Reeve and immediately recall the numerous witty details in his own work.

Beyond the boundaries of Reeve's *Zoo* is a desert wilderness, and on the horizon we may discern the



17. Gozzoli, *Procession of the Magi*, 1459-1462.  
Cappella dei Magi, Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, Florence.

towers and domes of the city of Abidjan on the Ivory Coast. The outlying wilderness, populated by architectural marvels shimmering on the horizon, parallels the landscape backgrounds in Renaissance paintings that frequently include distant castles, houses and other edifices. As is the case in *The Zoo*, the landscape setting in Italian Renaissance paintings is often an inaccessible backdrop, separated from the foreground subject by a physical barrier such as a fence, valley or line of stones. In Renaissance painting the division may underline a disjunction between the sacred space in the foreground, inhabited by saints and Biblical figures, and the profane world beyond



18. Bosch, *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1485-1500.  
Prado, Madrid.



19. Bellini, *Sacred Allegory*, c. 1500.  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

(fig. 19). Likewise, Reeve himself sometimes mediates between the prosaic world of the viewer and the semi-magical realm through a painting-within-a-painting in the immediate foreground of his compositions.

Among the present collection of paintings are several with such visual prologues to the main content of the works. In *Simpson Desert Landscape* (cat. no. 6), Reeve inserted a length of railway track across the lower width of the painting, in reference to the now defunct Great Northern Railway, of which Oodnadatta was the terminus (fig. 23). This functions like the fictive parapet that divides viewer from content in many Renaissance paintings, articulating the painted environment and fusing it with the surrounding space (fig. 20).

In Reeve's paintings this prologue usually takes the form of a still-life, often on the theme of food, but also containing objects that form a commentary on the main subject of the painting. Such thematic allusions also find a precedent in Renaissance painting, in which these pictorial footnotes often contain symbolic attributes of the main subject of the picture. In the Prado *Annunciation* by El Greco (fig. 21), an artist whom Reeve studied closely when in Madrid, a basket containing Mary's sewing (she is



20. Antonello da Messina, *St Jerome in his Study*, c. 1475.  
National Gallery, London.

believed to have been working on the veil of the temple when the Archangel Gabriel came) is surmounted by an image of a burning rose, an allusion to Moses and the burning bush. The edible content of many of Reeve's still-life prologues echoes the fruit that appears at the bottom of several of Carlo Crivelli's altarpieces, such as the apple and marrow on the parapet of his *Annunciation* in the National Gallery.

Located at the foot of his compositions, the still-life passages in Reeve's paintings also recall the *predella* panels within the bottom sections of the elaborate frames of Renaissance and gothic altar-paintings. El Greco and Crivelli's still-lives, likewise situated at the foot of their paintings, probably represent an evolution of the *predella*. Both works are divided into vertical sections by the architecture of the compositions – El Greco's clouds and Crivelli's buildings – and in this respect they are akin to earlier





21. El Greco, *Annunciation*, 1597.  
Museo del Prado, Madrid.

polyptych altarpieces in which different episodes of a narrative were depicted in separate panels divided by the frame. Reeve deployed a similar compositional device, albeit to a different narrative purpose, in the form of curtains (rendered with remarkable virtuosity) in *Twilight, Marrakesh* (fig. 8). The use of drapery as framing device was itself widespread in High Renaissance and later painting, as for instance in Titian's painting of *Danae* by Titian in Madrid (fig. 22).

James Reeve was a brilliant painter whose work evades classification and confounds the writer in search of a glib summary description. If his compositions sometimes point to the influence of the Italian Renaissance, and his handling of the brush calls to mind the Flemish artists of that period, his exotic



22. Titian, *Danae and the Shower of Gold*, c. 1560.  
Museo del Prado, Madrid.

subject-matter belongs to the English tradition of the intrepid artist-explorer. Also evident is the influence of Surrealism, a strain that resounds in his paintings of Mexico. He was a consummate story-teller, describing in paint his response to the human accomplishments and adversities as they unfolded before him. His paintings abound with charm, humour and above all his delight in the unending feast of incident and encounter offered by the world that surrounds us. Reeve himself recalled an awakening to these pleasures when he quit the Segovia monastery where he was novice monk for a year:

'Release opened the door of the cage and revived in me all the pleasures of the World: such simple ones as the deep-fried smell of churros, a dog slinking by, the purple stain of a wine glass upon the café table'.<sup>16</sup>

© Thomas Ash, Nevill Keating Pictures



23. Cat. 6 detail.

<sup>16</sup> J. Reeve, *Travels of a Painter*, Norwich, 2020, p. 63.

all 40x50 except no 10

large 40x50

- |    |   |           |
|----|---|-----------|
| 1  | Egyptian Museum                                 | "         |
| 2  | African Natural History Museum                  | "         |
| 3  | Roman and Greek Museum                          | "         |
| 4  | Twilight, Marrakesh                             | "         |
| 5  | Novitake Dominican nuns in their orange orchard | "         |
| 6  | Simpson Desert landscape, Australia             | "         |
| 7  | Village square, N. Yemen                        | "         |
| 8  | The Zoo   | "         |
| 9  | Still-life with artichokes, Mexico              | "         |
| 10 | The last Tango in the orchid-house, Mexico City | " 38x54 " |
| 11 | Travelling Circus, Mexico                       | "         |
| 12 | The dansant, botanical gardens, Mexico City     | "         |
| 13 | Hotel swimming pool, Mexico                     | "         |

Small (sketch details for mini) 14x14

- |    |             |   |
|----|-------------|---|
| 2  | a)          | sketch details for 2 (African Natural History Museum) |
| 3  | b) c) d) e) | " " 3 (Roman and Greek Museum)                        |
| 1  | f) g)       | " " 1 (Egyptian Museum)                               |
| 12 | h)          | " " 12 (The dansant, botanical gardens Mexico City)   |



Egyptian Museum

oil on canvas, 101.5 x 127 cm (40 x 50 in)





## African Natural History Museum

2020, oil on canvas, 127 x 101.5 cm (50 x 40 in)





## Roman and Greek Museum

2021, oil on canvas, 101.5 x 127 cm (40 x 50 in)





Twilight, Marrakesh

oil on canvas, 127 x 101.5 cm (50 x 40 in)





Novitiate Dominican Nuns in their Orange Orchard

2017, oil on canvas, 127 x 101.5 cm (50 x 40 in)



Simpson Desert Landscape, Australia

oil on canvas, 101.5 x 127 cm (40 x 50 in)





Village Square, N. Yemen

2017-18, oil on canvas, 127 x 101.5 cm (50 x 40 in)





The Zoo

oil on canvas, 101.5 x 127 cm (40 x 50 in)



Still Life with Artichokes, Mexico

2016, oil on canvas, 127 x 101.5 cm (50 x 40 in)





The last tango in the orchid-house, Mexico City

2018, oil on canvas, 137 x 96.5 cm (54 x 38 in)





Travelling Circus, Mexico

oil on canvas, 101.5 x 127 cm (40 x 50 in)



*Thé dansant*, botanical gardens, Mexico City

2018, oil on canvas, 127 x 101.5 cm (50 x 40 in)





Hotel swimming pool, Mexico

2018, oil on canvas, 127 x 101.5 cm (50 x 40 in)





African Natural History Museum: Study (a)



Roman and Greek Museum: Study (c)



Roman and Greek Museum: Study (b)



Roman and Greek Museum: Study (d)

each Study 35.5 x 35.5 cm (14 x 14 in)

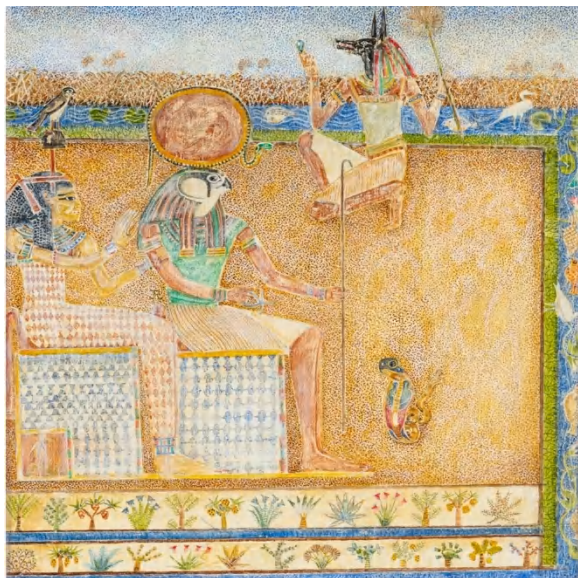




Roman and Greek Museum: Study (e)



Egyptian Museum: Study (g)



Egyptian Museum: Study (f)



*Thé dansant*, botanical gardens: Study (h)

each Study 35.5 x 35.5 cm (14 x 14 in)





Aboriginal Shack; Oodnadatta; S. Australia

44.5 x 58.9 cm



Beach shack; Kangaroo Island; S. Australia

43.1 x 58.9 cm



White man's Shack – Oodnadatta – S. Australia

43.9 x 58.9 cm



Fettler's Quarters; Marree; S. Australia

43.4 x 58.6 cm

(Works on Paper, rediscovered 2024)



Stockyard; Oodnadatta; S. Australia

43.5 x 58.7 cm



Outbuildings; Oodnadatta; S. Australia

44.3 x 58.2 cm



Mount Abu; Rajasthan; India

30.4 x 28.3 cm



Windows of an old Znana; Khandela; Rajasthan

43.4 x 52.1 cm

(Works on Paper, rediscovered 2024)



# A collector of follies & fantasies

by Bevis Hillier

*The Times Saturday Review*, May 15 1971

The greatest collectors, men such as Horace Walpole and William Beckford, have been fantasists. Ministers to their own environment, they created their collections as something to escape into. Sometimes the collections took precedence over the outside world.

James Reeve, a portrait painter who lives over Olympia Station, is the only modern collector I know who has collected, not to fill elegant cabinets, or to form a series of anything, but simply because these were the things he wanted about him. And what things! There is a wooden baroque shrine with barley-sugar columns. This came from an old colonel in Exeter. Like Reeve he was a Roman Catholic convert, and when he died his nonconformist housekeeper through out all the papal trappings. A mummified monkey was given to Reeve by the uncle of the Princess Elizabeth of Toro.

On the mantelpiece is a model of Crippen hanging; inside a drawer in the platform is a piece of the rope with which he was hanged. "Believe it or not, that was given to me as first prize at a children's party when I was six. It was the first object that fired my collection." Reeve also owns a Victorian trade card printed "William Marwood, Executioner, 6 Church Lane, Horncastle, Lincolnshire, England." There are skulls galore, shells, corals, stuffed birds, and eighteenth-century artist's lay figure of boxwood, puppets, advertisements for giants and dwarfs, and egg perched on bird legs, and an ivory snail, emerging with horrible liquescence from its

helter-skelter shell. Everywhere there are branches, lianas, and great kek stalks: you would think he needed a machete to get to bed.

How is such a collector formed, and where does he acquire the materials of fantasy? I visited James Reeve to find out. He was born in 1939. At six, he was sent to Pinewood School, and at once became a collector. "Everyone collected there. The headmaster collected ties and tie-pins. The maths mistress refused to throw away any of her empty talcum-powder tins. The Latin master, Nathaniel Wade, was a world authority on wild flowers. I collected pigeon feathers. We were given prizes for collecting. One boy collected cuttings from *Vogue*, which his mother sent him, and he was an object of my envy."

Then to Rugby, which he loathed. "One went on appalling long-distance runs until one's heart cracked. One had to retire to the churchyard to read." There was not much collecting at Rugby, though "everyone stole books from the library when they left. When I became a Roman Catholic I sent mine back. A friend of mine removed a complete set of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters."

He thought of two of the staff -- the headmaster, Sir Arthur fford (("later remarkable, as head of the B.B.C., for refusing to have a television set"): "he always gave the impression that he hated the place as much as oneself"; and a Shakespearean scholar called Mr. Toss will, "who worked on the rather undemocratic based of selecting the cream of the pupils and making them an élite club'.

Among his contemporaries, he found only one kindred spirit, Anthony Short, who is now a film director. "I remember one marvellous occasion, one of those filed

days when the whole school corps marched off to do battle with Stowe. We were supposed to fire blank cartridges, which are really extremely dangerous. If you got hit, and you were out. Anthony and I had the happy idea of shooting ourselves: we eliminated ourselves for the whole afternoon and had a delirious time exploring the temples and grottoes of Stowe – a pleasant change from Rugby, where the main monument was to William Webb Ellis, the inventor of rugby football.”

In 1958 he won a modern languages scholarship at Magdalen, Oxford. On arriving there, he was disconcerted to find that he was allotted “a mean little room over the main street” instead of in the eighteenth century New Buildings, where someone he had particularly disliked at school had a lush suite of panelled rooms. After three months he left. His tutor thought enough of him to trail him down to Devon to try and persuade him to return; but without success.

In 1959, Reeve went to Italy. He had lodgings with two anachronistic sisters above the Piazza Antinori, Florence. One of them, who spent her days making whalebone corsets, would ask him every time he returned from England, where the horses had watered. At this stage Reeve got to know Harold Acton, “who was extraordinarily kind”.

To make ends meet, he hit on the idea of crystallizing chrysanthemums by dipping the petals in molten sugar. “They became all the rage; they were decadent, smelt of autumn, tasted of Chanterelle mushrooms.” An exhibition of his paintings was held at the British Institute. Plunging, as he easily does, into the macabre, he laid on a mock funeral for an English woman who had always wanted to see her own obsequies. “An empty coffin. Everyone came. She sat in a corner of the church

opposite the one-time French embassy. Of course, when she finally died, wolf, wolf, nobody came.”

He was invited to a costume party at an American finishing school. “I wore my death costume – made up by a little *modiste* in Florence, with dead flies stuck all over it. On the way there with my partner, Mary Jo Bryant, my motor car gave out, and I had the awful business of pushing it to a garage, dressed as, and feeling like, death. When I was announced at the party, all the servants crossed themselves and fled. I was frightfully hungry. I had hired a skull as an accessory, and during dinner I stuffed it with canapés to take away. When I was introduced to the headmistress, an absolute cornucopia of entrées fell out on the floor.”

In 1963 Reeve went to Spain, and stayed there for five years. On his arrival in Madrid, he went to the circus and met Don Eduardo, the impresario of the dwarfs. He was offered the job of hunting the dwarfs for the circus. “I travelled the length and breadth of Castile, paying 4,000 pesetas (about £20) for a dwarf. In the minute villages one was received as the Second Coming. Even as late as the nineteenth century, as you probably know, dwarfs were left out on the Sierra to starve or be eaten by wolves.”

Reeve worked for a season at the Circo Price, designing costumes and sets for dwarf tableaux. “My great coup was to discover Doña Alicia, a most beautiful dwarf, whom I painted. She appeared as Marie Antoinette with a cardboard head which was ceremoniously lopped off with a dinky guillotine. My days with the circus ended abruptly, because of a Peruvian mystic who was in love with me. I introduced her to one of those white-face sexless clowns with a sequined hat, and he tried to rape her. I had to leave.”



He rented a studio in the house of the widow of Alfonso XIII's court photographer. "At one end of the room were all these painted stills of rooms in the palace, so he had this brilliant idea of having them photographed against stills of the state rooms. The court photographer had illicitly kept copies of all the photographs. *Paris-Match* would pay a fortune for them. I wish I had got hold of some."

In Spain he collected things wherever he went. He was given relics by the sacristans of churches. In a monastery outside Segovia he acquired three skulls. "In repairs to the refectory, several skeletons were found of visiting monks from a sister order, who had been killed by plague in the fifteenth century. The monks wrapped them up for me in greaseproof paper, just like Harrod's, and I took them away in my old jalopy."

Reeve's main reason for leaving Italy for Spain was to study Velasquez, as an antidote to "the saccharine horror of Perugino". Velasquez is still the painter he most admires. He attended the academy – "the last school in Europe where they still practiced the seventeenth century anatomy-school methods of Vesalius. (Since then it has been closed down.) One studied portions of the boy. It was valuable to feel the length of tibia, or to hold an eyeball in one's hand."

In 1968 he returned to England. "I would hate to be an expatriate. After more than five years one becomes ... odd." A portrait painter who gets good likenesses without slavish representationalism, Reeve has no lack of sitters. A cousin of the Literary Longfords, he has painted several of them: Lady Antonia in a high-backed chair, Lady Rachel in a Raccoon coat, Mrs Judith Kazantzis lying on the floor.

Recent sitters have been Lord John Cholmondeley, the Knight of Glin, and Mr James Pope-Hennessy. The element of fantasy spills over into the backgrounds. With apprehensions the subject peers round the canvas to see whether Reeve has painted in a monkey in a death embrace with a rattlesnake, a Hieronymus Bosch strawberry or a moulting albatross.

Where can the novice fantasist start his collection? Obviously it is the essence of such a collection that most of the objets should be *trouves*, and that means foraging in junkshops for yourself. But James Reeve buys his sprays of coral, at about £1 each, from Sarogny Art Products, Twickenham. His shells come from The Shell Shop, Lyme Regis.









## Lore of the jungle

*The Daily Telegraph*, August 9, 1986

James Reeve, as told to Hilary Alexander

"I don't subscribe to that masochistic, hand-wringing school of gardening that persists in agonising over the long rows of club-rooted cabbages and the sad contemplation of gall weevil and heart rot, woolly aphid and blister mite, potato eel worm and raspberry midge. In my version of the garden, the sick or unwilling are mercilessly obliterated, substituted or ignored.

The proper attitude towards vegetables is that of an aunt of mine who was driven at last, by her husband's despairing preoccupation with an infertile mushroom bed, to planting out, early each morning, half a pound of greengrocers mushrooms. I belong to an extension of the Sackville-West school of impenetrable jungle; besides, areas of jungle harbour things that prey upon most of the unwelcome presences.

Blessed Geoffrey Smith tells us we mustn't spray greenfly, which are the ladybirds' diet; likewise the blackfly on broad beans provide for the ants. This is welcome news, because I hate the paraphernalia of plastic spray equipment: the jammed trigger, the blocked nozzle.

The Gunnera-shrouded pond breeds frogs and toads and attracts wild duck. All inhibit slugs and snails. In the old days, Khaki Campbell duck were kept in kitchen gardens for that purpose.

I found a family of vipers down there recently, which I suppose eat the frogs which eat the slugs. But never mind, perhaps the magpies eat the snakes ... and I shoot the magpies. (I put out the stuffed barn owl on the veranda in the middle of the lawn to bring them down.) And then I pick them off to use for stock. It's not generally known that they make a good basis for a bouillabaise.

My garden is chiefly designed to lure passing creatures, the odd magpie, squirrel, fox or rabbit, which then end up in my cooking pot. (A weathered 20-bore shotgun lies across the arms of a white wicker chair ready for the opportunistic pot shot.)

I use "Soyer's Pantropheon: the History of Food and Its Preparation from the Earliest Ages of the World", which has ancient Greek and Roman recipes for cooking foxes and squirrels and stag's feet, even camels, of which there are a singular lack in Dulverton. All the bones and remains of my meals end up on the compost heap and so the cycle goes on.

Much as I admire the precision and logic of some gardens, I could never achieve such perfection, least of all around this shack, where there isn't much snobbery. Hollyhocks and snapdragons are as welcome as echinopsis and alstromeria. Besides, the mathematical attitude denies the pleasure of self-seeding things in ridiculous places: verbascum suddenly in the middle of a path, or a tree peony seeding in a blocked gutter.

But in those areas away from the nettle beds, providing for those, this year, non-existent tortoiseshell butterflies, which are supposed to be their justification, nature should conform to art.

That fine, fruiting so splendidly? The grapes are plastic. Those orchids you admired by the door, they are made of linen. That birdcage which no bird should choose for its nest? It houses a stuffed jay on a last year's blackbirds nest. Likewise, stuffed snakes, crocodiles and birds embellish remote corners.

I like the garden to be an extension of my house and travels; thus, the occasional creeper-covered ruins - ruined remains again - which remind me of places I've painted, the Mayan ruins of Tikal in Guatemala, for example. That one down there looks less Mayan than Alexander Pope, but no matter.

My favourite occupation in the garden is heaving around great forkfuls of manure and it follows quite naturally that my favourite area is the compost heap. What satisfaction of finally rotted mould and the delight, an archaeologist's delight, of rediscovering recollections of ancient meals: a crab's claw, a mussel shell, a breastbone of a goose.

In the time of the Mastodon, this area was devoted to tanneries and scrub oak closed the steep hills behind and below because its bark was used in the tanning process. This didn't do anything for the soil, merely impoverished it. Hence my interest in compost.

One of the first things I put in was the Lime Walk. It's very important to plant trees immediately, because we are frail creatures and trees take time, and we don't have much time. There was also a sentimental reason: my grandparents had one and I wished to repeat it.



They are Red Twigged limes which don't drip or weep onto the stuff beneath, which like their feet in the shade and their heads in the sun.

Another of the early things to go in was a Gunnera which has subsequently grown to gargantuan proportions and provides a jungle backdrop. This was given to me as a cutting by one of the network of gardeners which operates around here, rather like an antiques dealers' ring. It's essential to give things because if you get a bad frost, as you did last winter, then you have a chance to get stuff back.

Around the pond I've put in a lot of things from Ireland, County Cork. Watery things like bog myrtle and Libertia. Irish fuchsia and irises is an small leafed bamboo. And there's a small Raubritter rose around the crumbling ruins, amongst pink mallow.

Why do I like gardening? It's the actual process of feeding and tending. The satisfaction of a final trumpet,

or whatever, is more in the reward for one's efforts than its own peculiar form or smell, although those are very satisfying, too. It's the process you go through, the composting and the manuring and, yes, the physical effort, because it is the only exercise I get, stuck in the studio all day long. When I'm abroad, during my travels, I get the exercise of struggling through jungles and over deserts, but here, when I come back to finish the paintings off, I'm stuck there, peering down my sable brush.

I have a very disciplined day. I get up every morning about half past six or seven, work through lunch time until about half past six and then I put my brushes down and work on in the garden until nightfall. I've been here five years now and I suppose the garden is going to need another three years before it is as I want it. Then I shall just sit back and enjoy it. There will be the occasional bout of pruning and trimming and cutting things back and, of course, the eternal vigilance and toil in the compost heap, which is where it all begins."

