

THE ART AND LIFE OF FRANCIS HEWLETT

IMPASSIONED OBSERVER

Jenny Pery

From 1960 to 1981 Francis Hewlett was Head of Painting at Falmouth College of Art, a vital figure in promoting the artistic and academic achievements of the College. He combined teaching and administration with his own painting, and later with ceramic sculpture, working three-dimensionally with images he had developed as a painter. His paintings of Cornwall made during this period and following his retirement from teaching are an important contribution to the artistic heritage of the region. His innovative sculpture gained considerable renown for its technical bravura as well as for its iconoclastic humour.

From the moment he left school Francis Hewlett dedicated his life to art. This was a surprising choice for a boy raised in difficult circumstances in Bristol, with no artistic background. His exceptional early talent as a draughtsman gained him a place at Bristol College of Art, and then at the most prestigious art school in the land, the Slade School of Art in London. In 1952 he also won a national art competition which earned him a year's study in Paris, all expenses paid. The drawings he made during these student years were of such informed intensity that he was able to use them to make remarkable paintings over thirty years later.

Throughout his life Hewlett remained a committed realist, against the tide of fashion. In his diaries he mused on the role of the artist and on the nature of his own art: 'I see the artist as an observer, trying to put the facts as he sees them in a picture, in as unbiased a way as possible, with a sort of visual egalitarianism about those facts, none emphasised, none suppressed... I paint figurative paintings, sometimes from nature, sometimes from drawings, but always with the same intent of drawing a recognisable object and finding the essential geometry embedded in the object observed.' It is the extraordinary 'realness' of his art that guarantees its longevity.

Containing over 200 paintings and drawings by the artist, along with photographs of his sculptural works, the majority never before published, this superbly illustrated book charts Francis Hewlett's development as an artist from indefatigable draughtsman and teacher to dedicated painter of the major series of Bristol Empire and Notre Dame paintings.

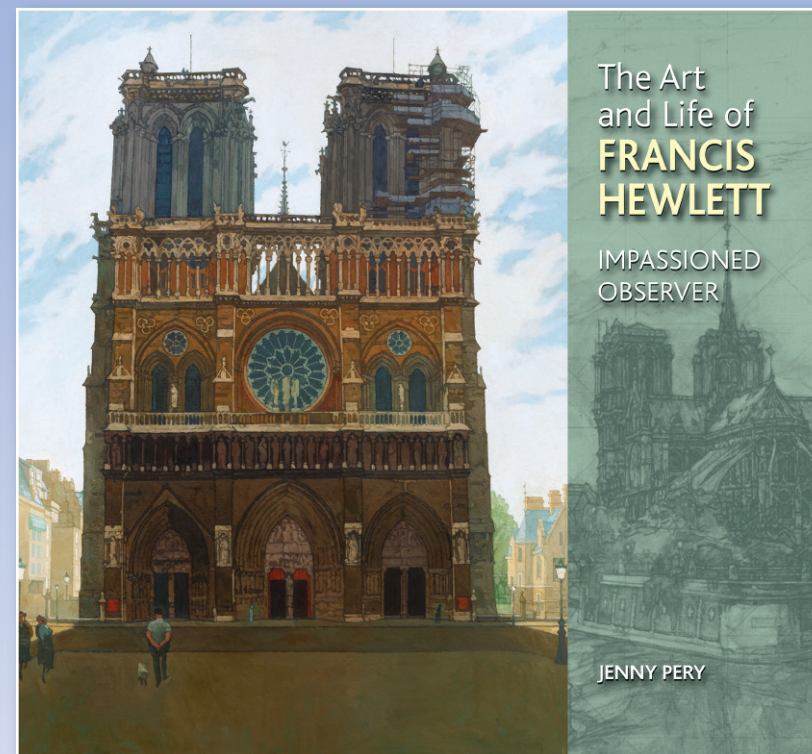
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Devon-based author, artist and art historian, Jenny Pery has written numerous titles on British art, including books on Anthony Eyton, Benedict Rubbra, Daphne Todd, Tristram Hillier, Claude Rogers, Solomon J. Solomon, John Dodgson, Caziell, Edward Piper, Robert Organ and Alan Cotton.

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HALSGROVE TITLE INFORMATION



Format: *Hardback, 144 pages, 238 x 258mm,
including over 200 paintings and drawings*

Price: *£29.99*

ISBN: *978 1 906690 54 0*

Imprint: *Halstar*

Published: *October 2014*



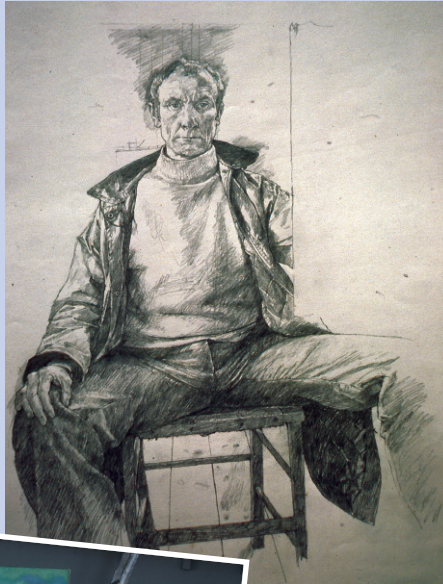
Halsgrove Publishing, Halsgrove House, Ryelands Business Park, Bagley Road,
Wellington, Somerset TA21 9PZ Tel: 01823 653777 Fax: 01823 216796
www.halsgrove.com e-mail: sales@halsgrove.com

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Dream Boy,
1976, ceramic

Self Portrait at Greynog, 1977
pencil on paper

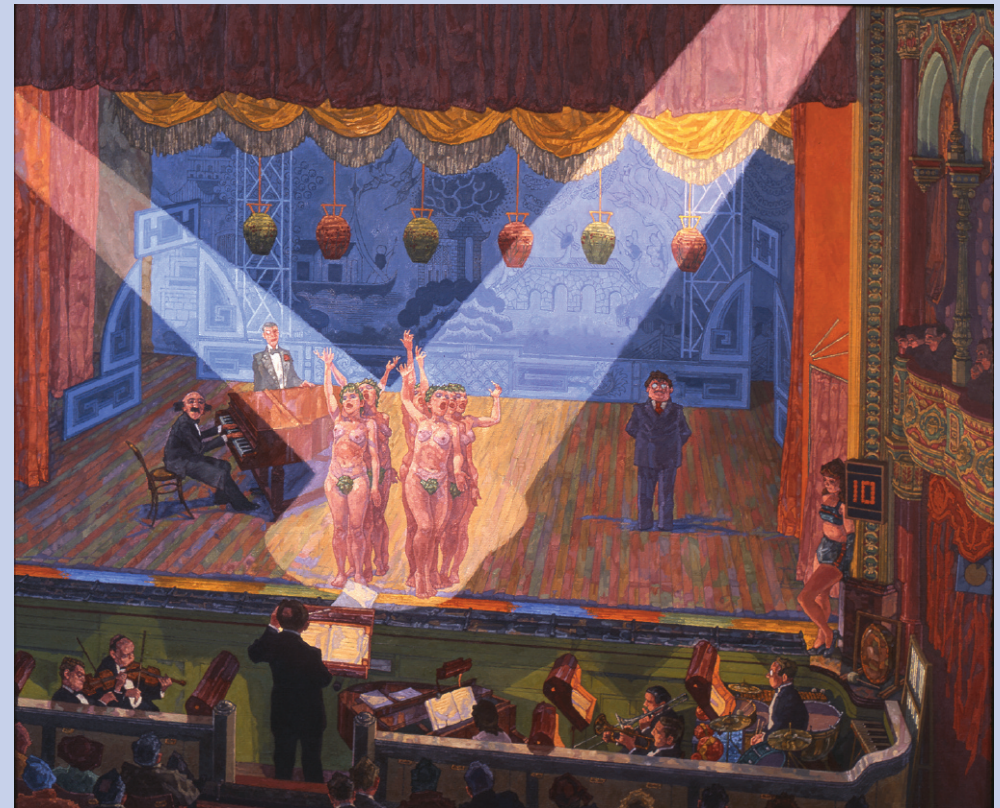


Francis Hewlett's Studio
with Notre Dame on easel
© Colin Robins



Example of a
double-page spread.

*The Empire. Shouting
Girls and Issy Bonn on
Stage, 1989*
oil on canvas



*Interior, Claire with
Baby Harry, 1984–85*
oil on canvas



6 The Secret Vice of Ceramic



AT THE END OF THE 1960s, after several hectic years working to raise the status of Falmouth School of Art while teaching increasing intakes of new students, Hewlett found himself struggling with inconsistency in his personal life and in his art. As far as art was concerned he was all too aware that painting directly from observation was controlled and he was experimenting with more indirectly realised work. He was equally dissatisfied with this. His innate puritanism made him recoil from the current idea that 'anything goes' – that any gesture or colour might suffice as an artistic statement. He reacted to produce a substantial body of work based on observation but he was at loggerheads with his materials. Rendering this problem in his diaries, he grumbled: 'I sometimes wish I had never been introduced to an early sign, with the promise for the kind of objective, observed painting I so much admire. It would be so much easier to make things up out of my own head, or gained from memory but this stubborn insistence on observed fact, so much as I can manage it, is now a permanent part of the way I work, and instead of the way I think, since my whole (limited) philosophy of life, such as it is, seems to have reduced itself... to a refusal to accept anything other than the veritable or the rational... This puts me beyond the pale of most contemporary painting, the present threat of which seems to be towards a sort of kind of ecstasy in the way things are portrayed and a profoundly eclectic approach to what is actually painted. Whether the attraction, and the end of this kind of expressionist image, I have to avoid it. For me, this kind of emotional indulgence is now irrelevant, and dangerous.'

It was to ceramics that Hewlett turned, initially on a sort of 'secret hobby', to find another means of expression. His point was becoming thicker and thicker, seeking to make the confines of canvas or board. It occurred to him that working in clay might be a way out of his dilemma, allowing him to make objects that would literally stand up. He began experimenting with small objects, painted in polychrome and fired in a small electric kiln that he installed first in his studio and later in a garden shed. A diary entry of 1979 shows him experimenting all through one day, 'working out an approach which makes it more without making it too mechanical. I fired some small but pieces of ceramics in preparation for the real thing.' The selected objects that had figured in his *Capitols Aboli* paintings began to appear in subsequent form. Hands, eyes, boats and trees took on a life of their own in clay and gradually grew larger and increasingly quirky. Initially, the more solid the object, the more freedom to fantasise Hewlett felt. All details of domestic life were grip to the mill, including such 'background' items as flying ducks and



Four Hands, 1968–70,
glazed earthenware

Opposite: The Slaves, 1979,
oil on canvas