



I. front cover

*Ewe Sitting Down*, 1994

Oil on canvas

106 x 106 cms / 41.7 x 41.7 inches

Signed lower right, titled on reverse



Mary Newcomb and Andras Kalman at her Retrospective exhibition at Abbot Hall Gallery, Kendal, Cumbria, 1996





MARY NEWCOMB

(1922-2008)

6th MARCH – 19th APRIL 2025

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## *‘be sure to put it down’*: The Magical Naturalism of Mary Newcomb

by Philip Vann

As a person and as a painter, Mary Newcomb (1922-2008) was a quiet yet preternaturally perceptive countrywoman at heart. In her Diary whose vivid entries (begun in 1986 and continued over the next two years) have the stark immediacy of a Japanese *haiku* poem, she noted, ‘*The countryside is companionable. towns [sic] are not.*’ Born in Harrow on the Hill, her early childhood was spent at Trowbridge in Wiltshire, near the Westbury White Horse carved in the chalk hillside. During the War she read Natural Sciences at Reading University, after which she stayed for a while at a small research station off the Scottish Ayrshire coast, collecting marine specimens, which ‘in the afternoons and evenings we identified... and drew them, and I thought this was a marvellous life. What could be better?’

In the immediate postwar years she was a science teacher, making many drawings of birds and plants. In a way this period anticipated what would become her working method of making copious quick visual notes towards paintings. She described in the 1980s how she would typically make ‘a synopsis of hundreds of drawings at the end of a preparatory day under headings such as rain, bubbles, bridges, golden cockerels on churches’.

In 1950 she married Godfrey Newcomb, later a potter, and for twenty years they lived on a fairly remote, small family farm on the Norfolk/Suffolk border. In a conversation we had in 1996, she recalled, ‘My studio then overlooked a plateau of cornfields. It was lovely in summer, desolate in winter. At night you could just see lights on the horizon. There was a road going round what had been the village, and there was also a ruined church. The darkness was like a wall, mysterious.’

Living and painting in such rural seclusion amid wide East Anglian land-and-skyscapes (with their keen clarity of light) – and later on living in an old rustic Norfolk house (with half a dozen, noisily gabbling Indian runner geese often to be found wildly roaming the garden) – afforded the artist the kind of interior spaciousness she needed to observe minutiae as well as grand events of nature – alongside surreally curious human incidents and attributes happening to impinge on it.

Newcomb’s sense of perspective in her art is purely a visionary one insofar as she habitually homes in on particular figurative details that are compellingly meaningful to her. In this regard, the impetus she had to record her experience has much in common with the art of children as with authentic naïve painters and intuitively sophisticated

self-taught artists such as the St Ives ex-fisherman Alfred Wallis (whose raw yet sensitive, powerful paintings she much admired). She herself described herself as ‘untaught’ as a painter, writing, ‘For people who have been taught, their thoughts are second-hand.’ Though preliminary notes were prolifically made outdoors, the paintings themselves were distilled in studio solitude. ‘Often’, she wrote, ‘I work with reticence. This is because it is not a good idea to tear apart a quiet, balanced moment.’

Her 1972 painting of a grouping of waterside swans resting on their nests focuses on the expansive pristine whiteness of one particular creature on its mound of vegetation. The other nesting swans appear quite marvellously miniscule by comparison; the overall effect here is spontaneously humorous (Mary said she appreciated the ‘sense of humour’ she discerned, say, in medieval Carolingian paintings). The lyrical arrangement of colours and forms here – the tawny, beachy backdrop against which the swans are settled, bisected by a turquoise rivulet running down from the stretch of river or pond at the top – is choreographed in a tersely abstract manner. Far from being an insular *naïf*, Newcomb found herself inspired by the examples and qualities of artists ranging from Matisse to the American Modernist Milton Avery (1885-1965), the latter also a painter whose reticent yet sublimely poetic works encompass simplified forms and harmonious colours.

She wrote that she ‘*was struggling to complete ‘Birds Scattering Round a Tree’ [1988]. I wanted to say how light comes through the thin feathers in small scattered patterns – how birds appear fragile in structure, yet strong, and fly with powerful upthrusts and twists...*’ This sense of concomitant avian delicacy and agile strength is expressed through the portrayal of one bird (at top right) as a dynamic black body moving upwards, another (lower down) as a spectral, translucent figure, wings articulately extended, its glistening profile urgent with open-mouthed song. The rendition of the tree and the background – each composed of multi-layered pinks, greys, whites and pale emeralds – appears deliciously allusive and nuanced in tone.

Newcomb’s tender empathy with her fellow creatures – dogs, cats, sheep, donkeys, weasels, hares, birds and insects, etc. – finds a parallel in the discerning intimacy with wildlife expressed in the work of the self-taught 19th century rural poet John Clare, which she highly appreciated. Clare recalled as a schoolboy, ‘In a strange stillness watching for hours the little insects climb up & down the tall stems of the wood grass.’ Mary told me that his approach to nature resonated strongly with her: ‘He didn’t cycle, he walked; so his entire world was

within walking distance. That’s what we’ve lost. We go to such lengths, such distance, we’re missing the bits in between.’

This Diary entry evokes well the nature of Newcomb’s at once precisely delineated and universal focus on things:

*be sure to put it down, be it squirrel in a woodpile,  
men with white toed boots working on a mountain railway  
caterpillars hanging stiffly and staring from a laurel bush,  
the magnitude of the stars – there is no end.*

It was certainly ambitious on Newcomb’s part to paint such a large-scale animal portrait as that of a *Ewe Sitting Down* (1994). Yet the picture succeeds in evoking the creature’s settled demeanour and engagingly enigmatic mien – along with the bold contrast between its black feet and visage and its fleece’s roseate glow – with a monumental intimacy, an imposing simplicity.

Newcomb’s made a number of paintings of goldfinches in flight around a tree. Such a flock is also known as a charm of goldfinches (a term derived from the old English *c’irm*, describing the birds’ twittering, trilling song). In *Goldfinches flying to a lit bush* (1994) and the more abstractly composed *A Flock of Goldfinches Dispersing* (1993-95), the pert as well as undulating movement and liquid musicality of these vibrantly coloured, gregarious birds – with their distinctive red faces and bodies appearing like flashes of saffron – is set against numinous golden and ochreish winter skies. Newcomb recorded, ‘In the end I think it is the goldfinches who have played the greatest part – and the sun – the sun and the goldfinches.’

Sometimes the birds she portrays are caged ones, budgerigars and canaries whose sprightliness, alacrity and exotic vibrancy are contained in tiny metal cages at Norfolk country shows, often enchantingly eccentric events at which, she notes, ‘Everyone is quietly busy’. The title of a 1978 picture of serried rows of constrained canaries is *The Half Hour Prim Peace (Between the Judging and the Entry of the Public)*. The 1979 painting *The Canary Tent, Waiting for the Judges*, similarly evokes a hiatus of ‘prim peace’; the striking formal contrast here of heavy black metallic cage bars and the variegated yellows of the small palpitating birds is poignantly affecting.

Newcomb often ingeniously highlights idiosyncratic details of playful human intervention in the landscape as well as aspects of agrarian activity. An example of the former is seen in the painting *Farm Tennis* (1979); beyond a field of scintillating mixed grasses and a large dark hedge against which outsize poppies bloom radiantly, we catch sight

of the white-stringed frames of two tennis rackets suspended in the air. This literally surreal, fleeting glimpse of a pair of small, raised, white abstracted shapes against a weirdly darkened, reddened sky, is all we require in order to summon up the mysterious presence of two otherwise occluded persons on the farm, dynamically at play.

*Rain on the Swarm* (1977) – portraying two anonymous beekeepers (looking a bit like homespun astronauts) in their greyish overalls, gloves and offbeat-looking headgear (with veils concealing their faces) – appears as a quite otherworldly scene. Their focus is on the sombre clustered form of innumerable oscillating honey bees – having left their colony in late spring - hanging from a vine-covered pergola. Random blobs of black paint conjure up the appearance of bees buzzing in the air. The use of a muted, matt palette of sage greens and greys (enlivened here and there with lustrous pink striations) only helps to accentuate this evocation of a tensely rapt atmosphere on a rain-soaked day.

In *The Pylon* (1973), an iconic lattice tower supporting overhead electrical cables, is depicted without its concrete foundation – its monumental steel structure thus seeming to be suspended gracefully above the faint green and pink-hued hillside on which it stands. Such transmission towers have to be incredibly sturdy so as to withstand extreme weather conditions. Newcomb elegantly outlines the pylon’s powerful actuality in the landscape, endowing it too with a filigree-like delicacy. In her Diary, she observed, ‘... details of cobwebs as strong and complex in their structure to a spider as a pylon is to a man...’

In this picture, she is not making a polemical statement about the ‘permanent disfigurement’ of the landscape (in the words of Rudyard Kipling and John Maynard Keynes, who in 1929 wrote a joint letter to *The Times* protesting about the construction of such towers) but rather - in a pared-down composition of attenuated colour – acknowledging the pylon’s strange beauty.

The rare originality, humour and at once oblique and incisive perspective of Newcomb’s fresh painterly vision of the natural world (one that doesn’t preclude fascinating human activity, both centrally and peripherally) are perfectly epitomised by the Zen-like phrasing of a particular picture title: *A Football Match Seen Through a Hole in an Oak Leaf Eaten by a Caterpillar*.

*Philip Vann is a writer on the visual arts. He met Mary Newcomb a number of times, interviewing her in 1985 and 1996. He lives in Cambridge.*



2.

*Study of a Moth*

Pencil, coloured crayon and watercolour  
13.5 x 21 cms / 5.3 x 8.3 inches  
Signed lower right



3.

*Sun after the rain, 1983*

Oil on canvas  
71 x 61 cms / 27.9 x 24 inches  
Signed and dated lower right



4.

*The Masham, 1975*

Oil on board

50.8 x 50.8 cms / 19.75 x 19.75 inches







5.  
*Pylon in the Rain, 1989*  
Pencil and wash on paper  
19.1 x 24.1 cms / 7.5 x 9.5 inches



6.  
*The Pylon, 1973*  
Oil on canvas  
62 x 71.5 cms / 24.4 x 28.1 inches  
Signed and dated lower right; signed, titled, dated verso



Dear Dotty and André and Sally <sup>at 11</sup> Martello  
We had an effortless journey Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup>  
down by train. There was thick snow south of Paris  
and some snow even at Lyons - then once we were in  
the limestone area, suddenly there were trees in  
blossom - pink like a Van Gogh drawing of Arles - also  
some wild cherry. It was quite enchanting and hills  
such as I have never seen.

At Toulon there was a bus almost straightaway  
to Le Lavandou and we stepped out into a sparkling clear  
day with hot sunshine very blue sea very calm too.  
The mimosa is in full bloom, also rosemary down the  
drive, an odd marigold or two in the flower tubs  
- bees and flies and two brimstone (yellow) butterflies,  
flapping about - today it is bright and sunny but  
more windy but still warm enough to sit on the balcony  
Mairi was delighted with her painting and is  
drawing us out this afternoon - she brought down  
extra blankets and a fire but we don't need them. I must  
say the eucalyptus to the right of the flat looks a bit  
grey and battered due to the bad weather. The flat is  
fine very gracious living. I do appreciate being here  
very much indeed - thank you for lending it to us.

I have fallen in love with the palm  
trees and the arcades of Hyères, also the exotic  
bamboos and the heavily pollarded plane trees  
by the beach. Madame Bonfois is enthusiastic  
and most helpful.

Tomorrow we are going out to Port  
Cros and have to leave by 7.30 am. The boat is  
almost empty, at this time of year. Godfrey  
and Mary send their best wishes

love to Sharon

with best wishes

Mary (Newcomb)



7.

Garden above the sea, Le Lavandou, 1990

Oil on canvas

72.4 x 54.6 cms / 28.5 x 21.5 inches

Signed and dated lower right



*After a wedding at the church on the hill at Bormes-les-Mimosas, the bride and the groom were coming out to sit on the wall and have their photograph taken. The sun was just setting making everything pink and a strong wind from the valley was blowing the bride's veil above her head out of control.*

8.

*Battling the elements – a high wind and a fast sinking sun, 1986*

Oil on board

71 x 71 cms / 28 x 28 inches

Signed and dated lower right





9.

*Poppies Ready to Drop*, 1988

Oil on board

61 x 61 cms / 24 x 24 inches

Signed and dated lower right







10.

*Swan on the Marshes, The Waveney, Suffolk Border, 1980*

Oil on canvas

61 x 86.3 cms / 24 x 34 inches

Signed and dated lower right





II.  
*The Vine*, 1991  
Oil on board  
56 x 46 cms / 22 x 18.1 inches  
Signed and dated lower right



12.  
*Rain on the swarm*, 1977  
Oil on canvas  
60.5 x 75 cms / 23.8 x 29.5 inches  
Signed and dated lower right & verso



13.

*The Cat and The Bird*, 1981

Oil on board

51 x 46 cms / 20 x 18.1 inches

Signed and dated lower right







14.  
*Spring Bird Tearing Yellow Flower, 1971*  
oil on board  
46 x 41 cms / 18.1 x 16.1 inches  
Signed and dated lower right



15.  
*Daffodils in the wind, 1991*  
Oil on canvas  
82 x 86 cms / 32.3 x 33.9 inches  
Signed lower right



16.

*Gates to a Descending Garden, 1989*

Oil on canvas

109 x 124 cms / 42.9 x 48.8 inches

Signed and dated lower right





17.

*Boats on transparent water, 1986*

Oil on board

76.2 x 76.2 cms / 30 x 30 inches

Signed and dated lower right





*As I cycled towards a small village I saw a man with a broom talking to a woman who also had a broom, a cat sitting in the middle of the warm road, a grey pony with a blue halter tethered by the roadside, some black hens pecking round another horse and a guinea fowl balancing like a clown across a gate.*

18.

*The Guinea Fowl, 1981*

Oil on board  
50.5 x 51 cms / 19.75 x 20 inches  
Signed and dated lower right







19.  
*Woman puzzling over seed heads, 1991*

Pastel on paper  
17 x 12 cms / 6.7 x 4.7 inches  
Initialed lower right



21.  
*Horses and Sloes*

Pencil and coloured crayon on paper  
19 x 40 cms / 11.5 x 15.75 inches  
Signed MN lower right



20.

*Pheasant*

Pencil and coloured crayon on paper  
11 x 12 cm / 4.25 x 4.75 inches  
Signed MN lower right

22.  
*Dorset Horn Ewe and Young Lamb,*  
c. 1980

Pencil and wash on paper  
20.3 x 25.4 cms / 8 x 10 inches







23.

*Flowers for sale, August 1974*

Oil on board

27.5 x 61 cms / 10.8 x 24 inches

Signed and dated lower right



24.

*Goldfinches flying to a lit bush, 1994*

Oil on board

64 x 55 cms / 25.1 x 21.6 inches

Signed and dated lower right





25.

*Look hard for the birds you expect to find, 1979*

Oil on board  
58 x 75.5 cms / 22.8 x 29.7 inches  
Signed and dated lower right







26.

*The Gladioli Seller, c. 1973*

Watercolour on paper  
11 x 15.2 cms / 4.3 x 6 inches  
Signed lower right



27.

*The Green Bridge, 1985*

Oil and pencil on canvas  
127.5 x 127.5 cms / 50.2 x 50.2 inches  
Signed and dated lower right



28.

*A Lane in Finisterre, 1994*

Oil on board

61 x 62 cms / 24 x 24.4 inches

Signed & dated lower right





29.

*Redwing with disturbed feather, 1977*

Oil on board

29.5 x 31 cms / 11.6 x 12.2 inches

Incised with date '77 lower right; signed, titled and dated verso







30.

*Up the track, 1972*

Oil on board

61 x 81 cms / 24 x 32 inches

Signed and dated lower right; signed, titled and dated verso



31.

*Man with Two Dogs, 1971*

Oil on board

63,5 x 75,5 cms / 25 x 29,75 inches

Signed, titled and dated verso



32.

*Swans on their nests, 1972*

Oil on board

27.9 x 30.5 cms / 11 x 12 inches

Signed and dated lower right







33.  
*Moths Flying into the light of a barge, 1980*  
Oil on board  
60 x 70 cms / 23,5 x 27,5 inches



34.  
*Now you lot, You Multifarious Lot...  
Order, control, pattern & peace, 1977*  
54 x 55 cms / 21.2 x 21.6 inches  
Oil on board  
Signed and dated lower right





35.  
*Farm Tennis, 1975*  
Oil on board  
61 x 76 cms / 24 x 30 inches



36.  
*Shooting in the Orchard, 1969*  
Oil on board  
60.9 x 71.1 cms / 24 x 28 inches  
Signed and dated lower right



37.

*The Canary Tent, Waiting for the Judges, 1979*

Oil on board

60.3 x 70.5 cms / 23.75 x 27.75 inches

Signed lower right





38.

*Birds Scattering Around A Tree*, 1988

Oil on canvas

127 x 167.6 cms / 50 x 66 inches

Signed, dated and titled





39.

*Cat in the ash tree, 1985*

Oil on canvas

71 x 59 cm / 27.75 x 23.25 inches

Signed and dated on reverse





## Biography

Mary Newcomb

Mary Newcomb

MARY NEWCOMB (1922-2008)

Mary Newcomb

Mary Newcomb was born in Harrow-on-the-Hill, England, in 1922. She studied at Reading University in 1943 for a degree in Natural Sciences and went on to teach science and mathematics in Somerset, before moving to Norfolk in 1950. Here, Newcomb started painting and became a member of the Norfolk and Norwich Art Circle.

Mary Newcomb

Newcomb's first solo show was held at Crane Kalman Gallery in 1970 and the gallery has regularly held exhibitions of her work. It was in association with the gallery that Christopher Andreae wrote a monograph on her work in 1996 to coincide with the retrospective that travelled to Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, Cumbria; Schoolhouse Gallery, Bath; King’s Lynn Art Centre, Norfolk; Crane Kalman Gallery, London.

Mary Newcomb

Newcomb exhibited internationally including at Galerie de Beerenburght, Eck on Wiel, Holland, 1976, as well as at Galerie Kusten, Gothenburg, Sweden, 1976 and Galerie Nanky de Vreeze, Amsterdam in 1984; at Galerie XX in Hamburg and at Graham Modern Gallery, New York, both in 1985.

Mary Newcomb

Newcomb’s work can be found in many public collections, including the Tate Gallery; The Ingram Collection of Modern British and Contemporary Art, London; Norfolk Museums, Norwich; Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich; Lakeside Arts, University of Nottingham; Northampton Museums and Art Gallery; Ipswich Art Gallery, Colchester and Ipswich Museums, Suffolk; Pembroke College Oxford, JCR Art Collection and Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Scotland.

Mary Newcomb

In 1999 the Djanogly Art Gallery at The University of Nottingham (now Lakeside Arts) held a large Mary Newcomb exhibition.

Mary Newcomb

In 2009 *Mary Newcomb's Odd Universe, A Memorial Exhibition*, was held at Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery, and Crane Kalman Gallery. Most recently, in 2021, Compton Verney Art Gallery in Warwickshire presented a large retrospective of Newcomb’s works and in 2018 Crane Kalman Gallery published ‘Mary Newcomb: Drawing from Observation’ by William Packer and Tessa Newcomb in association with Lund Humphries.

## List of Works

Mary Newcomb

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Mary Newcomb

1. *Ewe Sitting Down, 1994*

Oil on canvas
106 x 106 cms / 41.7 x 41.7 inches
Signed lower right, titled on reverse

Mary Newcomb

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*Study of a Moth*

Pencil, coloured crayon and watercolour
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4. *The Masham, 1975*

Oil on board
50.8 x 50.8 cms / 19.75 x 19.75 inches

**Literature:**

Mary Newcomb by Christopher Andreae, published by Lund Humphries, 2006, pl. 29 reproduced in colour, pg. 39

Mary Newcomb

Mary Newcomb

5. *Pylon in the Rain, 1989*

Pencil and wash on paper
19.1 x 24.1 cms / 7.5 x 9.5 inches

**Exhibited:**

*Mary Newcomb*, Crane Kalman Gallery, April 7th – May 21st 2016, illustrated in colour

Mary Newcomb

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6. *The Pylon, 1973*

Oil on canvas
62 x 71.5 cms / 24.4 x 28.1 inches
Signed and dated lower right; signed, titled, dated verso

**Literature:**

An Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings & Watercolours by Mary Newcomb, 7th November-23rd December 2006, illustrated in colour

**Provenance:**

Private Collection, UK

Mary Newcomb

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Private Collection, UK

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23.  
*Flowers for sale, August 1974*

Oil on board  
27.5 x 61 cms / 10.8 x 24 inches  
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**Provenance:**  
The Artist  
Private Collection  
Crane Kalman Gallery, where acquired by a Private Collection, UK

**Exhibited:**  
*Mary Newcomb: Recent Paintings*, 26th Oct – 13 Nov 1976, Crane Kalman Gallery, London

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*Goldfinches flying to a lit bush, 1994*

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**Exhibited:**  
*Mary Newcomb*, Graham Modern Gallery, New York, 1985

**Provenance:**  
Crane Kalman Gallery, London where acquired by previous owner, 1987

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*Man with Two Dogs, 1971*

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**Provenance:**  
Private Collection, Scotland

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**Exhibited:**  
Mary Newcomb, Crane Kalman Gallery, 11th March – 4th April, 1970, ill. no.13, plate VIII

37.  
*The Canary Tent, Waiting for the Judges, 1979*

Oil on board  
60.3 x 70.5 cms / 23.75 x 27.75 inches  
Signed lower right

**Provenance:**  
Private Collection, Switzerland

38.  
*Birds Scattering Around A Tree, 1988*

Oil on canvas  
127 x 167.6 cms / 50 x 66 inches  
Signed, dated and titled

**Provenance:**  
Crane Kalman Gallery, London  
Private Collection, purchase from the above

**Literature:**  
*Mary Newcomb*, Christopher Andreae, Lund Humphries, 2006, illus. in colour pl. 149, pg. 167  
*Mary Newcomb*, Crane Kalman Gallery, 12th April – 26th June 2021, illus. in colour  
*Mary Newcomb, Paintings and Drawings*, 28 Oct-26 November 1988, illus. in colour on cover of exhibition catalogue

39.  
*Cat in the ash tree, 1985*

Oil on canvas  
71 x 59 cm / 27.75 x 23.25 inches  
Signed and dated on reverse

40.  
*Country Wedding, 1971*

Oil on board  
61 x 71.1 cms / 24 x 28 inches  
Signed and dated lower right

**Provenance:**  
Crane Kalman Gallery, 1997  
Private Collection, USA



# Museums and public galleries that have acquired paintings from Crane Kalman Gallery

Aberdeen Art Gallery, Aberdeen, Scotland

Baltimore Museum of Art, USA

University Art Museum, Berkeley, California

Dundee Art Gallery, Dundee, Scotland

Kunstmuseum, Dusseldorf, Germany

Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries, Glasgow, Scotland

The City Art Gallery, Leicester, England

Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, England

Arts Council of Great Britain, London, England

The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England

Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, Manchester, England

Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin, USA

The Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Conn., USA

The Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, New York, USA

The Louvre, Paris, France

Rochdale Art Gallery, Rochdale, England

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia

The Museum of Everything, London, England

Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain

Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, England

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Ulster Museum, Belfast, Northern Ireland

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, England

National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh

Hiroshima Prefectural Art Museum, Japan

Musée des Beaux Arts, Le Havre, France

The Tate Gallery, London, England

Imperial War Museum, London, England

City Art Gallery, Manchester, England

The Felton Bequest, Melbourne, Australia

Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, Germany

Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, USA

Western Australia Art Gallery, Perth, Australia

Museum of Sao Paulo, Brazil

National Gallery of New Zealand, Wellington

The National Gallery of Art, Washington, USA

The Museum of London, London, England

Nuffield College, University of Oxford, Oxford, England



40. back cover

*Country Wedding*, 1971

Oil on board

61 x 71.1 cms / 24 x 28 inches

Signed and dated lower right





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