

# Frank Brangwyn

## A Mission to Decorate Life

*'An artist's function is everything: he must be able to turn his hand to everything, for his mission is to decorate life . . . he should be able to make pots and pans, doors and walls, monuments or cathedrals, carve, paint, and do everything asked of him.'*

Brangwyn quoted in 'King of the Earth with Sixpence',  
*Daily Sketch*, 17 October 1934





Text by Libby Horner

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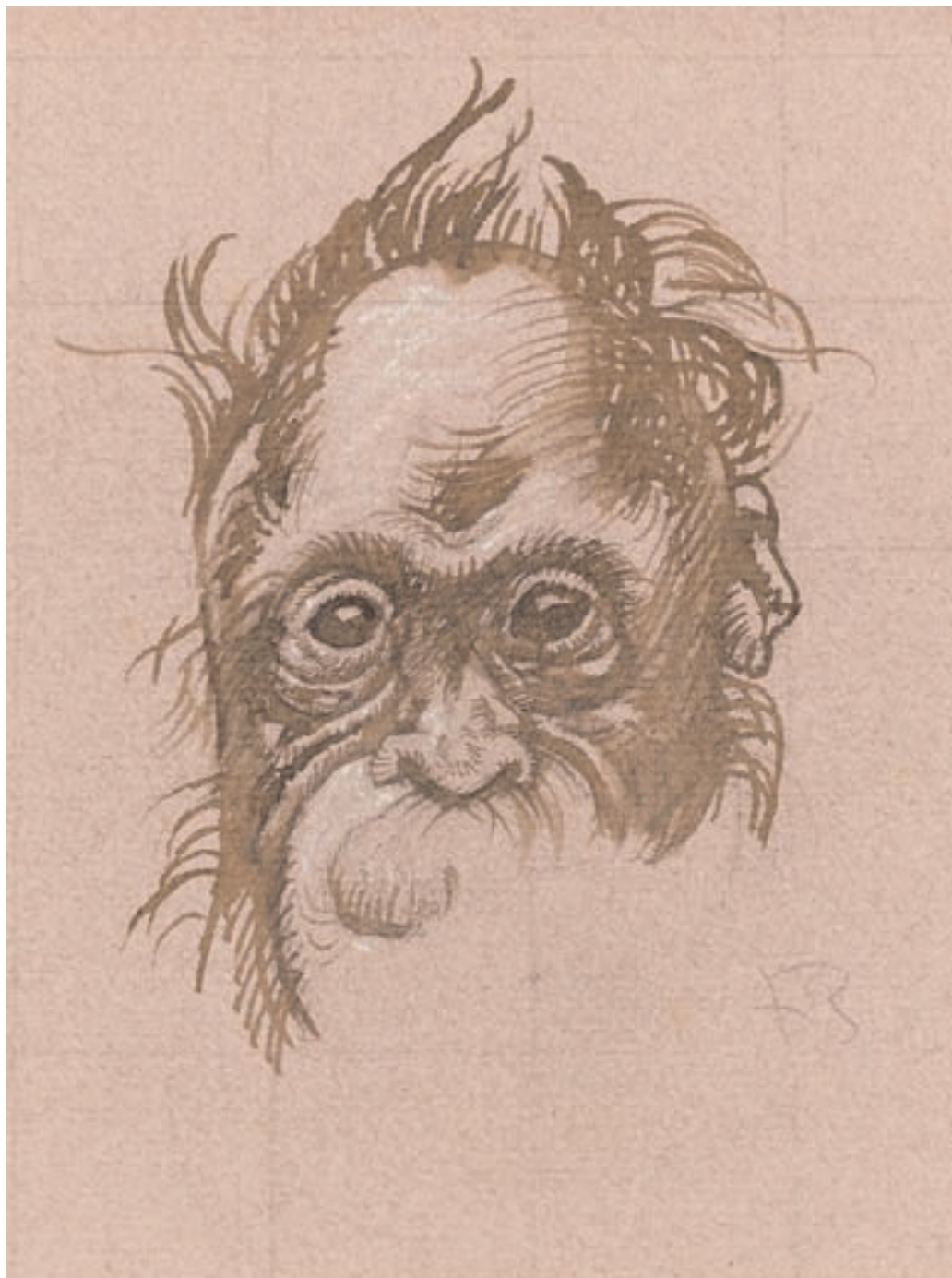
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OPPOSITE  
*Life in Messina after the  
Earthquake, c 1948* (detail;  
cat 92). Provenance: from  
the collection of William  
de Belleruche.

## THE BRANGWYN HANDBOOK

‘Sir Frank Brangwyn is one of the most baffling figures in the history of British painting’

John Russell, ‘Brangwyn’, 1952 (untraced newspaper cutting)

This exhibition, which has been five years in the making, is the largest commercial show of Brangwyn’s work ever undertaken. All 300 works are for sale. Our aim has been to represent every aspect of Brangwyn’s remarkable *oeuvre* in the belief that the range and diversity of his talent has never previously been fully appreciated. For too long he has been known simply as a muralist or a painter or print maker. We want him to be seen in the round: a man whose self-stated *raison d’être* was ‘a mission to decorate life’.

The feasibility of this exhibition has been made possible by the recent discovery of two remarkable collections of Brangwyn’s works – those of William de Belleruche and Edgar Peacock (see p 237).

William de Belleruche was the self-appointed champion of Brangwyn, responsible for the establishment of the Brangwyn museum in Bruges (1936) and the major retrospective at the Royal Academy (1952). Shown here for the first time in 50 years are the original drawings which were used to illustrate the two biographies Belleruche wrote about Brangwyn (*Brangwyn Talks*, 1944, and *Brangwyn’s Pilgrimage*, 1948).<sup>1</sup> (see cat 92) Another remarkable series of objects from this collection are some of Brangwyn’s original woodblocks. A rare survival (blocks are frequently disregarded, or shaved down for re-use), these are beautiful objects in their own right and offer an insight into the artist’s working methods (see cat 121, illustrated on p 9).

Edgar Peacock was the son of Brangwyn’s housekeeper, Elizabeth (Lizzie) Peacock. He and his mother were the principal beneficiaries of Brangwyn’s estate.<sup>2</sup> Until Edgar’s cache of design drawings was offered for sale at Edgar Horns’ auction house in 2000, the full range of Brangwyn’s output had not been fully recorded – here were designs for the famous Whitefriars glasswork, unrecorded designs for Royal Doulton, and the





original drawings for some of Brangwyn's most complete architectural schemes (ranging from the Davis bedroom (1900) to an interior for the *SS Empress of Britain* (1930-1931). Brangwyn's interest in architecture and interior design is little known, in spite of the fact that he designed well over 40 complete schemes, at least 13 of which were realised. The designs in this exhibition offer a remarkable record of this least known, but most significant, aspect of Brangwyn's work (see cat 152).

To date no accurate single source of information has existed about Brangwyn – the standard reference works are riddled with inaccuracies and confusion. The most recent edition of the DNB has 25 factual errors and statements for which there is no evidence, including the wrong birth date.<sup>3</sup>

To mark the 50th anniversary of Brangwyn's death we have commissioned Dr Libby Horner to write this catalogue which has been deliberately styled as *The Brangwyn Handbook*. Each catalogue section is preceded by an introductory essay and checklist of major commissions. Drawing on five years of research this offers the first accurate overview of Brangwyn's *oeuvre*: his 'mission to decorate life'.

Fifty years after Brangwyn's death, we hope this exhibition and catalogue will make a significant contribution to Brangwyn scholarship and mark a watershed in terms of public perception.

Paul Liss

*Electric light switch board*, c 1899–1900 (cat 152). Inscribed with title. Pencil, pen, paint and white chalk on grey paper, 38 × 52 cm (15 × 20½ in). Provenance: from the collection of Edgar Peacock

OPPOSITE  
*L'Eroica*, c 1919 (cat 121)  
Original woodblock. Provenance: from the collection of William de Belleruche







OPPOSITE  
*Napier Hemy Painting at Putney, c 1948 (detail; cat 93)*

## INTRODUCTION

‘Swim against the tide, even if you don’t reach the other side’

Brangwyn quoted in ‘The Rebel’, *Daily Mail*, 8 October 1952

Brangwyn has never fitted comfortably into accounts of 20th-century British art. As early as 1914 he formed part of Wyndham Lewis’ infamous list in *Blast* and was pilloried as an archetypal establishment figure; and yet just two years earlier he had been singled out by Kandinsky as one of the first 20th-century artists to use colour in a modern manner.<sup>4</sup>

Brangwyn dared to be different, always maintained his artistic integrity, and was apparently indifferent to the consequences. Critics have been variously shocked, delighted and confused by his work. In the United Kingdom the general tone was one of scepticism during his lifetime, disparagement since; he fared better in Europe and the United States of America.

With Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo as his mentor, an apprenticeship with William Morris, commissions from Siegfried Bing to decorate his seminal shop *L’Art Nouveau* (1895), from Tiffany to design stained glass (1899), and a significant contribution to the first Vienna Secession (1898), Brangwyn should naturally have been at least mentioned in the Royal Academy show, *1900: Art at the Crossroads*. But his total omission from such accounts is all too frequent.

Why have Brangwyn’s achievements not been fully appreciated?

Brangwyn had no formal artistic education and remained throughout his life, at his own insistence, outside the art establishment. This was despite the fact that he was the recipient of endless honours.<sup>5</sup>

Brangwyn’s lack of art education allowed him to flout convention, to experiment with techniques and mixed media, but also left him outside the artistic social pale. Brangwyn did not appear to regret his lack of training, writing later in life to his early mentor, Mackmurdo, that art schools ‘only produce a lot of clever imitators, and destroy all originality and turn out sophisticated prizes.’<sup>6</sup>





FB *Painting Alfred East in the Garden*, c 1948 (cat 87)

More significantly, Brangwyn refused to confine himself to one discipline. Partly as a result of this there was a *perceived* lack of attributable style in his work.

In a desperate attempt to categorize Brangwyn, critics compared his work with Oriental carpets, Italian Renaissance artists and the Old Masters, and in particular, among others, Tintoretto, Rubens, Rembrandt and Delacroix.<sup>7</sup> He was also linked to various movements, among them Arts and Crafts, the Century Guild, the Newlyn School, Vienna Secessionists, French Impressionists, the Nabis and Art Nouveau, and his paintings display fleeting references to individual painters, including Bastien-Lepage, Napier Hemy, La Thangue and his friends and travelling companions Sir Alfred East, Dudley Hardy and Arthur Melville. However, Brangwyn was too impatient and imaginative to be restricted by the ideology of one particular school or person. He was a jackdaw of art, adopting the most attractive or relevant baubles of each group and transmuting them into his own inimitable style.

From the outset Brangwyn applied himself with rigour and equal success



*Gulur*, 1892 (cat 21)

to every area of artistic production, becoming a polymath, a quintessential artist-craftsman. The sheer scale and variety of his artistic production daunted the critics.

Fate has contributed to Brangwyn's fall from favour. If the project to decorate a dome at Selfridges' department store in Oxford Street had been carried out (see cat 5), or the British Empire panels had been installed in the House of Lords as originally intended (see cat 6), he may have become a household name.<sup>8</sup> Brangwyn's commission to design an art gallery for Tokyo would have provided the country with the largest museum of western art outside Europe and the Americas.<sup>9</sup> Many of Brangwyn's important works have been destroyed, for example the murals for Siegfried Bing's shop *L'Art Nouveau* and the murals for Lloyd's Register of Shipping (see p 21). In addition, 40 of what Brangwyn considered to be his 'best works' were burnt in the Pantechnicon fire in London, 8 October 1939 (see cat 31, illustrated on p 15).<sup>10</sup>

During his lifetime Brangwyn produced an estimated 12,000 works, making him the most prolific British artist since Turner (see p 17).



ABOVE RIGHT  
*Death and the Devil*, c 1916  
(cat 31)

OPPOSITE  
*Brass Shop*, 1907 (cat 27)



But what counts is the range and diversity and his rude energy, which permeates all of his oeuvre, making it so recognisably Brangwyn. Today Brangwyn's talent remains undervalued: Art Galleries and Museums in Britain have between them well over 1000 works by Brangwyn, making him probably the most represented but least known of all 20th-century British artists. During his lifetime the sheer energy of the man and his work forced the attention of curators and collectors alike. He was a natural choice to paint the Rockefeller murals, alongside Diego Rivera and José Maria Sert after Picasso and Matisse had turned the commission down. In his life international recognition came to him and now he is entitled to be viewed as one of the major figures of 20th-century British Art.



## CATALOGUE NOTE

The catalogue entries for each section are arranged in chronological order. Each section is preceded by notes which give an overview of Brangwyn's activities in that particular discipline and where appropriate checklists of major commissions.

Emphasis has been placed on the original designs for items, rather than the commercially produced versions. Thus, in the Decorative Arts section, the ceramics featured are either in the form of original drawings, or unique pre-production models. The print section is made up of original drawings for prints, working proofs and actual woodblocks and lithographic plates, rather than the editioned prints.

Catalogue entries and text are by Libby Horner who is currently compiling the catalogue raisonné of Frank Brangwyn's entire oeuvre. The number in brackets following each picture title indicates the number by which the work is identified in the Horner catalogue raisonné.

Seven standard reference books have been produced in the past:

Frank Newbolt, *The Etched Work of Frank Brangwyn ARA RE*,  
London: The Fine Art Society, 1908

*Etchings by Frank Brangwyn*, London: The Fine Art Society, 1912

William Gaunt, *The Etchings of Frank Brangwyn RA*, London:  
The Studio Limited, 1926

Cyril G E Bunt, *The Water-Colours of Sir Frank Brangwyn RA*,  
Leigh-on-Sea: Frank Lewis, 1958

Vincent Galloway, *The Oils and Murals of Sir Frank Brangwyn RA*,  
Leigh-on-Sea: Frank Lewis, 1962

James D Boyd, *The Drawings of Sir Frank Brangwyn RA*,  
Leigh-on-Sea: Frank Lewis, 1967

Dominique Marechal, *Collectie Frank Brangwyn*,  
Bruges Stedelijke Musea, 1987

Marechal's book, based on the collection in the Arents House, Bruges (see p 238 and cat 88–89), is the most scholarly work on Brangwyn, but unfortunately out of print.

The names Gaunt, Bunt and Galloway are used as standard references for Brangwyn's work in etchings, watercolours and oils. However these books have limitations. Gaunt's book does not list Brangwyn's etchings after 1926 and there are errors (see p 116). The three books with introductions by Bunt, Galloway and Boyd were in fact the result of research undertaken by the publisher Frank Lewis who was a passionate collector, rather than a scholar, of Brangwyn. The books are incomplete and inconsistent with some works listed twice and many missing dimensions, making identification difficult.<sup>11</sup> The Boyd catalogue, with the exception of five works, consisted of drawings in the collection of Frank Lewis (now at Dundee Art Gallery). No catalogues have previously been attempted listing in full Brangwyn's woodcuts and lithographs or his architectural and interior designs, furniture, carpets, metalwork, ceramics and stained glass.

In 1952 Clifford Musgrave estimated that Brangwyn had produced over 12,000 works.<sup>12</sup> Whether this figure was based on Brangwyn's work in all disciplines or included studies for completed commissions is unknown. However, it is interesting to note that Gaunt listed 331 etchings, Bunt 765 watercolours, Galloway 813 oils and Boyd 96 drawings, making a total of 2,005 works. To date Libby Horner has catalogued over 5,000 works, including nearly 1000 oils, over 650 watercolours (including gouache and mixed media) and over 1750 drawings, of which around 1,000 relate to known works in other media (murals, oils, watercolours, prints etc) and around 750 are studies in their own right. Every item listed in the catalogue raisonné is supported by an image, thereby reducing the risk of double cataloguing. Statistics in each section refer to completed works only.

*All works are for sale*

*Inscriptions are by Brangwyn unless otherwise stated*

*pwu = present whereabouts unknown*

*The copyright holder is David Brangwyn who can be contacted via [lissfineart.com](mailto:lissfineart.com)*