

Lost and FOUND

Artist Suzanne Cooper's nascent career was halted by war. Now the world is rediscovering her remarkable talent

INTERVIEW: Lucy Hughes Hallett PHOTOS: Bill Jackson

In the 1930s, when she was in her teens and early twenties, the artist Suzanne Cooper was a rising star. But then the Second World War brought her career to an abrupt halt.

Now, 25 years after her death, she is finally getting her due. A solo exhibition at the Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden, in March was hailed as 'revelatory' and 'a rare and exciting event'. On June 3, Suzanne Cooper's work goes on show in Suffolk when a second exhibition opens at the Printroom Studio,

Sweffling. Her daughter-in-law, Suffolk-based, award-winning author Lucy Hughes-Hallett, talked to Suffolk magazine about putting Cooper back on the art-historical map.

SM: What inspired you to set up these two exhibitions?

LHH: Four years ago I was in New Zealand, speaking at a literary festival. I had an afternoon to spare, so I went into the Auckland Art Gallery. I was standing in a room full of 18th century portraits, when I

saw – visible three rooms away – a painting that I knew at once had to be one of Sue's. Her style is unmistakable. I was amazed. As far as anyone in her family knew, her only surviving paintings were the ones we had in our houses.

It was hanging alongside others by Christopher Wood and Alfred Wallis. I'm partial, but it seemed to me the best of the three. The label had Sue's name right, but her date of birth was out by over 20 years.

Very excited, I found a custodian and told him I simply





had to see the person in charge. It was Sunday. The curator, Mary Kisler, wasn't in. By noon on Monday I'd be on my way to the airport. I was at the gallery as the doors opened. Happily, Mary was there. She told me that 'Royal Albion' is one of the gallery's best-loved pictures. I went back to London thinking that if, on the other side of the world, Sue's work was treated as museum-quality then it was time we in her family did something to tell the world about her.

SM: Had you always admired her work?

LHH: Immensely. I started going out with her son, the publisher Dan Franklin, in the 1980s. Her

charming, eery 'Cat-Girl' hung in his London flat. When we went down for the first, awkward, meet-the-parents Sunday lunch, I saw more of her pictures. More, but not as many as I might have. Sue was so dismissive of her own remarkable talent that she kept several of them stowed away under the spare-room bed. What I saw, though, was enough to make me a fan.

SM: Tell us about her early life

LHH: She grew up in Frinton, that very proper and respectable seaside resort on the Essex coast. At 19 she joined the Grosvenor School of Modern Art, and quickly became a favoured protégée of the school's



SWEFFLING: DISCOVER THE ART OF SUZANNE COOPER

'Suzanne Cooper and the Art of Wood-Engraving' will be at the Printroom Studio, Sweffling, IP17 2BU, June 3 - July 15. Please check the website www.printroom.studio for opening times and also by appointment.

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Wood-engravings for sale online at printroom.studio/artist/suzanne-cooper

founder, the master wood-engraver Iain Macnab. Soon she was showing pictures at respected West End galleries. The influential collector Lucy Carrington Wertheim bought several of her oil-paintings. She was on her way.

SM: So what went wrong?

LHH: The war. In 1939 the Grosvenor School closed. A year later Sue married Michael Franklin. He fought in north Africa and Italy, while she worked as a volunteer nurse. Afterwards they settled in Hertfordshire, and had three children.

Sue made small pictures in pastel and crayon. She created exquisite petit-point cushions to her own abstract designs. She taught art in the village school. But no more oil-painting, no more wood-engraving. She seemed to have given up her artistic ambitions.

SM: How did the exhibitions originate?

LHH: The main problem was that none of us wanted to sell our paintings, so it wasn't a particularly tempting prospect for a commercial gallery.

The breakthrough came when my brother-in-law, Charlie Franklin, opened one of the boxes he'd stored after Sue's and Michael's deaths. It had been sitting for years in Michael's cupboard-under-the-stairs, along with the mop and the Hoover. In it Charlie found the original blocks for 11 of Sue's wood-engravings, including some gorgeous images none of us had seen before. So we were able to create a new limited edition of prints from them, which are now for sale.

That meant we had a show to offer. There was a happy week last August when, on two consecutive days, we showed the

pictures to David Oelman, chairman of the Fry Art Gallery, and Monica Petzal, who runs the Printroom. Each of them, without any hesitation, said yes to an exhibition. I particularly remember David, looking at one of the wood-engravings, saying 'They're a bit like Ravilious. Actually, in some ways, better.' A very proud moment!

Even before the Fry exhibition opened it was clear everybody loved the pictures we sent out. There was a full page in *The Telegraph*, a double-page spread in *Country Life*, a notice in *House & Garden*. We were amazed by how many people were planning to make the journey from London, or from Suffolk.

On opening day it snowed. I thought, 'Ok, that means only the locals will come,' but not a bit of it. The place was packed.

Since then we've been approached by the Norfolk-based publisher Mainstone Press, who are interested in bringing out an illustrated book on Sue's work. And we've heard from a collector in Yorkshire who has one of Sue's paintings. We hope more will turn up - we know of at least a dozen that were sold in the 1930s and are now lost.

SM: What can we expect at the Printroom Studio?

LHH: There'll be an opening party on June 3, 11am till 6pm, please go to www.printroom.studio and subscribe to the mailing list for an invitation. There will be a talk by Dan and Charlie Franklin - Suzanne Cooper's sons - at 3pm. There are further events planned including a wood engraving demonstration by artist Joseph Sloan on Sunday June 17. It's a beautiful space, surrounded by woods and water-meadows - a great place to wander on a summer's day after looking at some art. ♦

Printroom studio showcases the best of international contemporary printmaking. Started in London in 2006 by artist and curator Monica Petzal, it moved in 2016 to a stunning purpose built space, 33 metres long, full of natural light close to the River Alde. Printroom exhibits signed and numbered prints made by artist printmakers in all print media. Prices are set by the artists and range from under £150 to about £1,000 with most in the £300-£700 range. Printroom also offers an expert inexpensive framing service.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett's novel, Peculiar Ground, is out now in paperback

