

THE SPECTATOR

The May manifesto

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Following Venice, Armitage exhibited elsewhere in Europe, in New York and in South America and his art entered many public collections. In 1958 he won the Biennale prize for a sculptor under 45 and in 1959 joined glamorous Marlborough Fine Art.

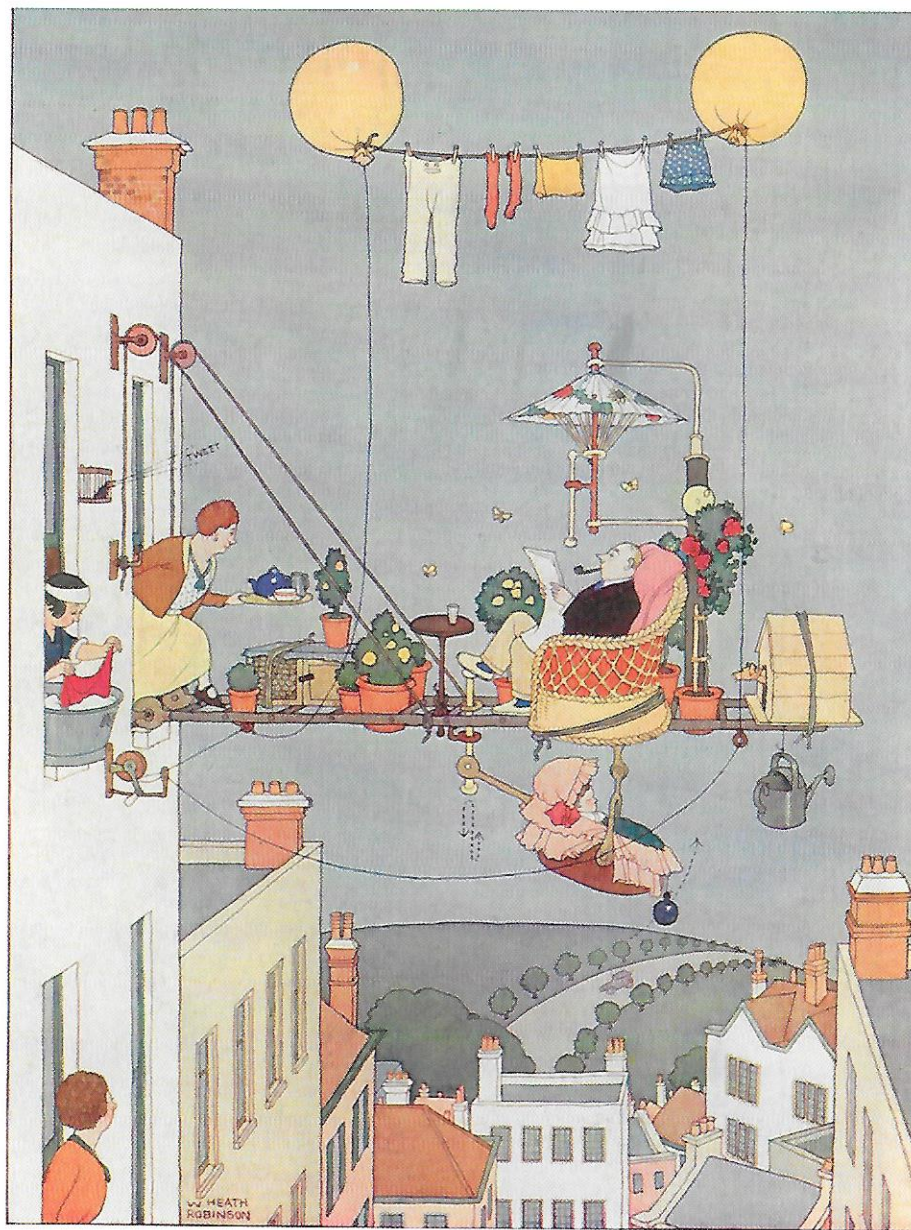
His trademark — abstracted human figures where mass was indicated by shape rather than volume — derived from the war, when he taught aircraft and tank identification from silhouettes. The training never left him. He abandoned carving for modelling — casting the plaster model in unbreakable and easily transportable bronze when affordable. Armitage's expansion complemented Giacometti's reduction. 'People in the Wind' recalled a group united by flapping clothes. Moore is characterised by the reclining figure, Armitage by movement. As Joanne Crawford writes in her introduction to the 1950s show, his art captured the 'quickening world'.

The 1960s brought eclipse. Bronze, unfashionable between the wars, became unfashionable again. In England Caro preferred painted steel, Phillip King coloured plastic. Globalisation rapidly dissolved the romantic notion of an avant-garde. Armitage left Marlborough, fell out with Chadwick and fended for himself. He experimented with new techniques and materials, nursed international contacts and spent two years in Berlin.

In Leeds the exhibits span half a century, showing that his work evolved in subject and scale, without any loss of invention or his characteristic zest for life. The two exhibitions also demonstrate that, like Moore, and indeed Rodin, founder of modern sculpture, drawing was of equal importance for him. This is especially true of his show at the Tetley, inspired by Richmond Park's ancient oak trees, which absorbed him for a decade from the mid-1970s. A modified version of the Tetley show, *Kenneth Armitage: The Oak Tree Sculptures*, can be seen in the foyer of Canary Wharf, 1 Canada Square (7 August–9 September).

Late in life a visit to Abu Simbel's colossi in Egypt goaded him to realise several monumental pieces working with the sculptor Dick Budden and Rungwe Kingdon's Pangolin foundry, where Hirst has sculptures cast. 'Legs Walking' (2001) in Leeds City Square and 'Reach for the Stars' (2001) elsewhere attest to his enduring love of movement. At Sotheby's Bowie sale, the Armitages went for well above estimate. The coincidental centennial celebration shows that this was no Bowie effect but rightful recognition of a neglected master.

Jessie Flood-Paddock's inclusion celebrates Armitage's other legacy, his Foundation. Its chief gift is a sculptor fellowship that funds a biennial residence in his remarkable James MacLaren-designed Arts and Crafts studio in Olympia. Flood-Paddock was the 2013–15 fellow.



'The Deckcheyrie For Unbalconied Flats... will be found to work perfectly, we shouldn't wonder. If not we're sorry', from How to Live in a Flat, 1936, by W. Heath Robinson and K.R.G. Browne

Illustration

A method to his madness

Adam Hart-Davis

I first came across the extraordinary creations of the artist and illustrator William Heath Robinson at least 60 years ago. I loved them, even though I may not have understood every nuance. When I look once more at old favourites such as the machine for conveying peas to the mouth I often spot in the corner some little twist or joke that I had not seen before.

What also wasn't clear at the time is how prescient some of his contraptions were — in one illustration you can see a prototype

selfie stick; in another he invents the silent disco. Many of his madcap solutions were semi-serious responses to societal problems. Some weren't far off what serious inventors were coming up with themselves.

The expression 'Heath Robinson' has entered the dictionary to mean 'an over-ingenious, ridiculously complicated or elaborate mechanical contrivance'. But early domestic gadgets were often ridiculously complicated. Hubert Cecil Booth's original vacuum cleaner of 1901 was a steam-powered machine the size of a large cart, and pulled by horses. When you summoned it, the monster was brought to the road outside your house, and pipes led in through the windows. This was an important social event — ladies would invite their friends to come and

take tea and observe the wonderful machine in action.

Robinson, however, went even further. There was the improbable hydraulic device for clearing the breakfast table, the auto-shampoo chair, the complex mechanical slimming engine to pummel you into shape...

William Heath Robinson was born on 31 May 1872 in Hornsey Rise, north London. His father, Thomas Robinson, earned his living by drawing illustrations for the *Penny Illustrated Paper*. The children loved watching — and copying — their father. Heath claimed that at an early age he 'could draw a passable Zulu, with feathered headdress, long oval shield, and assegai'. When he was 15, Heath went to art school in Islington, where he and his fellow students 'worked hard intermittently and talked a lot about art'. He later acknowledged the influence on his work of many predecessors and contemporaries, including Aubrey Beardsley, Kate Greenaway and various Japanese artists.

On leaving art school, Robinson tried the romantic life of a landscape painter, but things did not work out — a dealer advised him to try another profession. He made a collection of drawings instead and tramped

In one illustration you can see a prototype selfie stick; in another he invents the silent disco

round all the publishers in central London, eventually succeeding in selling a few.

By the time he was 24, Robinson was earning a living from his art. But it was his strip for the *Daily News* where the classic Heath Robinson image crystallised itself. It provoked much interest from a variety of industrial companies, who invited him to see the factories and draw what he found. These led to invitations, to see the manufacture of Swiss rolls, toffee, paper, marmalade, asbestos, beef essence and lager. A series of illustrations of 'Great British Industries' included such fantastical scenes as 'Stiltonizing Cheese in the Stockyards of Cheddar' and 'The Pea-splitting Shed of a Soup Factory'.

In 1914 H.G. Wells sent him a letter:

It may amuse you to know that you are adored in this house. I have been ill all this Christmas-time and frightfully bored and the one thing I have wanted is a big album of your absurd beautiful drawings to turn over. Now my wife has just raided the *Sketch* office for back numbers with you in it and I am running over lots of you. You give me a peculiar pleasure of the mind like nothing else in the world... I hope you will go on drawing for endless years.

The peak of Robinson's career came in the 1920s and 1930s when his fame spread worldwide and he received ever more eye-catching commissions from German paper

makers and tyre manufacturers and Canadian dairy companies... In 1930, when the Pacific Steamship Company was building the luxury liner *RMS Empress of Britain*, they engaged Robinson to decorate its Knickerbocker Bar and Children's Room. In 1934 the *Daily Mail* asked him to design a 'Gadget House' for its Ideal Home exhibition. A firm was paid to build it to two thirds scale, like a giant doll's house with the front removed to reveal the inner workings.

Robinson found ingenious solutions to many of the problems brought about by the rising population and aspiring middle-class families not having enough money to employ help. Servants could be replaced by pieces of string, so that people could bring themselves whatever they wanted without moving from their chairs — the early 20th-century version of remote control.

He also never forgot his experience of flat living. 'Since the primary purpose of flats is to enable at least five families to live where only one hung out before, thereby quintupling the landlord's income, they are apt to lack... spaciousness. From the keen cat-swinger's point of view this is regrettable,' he wrote in his 1936 book *How To Live in a Flat*.

One way of maximising the limited space available to flat dwellers was to use the balcony or, in the absence of a real balcony, a virtual one. All you needed, according to Robinson, was a few cantilevers and some pieces of rope, and you could enjoy the great outdoors. Robinson imagined greenhouses, indeed entire gardens perched in the sky. In these proposals the long arm of health and safety does not seem to have impeded him in any way.

For almost all the drawings, Robinson used just pen and ink, often with half-tones, which were sometimes printed in sepia. When he was commissioned to do pictures in colour he charged extra.

He maintained a prodigious output until his health began to fail in the summer of 1944. He died of heart failure on 13 September that year. Many artists of his era are long forgotten, but Heath Robinson's name lives on. He has influenced a wide range of people, from Nick Park, the creator of *Wallace and Gromit*, to Michael Rosen and J. K. Rowling, who contemplated devising a Heath Robinson-type machine while dreaming up the Sorting Hat at Hogwarts. A Heath Robinson revival is afoot, with the formation of the William Heath Robinson Trust and the opening of the Heath Robinson Museum in Pinner, north-west London.

The secret of his enduring popularity lies in his unique ability to inject humour and humanity into the cold efficiency of the machine age. He let the outlines of his superb draughtsmanship go wonky so that his drawings share the endearingly amateur appearance of the makeshift contraptions they depict. We are invited into a reassuring

world of gentle eccentricity, cheerful stoicism, a flair for improvisation and a gleeful debunking of officialdom — and anyone who takes themselves too seriously.

An edited extract from Very Heath Robinson: Stories of His Absurdly Ingenious World by Adam Hart-Davis, published by Sheldrake Press, £40.

Exhibitions

League of nations

Martin Gayford

57th Venice Biennale
Until 26 November

'Are you enjoying the Biennale?' is a question one is often asked while patrolling the winding paths of the Giardini and the endless rooms of the Arsenale. It is not easy to answer. The whole affair is so huge, so diverse and yet — in many ways — so monotonous. Like the EU, an organisation with which it has something in common, La Biennale di Venezia believes in the principle of subsidiarity. Therefore individual nations are allowed to do what they like within their own pavilions. However, there are also strong homogenising forces at work — so much of what is on view in the national pavilions and elsewhere tends to fall into certain approved categories: notably video art, photography (often rather dull) and messy installation.

Phyllida Barlow, batting for Britain on this occasion, has opted for the last of those. Her exhibition, entitled *Folly*, has some stereotypical British characteristics. It looks (deliberately) provisional, amateurish and bodged: as if a giant toddler had been presented with a pile of art materials and told to make a full-scale model of a building site.

Outside there are huge, vaguely spherical objects on sticks, spattered with red, looking like balloons fashioned from heavily preused Play-Doh. Inside, the roof seems to be supported by mighty pillars made from cement and sacking. All around are big ungainly objects: an enormous cone of untidy red wire, a pair of rough-hewn wheels on an axle, a megaphone.

Altogether it has a ramshackle charm, especially in comparison with the German contribution next door, which is downright fearsome. The artist, Anne Imhof, has placed wire cages in front of the building, patrolled by Doberman pinschers and a squad of soberly-clad attendants. Within, you encounter more performers writhing under a transparent floor and trapped in sealed compartments.

I preferred the neighbouring Canadian Pavilion — which has been semi-dismantled and turned into a fountain — and, even