

# Ronald Searle: 'Obsessed with Drawing'

Exhibition on St Trinian's creator shows the breadth of one of the great satirists of the modern age

13 October 2015 to 31 January 2016 | Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge  
Free admission

Companion exhibition:  
*Cradled in Caricature: visual humour in satirical prints and drawings*

Following a gift from the artist's family, the Fitzwilliam Museum is holding an exhibition on Cambridge born artist Ronald Searle (1920-2011). *Ronald Searle: 'Obsessed with Drawing'* will show the versatility, range and meticulous working habits of one of Britain's most popular and celebrated graphic satirists. This will be complemented by a concurrent exhibition on caricature in Britain featuring artists such as Hogarth, Gillray and Rowlandson.

Searle was by his own admission "obsessed with drawing". He had one of the longest, most productive and wide ranging career of any 20th century caricaturist, working in book and magazine illustration, travel reportage, war reporting, political caricature, theatre, film and medal design. The exhibition explores his incredibly elaborate and painstaking working methods, and will display a selection of his art materials and preparatory documents alongside his cartoons. These include photos he took as reference material; he was so exacting that in each one he noted the camera and lens.

He is best-known as the inventor of the fictional girls' school St Trinian's (1948) and for his collaborations on Geoffrey Willans' *Molesworth* series (1953-58). However, his work went far beyond these renowned illustrations of unruly schoolchildren and visitors to this exhibition will be able to view the fuller range of his remarkable talent.

Since Searle grew up in Cambridge, the exhibition represents something of a homecoming.

Son of a porter on Cambridge railway station, Searle enrolled at Cambridge School of Art (now Anglia Ruskin University) at the age of fourteen and during this time haunted the Cambridge museums, in particular the Fitzwilliam, where he poured over the works of great artists such as Blake, Turner, Gillray and Rowlandson.

His career began at 15 when he started submitting a cartoon a week to the *Cambridge Daily News* for half a guinea each.



Ronald Searle (1920-2011), *Molesworth*  
© The estate of Ronald Searle.



Ronald Searle (1920-2011),  
*Cat lecturing in a gallery.*  
© The estate of Ronald Searle.

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His education was cut short by the outbreak of WW2 and he enlisted in the Royal Engineers. He would be taken as a Prisoner of War and forced to work on the Siam-Burma Death Railway. These experiences would hone his style for the remainder of his life – his dark wit and cutting observations on human nature the foundation of his work with many journals including *Punch*, *Le Monde* and the *New Yorker*.

The exhibition is drawn from a recent gift of Searle's work, generously presented to the Museum by the artist's children in 2014. The range of works shown celebrate his life as a caricaturist and draughtsman. These include cartoons drawn for the *Cambridge Daily News* as a teenager, the arch-delinquent schoolboy, Nigel Molesworth, his famous cats – at once manic, hedonistic and introspective, 1950s drawings of Londoners, bizarre fantasy drawings, and a drawing of one of his fellow soldiers.

Throughout his life Ronald Searle, was fascinated by the long history of caricature, calling it 'the ancient art of deflation.' He designed medals on various caricaturists which were produced by the French mint (some of which will be shown), and even hand-wrote an incredibly detailed timeline of caricature charting artists from the 1630s to the mid-20th century, including Hogarth, Gillray, Rowlandson, Cruikshank and Daumier.

Searle was taken with George Cruikshank's description of his upbringing, 'cradled in caricature' and a companion exhibition at the Fitzwilliam, *Cradled in Caricature: visual humour in satirical prints and drawings* (13 October 2015 - 31 January 2016), looks at how artists, caricaturists and cartoonists from Hogarth to the present day create visual jokes to make their audiences laugh.

In Searle's timeline of caricature, he highlighted the high and low points of its history. In the time of Hogarth, Gillray and Rowlandson he described caricature as 'a vigorous weapon', whereas he felt it had declined in the 19th century to 'drawing-room gentility'. He was happy to be a part of its recovery during the 20th century, making the final point of his timeline Private Eye.

Making visual jokes is hard and not every artist has the skill. Gillray was sent designs by enthusiastic amateurs, which he would translate into print. *Cradled in Caricature* focuses on the techniques and tricks that worked, and which still have the power to amuse us today. These methods range from simple exaggeration of facial features, costumes and fashion fads; clever juxtapositions and contrasts of body types; absurd, nonsense comedy; physical, burlesque comedy; dark humour; bawdy humour; and more complicated word-play, with the interplay of word and image or ironic literary allusions. The works are drawn from the Fitzwilliam's collection with key loans from Andrew Edmunds and Benjamin Lemer.

A further exhibition celebrating Searle, *Coming Home: Ronald Searle and Cambridge School of Art* (13 October - 19 November), will run concurrently at Anglia Ruskin University's Ruskin Gallery.

Artist Sir Quentin Blake, wrote on the exhibitions in Cambridge: "It is a privilege to be able to take part in an occasion which honours Ronald Searle not only in his own country but in his own city. Here in Cambridge we can now come close to the artist's hand at work, and not simply on its own but in the company of his great forebears, Hogarth, Gillray, Rowlandson, Cruikshank, as well as the visual tributes of his great contemporaries. Searle was deeply convinced of the beneficent effects of the bubbles in Billecart Salmon Brut Rosé. Let us raise a glass to him."

*Ronald Searle: 'Obsessed with Drawing' and Cradled in Caricature: visual humour in satirical prints and drawings* are at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge from 13 October 2015 to 31 January 2016.

Admission is free.

- Ends -

**For further information and images contact the Press Office:**

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**Notes to editors:**

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB  
FREE ADMISSION

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00  
Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00  
CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January and Good Friday.

**Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum** is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

**The Fitzwilliam is celebrating its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2016.**  
[www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)