

RICHARD GREEN

SIR CEDRIC LOCKWOOD MORRIS, 9TH BT.

Sketty, Swansea 1889 - 1982 Ipswich

Ref: CD 229

The blue poppy



Signed and dated lower left: *Cedric Morris 1932*

Oil on canvas: 30 x 25 in / 76.2 x 63.5 cm

Frame size: 36 ½ x 32 in / 92.7 x 81.3 cm



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Provenance:

Acquired from the artist by Robert (Bobby) Bevan (1901-1974), Boxted House, Essex; by descent

Exhibited:

Cardiff, National Museum of Wales, *Cedric Morris Retrospective*, 16th June-29th July 1968, no.32
Edinburgh, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, *From Sickert to Gertler: Modern British Art from Boxted House*, 15th March-22nd June 2008 and partial tour to Sudbury, Gainsborough's House, 4th October-13th December 2008 and Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, 17th April-12th September 2010, pl. 30, illus. in colour

Literature:

Gwynneth Reynolds and Diana Grace, *Benton End Remembered: Cedric Morris, Arthur Lett-Haines and the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing*, Norwich 2017, p.90, illus.
Hugh St Clair, *A Lesson in Art & Life: the Colourful Work of Cedric Morris & Arthur Lett-Haines*, London 2023, p.80

This work is one of the most striking of Cedric Morris's flower paintings, with its large, sculptural blooms and vivid juxtapositions of ice-blue and orange, salmon pink and blush pink, deep purple and emerald. Marching across the canvas in thick swirls of impasto, the flowers have a forceful, slightly sinister life, brushing up against the Surrealist painting practised by Cedric's lifelong partner Arthur Lett-Haines. From observation and instinct, Morris knew that the plant world harboured secrets far beyond the ken of humans, writing of 'the eternity of experience that flowers themselves have, not merely of struggle and achievement but a crystallization of all past apprehensions'¹. Recent science has brought some of these secrets to life, including the discovery that plants 'hear', 'see' and 'talk' to one another via underground root systems.

The painting was made when Morris was living at The Pound, Higham, a pink-painted, sixteenth century farmhouse nestled in the gently-undulating landscape of south Suffolk. After a hectic few years among the Bright Young Things of 1920s' Paris and London, Cedric and Lett decided to live in the country. Even while living in cities, the pair had made sorties to the unspoiled southern Mediterranean, with its rich wildlife. Cedric began to create the first of his wonderful gardens at The Pound and thus began a pattern of springs and summers in Suffolk and winter Mediterranean wanderings, a fertile ground for plant collecting.

This painting is dominated by the cerulean blue of the Himalayan blue poppy (*Meconopsis betonicifolia*), glowing against the warm colours of the rest of the plants. Fiendishly difficult to grow, very fussy about heat and soil type, it was not introduced into cultivation in Britain until 1924. It takes three to four years to progress from seed to bloom, so Cedric must have been one of the earliest growers in England. Truly blue flowers are comparatively rare and exert an especial fascination. There is no naturally occurring blue pigment in plants; creating the hue is metabolically expensive and genetically demanding. It is only worthwhile if the benefits outweigh the costs. Blue flowers are highly visible to key pollinators such as bees, but developing this

¹ 'Concerning flower painting', *The Studio*, vol. CXXIII, no.590, May 1942, p.130.

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complex mechanism has only evolved in a small percentage of flowering plants where the advantage outweighs the expenditure of energy.

The poppies were a longstanding interest, both the showy Oriental poppies and the delicate mauve opium poppies also depicted here. By cross-pollinating, Cedric tweaked the scarlet of field poppies into the myriad faded hues of Fortuny velvets, creating Cedric Morris poppies which still bloom in many Suffolk gardens today. Another interest was irises, shown here both as the bearded type at bottom centre – which Cedric also became famous for breeding – and the delicate, deep purple bulbous iris.

The painting was owned by Robert (Bobby) Bevan (1901-1974), son of the Camden Town painter Robert Polhill Bevan and a friend of Cedric and Lett from the late 1920s. Bobby was Chairman of the advertising agency SH Benson Ltd, while his wife Natalie Ackenhausen was a painter and ceramicist. The Bevans married in 1946 and moved to Boxted House, not far from Benton End, Hadleigh, where Cedric lived from 1940. The Bevans amassed an outstanding collection of twentieth century British and European art.

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Cedric Morris, one of the most original British painters of the twentieth century, was the son of the iron magnate George Lockwood Morris, 8th Bt. He descended from a line of Welsh industrialists whose founder, Sir John Morris (1745-1819) had been a patron of Reynolds and brother of Margaret Desenfans, co-founder of Dulwich Picture Gallery. In 1914 Morris studied at the Académie Delacluse in Paris, before spending the First World War in the Army Remount Service with Alfred Munnings and Cecil Aldin. In 1918 Morris met his lifelong partner, the artist Lett Haines, and the pair settled in Newlyn, Cornwall.

In 1920 Cedric and Lett moved to Paris where, great party-goers and -givers, their circle included Duchamp, Gris, Léger, Peggy Guggenheim, Nancy Cunard and Hemingway. Morris was influenced by abstraction although he continued to paint bold, almost naïve landscapes, incisive portraits and Parisian genre pieces. He had his first well-received London exhibition in 1924. Two years later he settled with Lett in London, becoming a member of the Seven and Five Society at the same time as Christopher Wood, who influenced him.

Morris's 1928 exhibition at Arthur Tooth, which included some of his powerful and mysterious animal paintings, was a sell-out. A countryman who liked to paint with his pet rabbit Maria Marten perched on his shoulder, Morris seemed to distil the essence of flowers, birds and animals in colourful, richly-textured works. Wry humour, and his admiration for Italian 'primitives' such as Piero della Francesca, is apparent in a work of 1926, *The entry of moral turpitude into New York* (private collection, England), sparked by the American authorities' refusal to let a divorced, titled Englishwoman enter the USA.

In 1929 Morris moved to Pound Farm, Higham in Suffolk, inheriting the house from his landlady and student Mrs Vivien Doyle Jones in 1932. There he created a memorable garden, becoming a renowned breeder of irises. In the 1930s, deeply distressed by the effects of the Depression in his native Wales, Morris made many trips back to his birthplace, organising an exhibition of Welsh Contemporary Art at Aberystwyth and becoming involved with an art centre for the unemployed at Gwernllwyn House, Dowlais.

Already disillusioned with the wiles of London dealers, Morris nevertheless went ahead with an exhibition of portraits at Guggenheim Jeune Gallery in 1938. A guest so objected to his work that he began to burn the catalogues and Morris hit him: 'the walls of the gallery were spattered with blood'². Thereafter Morris abandoned the London art scene. The previous year he and Lett had set up the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing in Dedham, Essex. When the building caught fire in 1940 (gleefully applauded by Sir Alfred Munnings, who hated modern art) the school, as well as Cedric and Lett's home, moved to Benton End, Hadleigh, Suffolk, where another marvellous garden was created. Students were given creative freedom as well as a solid grounding in technique (not to mention the benefits of Lett's superb cooking). Alumni include Lucian Freud (who imbibed Morris's method of painting directly on to canvas, without underdrawing) and Maggi Hambling. Morris travelled to America, Mexico and Cuba in the 1930s

² Quoted in Morphet, *ibid.*, p.54.

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and to Europe and north Africa throughout his life, collecting rare plants and painting landscapes. Failing sight caused Cedric Morris to give up painting in 1975, but he was still gardening at the age of ninety-one in 1981; he died in Ipswich the following year.

The work of Cedric Morris is represented in Tate Britain, London; the V&A, London; the National Portrait Gallery, London; the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff; the Musée du Petit Palais, Geneva; the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp and the City Art Gallery, Auckland.

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