

RICHARD GREEN

SIR CEDRIC LOCKWOOD MORRIS, 9TH BT.

Sketty, Swansea 1889 - 1982 Ipswich

Ref: CE 122

Summer garden flowers



Signed and dated lower right: *CEDRIC MORRIS / '44*

Oil on canvas: 28 ³/₄ x 24 ¹/₈ in / 73 x 61.3 cm

Frame size: 35 ¹/₂ x 30 ¹/₂ in / 90.2 x 77.5 cm

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Provenance:

Beth Chatto OBE, VMH (1923-2018), acquired in the 1970s;
by descent until 2019;
Sotheby's London, 20th November 2019, lot 102;
private collection, Europe

Exhibited:

Sudbury, Gainsborough's House, *The Art of Cedric Morris and Arthur Lett-Haines*, 2024, pp.47, illus.
in colour; 51

Cedric Morris created two remarkable gardens, first at The Pound, near Higham in Suffolk and from 1940 a few miles away on the edge of the pretty town of Hadleigh. Morris settled at Benton End, a rambling, sixteenth century house, running the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing with his partner Arthur Lett-Haines (1894-1978), always known as Lett. They were to live there for the rest of their lives. Behind the mellow brick walls that surround the garden were fluid, informal beds of the irises and poppies which Cedric became renowned for breeding, interspersed with unusual Mediterranean plants brought back from winter collecting trips. The relaxed exuberance of the garden chimed with the sophisticated, Bohemian lifestyle which undoubtedly would have raised eyebrows in the straight-laced Hadleigh of the 1940s and 50s. The East Anglian School was run on similarly liberal lines, with students sent to paint *en plein air* among the flowers and Cedric drifting elegantly by, encouraging rather than prescribing, the aim being for students to develop their own artistic personalities. The school's most famous alumnus, Lucian Freud (1922-2011), was to exemplify this perfectly.

Summer garden flowers was painted in 1944, as the Second World War drew to an end. Benton End was a haven in the war years, the garden mostly given over to growing vegetables, which Lett turned into delicious meals for students and friends. The work focusses on just three species, red hot poker (*kniphofia*), clematis and mallow (*lavatera*), in two terracotta vases. The quietly menacing, questing flower heads of the red hot poker, with their sword-like leaves, contrast with the graceful sinuosity of the delicate, lilac-pink clematis. Rich, staccato impasto describes the clustered bell-flowers of the *kniphofia*, long brushstrokes the satin petals of the clematis. For Morris, flowers were not merely charming, decorative objects to paint. He had a profound reverence for plants, their ancient development and history, writing of 'the eternity of experience that flowers themselves have, not merely of struggle and achievement but a crystallization of all past apprehensions'¹.

The vases are set on a table top, beyond which is a tall window, or open door, looking out onto a surprisingly bare garden, brick wall and fencing or outbuildings. Morris plays with perspective, concealing and revealing the vista, in a way which recalls the claustrophobic Surrealist still lifes of his friend Paul Nash (1889-1946), whose artist brother John lived not far away at Wormingford. The Surrealism and the slight sense of threat are also influenced by the work of Arthur Lett-Haines, who pursued a parallel artistic career while shouldering most of the administration for the East Anglian School. Morris had experimented with unstable perspective and vistas in an earlier painting, *Still life in doorway*, 1942 (with Richard Green in 2017; private collection, UK).

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

RICHARD GREEN

Summer garden flowers shares with that work a light palette of pale pink, creams and soft greys. If the occluded view, with only a glimpse of ghostly trees in the distance, hints at the privations and difficulties of wartime, the fierce vigour and personality of the foreground flowers give cause for hope.

Note on the provenance

This painting was acquired in the 1970s by the gardener, plantswoman and garden writer Beth Chatto (1923-2018), one of Cedric Morris's most devoted and distinguished protégés. They became friends in the 1950s and through Morris's inspiration Beth Chatto developed her garden and nursery at White Barn House, Elmstead Market, near Colchester. Like Morris, she was interested in unusual plants and challenging habitats, creating a dry gravel garden, woodland and water gardens which have an informal flow like the planting at Benton End. Above all, Morris and Chatto shared a passion for plants and the patience to cultivate and hybridise them. She wrote of her visits to Benton End: 'I spent many hours with Cedric in the garden, savouring the plants, where his knowledge and experience flowed as naturally as breathing. I taught myself to propagate from the precious screws of paper full of seed, berries, or cuttings Cedric gave me, as well as from his generous earthy bundles of roots, tubers, and bulbs'.

The garden and house at Benton End are now being restored under the direction of the Garden Museum, with the aim of opening the house as a venue for horticultural, artistic and cultural activities in the spirit of Cedric and Lett. The partially-restored garden was first opened to the public in the summer of 2026.

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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.

RICHARD GREEN

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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