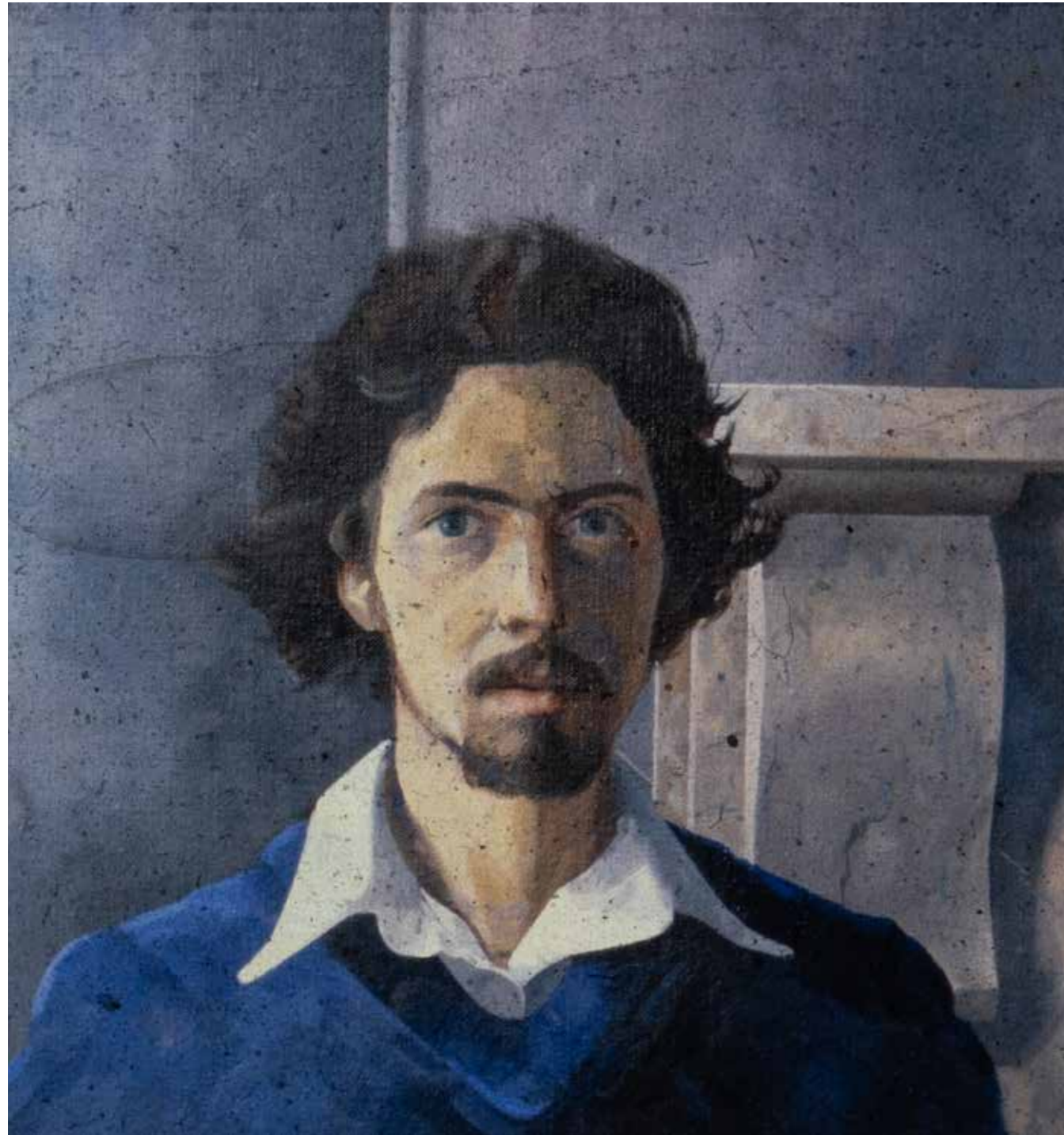




GRAEME WILLSON
A MEMORIAL RETROSPECTIVE

OCTOBER 2019
ILKLEY MANOR HOUSE GALLERY



Self portrait, 1976

Our dad, Graeme Willson, passed away a year ago in October 2018, from Oesophageal cancer. We learnt, following his death, that he had been planning to have an exhibition of his work in 2019, and wanted to donate some of the proceeds of sales to two cancer charities, Yorkshire Cancer Research, and Candlelighters.

There were very few details of the type of work to be exhibited, but we started to think about what a retrospective of our dad's entire life's work would look like to us, his children.

There were also many suggestions from dad's cohort and friends, that there should be an exhibition to celebrate his artistic career. Thank you to those who encouraged us!

It has always been clear that there have been three focal points to the work, Ecclesiastical, Public, and Studio work. There was also the personal and the public aspects, with one informing the other.

We have always particularly enjoyed the public aspect of our dad's work, and love the fact that much of the work can be enjoyed today in a public space. From Oddy Locks on the Liverpool-Leeds canal, to the Corn Exchange mural 'Cornucopia' in central Leeds, all take in their surrounding architecture and celebrate the area's history. It is fantastic that we are able to celebrate that contribution in this exhibition.

The Manor House was close to our dad's heart. He had a studio over the road from here for about 20 years and cared deeply about the Manor House's conservation. It is a great privilege to be able to hold the exhibition here.

*The exhibition runs from 4th October - 27th October 2019
Wednesday - Sunday 11am-4pm. Works are for sale - please refer to the separate list of works. Please speak to the exhibition invigilators if you are interested in purchasing, or contact admin@ilkleymanorhouse.org*

Lucy and Jacob

INTRODUCTION

In the heart of Leeds, a monumental and vibrant mural adorns the end wall of a building adjacent to the Corn Exchange. Painted in 1990, it was commissioned by the developers of the Exchange to mark the renovation of this Victorian landmark, designed by Cuthbert Broderick in 1861. Entitled 'Cornucopia', the mural is the largest and most visible artwork created by Graeme Willson (1951-2018). This is a major work in his extensive public art portfolio and the confident splendour of the mural pays tribute to Graeme's stature as an award-winning artist, who was dedicated to painting across a range of contexts and practices. 'Cornucopia' also bears witness to the artist's design and collaborative achievements, to his pleasure in the materiality of painting and to his delight in subject matter that juxtaposes the classical and the contemporary.

Characteristically, 'Cornucopia' salutes the splendid emporium of the Corn Exchange through a dynamic and figurative composition, which engages with the history and function of the place. Architectural history is acknowledged through details of the Victorian Exchange and earlier textile buildings. Function is addressed by the symbolic inclusion of an antique statue of Ceres, classical goddess of harvest and plenty, which alludes to the original agricultural role of the building as well as its regeneration as a cornucopia of consumer delights. As ever, human activity is a vital element that spans past and present. Hence, the mural testifies to Graeme's admirable regard for, and commitment to, the patronage he enjoyed throughout his career, from individuals and from commercial, ecclesiastical and public sector organisations.

Grounded in Fine Art and the History of Art, Graeme was attracted to traditions of art practice, such as those of the Italian Renaissance, as well as being open to new technologies and unfamiliar media. Creatively pragmatic, Graeme relished his pursuit of portraiture and studio painting alongside the public commissions. Each distinctive aspect of his endeavour complements another, so that it is no surprise to see visual ideas transferring from easel painting to public art, and the colour and composition of a studio canvas resembling a mural in miniature. Nor is it surprising when themes that consistently fascinated him, such as the exploration of relationships between architectural, human and mythological presences, span the breadth of his prolific output.

Forty years ago, Graeme and I found ourselves in the same group of the Natural Childbirth Trust, attempting to learn how to support our partners when the time came. We became colleagues in the School of Art and Design at Bradford College and, over the years, chatted about art in general and his own work in particular. Despite his unassuming, even self-effacing, tendencies, I always sensed that this waistcoat-bedecked and cravat-sporting chap cherished each

opportunity to paint in a new context and I enjoyed his quiet, yet adamant, belief in his own abilities. It is only now, however, that I've come to appreciate fully the enormity of his engagement with public art. It is, therefore, a special privilege to introduce this catalogue, and I applaud Graeme's children, Lucy and Jacob, in their aim to document the impressive range of his art activities.

In my imagination, Graeme was a Renaissance man, striding in the footsteps of artists who had combined art, design and craft to create public works in response to religious and secular commissions. Yet, in Graeme's experience, the Church of England became his Borgia papacy and William Morrison Supermarkets his Medici businessmen. Beginning with the prestigious commissions for York Minster (1979 and 1981), the Church's patronage spanned his public art career and encompassed works for numerous northern churches, including the etched glass doors and baptistry paintings for St Margaret's, Ilkley (2007) which Graeme found especially satisfying. Moreover, these commissions stimulated the artist to embrace collaborations with specialists in the hitherto unfamiliar media of textiles, stained and etched glass, mosaics and ecclesiastical furnishings.

Impressed by the award-winning originality of 'Cornucopia', William Morrison Supermarkets embarked on a pioneering programme of patronage to embellish a chain of new stores with the artist's characteristic fusions of architecture, industry and people that invoke the cultural heritage of a place. Graeme's own tally of planned works records thirty-nine paintings and five stained glass works, created between 1995 and 2006, for fifteen supermarkets stretching from Norwich to Manchester and from Sheffield to Glasgow. It is a tribute to Graeme's devotion to painting and his unflappable professionalism that he was able to surmount the challenge of this prodigious and somewhat daunting commission.

These reflections have confirmed my longstanding appreciation of Graeme Willson as a Renaissance man, who thoroughly enjoyed embracing an array of practices and media through which he could operate as a contemporary artist responding to the opportunities of his times. Just as his dedication to researching the right materials and subjects for each project has ensured the continuing resplendence of 'Cornucopia', the devotion of Lucy and Jacob, and the resulting breadth of this catalogue, will enable the enduring appreciation and enjoyment of the extraordinary range of his artistic achievements.

Patrick Eyres

PUBLIC WORKS



‘Public art can stimulate and provoke, embody forth ideas and feelings, and be part of a larger process of regeneration’

As much as he loved the intimacy and directness of small scale studio work, Graeme was inspired and motivated by huge wall surfaces and the prospect of larger-scale communication through public art.

Influenced by Italian frescos and Frank Brangwyn murals, Graeme also believed that galleries could be alienating,

and therefore bringing art into public spaces was worthwhile.

Graeme founded the ‘Yorkshire Mural Artists’ Group in 1978, and has said: ‘The work, in whatever medium or scale, should appear to belong or grow organically out of the site in question’.



Above left, detail from ‘Inner City Redevelopment’, Cookridge St, Leeds, 1980. Above, ‘Passengers’, Surbiton Station, collaboration with Sue Ridge, 1985. ‘Cornucopia’, Corn Exchange Area, 1990.

PUBLIC WORKS



In 1995 Graeme was approached by the firm Fletcher Joseph to work with them on a new Morrison's supermarket in Darlington. This involved the design and execution of a frieze on the theme of railways. Many more commissions followed and there are a total of 11 completed works in Morrisons supermarkets around the country, which include stained glass as well as mural works. Graeme worked with Martin Johnson on many stained glass commissions.

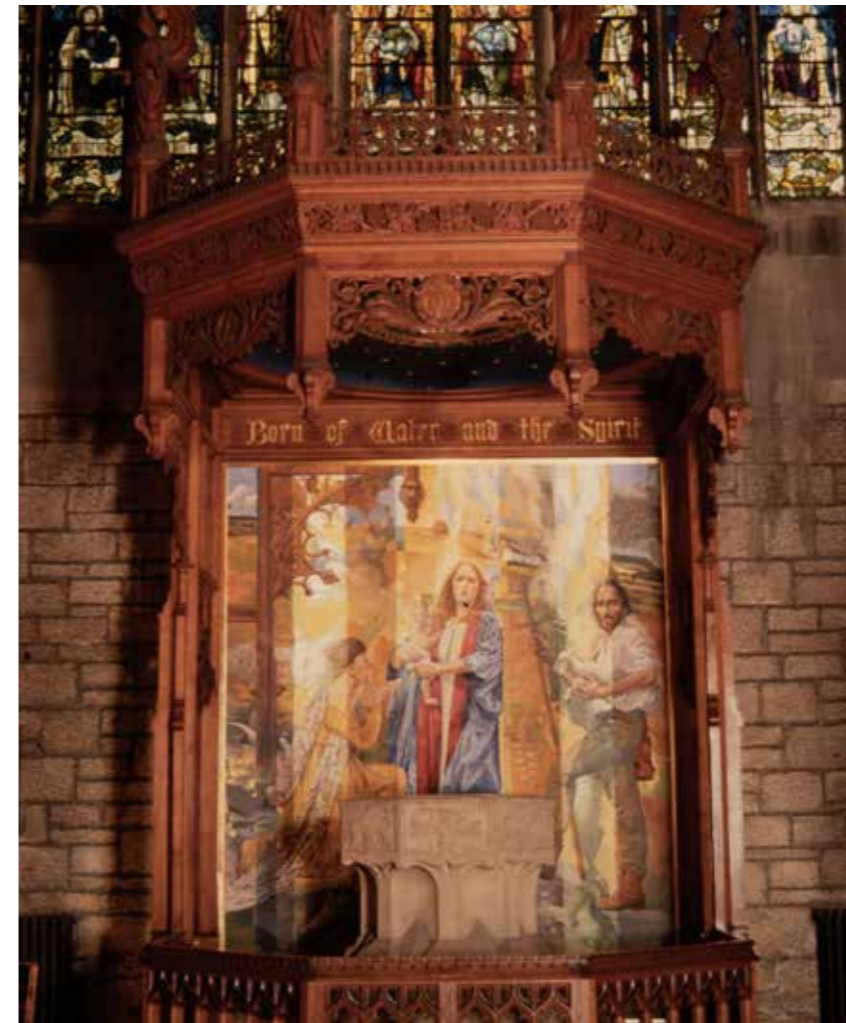


Graeme has commented that 'works on this scale involve an enormous amount of physical labour and time, and I count myself fortunate to have the help of assistants such as Jim Carrie, Nik Walford, Valentin Boiangiu and Alaric Price.'



Above, 'The Four Seasons', Morrison's, Darlington, 1996. Middle, Morrison's, Jarrow, 2001. Below, 'The Four Elements', Morrison's, Knottingley, 2004.

ECCLESIASTICAL WORKS



Influenced by Italian art, especially frescos, and Caravaggio's work in particular, Graeme enjoyed the aesthetic requirements of the church, the inherited iconography, and, as with his public art, the 'spirit of place'.

The York Minster commissions were perhaps where Graeme's mediums were the most diverse. Working with architect Charles Brown, beginning with 3 oil murals (The Three Saints) a commission followed for a ceiling painting (Christ in Majesty with St. Cuthbert and St. George), and a mosaic (St William of York).

At Halifax Minster, the designs included stained glass, the design of an altar table, and the clergy vestments.



Above, 'Madonna of the Moors', St Margaret's Church, Ilkley 2004. Below 'The 14 Stations of the Cross', detail, St Elisabeth's Church, Reddish, 1983.

Graeme enjoyed the challenge of balancing the demands of the past with the experience of the present, and said that the principle, whether applied to a medieval cathedral or a 20th Century railway station remains the same: the work must evolve organically from the site, and reflect something of the interior or architectural dynamics.

ECCLESIASTICAL WORKS



Left, detail of 'Madonna and Child', St Paul's Church, Thame-smead, London, 1984. Above, 'Christ in Majesty with St. Cuthbert and St. George', ceiling panel, York Minster, 1982. Right, 'Three Saints', York Minster, 1980.

‘the work must evolve organically from the site, and reflect something of the interior or architectural dynamics.’



STUDIO WORKS



Passionate about Italian art, Graeme went on many trips and pilgrimages to Italy throughout his life, and his early work in particular was greatly influenced by Piero della Francesca. His 'Urban Allegory' 1976 was typical and also encapsulated Graeme's interest with the human form positioned with significant architectural motifs.

This concern extended throughout his career, across public, ecclesiastical and studio work, with the figure being juxtaposed with architectural lines and elements, as well as related graphic shapes.

Graeme also had a great love for and interest in, landscape,



and many of his works celebrate this tradition in painting, whilst incorporating his love of landscape into other areas.

Above left, 'Mediterranean Scene', 1983. Above right, 'Urban Allegory' 1976. Below, 'Mozart Symphony Concentante', 2006. Opposite page above, 'The Heart Has its Reasons', 2006. Below left, 'Untitled' circa 2006. Below right, 'Prophecy and Vision', 2007.





In Venice, 1976



In the stained glass studio



With 'The Heart has its Reasons'

Graeme Willson, a Memorial Retrospective

Ilkley Manor House, Castle Yard,

Ilkley, LS29 9DT

4th - 27th October 2019

Wednesday - Sunday 11am - 4pm

Exhibition curated and organised by Clare Lamkin,

Lucy Wright and Jacob Willson

Thanks to

Patrick Eyres

Howard Eaglestone

Nick Robinson

Sarah Thomas

Rosemary Micklethwaite

Christine Davenport

The volunteer stewards at Ilkley Manor House

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We are interested to know where Graeme's work lives now. Many people have got in touch to say that they have pieces of work and invited us to go and see them, and we would welcome an email from anyone who has bought or acquired work from Graeme in the past, or collaborated on projects. We are forming plans to have an online archive in the future and being in touch will be very helpful.

Others have been in touch to express interest in the restoration, or even saving, of some of Graeme's public art works, namely 'Cornucopia' in Leeds, and 'Fragments from a Post Industrial Age' at Oddy Locks. If you would like us to let you know what's happening, please keep in touch.

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