

*'One finds the influences one is looking for – and we were certainly looking for that one'*



Ben Nicholson's comment refers to his 'discovery' of Alfred Wallis. It reminds us that the stories of naive or self-taught artists are underscored by the fascinating but problematic question of influence. The 20th century model suggests that the naive artist influences the tutored artist. It builds on the assumption that the untutored artist develops their art instinctively, free of influence. It is the sophisticate who accommodates and nurtures the naïf, celebrating the simplicity and directness, the lack of pretension and freedom from the machinations of the professional community. This all depends on the naïf having little experience of art other than their own.

It is both intriguing and instructive to speculate on how this model plays out in the work and career of the Warwickshire naïf Wally French. French first came into the public gaze in 2001-2, when the artist Richard Higlett identified French's work as noteworthy. Higlett, a Warwickshire boy himself, had left the area to study and work in south Wales. However, encounters with French on regular visits back home convinced him that French was not merely a 'one-hit wonder'. Higlett decided that French's work would indeed develop, and the objects which today define his distinctive artistic language began to develop a real consistency and, indeed, artistic and intellectual challenge.

Essentially, French's work is defined by two genres of object. First, both chronologically and in terms of presence in public exhibition, are the landscapes on brushes. Second, emerging later and eventually competing with the brushes for time and attention in French's practice, are the suitcase assemblages. Both groups of objects are consistent – the depiction of trees, fields, blue skies that are French's recurrent leitmotif. However, what is joyous in its simplicity when seen on an isolated brush, becomes unnervingly obsessive when an opened suitcase reveals a carefully organised group of everyday objects covered with a landscape arrangement that overwhelms and enthralls everything inside.

It is commonly assumed that French, for reasons that are hard to pin down, simply began to produce these works, albeit with Higlett's support and encouragement. However, the consideration of French's locality may offer some interesting counter possibilities. French, like Higlett, emerged not from the leafy Warwickshire of Shakespeare, but from the commercial and manufacturing communities of its towns. Leamington Public Library provided his education rather than the Forest of Arden. His trees and fields speak of a release from the repetition of the production line, even in their repetitiveness.

Therefore, when Compton Verney opened in 2004, it would be tempting to see its grandeur, its rural location, as the Warwickshire that would be terra incognita to French, *campagna non grata* to Higlett. However, it must be remembered that by this time French may well have had access to free bus routes, including the 497 which goes from Leamington Spa to Harbury, or the meandering 467, which can be picked up from Banbury station, a more circuitous route. He may even have found someone who could have given him a lift.

The idea that French, then, may have visited Compton Verney in 2004-5 brings us to the discussion of knowledge and influence. The influence upon Wallis of the professional artists in St Ives' Porthmeor Studios, a few doors along the street from his home, may well have reinforced the retired fisherman's commitment to painting. That such a thing may have happened does not figure in the literature on Wallis. It requires the artist Andrew Lanyon's continued commentary on Wallis' career to constantly remind us that Wallis existed outside the narrative created by Nicholson and his circle. That he may have visited the studios on open days, held there in the 1920s, for example, is highly likely. Similarly, Higlett's interaction with French reminds us of his wider biographical context. This can be seen particularly in the most recent large-scale installation he devised for 'We have the mirrors, we have the plans', the opening display at the newly refurbished Mostyn Llandudno. By juxtaposing the brushes with the suitcases in an elegant 'white box' installation, Higlett connected us to a museum reading of French's work. This recent installation prompts a comparison with the museum-style installation of the folk art collection at Compton Verney. There, tucked away in the attic of the grand house – one might say, consigning these ordinary artists to the servants' quarters – one can discover the delights of the so-called naive artist. One finds this display creating a dynamic tension with the sophistication of the temporary exhibitions and collection displays downstairs.

Can one imagine French enjoying a day out there? Yes, if one reinforces one's picture the opening season at Compton Verney with recollections of Peter Greenaway's extraordinary solo project there. Greenaway's cornucopia of imagery, films, letters, memorabilia evoked the quasi-fictional character Tulse Luper. The installation used the suitcase as a repeating device. The suitcase was both container and organising principle. It evoked images of dislocation and exile, carriage and storage, personal journeys made and memories stored. The life of Tulse Luper emerged by implication from fragments and glimpses – including that he, like Greenaway, grew up in South Wales.

So, in assessing the potential impact of Wally French's journey – putative or actual – to Compton verney, one is forced to imagine a journey into a world of counter-example and metaphor. The question must be asked : does the artist find the influence he or she) is looking for? If so, how do we place that influence into their practice : as actuated, or as interpreted? Thus far, the work of Wally French, and of his co-mentor Richard Higlett, remains open to both doubt and reward.

# Did Wally French ever visit Compton Verney ?

