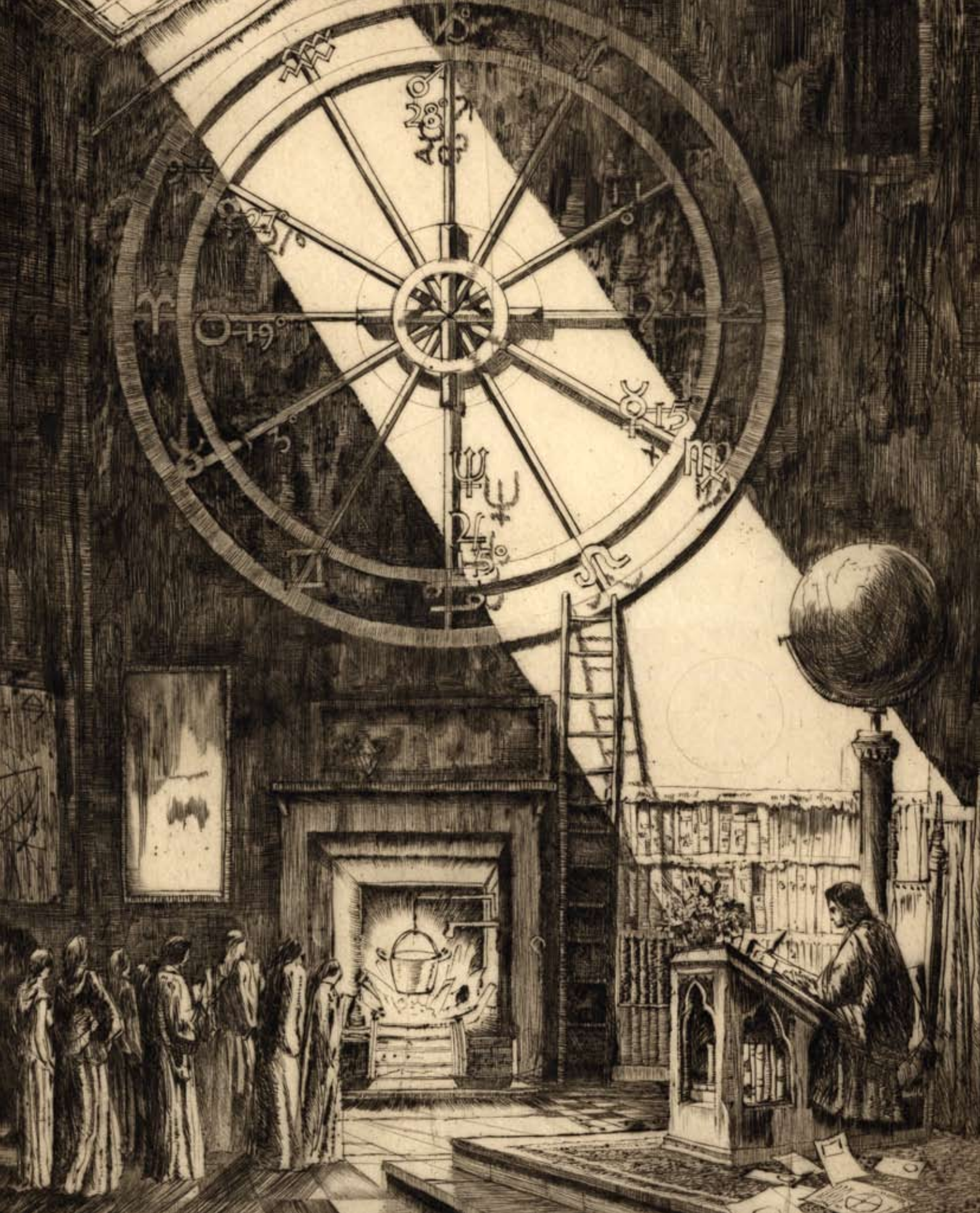
Joseph Webb

the lights that flit across my brain



Joseph Webb

1908-1962

the lights that flit across my brain

Robert Meyrick

A Retrospective Touring Exhibition of Prints, Drawings and Paintings
first shown at
Aberystwyth University, School of Art Gallery and Museum
& National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Summer 2007

Acknowledgements

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Colphon

Cover: *Asylum*, etching, 1930-31
Endpapers: Wallpaper design by Joseph Webb, undated
Half Title: Joseph Webb
Opposite Page: *Doors of the Heart*, oil, undated
Opposite Title Page: *An Astrologer Instructing his Pupils* (detail), drypoint, 1932

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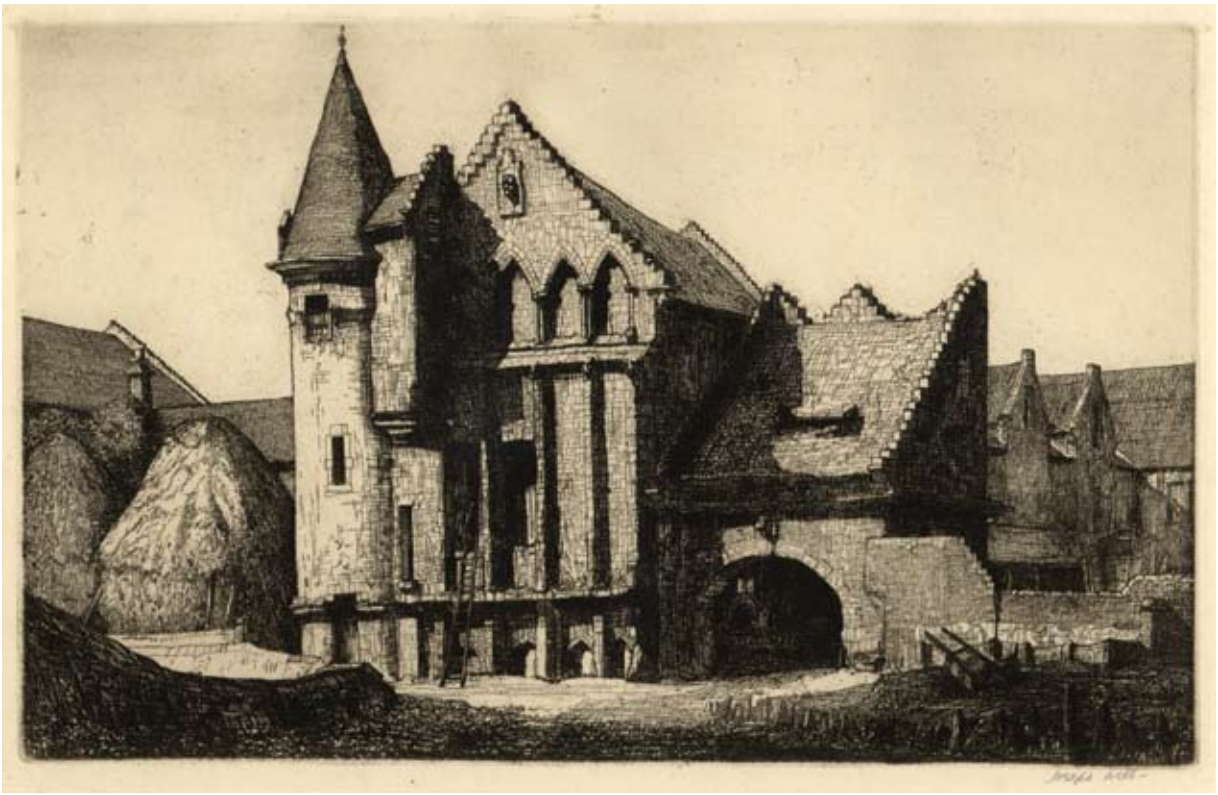
The measure of a man is not what he has done, important though that may be an indication; the true measure of a man's capacity is what he longs to do.

Joseph Webb, 'A Note to Artists', 17 February 1958



1 *Hospitalfield Farm* etching, 1927 (185 x 285 mm) Aberystwyth University

'Thee, Chauntress, oft the woods among'
Landscape and Architectural Etchings, 1927-1947

AT AN EARLY AGE, Joseph Webb was acclaimed a 'master etcher'; his ecclesiastical-looking structures *Rat Barn*, widely considered to be his masterpiece, and the iconic *Dream Barn*, were etched when he was just twenty years old. By 1932, the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum had each acquired five of his prints. Soon he was exhibiting in London, Chicago, New York and the Paris Salon. In 1933, aged 25, he staged his first solo exhibition at P. & D. Colnaghi in Old Bond Street, the most prestigious of the London print dealers and publishers. Its Director Harold Wright was a keen advocate of Webb's work and, not long afterwards, they collaborated to compile a catalogue raisonné of his prints. Yet despite this early promise and his absolute faith in his worth as an artist, Webb was unable to sustain his reputation and career. After 1933 he made prints only sporadically, finally giving up etching in 1947. Subsequently, he helped his common-law wife manage a café in Reading and, during the last six years of his life, ran a boarding house in South Kensington; few who encountered him would have realised that he was an artist.

Webb was born in Ealing in 1908, the son of a market gardener. He studied painting at Ealing School of Art (1920-22) and in 1925 was awarded a scholarship to the Patrick Allan-Fraser of Hospitalfield School of Art in Arbroath. He took up etching in 1927 under the supervision of Henry Daniel, a Slade-trained landscape painter and printmaker. By the end of the 19th century, public attitude towards etching had changed significantly. Old prejudices were overcome and etching attained respectability as an art form. The so-called 'Etching Revival' culminated in the 1920s with an unprecedented market for contemporary prints. Original yet affordable, modern etchings came to represent a symbol of refinement. The demand for etchings and the promise of commercial success led numerous young artists, Webb among them, to turn to printmaking.

After the Great War, many British artists sought stability and assurance in past traditions. They learned from the study of earlier printmakers and their search for a style and subject took them in many directions. Webb based his first print, *Falls of the Clyde* (etching, 1927), on an etching of the same title by J. M. W. Turner. With a shaft of sunlight dramatically piercing rain clouds, *Cutting the Rick*, a drypoint of November 1927, is lit and composed in a manner reminiscent of Rembrandt's etching *Three Trees* (1643). The Gothic appearance of *Hospitalfield Farm* (etching, 1927), the use of chiaroscuro, densely etched lines, and methods for rendering stone, roof tiles and natural forms, not only acknowledge the etched work of Charles Meryon and Frederick Landseer Griggs, but also present a foretaste of the monumental structures *Rat Barn* and *Dream Barn* that Webb envisioned the following year. [Illus.1] He admired, studied and assimilated the work

of past exponents—Rembrandt, Blake, the late canvases of Turner, and the mystical paintings of Charles Sims among them—yet his style and approach are peculiarly his own.

Hospitalfield stands on the site of a medieval pilgrim hospice on the Angus coastline in Scotland's agricultural heartland. In 1843, painter and patron of the arts, Patrick Allan remodelled the House, reviving 16th-century detail and decoration. Irregular in design, with its crenallated gable, bartizan towers, and triple oriel windows, the building is a precursor to the Arts and Crafts Movement in Scotland. *Hospitalfield Farm*, however, is of Webb's invention. It is an important print, for it shows his interest in buildings of mixed styles and form that have grown and developed over time; it was here that he learned to elaborate and reassemble architectural elements to envision new and fantastic structures.

Webb learned etching at Hospitalfield, but he principally studied painting there, more especially portraiture. *Mr Dion Murray* (oil, 1928), a portrait of a fellow student or model, is one of the few examples to survive from his time in Scotland. [Illus.2] Webb would continue to favour the technique used here: a relatively course linen canvas and a light grey ground, monochrome under-painting

2 Mr Dion Murray oil, 1928 (760 x 630 mm) Private Collection
3 *Dawn, An English Village* etching, 1928 (212 x 333 mm) Aberystwyth University

and small brushstrokes carefully applied to render the subtly of tonal values. Mostly he used a limited palette to compensate for his colourblindness. Webb would undertake a number of society portraits during the 1930s to supplement his income. In the catalogue of an *Exhibition of the Engraved Work of Joseph Webb ARE*, at Bent Tree Studio, Harrow-on-the-Hill (1932), he 'begs to advise his patrons that he is also a portrait painter and he is prepared to accept commissions in this medium. He will gladly quote for portraiture, according to the sitter's requirements'.

Webb returned to London in 1928 to continue etching under Hubert Schröder at Chiswick. Webb adored the British countryside. Whether driving or walking, he never failed to be 'absorbed and enthralled'. (Gascoigne 1985) In search of suitable subjects for etchings and paintings, he travelled that summer to Gloucestershire and southeast Wales, returning along the West Sussex coast. A solitary person, he travelled alone, and either camped or lodged inexpensively. *Dawn, An English Village* (etching, 1928) was the most sophisticated and resolved etching to result from his time in Gloucestershire. [Illus.3] Showing the sleepy Cotswold village of Wotton-under-Edge, viewed from a nearby hill at sunrise, it was his first etching to be burnished and re-etched through several finely wrought states, the softened forms and focus recapturing the artist's experience of an early morning haze.

Based on observations at Barnwood, a small village 2½ miles east of Gloucester, *The Horse Doctor* (etching, 1928) recalls Dutch genre etchings by Rembrandt and his contemporaries, Adriaen and Isack van Ostade, and Cornelius Bega. [Illus.4] Webb admired the narrative aspect of their informal scenes of local peasantry, and possibly was mindful here of Rembrandt's etching *The Ratkiller* (1632), in which an itinerant worker sells his services from door to door. In Webb's use of the medium for its intrinsic quality of mark, *The Horse Doctor* owes much stylistically to Rembrandt's swiftly executed genre subjects. The lightly-sketched *Tewkesbury* (drypoint, 1928), seen from across the River Avon, brings to mind the first landscape etchings Rembrandt made on walks along the Amstel river and drew directly on to the plate. *Gloucester Mills with Severn and Avon* (drypoint, 1928) and *Painswick Mill* (drypoint, 1928) were probably begun in situ. With its complex arrangement of gables, dormer windows, bell tower and chimneys, *Painswick Mill* prefigures Webb's extraordinary constructions such as *Rat Barn* and *Asylum*. It was, however, a faithful depiction of an actual building, one of the many woollen mills to once thrive at Painswick, six miles southeast of Gloucester.

Crossing into Wales, Webb set out on the Wye Valley Walk. In Monmouthshire he made drawings for *Chepstow from the Cliff* and *Chepstow*, both etched in 1928. [Illus.5&6]

4 *The Horse Doctor* etching, 1928 (151 x 126 mm) Aberystwyth University

Strategically positioned high on cliffs above the River Wye, this magnificent Norman castle is among the oldest stone-built castles in Britain. For *Chepstow*, Webb has taken the more conventional viewpoint, one for centuries favoured by artists—the east curtain of the medieval fortification drawn from the English banks of the River Wye with the Great Tower silhouetted on the skyline. When reproduced in *Fine Prints of the Year* 1931, its editor Malcolm Salaman felt Webb had 'pictured the actual place, through a romantic, imaginative vision'.

North of Chepstow on the road to Tintern, the '365 Steps' lead up to The Wyndcliffe, a popular vantage point for views overlooking the Wye and beyond to Chepstow Racecourse and the Severn Estuary. Here Webb planned *The Horseshoe Bend in the Wye* (1928), an etching of the Wye glimpsed between a wooded foreground and cliffs on the opposite bank. It is more restrained

5 *Chepstow from the Cliff* etching, 1928 (300 x 404 mm) Aberystwyth University

and economical than his preceding plates of Chepstow. Further along the walk, overlooking the Wye Valley in Herefordshire, he conceived *The Wye at Symonds Yat* (etching, 1928). Apparently unfinished, few lifetime impressions survive. The copper plate, one of only a handful of extant plates by Webb, was posthumously editioned in the 1980s with the title *River Valley*.

Returning to London along the West Sussex coast, Webb visited the *Black Rabbit Chalk Pit, Arundel* (etching, 1928). He was no doubt aware that in 1923 Graham Sutherland, then a 2nd-year student at Goldsmiths College of Art, had come to Arundel with Paul Drury and subsequently etched a plate, *The Black Rabbit*, in which he focussed on the Black Rabbit Inn and the River Arun. Webb drew the Black Rabbit quarry where chalk blocks were mined to be taken downriver by barge and used to line its banks. [Illus.7] Seven miles west of Arundel, on the outskirts of Chichester, he stopped at *Boxgrove Priory* (etching, 1928) where the parish Church of St Mary stands among the picturesque ruins of a Benedictine monastery and, east of Chichester, he drew *Bosham Priory* (graphite and conté, 1928). [Illus.8&9] The largely Saxon Church of the Holy Trinity at Bosham stands on one of the earliest Christian sites in Sussex, It was the only church depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry. Webb used his drawing in the planning

6 *Chepstow* etching, 1928 (240 x 406 mm) Aberystwyth University

7 *Black Rabbit Chalk Pit*, Arundel etching, 1928 (226 x 304 mm) Aberystwyth University

of a proposed etching, *The Bosham Bell*. In the 1920s, many were concerned about the disfigurement of the countryside by roads, railways and suburbanisation. Finely crafted topographical views of Britain's picturesque towns, landmarks and natural prospects were much in demand. Numerous printmakers, Webb among them, travelled in search of interesting aspects of Britain's architectural heritage: castles, farms, thatched cottages, mills, tithe barns, abbeys, and parish churches. Their approach to landscape tended to be conservative and nostalgic, harking back to a past golden age, a sanctuary of rural life that was believed to be under threat.

At Bosham Webb made a drawing of the Old Mill that became the genesis of *Rat Barn*. In one preparatory drawing, a detailed study of the mill has been worked over in ink and white paint; the back of the drawing he inscribed 'Sunset and Moonrise. Bosham Old Mill. November 1928'. [Illus.10] Both the otherworldly structure and barren landscape of *Rat Barn* (etching, 1928) evolved through numerous etched states and were ultimately of his invention. Its title derives from the form of the weather vane. [Illus.11] There is no evidence that *Dream Barn* (etching, 1929) was derived in the same way from observation. Webb

8 *Boxgrove Priory* etching, 1928 (152 x 170 mm) Aberystwyth University
9 *Bosham Priory* graphite and conté, 1928 (320 x 273 mm) Aberystwyth University

initially titled this etching *High Cradle Dream*, then *Rat Barn's Bride*, which suggests that he saw it as a pendant to *Rat Barn*. *Dream Barn* went through as many as sixteen states as he revised the composition, evolving the design from his original conception. [Illus.12] Of improbable scale, silhouetted by cold flat skies, and towering above the wilderness, the overwhelming sense of emptiness, uncertainty and mysteriousness of the unknown, have contributed to make these the most bleak and haunting of Webb's etched landscapes.

In 1929, Webb visited F. L. Griggs in Chipping Campden. Griggs' etchings of monumental Gothic cathedrals and visionary scenes of medieval England display sentiments akin to Webb's. Both artists shared a love of ancient buildings and their works convey similar religious and mystical concerns. Griggs became the principal contemporary influence on Webb's etchings. He not only demonstrated to Webb his wiping and printing techniques—taking impressions of *Rat Barn* and *Dream Barn*—but imparted his enthusiasm for the emotional power of Samuel Palmer's work. In William Blake's compositions, too, Webb saw that realism could be secondary to spirituality—the landscape a vehicle for emotions, its physical appearance transformed. He probably

10 *Sunset and Moonrise, Bosham Old Mill* ink and gouache, 1928 (150 x 282 mm) Aberystwyth University

11 *Rat Barn* etching, 1928 (176 x 303 mm) Aberystwyth University
12 *Dream Barn* etching, 1929 (280 x 303 mm) Aberystwyth University

etched his small plate *Owlpen Manor* after a drawing made during his visit to Griggs, though in the previous year he had been at nearby Wotton-under-Edge. Owlpen lies in a secluded valley at the edge of the Cotswold Hills and is renowned for its early formal terraced gardens and 17th-century yews. Webb was enchanted with the Tudor manor and for a time called his studio 'Owlpen'. In 1930, Griggs etched a large and more imposing plate of the east wing of Owlpen and its yew trees. Griggs taught Webb to mix warm black inks and convinced him of the virtues of using antique laid papers. Probably as a consequence of Griggs' use of 'Dover House Press', Webb inscribed his prints with 'Midcross Press'.

Later that year, Webb was back in Wales on an excursion that resulted in altogether more imaginative and arresting compositions. *Pembroke* or *The Great Keep* (etching, 1929) shows Pembroke Castle standing on high ground, its elevation much exaggerated.

13 *Pembroke* or *The Great Keep* etching, 1929 (254 x 354 mm) Aberystwyth University

[Illus.13] Encircling and climbing the hill are the fortified town walls, which he gives the magnitude of the Great Wall of China. The 13th-century round keep is prominent, as are the Chapel, West Hall and Monkton tower. After just two impressions, the castle and hill were burnished away, the plate cut down, and Webb developed *The Great Bridge* (etching, 1929). [Illus.14] Pembroke may be accessed by the Monkton Bridge or Mill Bridge, but neither was of this design or magnitude. An enormous three-arched stone bridge is all that remained after a drastic reworking of the plate.

On the same trip, Webb planned *Carew* (etching, 1929) following a visit to the 13th-century fortifications four miles northeast of Pembroke. [Illus.15] Viewed from the northwest, the low-lying castle is imagined to be surmounting a hill. The Griggsian foreground too is of Webb's invention, probably an amalgamation of drawings made in the Cotswolds. A tree-lined road and medieval barns replace the meadows and River Carew that actually lie beneath this part of the castle. The castle itself is accurately rendered: the drum towers and

14 *The Great Bridge* etching, 1929 (240 x 352 mm) Aberystwyth University

curtain wall, right, show the early structure, the Elizabethan north wing with mullioned and oriel windows, mark Sir John Perrot's modernisation of the late 16th century. After pulling one proof, Webb burnished away much of the composition until only the foreground wall and a few stone blocks remained. He then abandoned the plate.

During 1930, the year in which Webb was elected Associate of the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers and Engravers, he established Bent Tree Studio at Harrow-on-the-Hill. He acquired an etching press and lithographic press and throughout the winter of 1930/1931 he was deeply preoccupied with his work. It was an especially productive time in his life when many of the visionary-mystical subjects were conceived: *A Master's House* (etching, 1930), *A Speaker of Strange Truths* (lithograph, 1930), *Sermon on the Mount* (lithograph, 1930), *The Holy River* (lithograph, 1930), *Asylum* (etching, 1930) and *Prison* (etching, 1930). In the summer of 1931, he was on the road again, this time in Buckinghamshire, drawing sites with literary associations. *Stoke Poges* (etching, 1931), for example, shows the graveyard and

15 *Carew* etching, 1929 (199 x 313 mm) Aberystwyth University

12th-century Church of St Giles where it is thought the English poet Thomas Gray set *Elegy in a Country Graveyard*. [Illus.16] An impression of the first state of the etching bears the inscription 'Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap' from *Elegy*. Webb has drawn the oblique aspect of the church seen when entering the graveyard. The 14th-century porch stands on the south side and Gray's tomb lies under the Tudor-style mullioned east windows of the Hastings Chapel.

Seven miles north, continuing with a literary and, he hoped, more commercial subject, Webb visited *Milton's Cottage* (etching, 1931). In the summer of 1665, leaving London to escape the plague, the English poet and parliamentarian John Milton moved to the Buckinghamshire village of Chalfont St. Giles. [Illus.17] He was to live in this cottage for less than a year, yet it was here he completed *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* was conceived. The 16th-century cottage on Deansway stands much as it did during Milton's residence. In Chalfont St. Peter, two miles southeast, at the foot of the Chilterns, Webb drew A *Buckinghamshire Lane* (etching,

16 *Stoke Poges* etching, 1931 (200 x 303 mm) Aberystwyth University

17 *Milton's Cottage* etching, 1931 (177 x 224 mm) Aberystwyth University
18 *A Buckinghamshire Lane* etching, 1931 (101 x 151 mm) Aberystwyth University

1931). The subject, a modest cottage with topiary garden, has yet to be identified. [Illus.18] Another unknown subject, probably somewhere in Buckinghamshire, is *The Tannery* (etching, 1931). As the sun sets behind a dilapidated cottage, a couple appear to be tending a grave that is marked by a simple wooden cross; the uneasy organic forms of the architecture and vegetation suggests Webb imbued this print with a meaning beyond the commonplace. [Illus.19]

Inscribed impressions of his prints suggest that Webb had connections in Lincolnshire. He started but abandoned his first plate of Lincoln in 1929. There followed a drypoint of *Exchequer Gate, Lincoln* in 1931 and *Lincoln, Sunrise*, his only landscape mezzotint, in 1932. [Illus.20] A detailed pencil drawing for the mezzotint, to scale, is inscribed with the words of John Milton: 'Thy liquid notes that close the eyes of day' from *Sonnet to the Nightingale*, and 'Thee, Chauntress, oft the woods among' from *Il Penseroso*. Webb frequently used a line of poetry to signal his intent. For *The Glory Hole, Lincoln* (etching, 1933), Webb sat on the banks of Brayford Pool on the River Witham in the city centre to draw the riverside properties, the towpath and the remarkable four-storey Tudor house known as High Bridge. [Illus.21] It is one of the few remaining medieval bridges with

19 *The Tannery* etching, 1931 (177 x 305 mm) Aberystwyth University

houses in Britain. 'Glory Hole' refers to the Norman stone arch beneath which the artist made up a distant view of the city.

Webb was clearly establishing himself as a professional artist. He staged an exhibition of paintings and prints at Bent Tree Studio, regularly showed his etchings at the Royal Academy, and was absorbed working towards solo exhibitions at Colnaghi's in 1933 and Ryman's Galleries, Oxford in 1934. To supplement his £4-a-week salary teaching printmaking at Chiswick, he undertook commissioned portraits (including a mezzotint of the actress Fabia Drake), produced an etched Christmas card and engraved bookplates for Alfred Reneson Coucher and others, planned a series of etchings depicting the rivers of England and, with an eye on the local market, views of Harrow intended to appeal to residents of the town, and staff and pupils of Harrow School. *The Parish Church of St. Mary, Harrow-on-the-Hill* (etching, 1933), *High Street, Harrow-on-the-Hill* (etching, 1933), *The Headmaster's House and Fourth Form Room, Harrow School* (etching, 1933) and *Harrow School, from Deynecourt* (etching, 1933) were drawn in the studio from Francis Frith postcards. It was

20 *Lincoln, Sunrise* mezzotint, 1932 (209 x 334 mm) Aberystwyth University

rare for Webb to resort to such methods—consequently the exaggerated perspective and shadows recorded by the camera lens have been unimaginatively transferred to the etching plate using a rule.

The Harrow prints were poorly received and the plates never editioned. Commissions were scarce and print sales diminished. The market for etchings, which peaked 1925-27, was already in decline when Webb came to the scene, arriving too late to prosper from the opportunities that once existed. The market went into sharp decline following the Wall Street Crash in October 1929. Dealers, publishers, then the artists themselves, soon experienced the fall-out in Britain. Few etchers who enjoyed success in the

21 *The Glory Hole, Lincoln* etching, 1933 (200 x 250 mm) Aberystwyth University

1920s worked throughout the 1930s. Many turned to commercial and graphic design, textiles and ceramics. Webb made no prints during the next three years and thereafter returned to the press only intermittently. *Streamend* (etching, 1936) marks a spectacular return to form. It depicts a quiet rural scene, a nostalgic interpretation of the ford at Water End, a small village on the north banks of the River Lea Walk between Wheathampstead and Welwyn Garden City in Hertfordshire. [Illus.22] A horse-drawn cart crosses the river. The brick chimneys and gables of the 17th-century Water End Farm are visible above the large barn; both the farm and church have been imported by Webb to improve the composition. There followed two somewhat dull attempts to etch potentially commercial views: *St George's Chapel, Windsor* (etching, 1936) and, from across the river, *Windsor Castle* (etching, 1936). That year, Webb set up home with art teacher Ella Hemans. They lived together until her death in 1956; she took on his name, but they were never married.

In 1938, as war in Europe seemed increasingly likely, Webb focussed once more on pastoral subjects and nocturnal views. *Pippin Lane* (etching, 1938) is a moonlit subject most likely of Webb's invention, though 'Pippin' may allude to Webb's visits to the apple orchards of Kent. [Illus.23] On the South Downs in West Sussex, he

22 *Streamend* etching, 1936 (175 x 307 mm) Aberystwyth University

conceived the subject for *The Sompting-Steyning Road* (etching, 1938). One impression, sent to Beryl Gascoigne, is inscribed with lines from 'Daisy', a poem by Francis Thompson (1859-1907) who had lived at nearby Storrington:

> The hills look over on the South
> And southward dreams the Sea; —

Webb was an admirer of Thompson. Thompson had lived the life of a vagrant, became addicted to opium and renounced worldly pleasures in pursuit of greater spirituality and inner calm. *Oakywood White Owl* (etching, 1938) depicts a rambling cluster of farm buildings nestled in the woods, and retains many of the motifs—country farmyard, church spire, twilight sky and stylised clumps of trees—commonly used by pastoral painters and etchers of the 1920s such as Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, Paul Drury and Edward Bouverie Hoyton. [Illus.24]

For *Kent Hop Oasts* (etching, 1944), Webb returned to the Garden of England where a century earlier Samuel Palmer had found

23 *Pippin Lane* etching, 1938 (172 x 240 mm) Aberystwyth University

inspiration for his 'Valley of Vision'. [Illus.25] This appears to be a composition of Webb's imagination, drawn from the many such oast houses that are peculiar to Sussex and Kent. In this etching, Webb's vision of a village in a secluded wooded valley comes closest in spirit to the work of Palmer. At the end of the War, Webb etched *Anne Hathaway's Cottage*, a thatched, half-timbered, and lattice-windowed 15th-century farmhouse in the hamlet of Shottery near Stratford Upon Avon. Webb hoped that this quintessentially English cottage, famous the world over as the childhood home of Shakespeare's bride, would prove to be a popular subject for an etching. [Illus.26]

Webb's last and concentrated printmaking endeavour was in 1946/1947. *Rumps Point, with Distant View of Tintagel and the North Cornish Coast* (etching, 1946) from Pentire Point, near the village of Polzeath was his last completed print. [Illus.27] Jutting north into the Atlantic lies the promontory with an Iron

24 *Oakywood White Owl* etching, 1938 (150 x 212 mm) Aberystwyth University

Age fort known as 'The Rumps' that is said to resemble a dragon rising from the water. He also began *Kynance Cove* (etching, 1947), *January Storm, Kynance, Cornwall* (etching, 1947), and *Storm Battering the Lizard, Cornwall* (drypoint, 1947), but these seem never to have been resolved or exhibited.

Webb was one of the few artists who continued to make etchings during the 1940s. In 1949, he produced five paintings to be used for Shell Mex posters, a commission that was initiated by Gascoigne. Subsequently, he helped Ella Webb manage the Wishbone Fish and Chips Café in Reading where, in spare moments, he doodled on menus and scraps of paper. He abandoned printmaking, ceased exhibiting and only rarely painted. And yet, in spite of the decline in his reputation, a renewed interest in Romantic pastoral landscapes and British printmaking of the inter-war years has meant Webb's etchings are now among the most sought-after of his generation,

25 *Kent Hop Oasts* etching, 1944 (176 x 253 mm) Aberystwyth University

and they may be found in major museum collections from London to Los Angeles. In 1956 he moved to London with money inherited from Ella. During the last six years of his life, he ran a boarding house in South Kensington and painted a small number of mystical canvases; few who encountered him would have realised that he was an artist.

26 *Anne Hathaway's Cottage* graphite, 1945 (174 x 297 mm) Aberystwyth University

27 *Rumps Point, with Distant View of Tintagel and the North Cornish Coast* etching, 1946 (251 x 416 mm) Aberystwyth University

28 *Shepherd's Haven* etching, 1929 (130 x 251 mm) Aberystwyth University

'the lights that flit across my brain'

Webb and the Master's House

IN HIS PAINTINGS AND PRINTS Webb assimilated beliefs founded on his interest in Eastern religions, astrology, mysticism and the occult. Kenneth Woodbridge and the etcher Edgar Holloway recall his interest in Theosophy with its origins in 'Ancient Wisdom' religions. Woodbridge, who knew Webb in the 1930s, described evenings in Webb's studio listening to him talk of 'faraway things, astrology, planetary chains' and 'ancient races of men who lived before the dawn of history, in lost Atlantis'. (Hartley: 6) A close friend and 'soul mate' of the artist, Beryl Gascoigne remembers him talk not of his work but of reincarnation, astrology and eternity. Such first-hand information is rare. Webb never wrote and seldom talked about his motivations; he felt the paintings and prints should speak for themselves and that the production of art should be triggered by the 'inner self'.

In its idealistic comment on man's place in nature, *Shepherd's Haven* (etching, 1929) would appear not only to resonate with prints by Webb's contemporaries Graham Sutherland, Paul Drury and Robin Tanner, but with pastoral poetry and the work of William Blake, Samuel Palmer and 'The Ancients'. [Illus.28] A young shepherd cradling a lamb approaches an ecclesiastical-looking barn, its doors open and interior lighted. In its symbolism—God as guardian to his people, rescuing strayed sheep—there are clear Christian allusions to the Good Shepherd and Lamb of God. Yet its earlier title, *The Infinite Compassion*, also alludes to Buddhist teachings of warmth, mercy and inner peace—attributes common to Theosophist beliefs. *Serene Compassion* is an oil painting of two enormous clasped hands emerging from the light to embrace a small figure with its arms raised. [Illus.29] Woodbridge recalled Webb describe these as 'God's very own hands'. (Hartley: 5) In the 1920s and 30s, widespread insecurity and circumspection resulted in a growing interest in mysticism and Eastern religions as an alternative to the established orders of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. Webb had been introduced to such concepts at Hospitalfield, since its founder Patrick Allan Fraser had criticised 'orthodox dogma and ritual' and called for a 'religious naturalism based on Christ's teachings'. (*Christianity and Churchism*, 1889) Theosophy was the motivation behind many of Webb's oil paintings as well as a remarkable series of four large etchings: *The Speaker of Strange Truths, Astrologer Instructing his Pupils, A Mystery Temple* and *The Doors of the Heart*.

A Master's House (etching, 1930) was the first of Webb's etchings to display overt references to Theosophy and the writings of Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891), founder of The Theosophical Society. [Illus.30] In this print, thousands of pilgrims climb the steep and crooked path to the Master's House on the highest summit of a range of mountain peaks. From the river's bank, a prophet points out the direction of a journey that

begins by crossing a bridge. The bridge, as symbol of the transition between one world and the next, is a recurrent motif in Webb's mystical prints.

In Theosophist teachings, the Path to moral and spiritual self-improvement is a long 'road, steep and thorny, beset with perils of every kind' leading to the 'heart of the Universe'. (Blavatsky *The Voice of Silence*, 1889) The Path is a metaphor for the journey one must take to ascend from the worldly to the universal. For those who venture in search of unity with the eternal, the journey is never straight but tortuous. Pilgrims must watch their footing as they steadily climb the mountain, adjusting to challenges that beleaguer them in their search for the 'Master' and 'Hidden Wisdom'. Many of Webb's paintings almost certainly paraphrase Blavatsky, who claimed 'the more thou dost advance, the more thy feet pitfalls will meet'. *Will - and Wisdom* and *Death and Released Soul* demonstrate that 'Hidden Wisdom' is attainable only through pain and suffering, compromise and sacrifice. [Illus.31&32] Webb believed that those who journeyed in search of 'Ancient Wisdom' would be 'met and helped along the way' by a Prophet on Earth 'sent to help mankind and guide them until greater mysteries would be revealed to them'. The Master, the Path and the beleaguered pilgrim recur often in Webb's canvases, as demonstrated by *'I Shot Precipitated ...'*, *I saw a Light ...* and *The Prophet* [Illus.33,34&35]

For Theosophists, Christ's Sermon on the Mount represented his chief accomplishment

29 *Serene Compassion* oil, undated (765 x 635 mm) Private Collection
30 *A Master's House* etching, 1930 (175 x 348 mm) Aberystwyth University

31 *Will - and Wisdom* [?] oil, undated Private Collection
32 *Death and Released Soul* [?] oil, undated Private Collection
33 *'I Shot Precipitated ...'* oil, undated (763 x 630 mm) Private Collection
34 *I saw a Light ...* oil, undated (764 x 625 mm) Private Collection

35 *The Prophet* oil, undated (768 x 625 mm) Private Collection

as Master and Teacher. Webb deals with the theme in several prints, notable among them *The Sermon on the Mount – The Christ Starting to Speak* (lithograph, 1930). Crowds, arms raised in exultation, line a path that recedes sharply through a ravine toward a range of snow-clad mountains with five conical peaks. The tallest central summit, from which the Master speaks, radiates a bright light. At *The Master's House* (oil, 1930), high above the clouds and among soaring mountain peaks, a pilgrim approaching the end of his spiritual journey ascends the Path where he is welcomed by the Master's outstretched arms. [Illus.36] Webb believed that spiritual leaders—Master, Mahatma, or Lama—live in high places to look over and guard those on Earth. Those who eventually reach the summit become themselves a Master of Wisdom, a Saviour of Mankind, a Buddha, a Christ. Within the Master's House sits *An Astrologer Instructing his Pupils* (drypoint, 1932). [Page 2] On the wall of his study hangs a zodiac with symbols denoting the twelve stations and their celestial longitude. The Master is seated at his lectern, calculating the path of the planets and the sun in order to predict or explain events on Earth. In its composition, Webb's print draws heavily on *A Man Seated Reading at a Table in a Lofty Room* (1628-30) by a follower of Rembrandt (National Gallery, London). Webb was an amateur astrologer himself and would calculate the astrological charts of people he met. *Moon, Uranus, Mars, Saturn, Mercury* and *The Conjunction of Uranus and the Sun* are among his many near abstract canvases of the thirties relating to the planets, stars and origins of the cosmos.

Webb's paintings and etchings are rarely as identical in composition as in the case of *The Doors of the Heart* (drypoint, 1932; oil, undated [Page 5]). Analogous no doubt with the Gates of Heaven, two massive stone gates open partly to reveal *The Flame of Our Deeper Heart* (the title of another canvas by Webb) and worshippers line the narrow steps that lead to one of the Seven Portals to Wisdom. 'The path that leadeth on', wrote Blavatsky, 'is lighted by one fire—the light of daring, burning in the heart. The more one dares, the more he shall obtain'. (*The Voice of Silence*, 1889) Given Webb's admiration for William Blake, whom he regarded as a fellow mystic-visionary, obvious comparisons can be drawn between *The Tiger Within* (oil, c.1930) and *The Tiger* from Blake's *Songs of Experience* (1794). However, Webb alludes to Zen Buddhist strategies for 'Taming the Tiger Within', finding inner peace by dealing with the negative emotions of anger, jealousy and desire that cause suffering. At once beautiful and terrifying, the incarcerated tiger engulfed by the flames burning within the heart, breaks free of its shackles. [Illus.41] The etchings *Prison* and *Asylum* and several canvases also deal with individuals that are somehow enslaved or imprisoned. In *Asylum* (etching, 1930-31), pilgrims climb the winding path toward the light and eventual spiritual enlightenment.

[Illus.37] Some impressions are inscribed 'the lights that flit across my brain'. Intended as a pair, *Prison* (etching, 1930) depicts a massive imaginative structure atop buttressed fortified walls with tunnels leading into the rock beneath. [Illus.38] The artist inscribed some impressions 'Dedicated to all things living, caged.'

The Universal Egg and *The Iron Egg* show athletic males break open the shells within which they have been imprisoned. [Illus.39&40] The paintings are most likely grounded in the Daoist theory of the origins of the universe. In *The Book of Pillow Secrets*, astronomer of the Jin dynasty, Ge Hong, wrote that at the beginning of time, before the formation of the world and the division

36 *The Master's House* oil, 1930 (630 x 765 mm) Private Collection

of heaven and earth, the 'original chaos' was like an egg in which there was neither light nor sound. Inside the 'universal egg', a giant named Pangu had slept for 180,000 years. When he awoke and saw the emptiness of the universe, he broke the universal egg creating new dynamics. Light elements soared upward to form the sky or Heaven, and dense matter condensed into Earth. To stop Heaven from collapsing, Pangu held up Heaven while standing on Earth. There is no evidence to suggest Webb read *The Cellular Cosmogony* (Koresh, 1922), but according to its author the Universe is an egg or shell of seven metallic layers that enclose the solar sphere.

Webb's swansong was a large untitled canvas painted in 1958. He regarded it to be his greatest achievement. It shows a three-quarter length, life-size androgynous figure emerging from beneath a bright shining star, staring with an in tense gaze. Prominently superimposed are five 'chakra'—centres of spiritual power in the body—the mind, throat, the solar plexus, the sex organs, and the heart (largest, since most significant to Webb). In his Will he requested that the 'imaginative mystical painting' should be reproduced, using the income from the sale of posters to fund its wellbeing. He also stipulated that £6,000 be set aside to stage an international touring exhibition of his graphic work.

Although Webb was convinced that one day he would be as highly regarded as Rembrandt and hailed as the greatest of all British artists, his paintings never received the critical acclaim he felt they deserved. At an early age, he had found his niche etching imaginary medieval-inspired barns and cathedral-like structures. The best of these fine-wrought landscapes—*Rat Barn* and *Dream Barn*, *Asylum* and *Prison*—demonstrate sound draughtsmanship, technical virtuosity and a sure understanding of the medium. It is their intensity, mystery and longing for a spiritual refuge beyond this world that set Webb apart from his contemporaries, followers of Palmer and etchers of poetic Romantic landscapes with whom he is often associated. Despite these achievements, Webb was not content to be regarded solely as a printmaker.

Webb was torn between making a living by producing landscapes and expressing his inner self in mystical paintings heavy with symbolism and imbued with a spiritual fervour—a personalised blend of Christianity, Eastern religions, astrology and the occult. He believed that an artist should not 'go on creating old forms'. (Hartley: 6) As a painter he tried to create a new and personal visual language to express what was often intangible. With scant regard for an audience, he became so immersed in their meaning and significance that he became blind to their shortcomings; their message was evidently more important to him than their execution, which is crude in contrast to his etchings.

The majority of Webb's paintings and prints were completed by the mid 1930s.

Thereafter, he worked at irregular intervals and, as Gascoigne put it, never looked as if he had done a day's work. Having made such a promising start, it leads one to assume that he became disillusioned when his career did not take off. And yet, there were aspects of his solitary and somewhat isolated life about which even those closest to him knew nothing. 'You asked what he believed in?' Gascoigne once remarked. 'He believed in himself, first and foremost'. (Hammersley: 69) In his handwritten manuscript 'A Note to Artists' (February 1958), Webb argued that it is not possible to understand modern or abstract art without 'emptying the mind of traditional training and conceptions'. (Furst:7) To be receptive:

> One must be open minded and
> Open hearted
> One must abandon one's prejudices
> One must believe that all things
> Are possible—including the
> Possibility that one may be wrong.

The critics and audiences of the 20th century, for whose praise Webb could not wait, may very well have been wrong to dismiss the paintings that remain as a testament to his personality and vision.

37 *Asylum* etching, 1930-31 (178 x 305 mm) Aberystwyth University

38 *Prison* etching, 1930 (178 x 303 mm) Aberystwyth University

39 *The Universal Egg* oil, undated (763 x 635 mm) Private Collection
40 *The Iron Egg* oil, undated (763 x 625 mm) Private Collection

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41 *The Tiger Within* oil, undated (1250 x 000 mm) Private Collection

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