

WINSOR BIRCH

— The Fine Art & Sculpture Company —

Sliding Doors: The Hidden Life of Ken White

For fifty years, millions of people saw Ken White's work without ever knowing his name. He painted illusions onto the sides of aircraft, his masterpieces adorned city walls and gave Richard Branson's Virgin fleet its most famous figure, the 'Scarlett Lady'. Born into a Swindon railway family and trained as a boy in the signwriting sheds of the Great Western Works, White spent his public career as a master of trompe l'oeil, tricking the eye on gable ends and fuselages around the world. But alongside that very public work, he kept a private one: unsigned, unseen paintings of the riveters, streets, and chapels of the working town he never left, painted with none of the illusion that made him famous.

This talk brings the two halves of White's career together for the first time, tracing how a Swindon-born apprentice became one of the last practitioners of a nearly vanished craft and asking what it means for an artist's most public work to also be his most anonymous.

This talk runs alongside *Ken White: A Retrospective* showing at The Little Gallery in Marlborough.

Ken White Biography

Ken White (1943-2025) grew up in Swindon. At fifteen he left school for an apprenticeship at the GWR railway works, however, fed up with burns from riveting, he transferred to signwriting in the Carriage and Wagon Department instead.

Determined to paint professionally, he decided to study at Swindon Art College. In London, Ken built a career in commercial illustration, designing album covers for Ray "Gilbert" O'Sullivan, whom he had met at art college, and contributing to the 1970 Beatles *Illustrated Song Book*.

A young Richard Branson, seeking a Dudley Moore drawing, became Ken's greatest patron. When Branson opened Town House Studios, Ken painted its mural, beginning a 25-year relationship decorating Virgin offices, hotels, and record stores worldwide, most famously the Scarlet Lady figure on Virgin's jets.

Through the 1980s Ken became London's most visible muralist, working on the Park Lane Intercontinental, Madame Tussauds, Heathrow, and his celebrated faux-Georgian townhouse mural overlooking Covent Garden's Jubilee Gardens.

Alongside this, Ken developed figurative oils and prints drawn from recollections of his Swindon childhood, capturing industrial hardship with gentle humour but no sentimentality, a record of working-class life, seen through eyes his later success gave him distance to reflect on.

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Grant Ford's Biography

Grant Ford is an Independent Fine Art Advisor, Private Curator and Representative and he looks after a select group of prestigious private family art and antique collections. His company Grant Ford Limited is based at Angel House, 7 High Street Marlborough, Wiltshire. Grant is also a senior paintings specialist for BBC's Antique Roadshow and is particularly well known in the field of Victorian, Pre-Raphaelitism, Irish, Scottish, Sporting, Marine and European Art. He was responsible for Sotheby's Victorian Art Department (2001-2016), as well as being a Senior Director and Head of British & Irish Art Post 1850. Grant spent thirty years at Sotheby's (1986-2016) and during this time his department dominated the market. As both an experienced specialist and auctioneer, he was responsible for a number of significant world record auctions and artist results. Grant is also a regular guest lecturer in the United Kingdom, Ireland, USA, Canada and elsewhere and has written extensively for multiple publications.