



# Roland Collins: artist, Fitzrovian campaigner

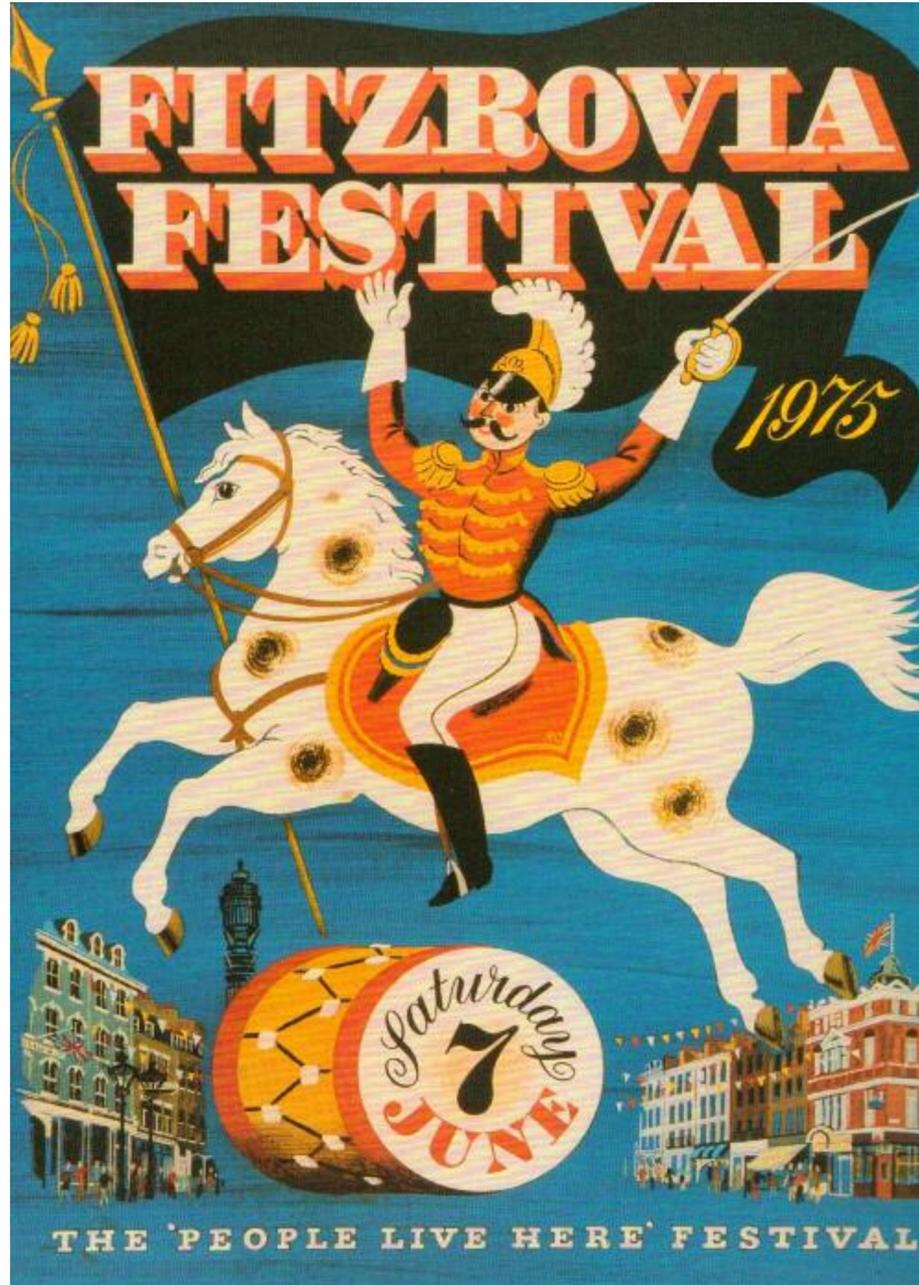
By Janet Gauld

Roland Collins, artist and long-time Fitzrovia resident, has died at the age of 97. A fine painter of places in the realistic tradition of the English Romantic watercolourists, he was prolific but did not become well-known until the last two decades of his life, when he held several exhibitions which led to popular and commercial success and a substantial publication which introduced his work to a wider audience. Critics said that his work displayed a “quietness” and praised his “fresh bright landscapes in gouache and the purity of his line drawing”

Born in Kensal Rise, Roland attended Kilburn grammar school and after showing early artistic aptitude, he was encouraged by the art teacher to go to St Martin’s School of Art (now Central Saint Martins) with the help of a London county council grant. After college he worked as a studio assistant in an advertising agency, preparing layouts and designs. He was developing his skills as an artist, while continuing with his painting. In 1937 he first exhibited a pen-and-ink drawing at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. When the second world war broke out Roland registered as a conscientious objector. During the war he got to know Fitzrovia and in 1940 took a studio at 29 Percy Street, which he kept until 1983. Many artists worked in this building which became a centre of artistic activity. Meanwhile he and his wife Connie, a poodle breeder, moved in to Colville Place in 1967. In 1990 they moved to Padstow in Cornwall, returning to London five years later. Roland, a Londoner through and through, regarded living in Cornwall as ‘exile’.

Artistically versatile, he relished turning his hand to other projects, working as a designer, photographer, painting a mural for a local Greek restaurant and even a travel writer. His chosen medium was gouache, a form of water-colour. He painted landscapes and seashore scenes, and above all the buildings and street scenes of his favourite place, London, and also Dieppe and Whitstable. In 1945 he designed the sleeve for the first British LP issued by Decca: Stravinsky’s *Pétrouchka*. In 1951 he wrote the text for *The Flying Poodle*, a children’s book.

In 1966 Roland had held his first one-man show in the Fitzroy Tavern. Over the years this was followed by shows at the Curwen Gallery and several at the Parkin Gallery in Belgravia. He also exhibited at the Royal Academy. His final exhibition, which sold out, was at Mascalls Gallery, Paddock Wood. To his great distress Roland witnessed many of the sights he had most relished painting being swallowed up in post war redevelopments. The unintended consequence was that his earliest work became an



Roland’s poster design for the 1975 Fitzrovia festival courtesy of Michael Parkin Fine Art

archive of a vanished Britain. He had an eye for overlooked detail, his work was filled with pub signs, rusting anchors, horsecarts or even disused whelk boilers. He leaves a large body of work whose quality has finally been recognised.

Roland was also known to Fitzrovians for his work for the Charlotte Street Association, founded in 1970 to protect the area against the increasing threat of development, especially in Charlotte Street, and to preserve its mixed-use, small-scale character. He was a founder member of the Association and was its first Secretary, later becoming Chair, alternating the two positions with Max Neufeld. For

the next 20 years he worked tirelessly and effectively in battles against developers and planners. The first big battle, against the redevelopment of the Gort Estate, was lost but this was followed by many victories.

Many of Roland’s friends attended his funeral at Golders Green Crematorium on 27th October, followed by a gathering at the Art Workers’ Guild in Queens Square. He was a modest man but very talented, and his long life was well lived. His life and work is celebrated in ‘Roland Collins: found landscapes’, by Andrew Lambirth, who also wrote an obituary in *The Guardian*.

Roland is survived by Connie, whom he married in



Motcomb Street London SW1 1953



St Remy Dieppe 1995

1987. She looked after him devotedly in his later years and was able to take him in their car to many of the places he wished to visit. Although living in South London, they kept in touch with Fitzrovia and made frequent visits. Roland will be much missed.

Max Neufeld adds:- Roland had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the area, he was active and committed for many years in the CSA. As part of the campaign to secure Crabtree Fields as a park for Fitzrovia he designed and printed on his litho press the “Go green for Fitzrovia” stickers which were displayed in windows and shops. Every Christmas he produced his own screen-printed Christmas cards.

(some of which are shown on the edges of these pages)

“In part he had benefited from the re-emergence of landscape as an acceptable subject for art which has refocused attention on those who have continued to make paintings about buildings and places, irrespective of fashion.”

“Collins had a real feeling for vernacular architecture, particularly in the city and by the seaside, for canals and the Thames, for fishing boats and sea defences. He loved to paint the unusual or overlooked: costermongers’ barrows, a disused whelk boiler, barrels, fish carts, marine debris, pub signs, street and boat signage. Much of what he depicted has since vanished, so his work is historical record as well as aesthetic statement. His evident delight in wooden fences, gates and odd-shaped buildings was set against the drama of his skies: often full of driving cloud poignantly patterned.”  
Andrew Lambirth *The Guardian*



Roland's design for Decca records LP recording of Petruska

