

# FAMILY VALUES

Artist Ted Coney's life and work are one and the same, as Alice Ryan discovers when she visits his Ely home: doubling as an art gallery, it displays a lifetime of powerful family-inspired paintings.

Pictures by Richard Marsham



**T**ed Coney is a natural raconteur. Spend an hour in his company and you'll be moved to laughter and tears by his stories – of eccentric ancestors, rambunctious children, family fall-outs, untimely deaths. To borrow from Anthony Burgess, all human life is here.

Each of Ted's tales is embodied by a painting, hung on the walls of his Ely home. Just up from the riverside, tucked behind Waterside Antiques, it's a 300-year-old, Grade II listed property with plentiful period charm; a fitting gallery for Ted's artwork which, painted over some five decades, charts his family history from distant past to present day.

## art house

"I did a lecture a few weeks ago and a chap came up to me at the end, saying 'You do realise you weren't just talking about your family, you were talking about mine,'" recounts Ted. "That's the nicest thing anybody could say about my work – that they identify with it. There's a universality to it, I think."

Ted and wife Hazel moved to Ely – from Cambridge, where he was head of art at Hills Road Sixth Form for some 34 years – when he retired. (Or, rather, went part-time: Ted still teaches art at St Andrew's College in the city; next September, he'll have been teaching for a full 50 years.)

While making it very much a home, Ted's vision was to turn the house into not so much a gallery as a work of art in its own right. The paintings are displayed alongside the family photographs and ephemera that inspired them; there's an element of installation involved. One upstairs room, an ensuivie bedroom, is packed with toys and puppets, including a handsome Pinham called Mr Turnip, who, with his orange face and green hair, makes an appearance in many a painting.

"Very occasionally, Hazel does say to me 'This isn't just an art gallery, you know – it is a home as well,'" laughs Ted. "I have this habit, like a lot of artists, of spreading out to fill any available space. In fact I've now got more paintings than walls, so what I'd really like to do is extend..."

Open to the public by appointment, the 'art house' concept was, explains Ted, inspired in part by Cambridge Open Studios. He's been involved in the summer exhibition series, which sees artists open their doors to the public, since it began.

Another major influence was Kettle's Yard, the famous house-come-gallery in Cambridge, brainchild of one-time Tate curator Jim Ede. "When we first moved to Cambridge, 44 years ago now, I remember going to visit and Jim Ede himself opening the door. It brought home to me that, displayed in a domestic setting, art is seen in a different – more intimate – light."

Walk into Ted's house, through an entrance hall almost wallpapered with family photographs, and you're greeted by a huge canvas, propped on an easel in the kitchen. A triptych of sorts, it shows a line-up of five ladies first in their youth, then middle-age, and finally old-age; the ladies are, explains Ted, his grandmother and her sisters, painted in 1969. It was the first of his family works, triggering what has become a lifelong project.



» Growing up in Hull, the youngest of three brothers, Ted remembers being "part of a very close-knit family: my grandparents lived just round the corner and I had lots of aunts and uncles in the area – that's how it was in those days". It was his grandmother's death that inspired Ted to put brush to canvas, a desire to immortalise his loved ones in paint, to keep them close.

He's painted dozens of what he describes as 'family portraits', though none of them are really portraits in the traditional sense: over the intervening years, the painting he's working on now is connected to his mother, telling the pictorial tale of two of her male cousins, whom she adored. "Their mother thought they were wonderful, but their father didn't agree."

"Cads is probably the best way to describe them: they had pots of money and drove fast cars. Their father considered them ne'er-do-wells, and packed them off to Canada where both met sad ends – in fact one died, of consumption, soon after."

"There's this tension between the two perspectives, the two sides of these lads – the light and the dark."

Drawing on work by Honoré Daumier, the 19th century French painter who famously set many of his subjects against the light, so they were almost silhouetted, the in-progress piece shows the brothers in two contrasting guises: as the jovial Laurel and Hardy, and as malevolent Javanese shadow puppets.

"I actually saw Laurel and Hardy when I was about 10," recalls Ted. "We saw them in the theatre and they were these great colourful characters. And then, quite by chance, we saw them on the street next day: two old men getting into a taxi..."

There's often a playful element to Ted's paintings. Take *Happy Families*, a personalised take on the age-old card game. Each of the characters is holding something pertinent: Ted's dad, an aeronautical engineer, is holding a T-square, while his mum is holding a teapot; the alliterative connection is a fun touch.

"At the time, one of my brothers had just been divorced and the other widowed, so more games are shown as played. Hazel and I had two children at the time, but you'll see a little space between their cards... That represents our stillborn daughter, Fay."

Ted and Hazel, now grandparents, have three children: Yve, Leo and Max, but he says coming to terms with the loss of Fay has been an ongoing process. "Thirty-seven years ago things were handled very differently: there was no funeral, no grave." A painting dedicated to her, which hangs in the dining hall, was cathartic to work on, adds Ted. "It has come to be a bit like a headstone."

One of the most eye-catching pieces in the sitting room, hung to the right of the fireplace, is *Limers*, a triangular wooden frame set with

37 of the most exquisite miniatures, each hidden behind a pair of dirty hinged doors. Painted on ivorine, a synthetic ivory equivalent, they represent (the 37 days of the Coney family Christmas – Advent, plus Christmas Day, plus the 12 Days). Showing everything from unopened bills to a toy train set, they're a delight to reveal.

Though artistic at school, Ted didn't begin to realise his talents until late in his teens. Leaving school before sitting his O-levels (he took them later on, at night school), he worked in a gentlemen's outfitters from 15. "My manager wore spats – that's how long ago it was!"

An interest in window dressing led him to apply for a place at art school, thinking exhibition curation might be his thing. But within weeks of starting the course, he found that fine art was his niche. A degree in Bath followed, then his first teaching job at a slightly stuffy grammar.

"The teachers were supposed to sit at a desk on a dais, but I wasn't having any of that. I quite enjoyed being the mad art teacher," Ted says, with a twinkle. "I remember I got the kids to paint all the art room furniture... I suppose I was a rebel, in my own quiet way."

## a story to tell

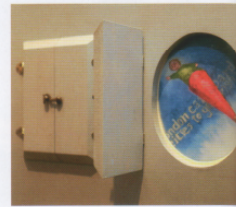
Ted speaks with great affection about his dad, an eminently practical man who, among other things, drew up the plan for the fiddly *Limers* frame. "He was also drafted in to help with our puppet shows: for about 15 years, when the children were young, we staged a show every Christmas. They were always very complicated, requiring all kinds of special effects: one year Dad devised a water feature; on another occasion we borrowed the school smoke machine..."

Housed in a crucifix-shaped frame, Ted's painted memorial to his dad shows father and sons as puppets in the self-same theatre. Called *Encore*, there is the promise, explains Ted, of a repeat performance: "My father's waving us goodbye, but we know we'll be seeing each other again."

Though he sells prints and postcards, and gives almost-weekly tours, Ted doesn't plan to sell any of his originals; they come as a set, and, for the foreseeable future, at least, he intends them to stay that way.

"For me, it's important that I can constantly look at them. It sounds a bit eccentric, I know, but they're almost like my children: when you've spent so long on something, you can't just cut it off – it becomes part of you."

Made by his own hand, drawn from his own family history, and part of the fabric of his own home, the paintings are undoubtedly part of Ted; the two are part and parcel.



» To book a tour – priced £3 for adults and £2 for over-8s (it's not suitable for younger children) – visit [tedconeyfamilyportraits.co.uk](http://tedconeyfamilyportraits.co.uk), where you can also take a virtual tour.