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Fleur Cowles has won distinction as writer and painter. A selection of her pictures is being used to illustrate an animal "fairy story", for which a young American, Robert Vavra, has written the text. Extracts begin on this page and H. E. BATES discusses her unique career

## TIGER FLOWER

why I don't paint—a question that vexes me considerably and to which I invariably reply: "There are enough bad painters in the world already, without my adding to them. Besides, writing is also a graphic art. I paint in words."

Some thought of this kind might well have occurred to Fleur Cowles, I fancy, during a weekend at her old and lovely house in the heart of Sussex in 1959. Although she was a writer, she had already shown a desire to paint, a desire that had been noted by the late Arthur Jeffress, who had decided to entrust her enthusiasm to a young and very talented Venetian' painter, Dominic Gnoli. The young Venetian had accordingly taken his paints to Sussex and Fleur Cowles was consequently imbued with the desire to paint with him. "Only on condition that you don't paint what I do," Gnoli said. "I hate to be copied."

Thus warned, Fleur Cowles meticulously arranged for herself a still life, "a rose, some shells, some grasses". Gnoli was outraged. "I don't allow you to paint those awful, banal obvious

things," he said. In answer to which she asked: "What shall I do instead?"

"Create something!" he said.

Thus began her career as a painter—a career which has led to exhibitions of her work in leading galleries in London, New York, Rome and Paris. A selection of her paintings, owned by collectors all over the world, has just been woven into an ingenious animal "fairy story" for which a young American writer, Robert Vavra, has written the text.

But why, one asks, should Fleur Cowles paint at all? The question fascinates. Primarily she was a writer. She had been Associate Editor of Look Magazine. In 1950 she created and edited Flair, which went to only 13 editions but is still a source of inspiration to magazines today. She had been successful in ambassadorial fields for America; both Eisenhower and Truman had appointed her to special posts in Europe; she was a successful hostess; she has written a book on Dali. Why paint?

I have sometimes toyed with the idea that Edward Lear wrote nonsense verse to escape from the strait-jacket of

giving Queen Victoria painting lessons. Perhaps Fleur Cowles started painting as an escape from what she callsspeaking of New York-"the stare and glare, the people totting up your score, which is the worst side of any toothand-claw town." Note the "tooth and claw"; it is perhaps more than a little significant. Like Dali, it would seem, she wanted "to go back"; back to the indelible recollections, the half dream world of childhood; to throw off the bitter jungle of New York's "stare and glare" and the even more frustrating, brittle jungle of political corridors and create, in their place, a jungle of her own: a half crazy, surrealist, worldwithout-rules jungle in which flowers, leaves, rocks, butterflies, shells are the more compulsive elements, together with her now quite celebrated "crowned tiger".

A very mild, likeable, charming tiger, in point of fact, teeth and claws drawn, eyes warmly contemplative, the entire head flower-clothed, unvindictive, but nevertheless strong, the whole adding up to richness obtained, surprisingly enough, not by "slapping it on thick," as Sickert is supposed to have advised Churchill, but with a meticulous delicate fluency.

When she arrived in England in 1955 she married an Englishman and then began to collect pictures in a new, intelligent and highly rewarding fashion. Like me, she believes that there are two main obnoxious ways of collecting pictures and both are anathema to her: one, the snob way, to collect names or what she calls "Label paintings"; two, the greed-grab way, to acquire paintings as if they were property, land, tobacco shares or antique silver, not for their intrinsic worth, but in the hope that they will increase, and if possible rapidly, in value.

She began to collect, instead, on an intensely personal basis: she devised for herself a rule that she would collect no painter unless she got to know him first. With this double intention she acquired Braque, Sutherland, Bombois, Lorjou, Cocteau, Vertes, Dufau, Donati and Salvador Dali, among many others. The walls of her suite in Albany, like those of her oak-beamed house in Sussex, need no wallpaper; the rewards of devoted friendships with great talents, backed by an eye undimmed by trends of fashion, leave not an inch to spare.

Surrounded by such illustrious and powerful influences you would guess her own work to be blatantly derivative. This she refutes. / continued on page 30

One day a bird flew to the grass where everything that should be small is big. And everything that should be big is small.

The bird saw a tiny tiger in the grass

and twittered,
"What unhappiness.
Tigers are supposed to be
big,
mean
kings
of the towering
tangled
green jungle.

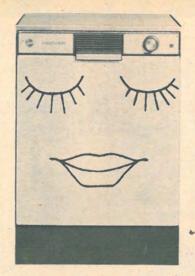
And here you are a silly, king of nothing, tiny tiger 'with a flower in your mouth.'

"SILENCE!!!"
growled the tiny tiger.
"The grass!
The grass!
The tall,
tall grass.
Tiger Flower,
King of the Grass,
that's me.

Once I was king
of the scarey, towering,
tangled
green jungle
where tigers are big
and the way they should be.
What work it was
being big
and mean
and crafty.
You're lucky I'm not there
or grrrrrrrrrrrrrr,
I'd be hunting you
instead of flowers.



SHE slips away to the heart of Sussex to paint almost in secret, not knowing what she is going to paint until brush and canvas meet. Her painting is a relaxation from the world of great events, something therapeutic to the mind



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## TIGER FLOWER

continued from page 24. / Your first thoughts on seeing pictures of hers are: Japanese, perhaps Persian (she owns a few examples of Fourth and Fifth century Persian calligraphy), Braque, Sutherland, Dali, Picasso, Chagall. This, too, she refutes.

Her derivations, in fact, simply go back to, and are for ever influenced by, that one word of Dominic Gnoli – "create!" It is imagination, she rightly realizes, not observation, that is the mainspring of art.

Art is also distortion, and she distorts like mad. In the jammy jargon so fondly employed by many art critics her paintings at one of her American one-man shows, of which she has already had 11, were described as "Surreal notions saved from cuteness by sharp gothic gaiety." To my dying day I shall ponder on what that means and so, I am sure,

will she. For myself I see her work as a kind of floating poetry. It has the wings of innocence. It is as if, in creating a picture, she opens the door of her imagination as if it were some bird-endowed, flower-blessed, tiger-ridden Noah's Ark and lets forth a magic flying population of creatures to enrich forests, make deserts flower and gather together in half-crazy dream sequences in which strange birds, giant blossoms, binocular-eyed butterflies and barren thorns are further ingredients in the already kaleidoscopic pattern. Naive it may sometimes look; but just as art is not truth so it is not worked out by means of slide-rules.

Naive – it is not at all surprising, therefore, that a great part of her excursions about the world has been taken up by a search for those painters known as *Les Naifs*. Of these she has collected relatively few of the older and more established ones. In America, Yugoslavia, Yorkshire, South America, France, Brazil, and elsewhere, she has, however, discovered a host of unknowns whose innocence and fantasy, so much in key with her own, "prove the joyous gaiety of their work".

Painters are rarely articulate (they don't need to be-they put "on canvas what they feel unequal to putting into words"), but if the miner and farmer she discovered in France, the disillusioned illiterate she found in Rio, the joinerby-trade she unearthed in Yugoslavia, could express what they felt, they would probably say that their "work is without complication, unhampered by tradition, untroubled by 'school', spontaneous and from the heart". Their work, like hers, springs from a private vision. It is, as I say, a sort of floating poetry: done, in her own words, "with a childlike hand".

Tiger Flower, by Robert Vavra and Fleur Cowles, is published by Collins on October 14, price 25s.