

Hertfordshire County Schools Art Collection

During the late 1940s, when a pioneering programme of constructing new schools and colleges in the region was underway, Hertfordshire County Council devoted part of their budget to sourcing artworks from leading British artists of the day. Simultaneously, the then Chief Education Officer Sir John Newsome founded the HCC Schools Loan Collection. His intention was for all pupils in Hertfordshire schools to have the opportunity to see, use and be inspired by original works of art. As one of the most imaginative Local Education Authorities to respond to the 1944 Education Act, Hertfordshire County Council's approach to collecting and art education during this period of post war reconstruction was spurred by a belief in the universal human capacity for creative expression.

Narrative/summary

Hertfordshire's Schools Loan Collection comprises approximately 1500 works including paintings, prints, textiles, sculptures, ceramics and glass. Of this, a core group of works purchased from some of the most important artists of the last century and therefore of national interest charts a particular story of British art of the early and mid twentieth century, revealing the intense interest in British landscape and tradition as a source of national identity.

Prominent among these include Ronald Ossary Dunlop (1894-1973) and Matthew Smith (1879-1959) whose landscapes, still lives and portraits trace the influence of modern French painting on British artists of the early twentieth century with links to Bloomsbury and Post-Impressionism. Represented by two paintings, the interiors and street scenes of Sylvia Gosse (1881-1968) correspond to an overlooked aspect of the painting of modern life typified by Walter Sickert and the Camden Town group formed during the first decade of the twentieth century leading up to the First World War.

The impact of the short-lived but radical Vorticist movement that emerged in London immediately before the First World War is reflected in the modernist compositions of Edward Wadsworth (1889-1949) represented here by an untitled abstract painting. Alternatively, two landscape paintings by John Nash (1893-1977) and Enslin Du Plessis (1894-1978) capture the feeling and nostalgia for the pastoral landscape of the inter-war period amidst Britain's changing national identity.

Modernism of the 1930s and early 1940s is represented with an abstracted landscape by the celebrated artist John Tunnard (1900-71), one of the most important British artists influenced by Surrealism whose work depicting the Cornish landscape fuses architectural and biomorphic forms. Another artist with a St. Ives connection - Adrian Heath (1920-92) - is represented with an early still life that charts the development of his analytic, abstract approach to form. Of the same generation, the sculptor and printmaker Gertrude Hermes (1901-83) is represented with a number of woodcuts that reveal the artist's predilection for depicting watery subject matter in her graphic work. Two important British sculptors Maurice Lambert (1901-64) and Frank Dobson (1888-1963) are represented by ceramics and a preparatory drawing that reveal their experimental approaches to the figure and their commitment to direct carving.

The work of a number of important Emigre artists who settled in Britain during WW2 and who made a significant contribution to British art at this time are also represented. Fred Uhlman (b. Stuttgart 1901-85) is represented by two paintings characteristic of his unique approach to landscape painting, particularly in South Wales. Focusing on the same area, the collection reveals how working people became the principle subject for Josef Herman (b. Warsaw, 1911-2000), here represented with a characteristic drawing of coal miners which became a particular interest during

the time he lived in Ystradgynlais, a mining community in South Wales, beginning in 1944. An expressionist seascape by Henryk Gotlib (b. Krakow 1890 – 1966) introduces the work of this leading member of the Polish avant-garde 'Formist' movement in the interwar Poland before settling in Britain in 1938.

A significant body of work represents artists commissioned or acquired by the War Artists' Advisory Committee founded by Sir Kenneth Clark in 1939 to compile a comprehensive artistic and documentary of the history of Britain throughout the Second World War. As well as paintings by Charles Mozley (1914-91), Humphrey Spender (1910-2005) and the official war artist Edwin La Dell (1914-70), a drawing by Erlund (Eleanor) Hudson (1912-2011) represents one of her best-known depictions of women at work during the period of conflict. Joining this rare commission of a female artist by the WAAC, Evelyn Gibbs (1905-1991) is also represented, with a later painting. Wartime drawings by Henry Moore (1898-1986) and Barbara Hepworth (1903-75) of coal miners and hospitals give an interesting insight into these artist's important activities during this period.

The different strands of art of the post war period typified by the poles of abstraction, Neo-Romanticism, realism and Pop are also represented. A major group of works by artists with an observational style of painting who asserted the importance of painting traditional subjects in a realist manner to create a widely understandable and socially relevant art, chime with the spirit of the Hertfordshire collection as it was formed in the late 1940s and 50s. A self portrait by Roger Monyhan (1910-90), an artist closely associated with the Euston Road School, kickstarts a wider roster including the founder of the Artists' International Association James Boswell (1906-71), Thomas Carr (1909-99), the portraitist Anthony Devas (1911-58), David Tindle (b.1932), the industrial landscapist John Kenneth Long (1924-2006), William Brooker (1918-83) and Malvina Cheek (1915-2016) - the last surviving official woman artist of the war. The celebrated artist Carel Weight (1908-97) who earned an independent and highly individual reputation with his fantastical scenes peopled with invented figures is represented with two paintings *Dark Day by the Canal* and *A Woman and Barn* (dates unknown).

Neo-Romantic painting, a movement that began during WW2 but developed into the post war period is represented by a thriving younger generation of British artists who looked back to 19th century traditions of landscape painting as well as French cubism including the distinguished writer, broadcaster and stage designer Michael Ayrton (1921-75) whose art criticism promoted British Neo-Romanticism as a national style as well as John Minton (1917-57), Robert McBryde (1913-66) and Keith Vaughan (1912-77) whose expressionist painting explored the dark side of human nature as well as escape from austerity and rationing.

Another group of works represent The Great Bardfield Artists, a community of artists and designers who lived in Great Bardfield, a village in north west Essex, England, during the middle years of the 20th century. The celebrated British illustrator Edward Bawden (1903-89) is represented by four of his distinctive and popular linocuts and George Chapman (1908-93) by a drawing and print. Paintings by Michael Rothenstein (1908-93) and Kenneth Rowntree (1915-97) further reveal how the village and neighbouring landscape nurtured a distinctive style from the 1930s to the 1970s and beyond.

Varied languages of abstraction in the post war period are represented by a print by Alan Davie (1920-2014) as well as oils by Norman Adams (1927-2005) and John Copnall (1928-2007). The concentric ring painting of Peter Sedgley (b.1930) take the collection in the direction of Op Art of the swinging sixties and an editioned silkscreen by the celebrated artist Peter Blake (b.1932) (also in the

collection of Tate and the Victoria and Albert Museum) nod to the figuration and fantasy of the British Pop movement.

This strong emphasis on work from the early and mid-twentieth century complements Hertford Arts Hub's mission to promote modern and contemporary British art through a temporary exhibition programme and permanent collection of the work of Alan Davie (1920-2014), one of Britain's most distinguished abstract painters and important contemporary for many of the artists represented here. The collection reflects HCC's belief in the formative power of art and education and its interest in the modern world where new art forms have the power to transform schools and teaching. It is unsurprising that many of the artists above attended leading British art schools and enjoyed formative careers as teachers and educationists as well as artists, a number having formed connections with the region. These artists are represented in national and regional collections in the UK including Tate; Victoria & Albert Museum; Arts Council Collection; Government Art Collection; National Portrait Gallery; Imperial War Museums; London Transport Museum, London; National Gallery Wales; National Gallery Scotland; Pallant House Gallery, Chichester; Kettle's Yard, Cambridge; Leeds City Art Gallery, Leeds; Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield; Hepworth Museum, Wakefield; Birmingham Museums; Towner, Eastbourne; Southampton City Art Gallery; Abbott Hall Gallery, Kendal.

The collection needs considerable work. Many works are undated and research needs to be carried out to place works within each artist's wider oeuvre, their subject matter and condition and provenance. That said, if retained it undoubtedly offers potential for a programme of exciting displays and exhibitions that place Hertfordshire in the story of British art.

Helen Little, July 2017

