

A Short History of the Cornwall Council Schools Works of Art Collection

Beginnings

On 6th May, 1961 Cornwall County Council received an anonymous donation of £100, made up of twenty £5 notes, with a short note saying simply 'To help Primary School Funds'. Attempts were made to trace the source of the donation through Plympton post office, from which it was sent, however these efforts failed.

Various meetings of the Education Sub-Committee were held to try and decide what best to do with the money, it was felt that it should be used for something specific rather than just subsumed into general funds, and finally art was agreed upon.

In September 1961 the Council's Secretary for Education, Jim Harries, wrote to the artists John Piper, Peter Lanyon and Barbara Hepworth and Jacob Epstein's recent widow, Lady Epstein explaining what had happened and asking if they might be able to sell something at a reasonable price, or had any other suggestions. They all replied; Piper thought that due to costs of original works buying a group of prints would be more effective, Lanyon was supportive but wanted £100 to supply two small paintings, Hepworth was also very enthusiastic and suggested a scheme of approaching a range of artists to asking them to each supply a piece at a minimal cost and finally Lady Epstein offered to sell a small bronze sculpture by her late husband for a reduced cost of £130.

Finally, it was agreed that the opportunity to acquire an Epstein sculpture was too good an offer to refuse and the expenditure of the additional £30 to secure the piece was agreed in January 1962. On arrival in Cornwall the sculpture, 'Frisky', a 'portrait' of Epstein's beloved sheepdog, was almost immediately sent out 'on tour' to schools in the county and was very well received.

Development

Meanwhile, Hepworth's suggestion to build a Collection for use in schools based on works donated, or bought for a minimal 'fee', gained significant support in the Council, and an initial annual acquisitions budget of £200 was agreed. Hepworth, along with Michael Finn, the principal of Falmouth School of Art, was approached to act as the main advisor. Along with Harries, they agreed the wording of an initial letter to a select group of artists, asking if they would serve as 'sponsors' of the Collection and would be willing to sell a work for a fee of £20. (Among Finn's first suggestions (letter 10/1/63) were his Falmouth colleagues Hewlett, Van Hear, Organ and Exworth.)

The main role of the sponsors would be to suggest other artists who they felt would be suitable to add to the Collection. Of those initially approached only Lanyon felt unable to participate, pointedly writing 'I

cannot unfortunately agree to Miss Hepworth's suggestion. While she may be able to provide work of her own at material cost I am not in a position to do so. I am educating six children!' Finn suggested in a letter of February 1963 that he would try and talk him round, however this evidently came to nothing.

Those who did agree to be involved were Terry Frost, Leonard Fuller, Alethea Gartsin, Patrick Heron, Bernard Leach, Alexander MacKenzie, Lionel Miskin, Denis Mitchell, Dod Procter and John Wells. When he was finally contacted Bryan Wynter was also added to the group of sponsors. Works by most of these artists were acquired in early 1963. Hepworth was particularly generous in also donating a very good Alfred Wallis from her own Collection.

Among pieces later acquired in 1963 as a result of the sponsors' first suggestions were Jeffrey Harris' 'Tangled Ochre', a Barns-Graham and a Bryan Pearce painting. A group of ceramics also entered the Collection, by William Marshall, Janet Leach (who wished to have time to make a 'certain type of pot that I know both Miss Hepworth and Mr Finn are fond of...') and Kenneth Quick, who had tragically died in Japan earlier in the year, and whose piece was presented by Janet and Bernard Leach in his memory.

Growth in the 1960s

In what would become the accepted system for the following few years, in January 1964 Harries wrote to all the sponsors asking if they had any new suggestions of artists whom they felt ought to be added to the Collection. Finn and Hepworth would then generally agree the year's 'short-list' along with Harries. That year Roy Conn was a particularly popular suggestion (mentioned by Mackenzie, Wells, Heron and Hepworth). Ben Nicholson was also approached and generously sent a work as a gift from his new home in Switzerland.

During the growth of the Collection many artists chose to make a point about the sum of money being offered in exchange for the pieces, in a letter (6/5/64) the sculptor Roger Leigh made a strong point about the undervaluing of artists in the county, and asked that in return for these discounted works that the County Council should consider building some cheap studios, which artists could then fit out to their own specifications.

In 1965 Patrick Hayman was a popular suggestion (Mitchell, Miskin and Heron) and he was successfully acquired, as were Broido, Le Grice, Hewlett, Milne, Pasmore, Weschke and Worsdell. Endeavours to acquire pieces by John Tunnard, John Hoskin and Trevor Bell were initiated; however they would unfortunately never come to fruition.

In April 1965 Stuart Armfield, who had been suggested by Leonard Fuller, was invited to submit work for the Collection, unusually neither Finn or Hepworth had heard of him so Harries had to provide them with some background information. When Armfield eventually sent in his submissions in 1966, Finn wrote to Harries explaining that he didn't like any of the

three he had seen, though he thought 'Winter Yachts' the best of them, which was the piece that was eventually acquired.

In 1966 Hepworth wrote to Harries, breaking down her suggested artists into categories of importance; 'Imperative' were John Hoskin, John Tunnard and Hubert Dalwood, 'Urgent' were Naum Gabo, Merlyn Evans and F.E. McWilliam and 'Additional' were Mary Jewells, Paul Feiler, Breon O'Casey, Adrian Ryan, John Milne, Paul Mount, Adrian Ryan and Brian Wall. She also suggested that it be a 'sculptor's year' and that sculptor's drawings also be added into the Collection.

Among the other sponsors Roger Hilton (Heron, Frost and Mackenzie) and Tony O'Malley (Heron, Wells and Wynter) were popular suggestions, though Mackenzie also added that he thought it might be time for a suspension of acquisitions for a few years while developments in the art scene were assessed. Of those approached only Gabo, by then living in the U.S. and Mary Jewells (on the issue of price) declined. Armfield, Evans, Hilton, McWilliam (though he pointed out that the cost of casting was at least £40), Milne (a bronze), Mount (a bronze), O'Malley and Wall were all acquired.

In 1967 Finn followed up Hepworth's earlier thoughts and suggested the addition of sculptor's drawings at a reduced price of possibly £15, and also an increase of the general price offered to £25.

Marie Yates, Breon O'Casey and Bryan Illsley were all popular suggestions, as was Robert Brennan, though unlike the others he was never acquired (or apparently even approached). Alethea Garstin thought that Peter Lanyon's widow should be approached for a work, but Finn felt it inappropriate given his refusal to be included while he was alive.

In July 1967 works by Breaker, Feiler, Yates, Bourne, Illsley, Lowndes, Exworth (drawing) and Mitchell (drawing) were acquired. Finn also visited London and saw work by Hubert Dalwood and Alan Davie at Gimpel Fils. Unusually the price limit was extended to £30 to purchase the Dalwood relief directly from an exhibition at the gallery. Finn also selected a Davie, despite being priced at 300 guineas, however through the gallery Davie fortunately finally agreed to generously donate the work to the Collection.

In 1968, perhaps in sympathy with the feelings of Mackenzie expressed a couple of years earlier, both Hepworth and Heron thought it was important to consider the historical perspective of the Collection and to acquire some earlier artists of significance. Hepworth suggested Adrian Stokes, Margaret Mellis, Borlase Smart and Gabo while Heron mentioned Stokes, Francis Bacon (for using 3 Porthmeor Studios to paint his important 1959 Marlborough show) Christopher Wood, Matthew Smith, Winifred Nicholson, Julian Trevelyan, Reg Butler and Robert Adams. Of the contemporary artists that year Margo Maeckelberghe and Michael Snow, both suggested in previous years, were the most popular names and they were successfully acquired along with Alan Wood. Mellis, Smart and Stokes were also added from the 'historical' suggestions.

The majority of the Collection was acquired through approaches made directly to artists, however, quite unusually in March 1968 the New Art Centre offered to sell a Jeffery Camp painting, of a specifically Cornish subject, to the Collection at £50, it remained unsold at the end of the exhibition and Finn was able to negotiate a reduction to £25 at Camp's say so.

1970s and 80s

Apart from a group of Jeffrey Harris works acquired from his studio sale before his emigration to Australia in 1969, the majority of the Collection had been acquired by 1968. During the 1970s the Collection moved about, spending sometime at Falmouth School of Art and between 1977-80 many works received some much needed conservation work or re-mounting and framing. Paintings were usually worked on at Sancreed Studios, while in 1980 technicians at Falmouth were used to re-furbish many of the sculptures in the Collection.

In 1979 Tom Cross, then the Principal of Falmouth School of Art, wrote an introduction to the Collection with some additional background information about the artists and their work. He also re-organised the Collection into meaningful small groupings which could be lent to schools as one, in an effort to encourage the use of the Collection and to make more sense of it. The same year a sculpture 'Cabinet for the Un-Immaculate Conception of Dr Caligari, or Jill and the Beanstalk or Where were you Jack?' by Laurie Burt entered the Collection, the sculpture was offered at £50 (valued at £300) to commemorate Burt's retirement from Falmouth School of Art, having lead the Sculpture Dept. there since 1974.

While c.1981-82 there were many reports of minor damage to works in the Collection, SW Arts wrote to the Sub-Committee suggesting that they '...may wish to reinstate purchasing for its Collection and co-ordinate this with the 'Artists in Schools' programme. A Sub-Committee memo from 1982 states that 'It was agreed, in principle, to go ahead with the proposed scheme for purchasing works from artists placed in schools under the 'Artists in Schools' scheme. Initially a group of loans was taken from the SW Arts Collection including Hilton, Mitchell, Wells, Frost, Whittington-Ince, Ray Atkins, John France and two 'Penwith Portfolios'.

In 1984 after much discussion, the Collection was handed over to the Penwith Galleries in St Ives for a trial year; they would carry on the school loan scheme and have to show the Collection in the gallery for 2 weeks per term, as well as develop information on the Collection and do any repairs that maybe required. Any related admissions and catalogue sales were to benefit the Collection, for this service there would be a charge of £1,000 to the Council. Penwith also raised money to employ for a year a 'Gallery Schools and Community Liaison Officer'. For whatever reason the trial was not deemed a success and at the end of the agreement the Collection was returned to Falmouth (in September and October 1984 approximately two-thirds of the Collection was exhibited at Falmouth Art Gallery).

Encouraged by SW Arts some new, significant acquisitions were made later in the decade; in 1986 Anthony Frost's 'Jazz' was bought from his solo exhibition at Newlyn Art Gallery. It was priced at £630; a letter from John Halkes (curator at Newlyn) to Roff Rayner (then head of Education) suggested that SWA would be willing to contribute £250 towards the purchase price if C.C.C. could find the rest. In 1987, Rose Hilton's 'The Cricket Match' was also purchased from an exhibition at Newlyn.

1990s and Beyond

The first of a number of new acquisitions to the Collection in the 1990s came with the purchase of the STAG (St Ives Tate Action Group) '10 Etchings' portfolio, which was created and published in 1991 to raise funds for the campaign to bring a new Tate Gallery to St Ives and included prints by John Emmanuel, Naomi Frears, Rose Hilton, Sheila Oliner and Bryan Pearce.

In 1993 preparations were made for an exhibition of a selection from the Collection, 'From Great Beginnings', which between January and April 1994 visited the Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro, the Penwith Gallery in St Ives and Launceston College. The booklet and posters accompanying the exhibition featured the iconic 'Parrot's Eye No.2' by Alan Davie. In order to develop and expand the Collection, to coincide with the exhibition a group of more contemporary works, in a wide-range of media, were taken on long-loan from the artists, with the hope that they would be acquired permanently at a later stage. These were; a photo-work by Andy Hughes, an acrylic painting by Louise McClary, an etched steel triptych by Roy Walker and an embroidered 'Koi Karp' by Vivien Prideaux (later purchased). A group of oils by Michael Strang and a sea bird sculpture by Max Barrett were also added by donation from the artists.

In 1995 Mount Edgcumbe House held a smaller exhibition of about 30 works from the Collection and in 1996 a similar number were shown at the Sterts Centre. Since then individual works have been occasionally lent to exhibitions in museums and galleries, the Alfred Wallis and Bryan Pearce paintings proving particularly popular. The Alfred Wallis visited Quimper in Brittany as part of the 'Christopher Wood: Un peintre entre deux' exhibition in 1997 and was on the move again in 2007 as part of a major exhibition 'Alfred Wallis: Artist and Mariner' at the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum. In 2006 a highly successful exhibition was held at the Royal Cornwall Museum showing highlights from the Collection.

In 2011 The Council approached the Royal Institute of Cornwall (at the Royal Cornwall Museum in Truro) and it was agreed that they would manage the collection on the Council's behalf. The Museum has since organised exhibitions of the work, loans to schools and learning resources. As part of the agreement a conservation programme has been undertaken and a number of works have been professionally restored in recent years, safeguarding them for the future and allowing them to be enjoyed in excellent condition.