

22 July 1998 – 1 November 1998

William Scott – Paintings and Drawings

William Scott was born in Scotland but spent his formative years in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland. After attending art college in Belfast his professional life was spent in Britain. However his work is difficult to place in any specific context. He was a central figure in the development of British modernist painting, but his work always retained a strong sense of individuality despite his close involvement with many other painters and movements.

Scott was prolific during his career, in drawing, painting and printmaking and this exhibition explores the relationship between his painting and drawing in particular. He explored both figuration and abstraction, regularly returning to the still life and the figure as touchstones for his art. A constant concern in his work was the treatment of form, whether figurative or abstracted from figuration and the relationship to the picture plane.

Drawing was an essential element of Scott's work and one that has yet to be comprehensively explored in relation to his painting. It served as a release from painting, independent from it yet feeding into it. Scott kept many of his drawings private, describing them as "... a private activity, that has an elusive quality, an ambiguity, that the paintings often miss" (David Anderson catalogue, 1975). A large number of drawings are shown in relation to the paintings in this exhibition, including some works which have never been exhibited before.

Scott exhibited widely during his career in many one person and group exhibitions including the Venice Biennale (1958), the Kunsthalle Zurich (1963), the Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York (1975), retrospectives at the Tate Gallery in 1972 and the Ulster Museum in Belfast in 1986 - an exhibition which toured to the Hopstore Galleries in Dublin and the Scottish Gallery of Modern Art.

Early Influences

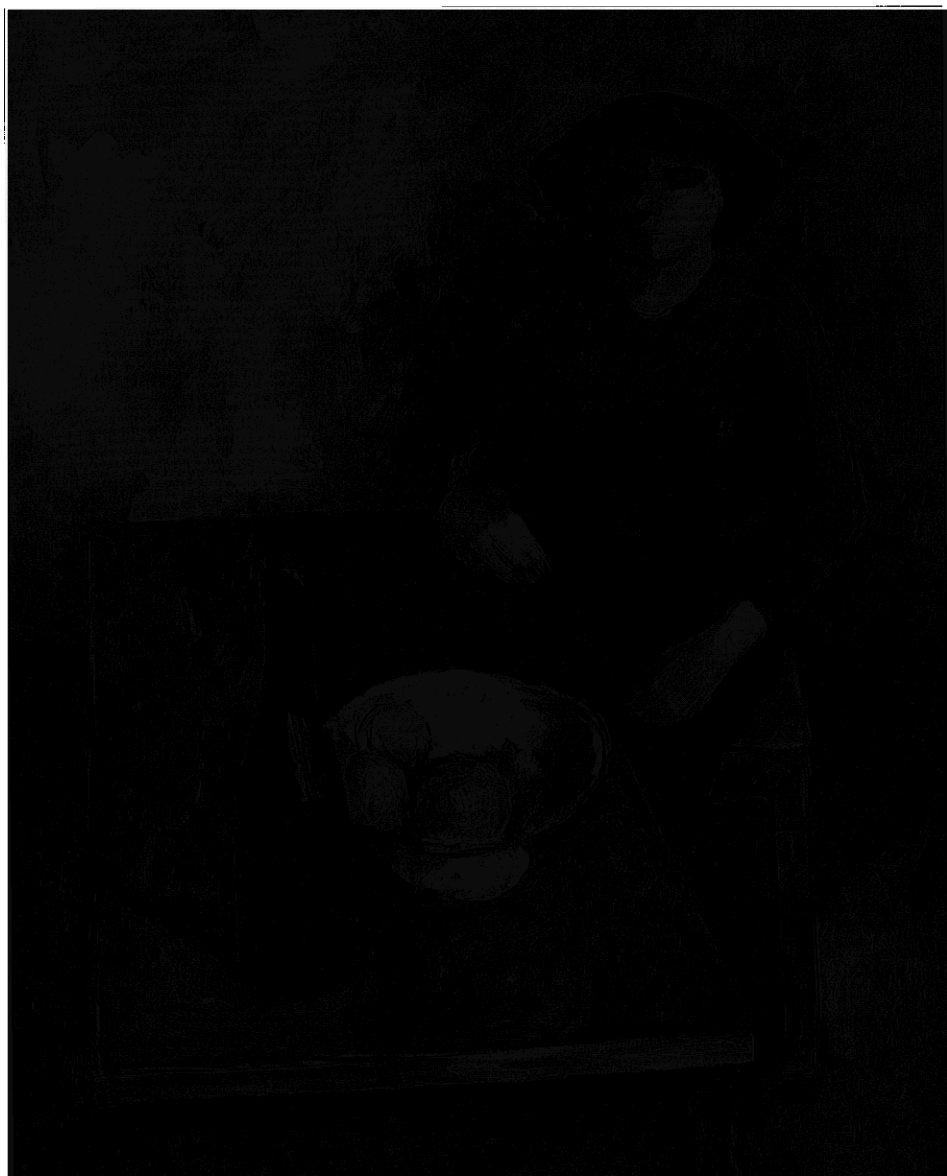
William Scott was born in 1913 in Greenock Scotland to Scottish and Irish parents. He moved to Enniskillen in Northern Ireland in 1924 when he was 11. At 13 Scott began to be taught a few hours a week by Kathleen Bridle who had

studied at the Royal College of Art in London. Unusually for the time she introduced him to modern painting, in particular Derain, Bonnard, Gauguin and Cézanne, who were to remain important to Scott throughout his career.

In 1928, when he was fifteen, he went to Belfast College of Art. Three years later he moved to London to attend the Royal Academy Schools, originally to

study sculpture but in 1934 he transferred to the painting school. One of the main parts of the course at the Royal Academy involved copying masterpieces in the National Gallery. In 1972 Scott wrote of this period:

"Continual figure painting made me aware of the great paintings of nudes. The pictures I had in mind amongst the Old Masters were Cranach, Titian,



*Girl at table 1938, oil on canvas
82 x 64 cm, Private Collection*

Giorgione, Goya, Boucher, and amongst later paintings, Corot, Manet, Gauguin, Modigliani, Bonnard and Matisse" (Tate catalogue 1972).

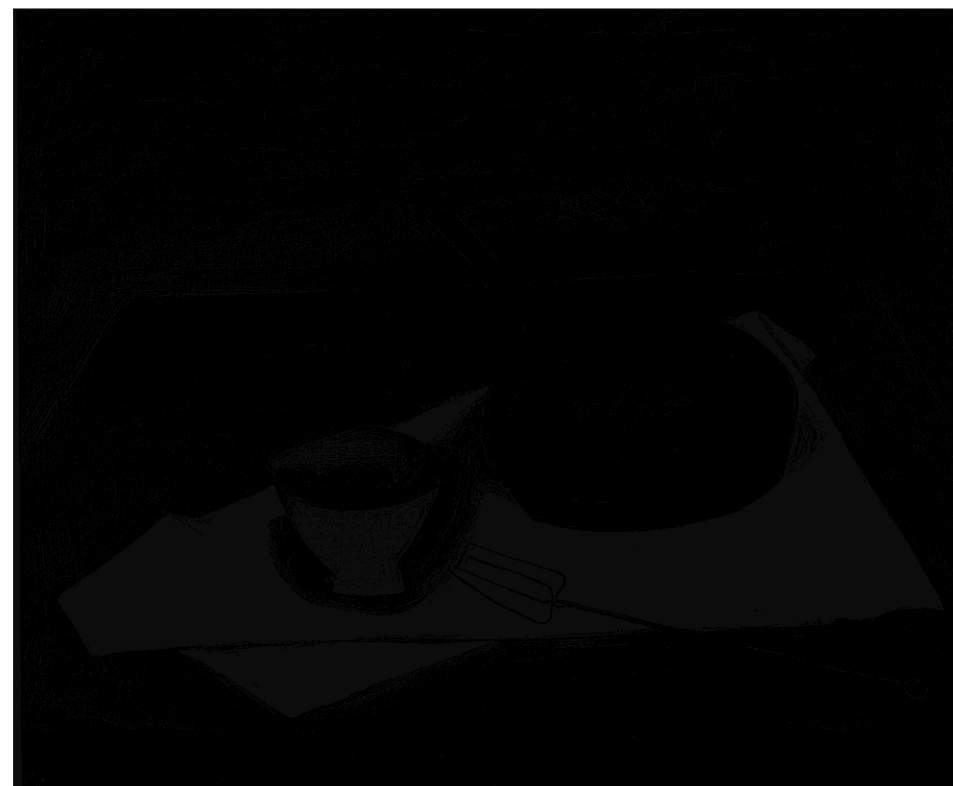
The earliest painting in the exhibition *The Adoration of the Shepherds* 1935 - 36 is the only surviving student composition from this period and it shows the influence of both Italian religious painting and the English artist Stanley Spencer, who by 1935 was an influential figure in the British art context.

However Scott also began to see many contemporary exhibitions while he was in London. The main debate in London at the time was between pure abstraction, a movement lead by Ben Nicholson and Unit One, and Surrealism, which Scott saw in the important exhibition in London, "The International Surrealist Exhibition" 1936.

1930s

Scott looked to Europe for his influences. He spent a short time in Cornwall in 1936 before travelling to Europe, finally settling in 1938 at Pont-Aven which had been an artist's colony since the 1800s established by Gauguin and his followers. While there he met Emile Bernard and Maurice Denis who were part of Gauguin's circle of artists known as the Nabis. Scott and his wife set up the Pont-Aven School of Painting with Geoffrey Nelson, which ran during the summers.

Scott's paintings from this period are mainly of still life, figure studies and landscape; themes that were to occupy Scott for most of his career. These works show the strong influence of French painting. *Girl at a table* 1938, for example,



Frying pan 1946, oil on canvas
54.5 x 64.5 cm, Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, London



The harbour 1952, oil on canvas
61 x 91 cm, Private Collection

shares compositional devices and colouration with works of Cézanne and Bonnard. Scott considered these paintings the beginnings of his mature career:

"...it was in Pont-Aven that I felt I started to discover what I needed - and then the war came" (Tate catalogue, 1972).

William and Mary Scott left France when the war broke out and returned to the UK, with a brief stay in Dublin in 1940, which was when the small sketch *Merriem Square* was painted. In 1942 William joined the Royal Fusiliers. This interrupted

his painting, but when he was transferred to Wales he managed to produce a series of watercolours which he exhibited at the Leger Gallery (*Composition* and *Cottages Wales*, both 1945). These studies have a literary symbolism that is unusual in Scott's work, and show the influence of the British neo-romantic painters, Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland.

1940s

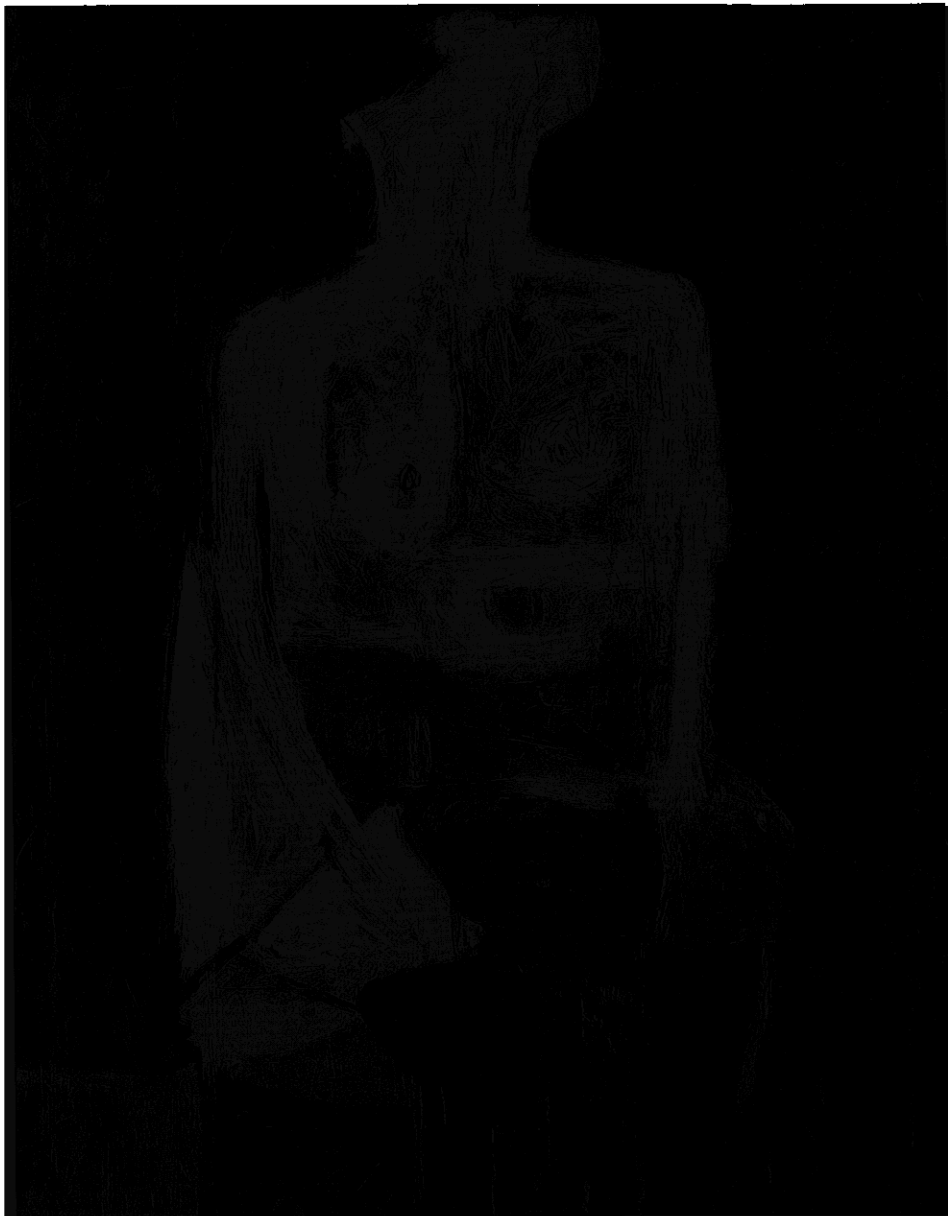
At the end of the war Scott started teaching full time at Bath Academy of Art. He felt the isolation of Britain during the war had created an unhealthy provincialism in the art world and in the mid-forties he again turned to Europe for his influences.

In 1946 when he travelled back to France to collect his paintings, many of which had been destroyed, he saw the exhibition "A Thousand Years of Still Life Painting" in Paris. This experience was to have a profound affect on him and his art:

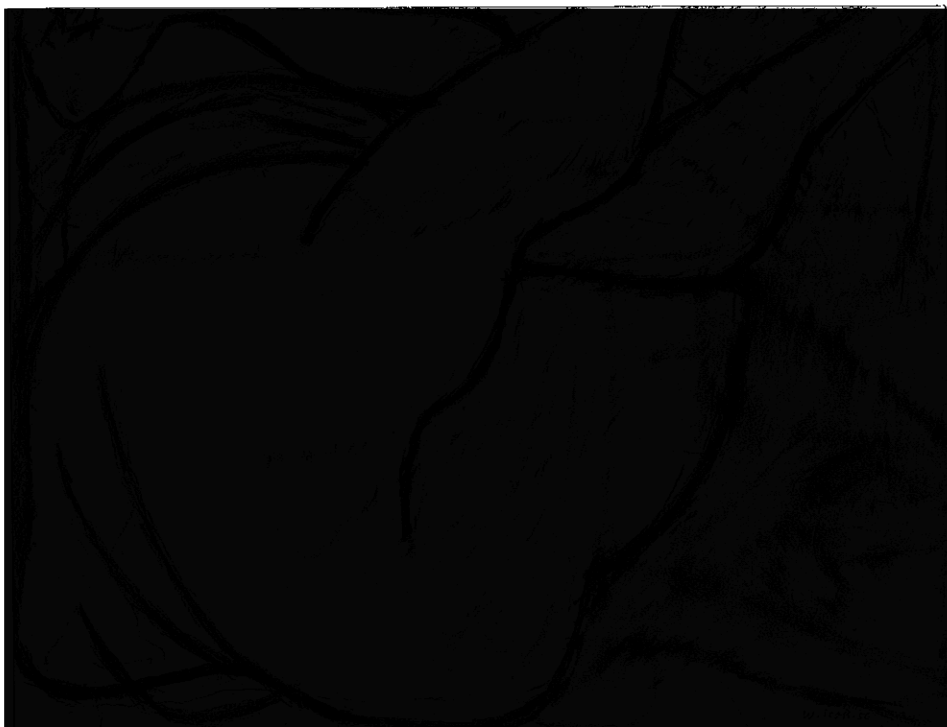
"I was really overwhelmed by the fact that the subject had hardly changed for a thousand of years, and yet each generation had in turn expressed its own period and feelings and time within this terribly limited range of the still life" (Alan Bowness, Lund: Humphries, 1964).

After seeing this exhibition Scott concentrated on the still life as a subject, to which he was to return throughout his career. He had developed a strong interest in still life while he was a student and was drawn in particular to the stark simplicity of the paintings of Chardin (b. 1699 - d. 1779). This was coupled with an interest in the formal qualities of Cézanne's compositions;

"My interest in still life grew directly out of looking at Cézanne. I wanted to look at Cézanne not through cubist eyes, but rather through the eyes of Chardin" (Tate catalogue, 1972).



Red nude 1956, oil on canvas
152.5 x 122 cm, Private Collection



Nude 1956, charcoal on paper
48 x 64 cm, Private Collection

In *Frying pan* 1946, for example, the composition is stark and minimal. The painting focuses upon the relationship of the objects to each other, the table and finally the flatness of the picture plane. The objects have been flattened spatially and the table is tilted to reduce perspective. The composition of this painting and these formal devices anticipate Scott's treatment of still life forms in later paintings.

Scott claimed that he painted still life because the subject matter was so boring it could become irrelevant, so allowing the paintings to be purely about form. However, the objects depicted were also personal to Scott, they hung in his studio, and commentators have linked their simplicity and Scott's austere treatment of them to his austere upbringing:

"I was brought up in a grey world, an austere world: The garden I knew was a cemetery and we had no fine furniture. The objects I painted were the symbols of the life I knew best..." (Alan Bowness, Lund Humphries, 1964).

Other commentators have found sexual symbolism in the echoes of the human body in the depiction of the objects in these paintings. Scott himself acknowledged a certain amount of symbolism in these early still lifes, but deliberately didn't expand upon it, writing of *Colander, beans and eggs* 1948 :

"These objects now take on another meaning, which is obscure and I don't personally like to point it out" (Alan Bowness, Lund Humphries, 1964).

1950s

Like many British painters at the time Scott was pushed initially into painting on a large scale by his inclusion in the Festival of Britain exhibition "Sixty Paintings for '51". As an articulation of the optimism of post-war Britain, the Arts Council set the dimensions of the paintings commissioned in order to ensure that all the paintings would be of an impressive scale. Scott wrote of this:

"I found the forms I had been using would not easily expand, and I realised that another step towards simplification had to be made. This I did, not only in shape but in reducing my colour key... I was finally left in 1953 with a table top in black and white" (Tate catalogue, 1972).

The works of the early fifties are increasingly reductionist in colour and become entirely black and white. Scott described this reduction as a way of concentrating on the underlying structure and composition. The forms in the painting lose any sort of depth, they are represented as flat shapes on the surface. In *Seated figure* 1953 the subject's form is merged with the picture plane, and the resulting image is a grid



Nile Valley: red and white 1962, oil on canvas
160 x 173 cm, Anderson Gallery Collection

of lines. Still life, landscape and the figure may have provided the subject matter but they became increasingly unspecific. *The harbour* 1952 may be the harbour at Mousehole in Cornwall which Scott was familiar with, but there are no direct references to a specific location. This harbour is reduced to its basic structure and it is treated purely as a compositional device.

In 1954 Scott visited the Lascaux Caves in France, one of the oldest examples of cave painting in the world. He had previously discovered "primitivism" through the work of Alfred Wallis, a Cornish fisherman whose work was heralded by several artists and dealers in London for its direct personal expression, "untainted" by formal art training. Scott saw a similar directness in the Lascaux paintings:

"My experience of these terrific drawings helped me to rethink what art was about. I renewed my earlier interest in primitivism, and set me on a new course" (Tate catalogue, 1972).

Red nude 1956, portrays the primal sexuality of the nude through the vivid colour and the aggressive angular depiction of the forms. Scott wrote in 1955, "I have a strong preference for primitive and elementary forms and I should like to combine a sensual eroticism with a starkness which will be instinctive and uncontrived" (Alan Bowness, Lund Humphries, 1964).

He saw in drawing a means to this direct expression; "Drawing for me is

exploring not explaining, containing geometry, sex, distortion and correction, forms pure and impure" (David Anderson, 1975). *Nude* 1956 is a study of the movement and corpulent flesh of the nude rather than a depiction of a female form.

Untitled - nude with outstretched leg 1956 and *Blue standing nude* 1957 are more controlled, classical portrayals of the nude, influenced by a visit to Pompei in 1956.

While travelling in the States in 1953 Scott met some of the American Abstract Expressionists, Rothko, de Kooning, Pollock and Kline and was the first British artist to see their work. He continued a friendship with Rothko for many years and Rothko visited Scott at his studio at Hallatrow in 1959. These American painters had an enormous impact on European, especially British, painting from the mid 1950's on and Scott played a central role in this relationship between Britain and the US. He was the first of the British painters to exhibit in New York and from 1954 he showed regularly at the influential Martha Jackson Gallery.

Orange and red 1957 and later, *Nile Valley: red and white* 1962 recall the floating shapes and gestural surfaces of Rothko and De Kooning's paintings but Scott claimed that ultimately the experience of seeing their work turned him away from abstraction and back to European painting.

By 1956 Scott was successful enough as an artist to leave his teaching position and concentrate on painting full-time

which he did in studios in London and Hallatrow in Somerset. During his time at Bath Academy of Art, which was now based at Corsham Court, it had become a centre of British art, with many leading artists teaching there for periods, including Terry Frost, Roger Hilton, Adrian Heath and Keith Armitage. Many of these artists worked in St Ives, Cornwall which was a focus for British abstract painting during the 1950s and 1960s. Scott was a frequent visitor to St Ives and many critics have grouped him with these artists, but despite a close association, Scott always maintained his individuality.

During the later half of the 1950s Scott's painting again moved between figuration and abstraction but this division became increasingly unimportant to him. His paintings increased in scale and he concentrated more on the surface texture: 'The actual touch and the way I put paint on canvas matter very much. I am extremely interested in textural qualities - the thick paint, the thin paint, the scratched lines, the almost careful-careless way in which a picture's painted...' (Alan Bowness, Lund Humphries, 1964).

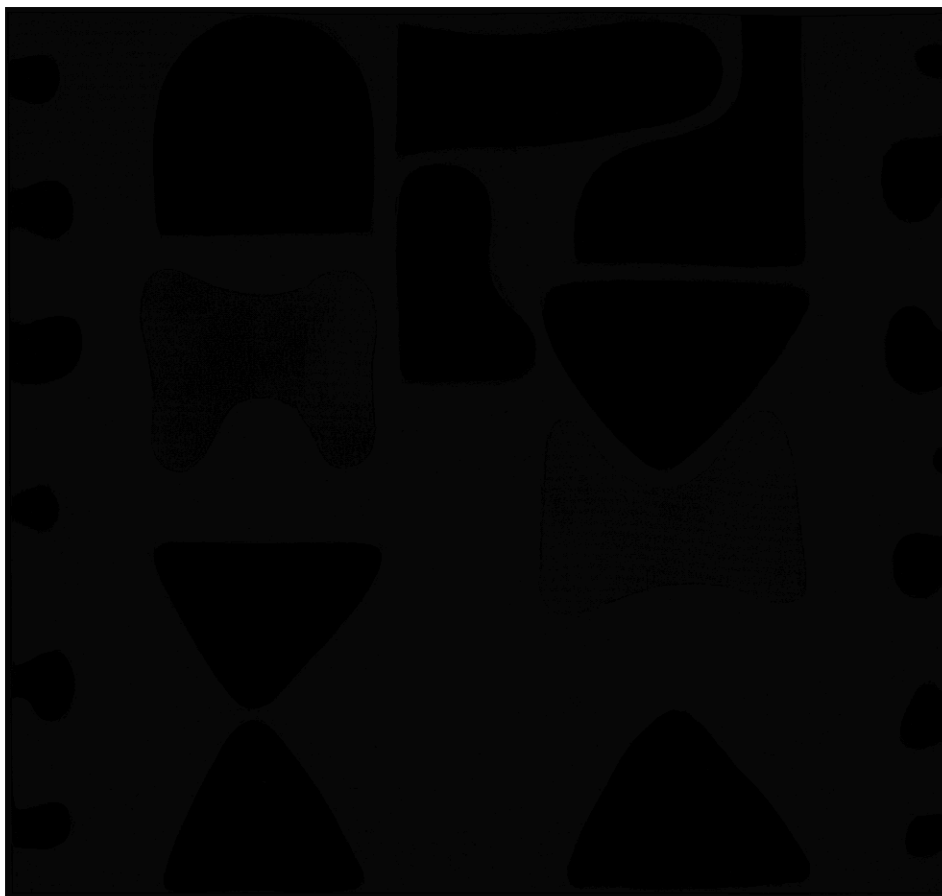
Many paintings from this period merge the subjects of still life, landscape and the figure. The upright form to the left of *Interior* 1959 refers to a figure, and the whole painting suggests body references through its amorphous shapes and skin-like paint surface. However, landscape references can also be found in the rough forms and surfaces that can be compared to the stone walls found in Somerset and Cornwall.

1960s

The forms and motifs of *White sand and ochre* and *Blue painting*, both 1960, recall



Interior 1959, oil on canvas
168 x 102 cm, Private Collection



Berlin blues I 1964, oil on canvas
162 x 175 cm, Dr Ronald Tallon

primitive and possibly Celtic imagery, but any specific reference is avoided. In 1959 Scott started working on a 45 ft mural for the Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry in Northern Ireland. It was finished in 1961 and studies for it show an initial use of Celtic imagery which became muted in the finished work.

Way In 1963 and other paintings from this period show a dramatic simplification of composition and form, a move furthered in a series of paintings executed during a fellowship in Berlin, (*Berlin blues* 1964). The colour in these paintings is flatter and closer to staining. In 1972 Scott wrote:

"My second phase of abstraction happened much like the first. The pictures were now larger and a process of elimination again took place - hardly with my awareness. I had returned to a new phase of abstraction with the difference that I was now prepared to leave larger areas of colour" (Tate catalogue, 1972).

1970s

At the beginning of the seventies Scott introduced flattened, simplified still life objects into frieze like paintings. In 1972 he wrote of this re-emergence of figurative elements as:

"I no longer worry whether a painting is about something or not: I am only concerned with the expectation from a flat surface of an illusion" (Tate catalogue, 1972).

In *Multi blues* 1971 the emphasis is on the relationship of the forms to each other and their relationship to the picture ground. These relationships vary with the differing hard and soft edges of the forms. Some forms merge with the ground and depth is erased.

The curvilinear forms also have an amorphous quality and again it is possible to see a merging of still life and the figure in Scott's work.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s Scott returned to a more realistic figuration. *Beans on a plate with mushrooms* 1978 and *Beans on a plate*, 1979 look back to the austere still lifes of the 1940s, but the flattened forms and the simplified space of these paintings also continue the formal concerns of the 1970s. One of the last pictures in the exhibition, *Reclining nude - orange pillow* echoes the composition of Manet's *Olympia* and Scott's early experience of the pictures in the National Gallery.

This painting and the large figure drawings carried out during the 1970s show a more controlled powerful sensuality than the expressive nude drawings of the 1950s but sexuality is openly an important part of these works. This can also be seen in the previously unexhibited series of drawings *Private suite or Dubious love* 1971, which take sex as their subject, where the figure is treated as an emblem and described in purely linear terms.

William Scott continued painting late into his life and died in 1989. This exhibition is the first large exhibition of his work in Europe since his death.

Sarah Glennie,
Curator of Exhibitions

Bibliographical References

Alan Bowness, *William Scott: Paintings*, London (Lund Humphries) 1964

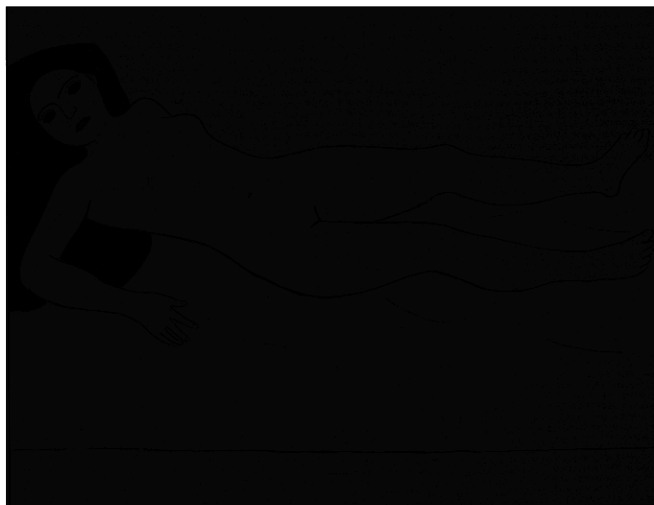
Alan Bowness, *William Scott: Paintings, Drawings and Gouaches, 1938 - 71*, exhib. cat., London, Tate Gallery, 1972

ed. Lou Klepac, *William Scott: Drawings*, exhib. cat., David Anderson Gallery, New York, 1975

Ronald Alley, *William Scott*, exhib. cat., Arts Council of Northern Ireland touring exhibition, 1986.

Michael Tooby and Simon Morley, *William Scott: Paintings and Drawings*, Merrell Holberton Publishers and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1998.

Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism*, London (Allen Lane) 1981



Reclining nude - orange pillow 1980 - 82, oil on canvas
122 x 160 cm, Private Collection

William Scott

Biography

- 1913 Born Greenock, Scotland, son of an Irish father and Scottish mother
- 1924 Family returned to father's hometown, Enniskillen, Northern Ireland
- 1928 Entered Belfast College of Art
- 1931 Moved to London, entered Royal Academy Schools, at first in Sculpture School
- 1933 Awarded silver medal for sculpture
- 1934-35 Transferred to Painting School
Awarded Landseer Scholarship in Painting
- 1935 Awarded Leverhulme Travelling Scholarship
- 1936 Worked for six months near Penzance, Cornwall
- 1937 Married Mary Lucas, painter and sculptor, a fellow student at the RA Schools
- 1937-38 Lived in Italy for six months, visiting Florence, Venice and Rome
- 1938 Moved to Pont Aven, Brittany
Met Geoffrey Nelson, with whom the Scotts organized the Pont Aven School of Painting
Elected Sociétaire du Salon d'Automne
Moved to St Tropez and Cagnes-sur-Mer, South of France
- 1939 Returned to Pont Aven, to teach and paint
Met Maurice Denis and Emile Bernard
On outbreak of war left France and returned to Britain
Settled in Dublin

- 1940 Birth of son Robert
Returned to London
- 1941 Moved to Hallatrow Somerset and taught part-time at the Bath Academy of Art
Birth of son James
- 1942 Volunteered for the Army, and served with the Royal Engineers for nearly four years
No painting, except for some watercolour landscapes.
First one man exhibition at the Leger Gallery, Bond Street
- 1946-56 Left Army and returned to Somerset
Appointed Senior Painting Master at the Bath Academy of Art, now at Corsham Court
- 1949 Elected Member of the London Group
- 1951 One of the artists invited by the Arts Council to paint a large picture for the Festival of Britain
- 1952 Took a studio and apartment in Chelsea, London, but continued to live part of the year at Hallatrow, with summers often spent in Cornwall.
- 1953 First visit to North America as guest instructor at the summer school of the University of Alberta's Banff School of Fine Arts. Returned to England via New York, where Scott met Pollock, Kline, de Kooning, Brooks and other American painters
One of five painters selected by the British Council to show recent work at the São Paulo Bienal II
- 1954 First exhibition in New York, at the Martha Jackson Gallery (with Barbara Hepworth and Francis Bacon)
- 1958 Retrospective exhibition at the XXIX Venice Biennale

- 1959 Awarded first prize in the British painting section at the second John Moores Liverpool Exhibition
- 1961 Completed a mural for Altnagelvin Hospital in Londonderry, Northern Ireland; the work measures 9 x 45 feet
Exhibited at the VI São Paulo Bienal; awarded Sanbra, (International Critics) Purchase Prize.
- 1963 Retrospective exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, and at the Ulster Museum, Belfast (modified)
- 1965 Moved to Coleford, near Bath
- 1966 Created C.B.E.
- 1972 Retrospective at the Tate Gallery, London
- 1973 Visited Australia, Mexico and India as visiting lecturer for the British Council
- 1975 Honorary Doctor of Royal College of Art
- 1976 Honorary Doctor of Literature, Queen's University Belfast
Visited Japan where he exhibited at Kasahara Gallery
- 1977 Honorary Doctor of Literature, Trinity College, Dublin
- 1984 Elected to the Royal Academy
- 1985 Featured in Channel 4 TV film Every Picture Tells a Story
Awarded the Korn Ferry prize at the Royal Academy Exhibition
- 1986 Retrospective at the Ulster Museum, Belfast and touring
Awarded first prize (with John Hyland) at the Royal Academy exhibition
- 1989 Died in December

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1942/45 Leger Gallery, London
- 1948/51 Leicester Gallery, London
- 1953/54/56/61/63/65/67/69/71 Hanover Gallery, London
- 1954/56/59/62/73/75/79 Martha Jackson Gallery, New York
- 1966-74 Gimpel & Hanover Gallery, Zurich
- 1974/76/78/80/85/87 Gimpel Fils Gallery, London
- 1973/78 Walter Moos Gallery, Toronto
- 1975/76/77/80 Kasahara Gallery, Osaka
- 1953 II Bienal São Paulo, Brazil
- 1958 XXIX Biennale, Venice
Musée d'Art Moderne Paris (retrospective)
- 1959 Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne
Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels
Kunsthaus, Zurich
Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam
Galleria d'Art Galatea, Turin
Galleria Charles Lienhard, Zurich
Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover and tour (retrospective)
- 1961 Esther Robles Gallery, Los Angeles
VI Bienal, São Paulo
Galeria Schmela, Düsseldorf
- 1963 Kunsthalle, Berne
Ulster Museum, Belfast
Galeria Anderson-Mayer, Paris
- 1964 Ford Foundation Exhibition
Haus am Waldsee, Berlin
- 1969 Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh
- 1971 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh
- 1972 Tate Gallery, London (retrospective)
Falchi Arte Moderna, Milan
- 1973 Lister Gallery, Perth
- 1974 Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol
- 1975 Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York
- 1976 Galerie Angst-Orny, Munich
- 1979 Arts Council of Northern Ireland - tour
- 1980 Gimpel and Witzenhoffer, New York
- 1985 Gimpel Fils "Every Picture Tells a Story"
- 1986 Ulster Museum, Belfast, Guinness Hop Store, Dublin and Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art
- 1987 On the Wall Gallery, Belfast
Taylor Galleries, Dublin
- 1990/97 Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London
- 1991/96 Kerlin Gallery, Dublin
- 1992 Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York
- 1993 Tate Gallery, London - Room 26

Exhibition supported by
Oxford Exhibition Services



OXFORD EXHIBITION SERVICES

Exhibition talks and lectures
supported by the British Council



Images © the William Scott Estate



Royal Hospital Military Road
Kilmainham Dublin 8 Ireland

Tel +353-1- 612 9900
Fax +353-1- 612 9999
Email info@modernart.ie