MODERN GODS: RELIGION AND BRITISH MODERNISM, 1890 - 1960

SUPPORTED BY THE PAUL MELLON CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN BRITISH ART

SATURDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 10AM - 5PM

A one-day conference accompanying the exhibition Stanley Spencer: Of Angels and Dirt. ‘Modern Gods: Religion and British Modernism’ will investigate the religious beliefs of a variety of British artists and critics who were active during Spencer’s lifetime in relation to their work. Dr Sarah Turner (Deputy Director for Research at the Paul Mellon Centre) and Dr Sam Rose (Lecturer at the University of St Andrews) will give the keynote addresses.

Scholarship on British Modernism has traditionally portrayed artists like Spencer and Eric Gill as religious eccentrics; stalwarts clinging to the fading spirituality of a pre-modern era. Recent research, however, has begun to demonstrate that many influential British modernists, working in a variety of mediums and styles, were similarly motivated by spiritual ideals.

Clive Bell described art as a point of access to ‘the God in everything’, while Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson and Winifred Nicholson were profoundly influenced by Christian Science (a faith that was of great importance to Spencer’s wife, Hilda Carline). Paul and Margaret Nash also practiced Christian Science, and Paul shared a Christian Science practitioner with Hepworth and Nicholson.

Perhaps the greatest champion of British modern art, Herbert Read, reflected at the end of his career: ‘All my life I have found more sustenance in the work of those who bear witness to the reality of a living God than in the work of those who deny God’.

Increasingly we are beginning to discover that, in many ways, British Modernism represents the natural outgrowth of Victorian spiritual idealism, rather than a radical reaction against it. This one-day conference aims to complicate oppositions between ‘modern’ and ‘non-modern’ art by examining the common threads of religious belief that ran throughout twentieth century aesthetic discourse.

SATURDAY 24 SEPTEMBER

10:00 - 10:30 Registration and Tea / Coffee
10:30 - 10:45 Welcome by Simon Wallis OBE
10:45 - 11:30 Key Note by Dr Sarah Turner - Mystical Moderns: Modern Art and the Mystical Revival in Early Twentieth-Century Britain
11:30 - 12:15 Key Note by Sam Rose – How (not) to write about modern art and religion
12:15 - 12:45 Q&A, chaired by Lucy Kent
12:45 - 2:00 LUNCH (not included) and a chance to see Stanley Spencer: Of Angels and Dirt
2:00 - 2:20 Eleanor Clayton – The Form of Stanley Spencer’s Church House
2:20 - 2:40 Tom Bromwell - David Jones’s In Parenthesis In Parentheses: Reconsidering the frontispiece and tailpiece
2:40 - 3:00 Q&A with Eleanor Clayton and Tom Bromwell, chaired by Dr Sarah Turner
3:00 - 3:20 BREAK
DR SARAH TURNER (PAUL MELLON CENTRE)

MYSTICAL MODERNS: MODERN ART AND THE MYSTICAL REVIVAL IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN

In recent years the ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘where’ of modernism and modernity have undergone significant revaluation. The canonical version of modern art, which was once based largely on formalist and stylistic assessments about what was modern and what was not, is gradually being opened up to take account of the complex cultural networks that shaped a range of artistic production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One particularly active strand of this reassessment has concerned the extent of the impact of esoteric ideas and organisations on modern artists and modern art movements. What was once deemed a fairly niche and indeed in itself, esoteric, topic of research has recently become the focus of major academic research projects, international conferences and popular exhibitions, such as the extensively-toured exhibition on Swedish mystic and abstract painter Hilma af Klint. The notion of a completely secular and disenchanted modernity is gradually being replaced with a more nuanced understanding that recognises the impact of religion, spirituality and mystical thinking on the aesthetic ideas and cultural formations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This paper will explore the significance of this ‘mystical revival’ for British art and artists, including Stanley Spencer and his contemporaries.

Sarah Victoria Turner is Deputy Director for Research at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art in London. From October 2016, she will also be Visiting Senior Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art. Sarah’s research interests encompass many aspects of British art from 1850 to 1950 and she has published her work in exhibition catalogues, academic publications and online. In 2018, she will co-curate a major exhibition with Mark Hallett at the Royal Academy in London to mark 250 years of the Academy’s Summer Exhibitions. Sarah was recently named one of Apollo magazine’s ‘40 Under 40’ inspirational people in the European art world. She is co-editor of British Art Studies, an open-access online journal. She is the co-founder of the ‘Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, Modernism and the Arts c.1875-1960’ Research Network, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and ‘Internationalism and Cultural Exchange c.1880-1920’, which was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

SAM ROSE (UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS)

HOW (NOT) TO WRITE ABOUT MODERN ART AND RELIGION

Religion is a neglected subject in the history of modern art. Or so, at least, a long series of writers on modern art and the spiritual have claimed. Given the many attempts to bring the two aspects together, as well as the fact that links between the two have been so clearly historically established, why is it still so difficult to conceive of a history revised on this basis?
This paper will run through and analyse some of the major difficulties faced by such studies, hoping to show ways that standard challenges and pitfalls can be met and avoided. Books discussed will include *Our Distance from God*, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art*, and *Picasso and Authority*. Themes will include the conflict of formalism and phenomenology with iconography, conflations between religion and its close cognates, and the trouble with histories that have to make use of writing around ‘the aesthetic’.

Sam Rose is a Lecturer in Art History at the University of St Andrews, prior to which he was a Research Fellow at Peterhouse, Cambridge. He is currently working on two book projects, both of which centre on modernism in Britain and beyond. The first is an examination of formalist art writing and modernist aesthetics in early to mid-twentieth-century England, and the second is a very brief history of the idea of visual modernism. Among other related activities, earlier this year he co-organised a conference (with Rachel Smith) on abstraction in British art, and he has recently joined the Executive Steering Committee of the British Association of Modernist Studies.

ELEANOR CLAYTON (THE HEWORTH WAKEFIELD)

THE FORM OF THE CHURCH HOUSE

Stanley Spencer’s is probably best known for his religious paintings – the multiple Resurrections made throughout his life, as well as biblical scenes he set in his home town of Cookham. In part this choice of subject matter was inspired by the early Italian painters and other masters he saw in the National Gallery, where he claimed to learn much about painting. Religious subjects had historically been a dominant subject matter for artists, and Spencer felt no need to abandon the past with the same verve as some of his fellow Slade students. Spencer himself had been raised within the Christian faith. He wrote of his memories of attending the Wesleyan chapel in Cookham, where the Stanley Spencer Gallery now resides, and his father regularly read the bible to the family. As Spencer developed as a person and an artist, so his religious beliefs and how they were manifested in his art developed. In this paper I will discuss a particular body of work, the paintings made for the ‘Church-House’, in relation to his particular religious beliefs and the form in which he presented them in paint.

Eleanor Clayton is Curator at The Hepworth Wakefield. She previously worked as Assistant Curator: Exhibitions and Displays at Tate Liverpool, and Assistant Curator: Public Programmes at Tate Britain. Prior to this she held research posts at the National Trust and the National Portrait Gallery, and curated exhibitions include *Caro in Yorkshire* (THW, 2015), *Geta Bratescu: The Line* (Tate Liverpool, 2015) and the currently exhibition Stanley Spencer: Of Angels and Dirt.

TOM BROMWELL (UNIVERSITY OF YORK)

DAVID JONES’S IN PARENTHESIS IN PARENTHESIS: RECONSIDERING THE FRONTISPICE AND TAILPIECE

Religious belief in the writings and artworks of David Jones (1895-1974) has widely been appreciated, to the extent that it has become something of a cliché to refer to Jones as ‘visionary’. Following his conversion to Roman Catholicism after the First World War, and a period as an acolyte of Eric Gill, Jones came to appreciate all processes of sign making as a religious act. However, Jones has been most remembered for an allegedly secular epic war poem.

The poem *In Parenthesis* (1937) has been identified as a masterpiece of English language modernist literature. Accordingly, literary critics have given significant attention to the fictionalised poem, which mirrors Jones’s own service during the First World War. Yet for all the scholarly attention given to the work, there is a crucial aspect that has never previously been considered: Jones’s paratextual illustrations from 1937 of a British soldier for the frontispiece, and a slain lamb as tailpiece.
Art historical scholarship has fleetingly touched upon the frontispiece and tailpiece as artworks by Jones in their own right. However, I argue that they are of crucial significance to the poem. I propose scholarship will benefit immensely from bringing together the written word and illustrations, which will uncover another dimension to Jones’s complex sign making. The conceptual implication of a parenthesis as an interlude has a distinct relationship with beginnings and endings. The corresponding artworks are literally the parentheses to the poem; yet they also carry ecclesial implications, which relate to the beginnings and endings of Christian soteriology and eschatology. By reconciling the text and paratext, I argue that we can begin to reconceive In Parenthesis as an interdisciplinary religious work of art, which is more reflective of the multidisciplinary religious practitioner David Jones, artist-writer-poet.

Tom Bromwell is a History of Art PhD candidate at the University of York. His research interests are Inter-war British art and apocalypse. He has previously published on Sir Stanley Spencer with the National Trust and Apollo: The International Arts Magazine.

LUCY KENT (UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE)

MORTAL AND DIVINE: CHRISTIAN SCIENCE AND THE WORK OF BARBARA HEPWORTH, BEN NICHOLSON, AND WINIFRED NICHOLSON

The fact that Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson and Winifred Nicholson shared an interest in Christian Science has been well documented. The extent of their commitment to the faith, however, and its subsequent value as an analytical resource for interpreting their work, is often overlooked. Considerable archival evidence demonstrates that Christian Science exerted a significant influence on their lives and thinking for the vast majority of their careers. Furthermore, each of them made explicit claims for a direct correlation between their aesthetic and spiritual convictions.

Guided by the doctrine of Christian Science, as well as the artists’ public and private assertions, this paper considers the symbolism, design and intended function of their work in the context of their mutual faith. Regarded in this light, the works discussed take on new meaning, not only as emblems of the artist’s personal religious beliefs, but as part of a broader project of facilitating the healing and enlightenment of society as a whole.

Lucy Kent is a doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge, where her research explores the correlation between new religious movements and modern art in England. She has a BFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MA with Distinction in British Modernism from the Courtauld Institute of Art. Her recent publications include ‘Immortal Mind: Christian Science and Ben Nicholson’s Work of the 1930s’ in The Burlington Magazine and “An Act of Praise” – Religion and the work of Barbara Hepworth’ in the catalogue of the Tate’s recent retrospective.

CLARE NADAL (HUDDERSTON UNIVERSITY/ THE HEPWORTH WAKEFIELD)

‘A PRAYER AT MOMENTS OF GREAT UNHAPPINESS: RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN BARBARA HEPWORTH’S POST-WAR PRACTICE

When there has been a great threat to life...my reaction has been to swallow despair, to make something that rises up, something that will win. In another age I would simply have carved cathedrals.
(Barbara Hepworth, ‘Interview with Edwin Mullins’, 1970)

Whilst religion and spirituality were subjects of immense importance to Barbara Hepworth throughout her life, she never adopted one specific fixed system of belief, instead referring to herself at differing moments as a ‘Christian Scientist’, an ‘Anglican Catholic’ and, on one occasion, an ‘atheist’. Significantly such changes coincided with shifts to her personal life and relationships, shifts that were also to have a marked influence on the course of her artistic output.

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between art and religion in the working practice, output, dissemination and display of Hepworth’s work from the late 1940s onwards. This was a time in which she gradually began to re-adopt a more traditional Anglican faith alongside the practice of Christian Science she had developed with Ben Nicholson in the 1930s. In the 1950s, alongside her Madonna and Child of 1954, she produced a number of other so-designated ‘religious works’, with titles referencing sacred vocal music; and in 1965-7 she produced the sculpture Construction (Crucifixion) alongside two related paintings. Whilst such works are bound in events of personal significance, including the death of her son Paul, the breakdown of her marriage to Nicholson and her diagnosis of cancer in 1965, I seek to assess their position and significance within her wider working practice and oeuvre. Drawing on Hepworth’s written correspondence and reading practice of the period, I trace their place within an artistic discourse that I propose aimed to contribute to the social and spiritual reconstruction of post-war society.

Clare Nadal is a first year collaborative PhD candidate at Huddersfield University and The Hepworth Wakefield. Her thesis ‘Sculpture and the Written Word: Reading and Writing Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore’ seeks to reassess the work of Hepworth and Moore through recourse to their writings and reading habits. As part of this she is currently working on the first ever public display of Hepworth’s library of books held at The Hepworth Wakefield, which will go on display in 2017 alongside a solo exhibition of the artist. Prior to her to PhD, Clare read English Literature at Durham University and holds an MA History of Art with Distinction from the Courtauld Institute of Art, which culminated in a dissertation entitled ‘Barbara Hepworth: Sculpture as Music and Dance’.

ELIZABETH FISHER (UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE)

ANOTHER NAME FOR GOD: BEAUTY, MYSTICISM AND DEVOTION AT KETTLE’S YARD

H.S. (Jim) Ede described Kettle’s Yard as a way of life. It was always more than just a place, although it is a place – a very particular place – where the relations between things and their surroundings are absolutely specific and as finely calibrated as if in a painting. While Ede’s spiritual outlook tended towards the pantheistic (a sense of harmony and interconnectedness underpins what he created at Kettle’s Yard), he blended it with Christian mysticism and Modernist asceticism to develop an almost monastic, highly aestheticized life of daily rhythms and demanding routines, of personal sacrifices and small ceremonies which included the Roman Catholic tradition of ringing the Angelus.

Religion also played an important role in many of Ede’s close friendships with artists such as David Jones, William Congdon and Richard Pousette-Dart, and fellow collector Helen Sutherland. This paper will trace the development of key spiritual themes through these relationships and their manifestation at Kettle’s Yard. In particular I will consider the notion of the sacramental in relation to Kettle’s Yard, and discuss the relationship between Ede’s beliefs and his appreciation of art with particular attention to works by Joan Miró, Ben Nicholson and Alfred Wallis.

Elizabeth Fisher is an independent curator, currently working on her PhD, ‘Kettle’s Yard: a curatorial genealogy’ at the University of Cambridge. She is also co-editing the forthcoming issue of Interdisciplinary Science Reviews ‘The Experimental Generation: networks of interdisciplinary praxis in British art, 1950-70’ and is series editor of Kettle’s Yard Artist’s Books. Previously she was Curator of Exhibitions and Collections at Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge.