

## PAULE VEZELAY.

Paule Vézelay may be considered as England's first abstract artists. She started her career, however, as Marjorie Watson-Williams and came from Bristol where she had been born to a distinguished medical family in 1892. She determined to be an artist, moving from the Bristol Municipal School to an exhilarating, pre-war London where 'Futurism and Ragtime danced together, unchaperoned' in 1912. As M. Watson-Williams, she established her reputation as an illustrator of delicacy and wit, under the aegis of George Belcher, the *Punch* artist; she immediately abandoned the Slade, although her first oils demonstrated the influence of Sickert. Whistler's example inspired her to adopt a butterfly-like monogram, intertwining an 'M' and 'W': the first step towards a new identity.

Three artists were important for Vézelay prior to her meeting with Arp: the Belgians Léon and Gustav de Smet, and the surrealist André Masson. Léon de Smet for whom Paule posed, arrived in London in 1914 and was soon moving in the intellectual circle of the writer John Galsworthy. His amorous persistence, Vézelay claimed, drove her to Paris in 1920. Subsequently her friendship his brother Gustav developed; his 'mâtelot' sailor themes and zig-zag motifs were echoed in some of her paintings. They held a joint exhibition at the Galerie George Giroux in Brussels in 1920. The de Smets' encouragement was important, leading to her exhibition at the Galerie Louis Manteau in Brussels in 1924. In October, 1920, however, Marjorie Watson-Williams held her first Paris exhibition at the Galerie des Feuilles d'Art. Formal debts were now to Degas and to Bonnard; but it was through her visits to the Cirque Medrano, much-beloved by Picasso and Archipenko that the motif of the tightrope dancer entered her work, anticipating the boxed lines and wires in space that would constitute perhaps her most original contribution as an artist working in three dimensions.

'Paule Vézelay', the name she took in 1926, was both poetic and evocative, an homage to the superb romanesque church at Vézelay, and ambiguous in its resonances: this was the era of the liberated 'garçonne' and the name 'Paule' feminised the sometimes useful disguise of a masculine-sounding name. (A similar indeterminacy surrounds the name of Marlow Moss, who later became very friendly with Paule) Paule found many dedicated and delightful female colleagues at the Salon des Surindépendants where she exhibited from 1929-1937, such as Christine Boumeester, Maria-Helena Vieira da Silva, Marlowe Moss and of course Sophie Tauber-Arp.

Although Vézelay claimed in retrospect: 'I was producing pure abstract art from 1928' (the year when in fact she turned to Juan Gris's cubism), one must consider the surrealist interlude which was so important for her work. In 1929, she fell in love with the prominent Surrealist André Masson. The couple were almost married: Paule experienced the most intense happiness and despair at this time. The influence upon her work was direct: the tightrope 'lines in space', in still essentially figurative works became marked by Masson's more flamboyant 'écriture', while inevitably, Paule was drawn into the intense, sexually exploratory, and with Masson often violent arena of surrealism. It was an ultimately tragic affair: another fresh start was necessary. Paule's membership of the international abstract group, 'Abstraction-Création' from 1934 can thus be seen as a deliberate change of camp and of artistic direction, although, ironically it was via Arp that Paule unsuccessfully attempted to show in the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936. Transitional works revealed the influence of Giacometti's drawings of sculptures, some imaginary, some realised, the famous 'Objets Mobiles et Muets' published in *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution* in 1931. Giacometti's biomorphic forms here displayed a sexual thrust whose malevolence, however, is entirely absent in Vézelay's floating, biomorphic shapes. Arp's biomorphic work, always sensuous is often humorous; his formal jokes retained the complex spirit of Dada that Paule, always serious, would never emulate. Her paintings such as *Triangles and Tubes* of 1932 show the move not only towards a more geometric art, in which

emotions were sublimated into a world of purer forms, but one in which the confusion on a two-dimensional surface of flat versus shaded, three-dimensional shapes, again show her developing instinct for sculpture. Recent work was shown at the important Galerie Jeanne Bucher (with two books illustrated by the Surrealist Kurt Seligmann) in February and March, 1934.

By this time Vézelay had met Arp; his studio was surely a revelation: his reliefs and sculptures, the interrelationship of forms, space and materials, his lightness and liberty - all would find their echo in Paule's developing three-dimensional work. Despite the fact that Sophie Tauber's studio was discreetly hidden one floor above her husband's (she appeared to be the model wife) the friendship with Sophie, too, indeed her perception of the couple's working relationship, was as important as meeting Arp himself. By the late 1930s, Sophie Tauber's work was rigorously geometric, - circles, squares, oblongs, triangles, but the sinuous, curving lines to which Paule later replied with her coloured wires in space, expressed a grace and 'joie de vivre' inspired by dance. There is no doubt that this new double friendship was a tremendous catalyst for Vézelay's work. Arp's ability to mingle the geometric world of modernism with the shapes and forms of the natural world, together with the tenderness of his approach, struck chords in the heart of the English woman deprived of her national landscapes. As Paule recalled: 'In 1935, I made my first constructions in three dimensions by using a small box in which I composed dried leaves, fishing lines and dry flies, sand and pebbles. This small and unimportant construction enticed me in 1936 to compose with white string stretched over canvas, and to make a collage with black and white forms on a black background, over which white cotton lines were stretched from point to point above the collage in the space beneath. I made other constructions which were included under the title of 'Recherches en trois dimensions' at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher exhibition in 1937... Such constructions with lines in space, as well as some drawings, certainly show an absorbing interest in space, and it was in 1935 that I began making sculpture in plaster, which increased my knowledge of form and its relation to space. Such forms, especially spheres and circles, are static, consequently they have a stabilising power in composition.

Because of the evolution of Arp's sculptures from his painted reliefs, much free-standing work had been made in painted wood: thus Paule was not inhibited by the difficulties and the mystique of direct carving in stone, as she might have been in England at the time. Paule's sculpture is not so humorous as the former dadaist, and it has a quieter purity: fish and leaf shapes are unashamedly representative, while the abstract *Garden*, (in the mode of art deco 'jardinières') was filled with sand and shells, starfish and seaweed. An immensely impressive list of international artists attended Vézelay's exhibition at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher in 1937; this was, undoubtedly, the summit of her career; in May, 1939 Arp and Sophie Tauber held a joint exhibition in her gallery. Paule joined the couple in the 'Réalités Nouvelles' exhibition at the Galerie Charpentier later in the year, which heralded the postwar Salon of the same name. In 1938, Vézelay exhibited with Arp, Domela, Kandinsky, Magnelli, Seligmann and Sophie Tauber at the Il Milione gallery in Milan. In August, 1939 she joined the Arps and François Arp's family in Maja-Sacher's Villa Santez-Gwen at St-Cast in Brittany. When war was declared, Sophie's abstract works were full of foreboding, with titles such as *Lines lost in a chaotic background*; Paule had no option but to return to England, where her flying forms in space soon metamorphosed into menacing barrage balloons.

Abstraction was relaunched in Paris in 1945 at the Galerie René Drouin where Sophie Tauber, Kandinsky, Mondrian and Klee were all commemorated at the exhibition 'Art Concret'. The following year, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles became the forum for a new generation of international abstract artists. Vézelay was elected a member in 1946; she returned to Paris for an exhibition with at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher in May-June 1946. Besides the tragic death of Sophie Tauber-Arp in 1943, she had now to bear the death from

cancer of her dealer Jeanne Bucher; a bohemian life in Paris was no longer financially viable or even desirable, despite her move to the avant-garde Galerie Colette Allendy, where she held an important retrospective. Her prose piece: 'Imagination, Mathematics, Balance' published in French on this occasion is far more confident and mature than her 1939 poem, with its explicitly Kantian balancing of reason, will and desire; it corresponds to the control of the new boxed work with curved and coloured wires; although the shadows which are part of these works insist as always, upon fragility and the ephemeral.

For Vézelay, Arp's studios at Meudon, outside Paris, and in Ascona near Locarno in Switzerland, became havens: yet she refused his proposal of marriage, fearing the enforced domesticity and role of emmanuensis that it would entail. The relationship with Arp continued, both tense and tender. Vézelay's life continued energetically and creatively in London despite disappointments. She joined the 'Groupe Espace' in 1953, becoming its English president, but her hopes for collaborations between abstract artists and architects were thwarted by the boycott of powerful figures such as Henry Moore in England. She made textile designs for Metz of Amsterdam and Heals of London, in which her shapes and lines in space became mobile patterns on beautiful curtains. Only in the 1960s was Paule able to think of casting her work in bronze, but the experiments were disappointing. Despite a Leicester Gallery exhibition in 1954, 'Lines in Space and their Shadows', and a Grovesnor Gallery retrospective in 1968, recognition was not really forthcoming until Vézelay's first solo show in New York in 1980 and the Tate Gallery retrospective of 1983. Subsequently feminists such as Germaine Greer have become interested in her work; Greer interviewed her for the B.B.C 'Women of our Century' programme in 1984.

While Vézelay's life as a woman artist is exemplary, her output was relatively small; its influences while transformed with sensitivity and flair are evident; she was privileged to have such an intimate dialogue with pioneers of first generation modernism, such as Masson or Arp, when her individual circumstances could never have matched the historical conjunctions which formed their art. Sadly, she antagonised powerful younger groups of artists with her claims to priority in particular the grouping of Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson and Herbert Read; it was not until the 1980s that her reputation was consolidated.

England & Co, London have represented the Estate of Paule Vézelay since 1988 ; see [www.englishgallery.com](http://www.englishgallery.com)

Valuable books from Paule Vézelay's personal library together with the annual Paule Vézelay essay prize for the Modern Department were given to the Courtauld Institute of Art, by the artist's niece, Sally Jarman.

### **Writing by Sarah Wilson on Paule Vézelay**

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