



# FACTIVE PLASTICITY: THE ABSTRACT POTTERY OF WILLIAM STAITE MURRAY

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*Judge the art of a country, judge the fineness of its sensibility, by its pottery; it is a sure touchstone. Pottery is pure art ... pottery is plastic art in its most abstract essence.<sup>1</sup>*

William Staite Murray emphatically positioned himself as an artist who made pots. He regarded pottery as a genre that offered possibilities for exploring three-dimensional form and its graphic treatment, a new discipline, he argued, that was the interface between painting and sculpture. As he stated in a BBC interview in the 1930s with his friend and colleague John Piper, 'Pottery stands between Painting & Sculpture in the plastic arts, it inclines to either and includes both.'<sup>2</sup>

Murray was part of a dynamic craft movement that emerged during the 1920s as a result of a developing modernist discourse in British art. This group of potters, weavers, letter cutters and others abandoned the iconography and style of John Ruskin and William Morris for an artistic agenda that valued expression, vitality and reductive form, adopting the same neo-vernacular modernism that had radicalised painting a decade earlier. Authorship became paramount; idea and execution were channelled through an individual sensibility instead of conforming to the division of labour between design and artisanship that marked most craft practice prior to this – 'The brain which conceives the pot controls the making of it also.'<sup>3</sup> Murray saw no difference between his approach as a potter and that of his associates Ben and Winifred Nicholson and Christopher Wood who, as painters, were also exploring ideas of abstraction through a modernist interpretation of vernacular primitivism and truth to materials.

A defining feature of Murray's career was his immersion

in London's artistic avant-garde and association with painters and sculptors from an early age. Born in Deptford, London in 1881, Murray grew up in a comfortable family of seed and bulb merchants.<sup>4</sup> His childhood included some conventional schooling but at twelve he was sent to study with two cousins, traditional professional painters who had occasionally exhibited at the Royal Academy. He began his ceramic career by taking pottery evening classes at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in 1909 after which he also continued to paint. From 1915 to 1919 Murray worked with the Vorticist painter Cuthbert Hamilton at his Yeoman Pottery in Kensington and between them they produced a range of glazed earthenware pots decorated with colourful and schematised abstract designs. Murray then joined the Arts League of Service, an organisation of 'long haired men and short haired women'<sup>5</sup> formed in 1919 to support young artists and actors and foster ties between contemporary art and the British public. The League included the leading Vorticists Frederick Etchells, Edward Wadsworth and Paul Nash who endorsed the group as a 'National Necessity'.<sup>6</sup> Murray again took part in mixed exhibitions with painters such as Cedric Morris and the sculptor Frank Dobson. As he later recounted, 'Experiments of that time in abstract painting and sculpture interested me.'<sup>7</sup>

Murray's formative years as an artist took place during the time which Anna Greutzner Robins has described as when 'virtually the entire canon of modern art'<sup>8</sup> was exhibited in London. This period also encompassed the peak of the curator, writer and artist Roger Fry's interest in pottery. He was the first modern critic to re-evaluate early Chinese pottery after the Burlington Fine Arts Club's exhibition *Early Chinese Pottery and Porcelain* in 1910, the first exhibition of Sung and Tang pots held in Britain. Significantly, Fry also became a part-time potter, learning to

William Staite Murray, *Stoneware pot* (detail), c. 1927

Fig. 8 William Staite Murray potting, March 31 1923, *Times Educational Supplement*, York Museums Trust



throw and manage the production of tableware for the short-lived Omega Workshops 1913–19. Much has been written about Fry's seminal exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* – 'The Art Quake of 1910'<sup>9</sup> – and the introduction of Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne to the British public. However, the majority of art historians have overlooked his inclusion of nine 'majolica'<sup>10</sup> pots, commissioned by the dealer Ambrose Vollard and painted by the Fauve artists, Derain, Vlaminck, Gireud, Friesz and Matisse. Fry's all-inclusive Post-Impressionist rationale offered a universal critical framework for appreciating visual art, from painting and drawing to sculpture and pottery. As Charles Harrison argues, 'it was not merely a question now of what was going on in art, but of what criteria were to be considered appropriate in the modern period for identifying an endeavor as a work of art in the first place.'<sup>11</sup>

Fry's formalist theories rejected naturalistic representation or 'the appearance of things.'<sup>12</sup> The conceptual emphasis of the artwork moved from the external world to the interpretation of the object itself; consideration of the artwork and its constituent parts was key, a phenomenon Fry described as 'synthesis in design'. In a transcript of a public lecture given on the exhibition, Fry used the Fauve pottery of *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* to illustrate his new ideas of decorative synthesis, identifying many of the key features of modernist practice that artists including Murray, Wood and Ben and Winifred Nicholson would adopt over the next two decades – abstraction, the materiality of the art work, spirituality and pure design:

I would instance as a proof of the direction in which the post impressionists are working, the excellence of their pure design as shown in the pottery in the present exhibition. In these there is often scarcely any appeal

made through representation ... Particular rhythms of line and particular harmonies of colour have their spiritual correspondence, and tend to arouse now one set of feelings, now another. The artist plays upon us by the rhythm of line, by colour, by abstract form, and by the quality of the matter he employs.<sup>13</sup>

Murray's first major exhibition was held at W. B. Paterson's Gallery in 1924. Shoji Hamada, Bernard Leach's Japanese assistant, had been the catalyst for the exhibiting of contemporary pottery in Bond Street with his two shows of the previous year. However, the gallery's remit was wide and included Chinese antiquarian art, Georgian furniture, Japanese prints and contemporary art including an exhibition of Ben and Winifred Nicholson in 1923 and the Seven and Five Society in 1924. Murray's early pots reveal their debt to Chinese stoneware. Predominantly consisting of generic jars and bowls with monochromatic glazes, these pots reveal his attempts to master throwing on the wheel and the technical complexities of firing at high temperature. Throwing is a complex skill and in the 1910s was an artisanal occupation, only employed in Stoke-on-Trent's factories and a few remaining independent potteries. Effectively self-taught, Murray's pots from the early 1920s were thrown to a modest scale and consisted of simple forms with rounded shoulders and collared necks. It was not until Murray met and became friends with Hamada in 1921 that he was able to learn relatively basic techniques from a creative and knowledgeable peer.<sup>14</sup> Murray learnt the secondary process of turning leather-hard pots (cutting off excess clay) after Hamada enquired why his bowls didn't have foot-rings: 'Murray's reply was that all the bowls he had hitherto seen had been in museums on shelves, and he could not see the feet.'<sup>15</sup> He also learnt how to paint using Japanese brushes, a technique that required a complete commitment with each brushstroke. From this point on, Murray's pots became more assured, increasing in scale and often featuring prominent, even exaggerated, unglazed feet and bold calligraphic decoration. As with the quality of a painter's brushwork, the physical act of throwing became synonymous with individual expression.

The premise of pottery as abstract art had recently come into focus through the publication of Bernard Rackham and Herbert Read's book *English Pottery*.<sup>16</sup> Read, a young curator in the ceramics department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, argued that pottery was equal to painting and sculpture as a means of

artistic expression. In the heated drive to abstraction of the early 1920s, Read even boldly concluded that pottery had a greater potential than sculpture, which was limited by its figurative past:

Sculpture, whether glyptic or plastic, had from the first an imitative intention, and is to that extent less free for the expression of the aesthetic sense than pottery, which may be regarded as plastic art in its most abstract form.<sup>17</sup>

From 1924, critics started to view the pots of Murray and the other leading potter Reginald Wells as integral to the contemporary art world, and on an equal footing with painting and sculpture. In the catalogue essay for a group exhibition including Murray, Wells, Winifred Nicholson, Paul Nash and Jacob Epstein, the art critic of the *Observer* P. G. Konody wrote of the 'consistent purpose of the artists' and how 'the union of these several schools will enhance the reputations of these several artists and of the whole modern movement in English art.'<sup>18</sup>

By the mid 1920s Murray's pots started to display an assurance, becoming more vigorously thrown, with intentional throwing rings left as clear evidence of their forming. This concern with the physicality of making was part of the modernist desire to transpose ideas directly into form, an attempt to make the artwork a real object within its own terms of reference, stripping away either the pictorial 'viewpoint of reality' in painting or, in Murray's case, the possibility of utilitarian function.<sup>19</sup> As with Ben and Winifred's Christian Science beliefs, there was an additional dimension of what Harrison describes as the 'spiritual-primitivist' tendency in modern English art, summed up by Barbara Hepworth's remark, 'Vitality is not a physical, organic attribute of sculpture – it is a spiritual inner life.'<sup>20</sup> Murray was one of the first Buddhists in England and his values shaped (or unshaped) the conception of his work as illustrated by his discussion of the mastery of throwing as 'a complete fusion of consciousness' between potter, clay and action. Art was not perceivable by the rational mind alone, and Murray used terms such as 'feeling judgement' and 'form attunement' to describe the spiritual nature of the creative process and its concordant 'sense of ultimate reality'. The spiralling centrifugal and centripetal forces of throwing became a microcosm for nature: 'the earth itself might almost be a vast potter's wheel.'

Murray quickly became established as the leading English potter through his annual exhibitions at Paterson's Gallery, but

the period from the mid 1920s also saw him become a significant figure in the wider contemporary field, in part through his association with many of its leading artists. In 1925 he took part in the mixed exhibition *Pictures, Sculptures, & Pottery By Some British Artists Of To-Day* that included Paul Nash, Jacob Epstein, Reginald Wells and Winifred Nicholson. P. G. Konody, author of the exhibition catalogue, noted the group's shared interests.<sup>21</sup> He acknowledged that 'the modern movement in art is based on a broad foundation' and argued that 'the union of these several schools will enhance ... English art.' Murray's relationship with the Nicholsons flourished and in 1927 Ben proposed him for membership of the Seven and Five Society with Ivon Hitchens seconding. Murray became a stalwart of the society, exhibiting in all of its group shows, becoming a member of the hanging committee in 1931 and Honorary Treasurer in 1934, before the society disbanded in 1935.

Murray and Ben shared their first exhibition in 1927 with Christopher Wood who had joined the Seven and Five in 1926. Charles Marriot of *The Times* reviewed this and the adjoining exhibition of paintings by Winifred Nicholson together as creating 'an engaging air of youthfulness which the ancient wisdom expressed in the stoneware pottery by Mr W. Staite Murray countenances but does not dispel.'<sup>22</sup> It was H. S. (Jim) Ede who summed up the commonality of aims in an article the following year to accompany an exhibition shared between Ben, Winifred and Murray at the Lefevre Gallery. In content, approach and final placement of the artwork, they were, he observed, 'curiously synthetic.'<sup>23</sup> There were paintings of domestic spaces populated with still lifes of cups, plates and flowers that were metaphorically and literally interchangeable with the actuality of Murray's pots. The tension between disrupted pictorial space and perspective in Ben's interiors was echoed by Murray's use of graphic motifs on the surfaces of his pots and a sense of pictorial space heightened from working on surfaces in the round. All three artists kept the material qualities of their medium prominent whether using paint or glaze, just as they did with direct mark making and the texture of their surfaces. Murray's aim of integrating pottery and painting was famously realised later by Ede in Kettle's Yard but was already evident in correspondence with the Nicholsons about how they incorporated Murray's pots in their private and professional lives. Winifred used, bought and borrowed pots for her home 'the one you gave me, which has had so much life with my pictures'<sup>24</sup> and requested a loan for her 1930 Leicester Gallery

exhibition, while Ben actively sited Murray's pots alongside his work in the Seven and Five shows.

By the late 1920s Murray's work had lost its overt historicist edge and displayed a forceful character of its own. In a confident assertion of his right to articulate abstract volume, Murray amplified familiar and archetypal forms such as jars, bottles and bowls to the point of disruption, and often to the point of ungainliness. Dark textural glazes with mottled and subdued earth-based colours flowed and streaked down the pots, the glaze arrested at the highest point of its liquid melt (as in *Bowl*, 1927, see page 86). These rich, heavy glazes contrasted with pots painted with bold calligraphic brushwork in dark pigment over light grounds. Abstraction was a flexible term during this period, referring as much to the idea of distortion or manipulation of imagery as to an absolute rejection of representation. Murray's graphic approach ranged from the conventional use of linear banding to establishing panels or 'framed' space on the pot's surface for painted motifs (fig. 9) to using a more ambiguous ceramic space where stylised references to plants, flowers and animals floated between the concrete nature of three-



Fig. 9 William Staite Murray, *Mist Early Morning*, 1929, Stoneware, H 44.2 cm, York Museums Trust

dimensional form and implied or pictorial space of the two-dimensional surface (*Cadence*, 1927, page 88). East Asian ceramic precedents still underscored his approach to potting, as a series of atypical pots featuring European imagery but employing the Korean technique of *sanggam* where light and dark inlay is inscribed into pots revealed (*Roundabout*, 1926, page 84). And, in a move away from the convention of describing a craft object descriptively or by materials, Murray titled his pots as a painter would, using poetic terms suggestive of mood and character.

Murray received widespread recognition for his work from many leading fine art and ceramic critics including Frank Rutter, Bernard Rackham and in particular his long-term champion Charles Marriot, who wrote thirteen reviews of Murray's work for *The Times* between 1924 and 1935, claiming that Murray was 'one of the most distinguished artists in Europe ... [and] has now made pottery a complete form of emotional expression, combining the more abstract possibilities of sculpture and painting.'<sup>25</sup> After five successful annual exhibitions at Paterson's, Murray left to show at the more prestigious Lefevre Gallery in 1930 with the exhibition *Pottery, Paintings and Furniture*.<sup>26</sup> Having moved studios in the previous year, and built a bigger kiln, he was able to throw a series of new elongated and anthropomorphic pots of which *The Bather* is the most iconic. As a mark of his respect for Murray, Herbert Read allowed his unpublished essay 'The Appreciation of Pottery' to be included anonymously in the exhibition catalogue a year in advance of its inclusion in his seminal book *The Meaning of Art*. Murray had come of age and Charles Marriot's review reflected his new status:

If Mr Murray's pots aspire to the condition of sculpture the new works by young British artists, in the room upstairs, may be said to aspire to the condition of pottery. Not, in the case, by the way of utility but by putting the emphasis upon the abstract appeal of form and colour. Mr Henry Moore, the sculptor, takes the lead in interest.<sup>27</sup>

In many ways, the 1930 Lefevre exhibition was the zenith of Murray's career. He exhibited with Winifred in 1930 at the Leicester Galleries and at the Bloomsbury Gallery in 1931 with Barbara Hepworth and Ben, before his separation from Winifred. His relationship with Ben was still positive, as correspondence from Ben about his 1931 exhibition reveals:

Such a lovely show of yours, really it is very very fine progress you have made and that big thrown pot is one of the finest things I have ever seen, I expect everybody is thinking the same, certainly Harry [Henry Moore] and Barbara did.<sup>28</sup>

Murray became particularly active in the Seven and Five Society and took part in their exhibition at Zwemmer Gallery in 1935, the first completely abstract exhibition in England. However, the tide of modern art was changing, from what Harrison described as a 'poetic or insular modernism' to the internationalism of the Modern Movement. The Seven and Five Society disbanded, Ben Nicholson looked to Paris and the Association Abstraction-Création for fresh interpretations of abstract art, critics like Geoffrey Grigson challenged ideas of handicraft in favour of manufacturing and Herbert Read published *Art & Industry* in 1934, a new utopian vision for the useful or material arts. Even Clive Bell acknowledged the changing tide in 'What Next in Art?'. Writing of Post-Impressionism's contribution to English art he admitted it 'has ... run its course. It is complete.'<sup>29</sup>

In 1935 Murray was 54 years old, well established, and with a prestigious teaching post, but he was working in what was at best a discipline on the margins of accepted artistic practice – with no likeminded contemporaries for support. Ben Nicholson was 41, in a new relationship with Barbara Hepworth and, with his white reliefs, was ready to redefine his practice along with an emerging generation of younger English artists. Murray was losing the peer group that had been so important to him over the previous twenty years. In an extraordinary twist of fate he went to visit relatives in Rhodesia with his wife in 1939 and became stranded in Southern Africa for the duration of the war. Meanwhile, Bernard



Fig. 10 William Staite Murray decorating a pot at Bray, c. 1930, Illustrated in *William Staite Murray*, Malcolm Haslam

Leach had published *A Potter's Book* in 1940. A new generation of aspiring potters flocked to St Ives from around the world, and the idea of the rural based self-sufficient studio potter was born, validated by Leach's prolific and revisionist books and writing. William Staite Murray stayed in Southern Rhodesia, became a Trustee of the National Arts Council, formed a Buddhist society and wrote poetry, but never made pots again.

#### NOTES

- 1 Herbert Read, 'The Appreciation of Pottery', catalogue for *Pottery, Paintings and Furniture by William Staite Murray*, Alex Reid & Lefevre, London, 1930, p. 3.
- 2 Interview with John Piper, BBC television, 10 March 1937.
- 3 Dora Billington, *The Art of the Potter*, Oxford University Press, 1937.
- 4 For full details of Murray's life see Malcolm Haslam's biography, *William Staite Murray*, Crafts Council, 1984.
- 5 Eleanor Elder, *Travelling Players: The Story of the Arts League of Service*, Frederick Muller, London, 1939.
- 6 Paul Nash, *The Artist and the Public*, New Writers, May 1919, Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash: Writings on Art*, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 7 Ibid. Haslam, p. 10.
- 8 Anna Gruetzner Robins, 'Modern Art in Britain 1910–1914', Merrell Holberton/Barbican Art Gallery, 1997.
- 9 D. McCarthy, 'The Art Quake of 1910', *The Listener*, London, 1 February 1945, pp. 123–29.
- 10 Tin or white glazed earthenware painted with coloured pigments.
- 11 Ibid. Harrison, 1996.
- 12 D. McCarthy, 'The Post-Impressionists', catalogue *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, Grafton Gallery, London, November 1910.
- 13 Ibid. Roger Fry, *Fortnightly Review*.
- 14 Bernard Leach, *Hamada: Potter*, Kodansha, 1975, p. 62.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Bernard Rackham and Herbert Read, *English Pottery: Its Development From Early Times To The End Of The Eighteenth Century*, Ernest Benn, 1924.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 P. G. Konody, February 1925, p. 4.
- 19 Virginia Button, *Ben Nicholson*, Tate Publishing, 2007.
- 20 Barbara Hepworth in *Art in Theory*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, Wiley-Blackwell, 1998, p. 374.
- 21 P. G. Konody, catalogue essay of *Pictures, Sculptures & Pottery By Some British Artists Of To-Day*, London, Lefevre Gallery, February 1925.
- 22 Charles Marriot, Beaux Arts Gallery, *The Times*, 21 April 1927.
- 23 H. S. Ede, *Ben Nicholson, Winifred Nicholson and William Staite Murray, Artwork*, 1928.
- 24 Winifred Nicholson, undated letter to Murray, Craft Study Centre, University of the Creative Arts.
- 25 Charles Marriot, 'Stoneware Pottery', *The Times*, November 1928.
- 26 Lefevre Gallery, November 1930. Murray was known to make and exhibit paintings, furniture, etchings and tile panels.
- 27 Marriot, November 1931.
- 28 Ben Nicholson, 1931 letter to Murray, Craft Study Centre, University.
- 29 Clive Bell, 'What Next in Art?', *The Studio*, 1935.