

Contrapuntal Forms: Barbara Hepworth and Terry Frost

This article is based on a lecture given to the Arts Society in Leamington by Justine Hopkins on 7 November. It includes a number of points from other sources, including a conversation with the lecturer.

Terry Frost was a Leamington boy, born in the town in 1915 and rightly commemorated by a blue plaque in Stamford Gardens. As a young man he worked at Curry's cycle shop in Bedford Street.

A few years on he served as a commando, was captured in Crete and then became a prisoner of war. For the first time he then began to paint. Commenting later, he described these years as a 'tremendous spiritual experience, a more aware or heightened perception during starvation'. Maybe this helped him to simplify his work and to celebrate the experience of life.

As a latecomer to art he used his ex-serviceman's grant to finance a place at Camberwell Art College. After the war the watchword there was realism, preached by William Coldstream as professor. By contrast Victor Pasmore supported a more abstract style and encouraged Frost to move in that direction. He soon made his way to St Ives and established a permanent connection with the Newlyn School.

One of his early works was seen by Ben Nicholson, at that time married to Barbara Hepworth. This was helpful in securing a sought-after position as her sculptural assistant at a time when she was producing important works for the Festival of Britain. Frost did much of the hollowing for those sculptures! Maybe she also recognised in him someone who was moving in the same direction as her artistically.

One of the two Festival pieces, very popular when exhibited, was perpetually turning. This appealed to Frost, obsessed like her with movement and reaction.

Frost was inspired by Cornish landscapes. Later he was also inspired by landscapes in areas where he taught, notably in Yorkshire and the North East. Hepworth was the older artist who had taken a long journey from realism to abstraction. *Doves* (1927) is still recognisably realist but *Triplets* (1935) is entirely abstract. It explores the tension between three simple objects, separate but reacting with each other in a harmonious way – contrapuntal forms.

Madrigal (1949), exhibited now in Leamington Art Gallery, is a good example of Frost's early abstract style. Submitted for a prize competition, it is a response to an Auden poem and consists of subordinated forms, geometrically worked out

To both Hepworth and Frost, a work of art was not about the question 'What is it?' or 'What does it represent'? Instead art was about forces, experiences and feelings. Abstract art was infinitely adaptable as a means of conveying emotions. It was also an exercise in communications, requiring an engagement with the viewer. In Hepworth's case that means getting inside the sculpture where possible. Her bequest of one piece was given on condition that the viewer could walk freely around it. Her famous holes are not

symbols or things to be looked through but instead an opportunity to enter the piece. They were very different personalities. Frost was gregarious, with a sunny disposition. Hepworth was certain, intense, formidable, dictatorial at the end, with few friends. The two were not soul mates but they continued to see each other, especially after Frost settled in St Ives, where he lived until his death in 2003.

Frost had his favourite motifs and palates, illustrated in *Blue for Newlyn* (1989) which consisted of piled up forms. His favourites included spirals, loops of colour, chevrons and, above all, a shape resembling a quadrant of a circle but elongated, like the prow of a ship. He did not paint symbols in a straightforward way. Rather he painted things that could become symbols through interaction with the viewer.

Both Hepworth and Frost were influenced by what was going on in the US in 1950s. Frost went to New York where he met Ellsworth Kelly, Willem de Kooning and other luminaries. The atmosphere was notoriously bitchy. "They were quite nice to me," he said, "but only because they knew I had a return ticket." The influence of Piet Mondrian's style – patchwork grids with blocks of colour – can be seen in some of Hepworth's work at this time. Despite that, both artists avoided the heavily cerebral approach characteristic of much abstract expressionism. Instead they tried to give abstraction a human face. They painted pieces that reach people, move them and help them to feel more intensely, pieces that appeal and play with the imagination.

Apart from his work in oils and then acrylics, Frost was a prolific print maker. Unlike some artists, he did not see graphics as a subsidiary medium. Towards the end of his life he discovered screen printing, an ideal medium for him because its colours are so true. He used a limited range of colours but did so powerfully to create a sense of movement and energy. Prints also enabled him to produce for a wider market. This took place at a time when he had achieved recognition and a knighthood. His work sold well, so he could at last make some money, in marked contrast to most of his career. When the Queen opened the new Justice Centre in Leamington in 2011 the walls were festooned with the works of Terry Frost. He had come a long way from the cycle shop.

Some of Frost's prints at the Leamington Art Gallery show different sides of his personality. His tastes were eclectic. Mae West was a favourite star. And one of his later works is positively Picasso-like. His favourite picture in the National Gallery was Rubens' *Judgment of Paris* – not for its exuberant female forms in themselves but because they are painted as they turn. Motion, always motion.

One cannot claim that Frost was as great an artist as Hepworth. But extended comparisons like this cannot fail to illuminate their style, philosophies and inspirations.