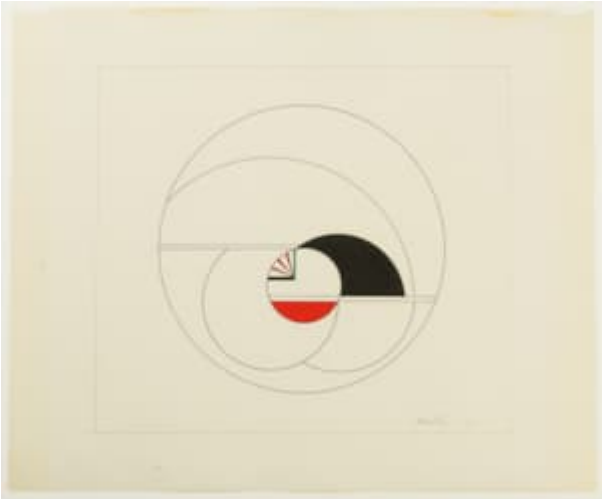


Marlow MOSS (London 1889 - Penzance 1958)

Untitled, 1950

Black ink, pencil and tempera, with a framing line in pencil, on stamped Bristol board.

Signed and dated Marlow Moss 50. at the lower right.

Illegibly inscribed and numbered C 17 on the verso.

241 x 271 mm. (9 1/2 x 10 3/4 in.) [image]

318 x 384 mm. (12 1/2 x 15 1/8 in.) [sheet]

Marlow Moss's work as a painter and sculptor was founded on a rigorous approach to drawing. As the Moss scholar Lucy Howarth has described the artist's working process, 'A work began with thumbnail sketches, in watercolour and gouache, dabs of colour, tentative and playful. From the initial sketches Moss then progressed to a working drawing, finding the mathematical relationships between the areas. In contrast to the freedom of the initial sketch, the working drawings are precise, executed with a sharp pencil, ruler and compass. These drawings are edged with notes and calculations in pencil. Often she collaged on coloured paper, further refining the divisions. Once the complete composition was arrived at, the drawing was transferred to the prepared canvas. The final painting was then executed; with layer after layer of thin translucent paint Moss gradually arrived at the desired intensity of colour, a concrete realisation of her a priori scheme.' Apart from two drawings in the Musée de Grenoble and another two sheets only recently acquired by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, however, almost none of Moss's works on paper are in public collections today.

The present sheet may be grouped with a small number of independent works on paper by Moss that have been aptly described by Howarth as 'optical diagrams'. As she further notes, Moss's drawings of this type - of which she lists just twenty-six examples in her catalogue raisonné of the artist's work - 'are the most undocumented section of Moss's oeuvre [and] have received scant attention in Moss scholarship...They are distinctly complete works, as opposed to the preliminary sketches and working drawings that were made in preparation for paintings…and they represent perhaps the most overtly experimental section of Moss's output, reminiscent as they are of Bauhaus student exercises.' The use of the colour green in this drawing exemplifies a feature that is only found in a handful of Moss's autonomous works on paper, since in her painted work the artist adhered to a strict use of only the

primary colours of blue, red and yellow, along with black and white.

Exhibitions

New York, Carus Gallery, Marlow Moss 1890-1958, 1979, no.16.

Literature:

Lucy Howarth, Marlow Moss (1889-1958), unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Plymouth, 2008, Vol.I, p.288, note 182, Vol.II [Catalogue raisonné], unpaginated, no. Wop 25 (as location unknown, and incorrectly dated 1949).

Artist description:

A British Constructivist artist and a significant figure in the development of non-figurative art in Europe, Marjorie Jewel Moss was born in Kilburn in north London. In her late twenties she began studying at the St. John's Wood Art School, leaving after a year to enroll at the Slade School of Fine Art in 1917. She remained there until 1919, when, at the age of thirty, she appears to have had some kind of mental breakdown, perhaps caused by her discovery of her sexual orientation. Sometime around 1920 she adopted the gender-neutral first name 'Marlow', and also began habitually dressing as a man, sporting closely-cropped, pomaded hair and wearing a cravat, hunting jacket and jodhpurs; as she is said to have later explained, 'I destroyed my old personality and created a new one.' (Indeed, in later years many critics and curators who knew her work but had not met her, believed that the artist to be a man.) Leaving London around 1924, Moss settled in Cornwall, living on her own and taking classes in sculpture at the Municipal School of Art in Penzance. Back in London by 1926, she began to paint again.

In 1927, at the relatively advanced age of thirty-eight, Moss moved to Paris, then the acknowledged centre of modern art, where she studied under Fernand Léger and Amedée Ozenfant at their private art school, the Académie Moderne. It was at around this time that she met her lifelong lover and partner, the Dutch writer Antoinette ('Netty') Nijhoff-Wind. Moss was already working in a non-figurative manner when, probably through Nijhoff, she met the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian, whose artistic theory of Neoplasticism – a purified, rational abstract art of straight lines and simple shapes, combined with black, white and primary colours – had led to the foundation of the De Stijl group in 1917. Moss immediately fell under the influence of Mondrian, and produced her first Neo-Plasticist painting in 1929. The following year she introduced close parallel lines (a so-called 'double line') into her abstract compositions; an innovation that brought her to the immediate attention of Mondrian. At his suggestion Moss became, in 1931, one of the founding members of the Abstraction-Création group, alongside Jean Arp, Jean Hélion, Naum Gabo, Auguste Herbin, Kurt Schwitters and the De Stijl artists Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg and Georges Vantongerloo, who became a close friend of Moss. Abstraction-Création was dedicated to the promotion of non-figurative art through exhibitions and publications, and Moss was the only British artist, and the only woman, whose works were included in all five of the group's annual cahiers, the last of which appeared in 1936.

Between 1927 and 1940 Moss lived between Paris and Normandy. Her long friendship with Piet Mondrian, although never overtly warm and sometimes quite guarded - in his letters to her, Mondrian always addressed her formally as 'Miss Moss' - lasted throughout her time in France. The two artists looked closely at each other's work, and Mondrian came to adopt the double line in his own work, although it was claimed by Vantongerloo that he did so without crediting Moss for her initial inspiration. Nevertheless, as Nijhoff noted of Moss, 'She understood Mondrian very well and vice versa. They were very well matched…a pair of extraordinary lone wolves.' Apart from her Constructivist paintings, based on mathematical principles and employing a colour palette limited to black, white, blue, red and yellow, Moss also produced a number of freestanding sculptures and white painted relief works. As Nijhoff has quoted the artist from memory: 'I am no painter, I don't see form, I only see space, movement and light.'

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a cross-dressing lesbian Jewish artist, Moss felt obliged to return to Britain in 1940, with the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1941 she settled in the village of Lamorna on the far west coast of Cornwall. She worked there in near-isolation, despite initially reaching out to Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, who lived not far away at St. Ives, but seem to have rejected her

overtures. Moss studied architecture at the Penzance School of Art and continued to live a somewhat reclusive life in Cornwall. Tragically, the vast majority of her work from before 1940 was lost when her home and studio in the village of Gauciel in Normandy was destroyed during a bombing raid in 1944. As a result, as one scholar has noted, 'All that remained from this early period were works no longer in her possession and photographs of works, which she had sent to art associations and interested parties for publication purposes or in the hope of being able to participate in exhibitions.'

After the war, Nijhoff rejoined Moss in Cornwall, though the couple returned several times to Europe, visiting Paris and Holland. The last decade of Moss's career was a very productive one, perhaps the result of her attempt to make up for the loss of almost her entire earlier output during the war. She exhibited at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles at the Galerie Charpentier in Paris in 1946 and 1950, and also had solo exhibitions at Erica Brausen's Hanover Gallery in London in 1953 and again in 1958, a few months before her death from stomach cancer. Moss bequeathed her entire estate to Nijhoff's son, Wouter Stefan Nijhoff, and in 1962 a major retrospective exhibition of her work was mounted at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

Until relatively recently, Marlow Moss has remained a very obscure figure, particularly in her native country. (She was much better known in Holland, where exhibitions of her work were held in the 1960s, 1970s and 1990s.) As the scholar Lucy Howarth has noted, 'Moss disrupted and subverted her surrounding narratives; she was a British artist in Paris and a European in Cornwall; she was a female artist amongst men, but can be regarded as a pseudo-man amongst female artists. This resistance to categorisation is a large factor in Moss's obscurity; she is omitted from the histories because she does not fit in.' Much of Moss's work from before 1940 was destroyed during the war, and only a handful of her works are in public collections in the United Kingdom. Paintings and sculptures by Marlow Moss are today in the collections of the Tate in London, the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as in several Dutch museums, notably the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, the Stedelijk Museum and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo.