



Composition

Blair Hughes-Stanton

Not on display

Title/Description: Composition

Artist/Maker: Blair Hughes-Stanton

Born: 1936

Object Type: Graphics

Materials: Ink, Paper

Technique: Wood engraving

Measurements: Page: h. 311 x w. 464 mm

Accession Number: S.860

Production Place: England, Europe

Blair Rowlands Hughes-Stanton (22 February 1902 – 6 June 1981) was a major figure in the English wood-engraving revival of the twentieth century. William McCance who worked with Hughes-Stanton said of him, 'He was an expressionist...but to find an expressionist who is able to take an intractable medium like wood engraving and make it a flexible instrument for his fancy and sensuous flights is unique.' [1]

Wood engraving is a printmaking technique, in which an artist works an image into a block of wood. Functionally a variety of woodcut, it uses relief printing, where the artist applies ink to the face of the block and prints using relatively low pressure. Hughes-Stanton's wood engravings have only been known to a narrow public, largely because the majority appeared in private press books of limited circulation. Similarly, the few dozen of his personal independent engravings were printed in small editions.

Hughes-Stanton was taught by Leon Underwood at Byam Shaw School of Art. Underwood's influence on him and several of his contemporaries was to be considerable. In 1921 Hughes-Stanton was among the first students (that also included Henry Moore) at the Leon Underwood School of Painting and Sculpture. He was also officially attending the Royal Academy Schools, along with Gertrude Hermes (his future wife). The American Marion Mitchell started the students wood-engraving. Underwood encouraged and joined his students in the new activity. His woodcuts probably inspired and influenced the students technically and emotionally.

In the early 1930s Robert Sainsbury was a collector of private press books and he was keen to offer Hughes-Stanton the financial and moral support to set up his own Gemini Press in 1933. Robert Sainsbury was originally a friend of Ida Graves, the artist's second wife. It was she who in fact introduced Sainsbury to Jacob Epstein, and Hughes-Stanton who introduced Robert Sainsbury to Henry Moore and to the contemporary art world in general, which allowed him to amass the amazing collection now housed at the Sainsbury Centre. [2]

Hughes-Stanton's relationship with Ida Graves energised an output of work for Gregynog, and later his own and other presses, which lasted until the outbreak of the Second World War, nine years later, and which was to prove the best of his career. Following their move to Essex in 1933 and birth of their children, Hughes-Stanton spent more and more time in London teaching life drawing at Westminster School of Art – a dynamic place to be in the 1930s under its principal, Kirkland Jamieson. Other staff there included Bernard Meninsky, Mark Gertler, Ernest Tedarb, Clifford Webb, Tom Chadwick and Gertrude Hermes. When in London he stayed with Gertrude and their children, an also with Arthur and Ara Calder-Marshall. [3]

This print is one of a series of personal engravings of semi-abstract figures that Hughes-Stanton created in the remaining three years before the war. The deliberately vague and similar titles have led to confusion over the years, for both the artist himself, as well as his collectors. This print, *Composition* (sometimes titled *Creation*) was engraved in 1936, and is much more abstract in style, the figures being far less discernible than his engraving *Holy Family*, of the previous year (S.86c in the Sainsbury Centre Collection). It is inscribed with the title 'Composition' and edition no. '5/12' in pencil bottom left, below the image, and signed and dated 'Blair HS 36' to the bottom right, below the image.

By this point Hughes-Stanton was at the peak of his discipline and influence. His reputation was cemented by engraver Claire Leighton's remark that, "Blair Hughes-Stanton is paying the price of his brilliance by having many imitators, till a school of fantastic, obscure mysticism threatens to swamp the individualism of English engraving."

Official recognition of his talent came in 1938 in the form of being one of only a few artists invited to represent Britain in Venice at the 21st International Biennale Exhibition of Fine Arts. The other artists were Jacob Epstein, Paul Nash, Matthew Smith, Stanley Spencer, Christopher Wood, Stanley Anderson and a group of 18th and 9th century masters. Hughes-Stanton was awarded the International Prize. [4]

Katharine Malcolm, June 2023

[1] Penelope Hughes-Stanton, *The Wood-Engravings of Blair Hughes-Stanton* (Private Libraries Association, 1991), ix

[2] Hughes-Stanton, p.66

[3] Hughes-Stanton, p.42

[4] Hughes-Stanton, p.45
