FORM AND COLOUR: FRIENDSHIP, PATRONAGE AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN BARBARA HEPWORTH, LESLIE MARTIN AND SADIE SPEIGHT

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Introduction

The personal papers of the architect Professor Sir Leslie Martin (1908-2000) were purchased by the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS), with the assistance of the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Friends of the National Libraries of Scotland, in 2002. Martin’s professional papers were acquired by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in the same year.

The NGS archive mainly consists of three major correspondences between Martin and his wife, the designer Sadie Speight (1906-92): with Naum Gabo (1890-1977), Barbara Hepworth (1903-75) and Ben Nicholson (1894-1982). This paper examines that with Hepworth, which covers the period from 1935 to 1972 and contains forty-three items, including letters and photographs.

Leslie Martin and Sadie Speight, 1930s
Unknown photographer
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Leslie Martin and Sadie Speight

Martin is renowned as much for his ground-breaking architectural practice as for his research and for his contribution to education. He held many important public and academic positions, including Principal Assistant Architect for the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (1939-48), Architect to the London County Council (1953-56), Professor of Architecture at Cambridge University (1956-72) and visiting professorships at Oxford (1965-66) and at Yale (1973-74). He was the architect of some remarkable post-war buildings, including the Royal Festival Hall on London’s
South Bank (1951), the Gulbenkian Foundation Centre for Modern Art in Lisbon (1979), and the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow (1987).

Speight was also a qualified architect and had a celebrated career as a designer. In 1938 she was jointly commissioned with her husband by Herbert Read to write *The Flat Book*, a reference book on contemporary furniture, fabrics and household products. Speight was a founder member of the Design Research Unit of the Council of Industrial Design and became renowned for her interior design schemes. She and Leslie Martin married in 1935.

Martin and Speight first saw the work of Hepworth and Nicholson at the Mayor Gallery in London in April 1934. A subsequent visit to Hepworth and Nicholson’s studio in Hampstead began life-long connections between the quartet, based on friendship, patronage and collaboration.

The most obvious form of collaboration came about after Nicholson and Hepworth introduced Martin and Speight to Gabo in 1936. Interests within the group were so closely affiliated that Martin became co-editor, with Nicholson and Gabo, of the seminal *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, which was published in 1937. Speight acted as Secretary and with Hepworth decided the lay-out. *Circle* highlighted the vital British contribution to the European abstract movement. Reprinted in 1971, it is now recognised as a classic amongst theoretical modernist texts. This project is more fully covered in the Martin-Speight-Nicholson correspondence in the NGS archive and within RIBA’s Martin holdings than in the NGS Hepworth material.

**The Pre-War Correspondence**

The second letter in the NGS Hepworth correspondence is from the sculptor to Speight. It illustrates the combination of friendship and patronage which characterises the material as a whole. In it, Hepworth provided an update on personal and professional matters:

> This week has been simply hectic. We have both made thousands and thousands of journeys up and down the Mall moving Ben into his new Studio, carrying innumerable canvasses and frames and furniture. We are more or less straight now and Ben is v.v.happy to have a quiet spot to paint in without the marble chips and I am busy filling up 7 The Mall with lumps of marble and stone.

The letter was accompanied by an invoice dated 8 January 1935, in which Hepworth listed three works with prices – two paintings by Nicholson, one drawing by her – which the Martins had purchased.

Martin and Speight’s patronage was to prove vital to Hepworth, not least in financial terms. In an undated letter of 1937 or 1938, she wrote to Speight about

I wonder whether you and Leslie could possibly give me a date when you could pay the remaining bit owing for the carving and painting you got. I am taking you at your word in writing and asking you this because a frightful crisis has arisen. We were not properly informed about the costs of this divorce business – we thought we had to pay after the divorce, and now quite suddenly we find that the money has to be paid into court before the case and we have to find £63.19.6 immediately or they threaten to withdraw proceedings. Knowing what this business means to Ben after all this long while – I feel I must make every effort.⁷

Ben and Winifred’s marriage was dissolved in 1938 and he and Hepworth married in November of that year.

Around this time, Hepworth sent two carvings, one of teak and the other of Lignum vitae, on approval to Martin and Speight, then living in Hull where Martin had his own practice. She wrote strict instructions on how to pack the one they did not wish to keep, for its return via passenger train:

If you want to return the Lignum carving...the packing needs to be much more elaborate than for the Teak carving – because it is so heavy. It needs a base making of strong wood – ½ inch at least with battens. 2 inches spare to be allowed all round carving on interior measurement. The carving wants building up in cloths so that sawdust does not scratch and then laying on a 2 inch bed of sawdust in the base, and then sawdust packing tight all the way round and on top right up to the lid and the base. So that the carving cannot possibly move out of place.⁸

This theme of what would now be called ‘collection care’ runs throughout the NGS correspondence. Martin and Speight purchased the teak sculpture, *Ball, Plane and Hole* of 1936 [BH 81], which is now in the Tate collection (T03399).⁹
War-Time Correspondence

At the end of August 1939, just days before the declaration of war, Hepworth, Nicholson and their children moved to Cornwall, where they were soon joined by Gabo and his wife Miriam. Not long afterwards, Martin and Speight moved from Hull to Hertfordshire, as Martin had been appointed Principal Assistant Architect to the London, Midland and Scottish Railway.

Hepworth described her new circumstances in a letter Speight of late 1939:

We seem to be starting a market garden...I have never done so much hard digging in my life. I miss my home and studio and work just like Hell...but life is settling down and Ben gets time to paint now and very soon I hope to get time to do some sculpture – I have made myself a corner in which to work. If we can garden ½ time and work the other ½ I guess both ends could meet and we shall be more than happy to be able to do some creative work...The landscape is miraculous.10

In December 1939, Hepworth and her family moved to Dunluce, Trelyon, St Ives, a photograph of which was annotated by Nicholson and sent to the Martins.11 Their support of Hepworth professionally and personally continued during the war; they offered to store some of Hepworth’s sculpture for her12, lent her and Nicholson money (£15 in late 1939)13 and cheered them up with news of their own projects in London.14

On 9 May 1940, Hepworth wrote to Martin to announce a breakthrough in her work:

In spite of various and endless other activities I have achieved what I think is a good new sculpture. I have only done it v.small but now I am going to do it bigger. It is another “Form & Colour” which I am most interested in. I have just photographed it and will send you a photo if good.15

The letter is illustrated with an annotated sketch which reads ‘circular / deep blue intercepting hollows / red intercepting cone / conical white’. The work can be identified as Sculpture with Colour (Deep Blue and Red), of which she made five small versions in plaster [BH 117], of which the second is now in the Tate collection (T03133).16 She later made a larger version in ‘wood painted with strings’ [BH 118].17

Hepworth went on to explain further and to ask for Martin’s opinion and help:

The strings of course are half way between the ptgs & sculpture. I wanted to discover something I could do...which would sell for £5. I am doing 1 or 2 copies of each. I should be most interested to know if you think they are any good. If you do think so would it be a bore for you to keep one or two and show them to anybody who might be interested; and return the rest to me. If you don’t like them please say so because I’m interested quite objectively and return the lot forthwith!18
The letter concluded with a reflection on this development, its overlap with Martin’s professional interests and potential for continuing collaboration between them:

I...think I have discovered how to use [colour and form] together and to achieve a new power and experience and I have discovered certain laws. I don’t think anybody has done it before – to my knowledge it has always been
coloured sculpture. You have done it in relation to architecture. There’s a lot
of work to be done and I only hope there will be time. Because I think it has a
direct bearing on a sort of pooled effort of architecture sculpture ptg and
sociology.19

A letter from Hepworth to Martin of 1940 suggested a specific project on which
they could collaborate. She wrote:

Gabo, Ben and I have had long discussions...We have decided we must start a
“war-time chronicle” – because we feel the absolute necessity for creating a
vehicle of expression between us all and one that will make a link between
those who are already in the navy, air force and army – also a thing which
will bring us together with those young and so far unheard of people – by
inviting co-operation and contributions. It is absolutely necessary in our minds
to discover the new impulses and unite them.20

Hepworth invited Martin to become editor ‘for everything to do with architecture’ in
this wartime version of Circle with Read looking after prose and poetry and
Nicholson, Gabo and herself responsible for painting and sculpture.21 Hepworth
concluded the letter with: ‘We do hope you feel sympathetic and not only that but
that you can be an Editor! We absolutely need you!’22

However, in the next letter in the archive, Hepworth explained to Martin that she
did not feel it was the right time to publish the chronicle, but reflected on the
group’s shared aims and achievements, writing:

I think all we did, prwar, was a preparation for just this – Concrete
expression may be at an end for the moment, as far as we are concerned, but
ideas are not at an end and must be expressed energetically in living. We may
even have to go through a long phase of suffering before the constructive
idea springs up as an expression of the people...Our few houses, sculpture,
ptgs, were only a pre-view, or research. They were the beginning and not the
end of something. In the nursery, destruction is considered to be the
frustration of a desire to construct. The same applies to humanity. Our
revolution is overdue and violence seems to be necessary.23

Post-War Correspondence

Hepworth stayed in Cornwall after the war and in 1949 moved to Trewyn Studio in
St Ives; two years later she and Nicholson divorced. In the meantime, she and
Martin found themselves playing major roles in the 1951 Festival of Britain.
Hepworth’s first public commission was from the Arts Council of Great Britain to
create Contrapuntal Forms [BH 165], to stand on the South Bank, London during the
Festival.24 Martin was responsible for the scheme concept and design for final
completion of the nearby Royal Festival Hall.
In a letter of 5 April 1950, Hepworth wrote to Martin explaining that she was:

...simply longing to see the inside of the Concert [i.e. Royal Festival] Hall....The whole of last Friday & Saturday I spent on the festival site – I got the figures up safely and for half an hour I was able to consider them (before scaffolding was put round) and I was pleased! It was the culminating point of the year’s work.25

She continued:

I was very stimulated by certain shapes and colours and methods of construction on the site – and immensely excited when I walked all round the Concert Hall – the scale is so fine and its shape in relation to the position. I really longed to get in...It must be glorious to be an architect and see such an immense ‘Sculpture’ grow almost overnight and to know that it has the power to move people as well as to supply their specific needs in the most perfect way possible.26

Hepworth and Martin’s post-war careers developed apace and their achievements were increasingly recognised; Martin was knighted in 1957 and Hepworth was made a Dame of the British Empire in 1965. Martin’s patronage evolved accordingly, for example providing details of the sculptures and drawings by Hepworth which he and Speight had acquired in the 1930s and ‘40s for inclusion in a monograph about her work.27

Accordingly, Speight annotated a letter from Hepworth of 11 April 1959 with sketches and cataloguing details of three sculptures, two gouaches and one collage in their collection, including Two Forms of 1938 [BH 106] and Ball, Plane and Hole.28

Conclusion

The Hepworth correspondence in the Sir Leslie Martin personal archive ends with a letter dated 11 January 1972 from her to him, in which she expressed her delight about the recent republication of Circle, thirty-five years after they had first published it:

I think I told you how glad I was about the republication of “Circle”. It has become a very favourite book with students. I looked at it with a cold eye and I thought it was jolly good and very contemporary. I hope you did.29

Following Hepworth’s death in 1975, Martin and Speight’s support of her work and reputation continued. The last letter in the Martin-Speight-Hepworth material is one from Martin of 3 July 1986 to A. D. Fraser Jenkins of the Tate. In it he explained what he knew of Hepworth’s sculpture Ball, Plane and Hole, which the gallery had acquired in 1982. Martin wrote:
We never bought anything from galleries: always directly from the artists themselves who were of course our friends. We bought our first Barbara in January 1935, a collage ‘Saint-Remy 1931’...We still have this.  

Speight died in 1992 followed by Martin in 2000. The Professor Sir Leslie Martin Archive at the National Galleries of Scotland pays testament to the friendship, patronage and collaboration between Hepworth, Martin and Speight and can be consulted on application to gmaarchives@nationalgalleries.org.


2 The RIBA Leslie Martin Archive is yet to be catalogued. Enquiries can be sent to drawingsandarchives@riba.org as at 30 March 2021.


5 Further to research by Rachel Smith about the date when Nicholson moved into his new studio, it is thought that this letter dates from the summer of 1936 [information provided in emails from Eleanor Clayton to the author of 15 October and 23 November 2021]. Thanks are also due to Kirstie Meehan, Archivist, National Galleries of Scotland for her help with this matter.

6 Undated letter [July 1936] from Hepworth to Speight, GMA A70/2/2. I have maintained Hepworth’s spelling, abbreviations and so on in the quotes in this paper.

7 Undated letter [1937/38] from Hepworth to Speight, GMA A70/2/8.

8 Undated letter from Hepworth to Speight, GMA A70/2/12.


10 Undated letter [late 1939] from Hepworth to Speight, GMA A70/2/15.

11 Photograph of Dunluce annotated by Nicholson, sent with a letter from him to Speight dated ‘October 28’ [1940] in the NGS archive – reference number is impossible to establish in March 2021 due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

12 Undated letter from Hepworth to Martin, GMA A70/2/16.

13 Undated letter [c.1939] from Hepworth to Martin and Speight, GMA A70/2/17.


15 Letter dated ‘May 9th’ [1940] from Hepworth to Martin, GMA A70/2/19.


17 Reference numbers from Hodin, op. cit, p. 165.

18 Letter dated ‘May 9th’, op. cit.

19 Ibid.

20 Letter dated ‘May 8th’ [1940] from Hepworth to Martin, GMA A70/2/21. Hepworth wrote to Read about this project on the same day. Letter dated ‘May 8th’ [1940] from Hepworth to Read, Herbert Read Archive, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Special Collections, HR/BH-4.


22 Ibid.

23 Undated letter [1940-42] from Hepworth to Speight and Martin, GMA A70/2/22.
25 Letter of 5 April 1951 from Hepworth to Martin, GMA A70/2/23.
29 Letter of 11 January 1972 from Hepworth to Martin, GMA A70/2/27.
30 Copy of letter of 3 July 1986 from Martin to A. D. Fraser Jenkins of the Tate Gallery, GMA A70/2/28.
31 As at 30 March 2021, or in writing to The Archivist, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Two, 73 Belford Road, Edinburgh EH4 3DS.