

SAM (T.S.) HAILE: POTTER & PAINTER (1909 – 1948)

After leaving school at sixteen Sam Haile worked in a shipping agents office by day and was a regular at Clapham School of Arts evening classes. A poor sleeper, he began a lifelong habit of painting into the night. His work showed enough promise to gain him a scholarship to the Royal College of Art but his evident interest in surrealism and in innovative figures like Picasso, Klee and Henry Moore led to the disapproval of Sir William Rothenstein the head of the RCA. This lack of favour and the threat that his artistic sympathies might have led him to fail to gain a diploma drove him to the relative sanctuary of the pottery department run by William Staite Murray. Murray was at best an enigmatic tutor whose own works were shown alongside those of contemporary painters but Sam Haile seems to have gained enough from him to keep up an occasional correspondence throughout much of the rest of his life. The forms of heavily thrown vessels he began to make at the Royal College owe a good deal to Murray but as the painter Patrick Heron noted, Sam Haile decorated pots with symbolic figures and dream characters more than a decade before Picasso began working with clay at Vallauris.

Sam Haile met Marianne de Trey, a textiles student at the Royal College of Art when they were both students. They married in 1938 and Sam introduced her to pottery. She was a stabilising influence on his unconventional and radical nature and tolerant of his night time painting sessions where he immersed himself in a surreal world. His early reputation as an innovative potter was firmly established by the Brygos Gallery exhibition in Bond Street in 1937. Critical reactions were very positive and his work was subsequently included in significant public and private collections.

These years preceding the Second World War were uneasy and, as a pacifist, Sam Haile suffered from both the threats of impending violence and an increase in his inner turmoil. Night time was still reserved for surrealist paintings and the days for making (and sometimes teaching) pottery. Very few of his surrealist paintings seem to have been exhibited in his lifetime. He made a number of visits to the French Alps with his wife Marianne and there he made a series of watercolours which celebrate the grandeur of the mountains and valleys. These works stand apart from the surrealist, night paintings but there is a sense that the landscape is in a state of anthropomorphosis and the clefts, folds and peaks suggest underlying sensual forces are at work. In both the surrealist paintings and the landscapes the quality of line is deft and the colour is sensitive and expressive. The landscapes and the surrealist works do not stand quite as far apart as some critics and historians have posited.

In the summer of 1939 Marianne and Sam were on holiday in France when they made the decision not to return to Britain. After obtaining visas in Switzerland they found their way to New York and Sam began a series of short term jobs. Sam's pots had been sent from England and when they arrived in 1940 they were seen by the director of a gallery in Madison Avenue, Rena Rosenthal. Significant sales were made from this exhibition and Sam's name came rapidly to the fore bringing an invitation to teach at Alfred University, the leading college for ceramics. The direct nature of his technique, his simple glaze recipes and the powerful surface painting became a radical force in American ceramics. After a move to Ann

Arbor in 1943 Sam Haile was forced to join the United States Army as a non-combatant. He was transferred to the British Army by the end of that year. The remaining years of the war were depressing and destructive.

Marianne returned to England at the end of hostilities and Sam began working with clay at Bulmer Brickyard. He had a period of making slipware there. He returned to the United States and sold his remaining stock of pots and was offered a teaching position at Rhode Island. Sam turned this down and on his return to England Bernard Leach suggested to him that the pottery and The Cabin at Dartington might make a good home and place of work. Marianne and Sam moved there in 1947 and Sam took a part time position with the Rural Industries Bureau as an adviser to potters across the Country. Just over one year later he was tragically killed in a road accident.

Had Sam Haile lived he would have undoubtedly been a leading figure in twentieth century ceramics. His integration into pottery of surreal expression and deep symbolism would have challenged Bernard Leach's oriental stance which came to dominate the thirty years following the War. Sam's surrealist paintings might have strengthened that wavering movement in England. His mature work has been denied us. Marianne has been stalwart in her determination to keep his works on view and by proffering to us the truths, as she understands them, of this complex and multi- talented man.

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