

Present Places, Absent Faces:
The Artist Thelma Hulbert from Childhood to First Solo Exhibition (1950)

By Deborah Julie SMITH

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Abstract

My research is presented as a chronological biography, questioning whether Thelma Hulbert (1913-1995) may have been the earliest Twentieth Century British working-class woman painter to achieve professional success comparable to that of her male contemporaries. Key to my argument is the understanding of Hulbert's working class 'otherness,' contrasting her story against those of her female contemporaries, who hailed predominantly from higher ends of the social strata. Despite five years as a student at Bath School of Art and a year at the Euston Road School under the guidance of Claude Rogers, Hulbert was consistently described as 'untrained' with her paintings falling outside of the art 'fashions' of more radical contemporaries. The later appears to me to have been in part Hulbert's conscious and deliberate choice, therefore I have chosen not to apply extensive use of art theory to her work. Hulbert's background and gender made her an Outsider in many respects, and her paintings could almost be classified as 'Outsider' Art.

In the central chapters I have analysed Hulbert's life and work from historical, psychological, socio-political, and gendered perspectives, considering the impact of The Great Depression and The First and Second World Wars on Art and Society. These chapters focus on my research into Hulbert's interaction with The AIA, The London Group, and The Euston Road School.

My analysis of Hulbert's post-war paintings centres on comparisons with Mondrian, who I have discovered was the Modernist Hulbert most admired. This biography finds its logical conclusion at Hulbert's first solo exhibition in 1950, at which point Hulbert's life took off on an entirely different personal and professional trajectory which I propose to cover as a PhD.

Preface

From 2005-2014 I was employed by East Devon District Council (EDDC) as an Administrator at the Thelma Hulbert Gallery, Honiton, Devon. The gallery, rebranded as 'THG' in 2010, is housed in Hulbert's last home and studio, Elmfield House, a grade II listed Georgian building. The house was purchased from Hulbert's estate by EDDC in 1996, becoming a gallery in 1998. On opening, the original Trustees of Hulbert's Artistic Estate loaned THG fourteen oil paintings, watercolours and sketches to form a representative core collection at the gallery.

Whilst working at THG I observed that little seemed known about Hulbert other than her involvement with the Euston Road School, and resolved to find out more. Had the gallery not existed in her name, her work might have escaped my attention and this biographical account of her early years might not have been written.

I began my research in 2012. THG holds a small archive which proved invaluable at the start of my independent research, comprising nine handwritten letters from Miss Hulbert, 35 press cuttings, 19 non-professional photographs of Hulbert's paintings, together with catalogues from Hulbert's Memorial exhibition at Central School in 1995, and her 1962 Whitechapel Gallery retrospective.

In 2002 EDDC commissioned a small (A5) booklet, titled *Thelma. A Portrait of The Artist Thelma Hulbert*, from the late Dr John Furse, and published it privately in a run of 600 copies. This publication is a basic guide book sold for £3 in the gallery foyer rather than a researched biography such as my thesis. Approximately two thirds of Furse's text is simply transcribed material from the THG archive, rendering his booklet of little more use for research than the archive itself (see Appendix on page 61 for a detailed review of Furse's text). Fortunately, THG hold a file of notes and correspondence which Dr Furse's did not include in his booklet, and these provided more assistance. My personal Hulbert archive now includes letters, reviews, catalogues, and photographic images which I obtained from archives, interviews, correspondence and internet searches, bringing together previously unseen material which now exceeds the THG archive by approximately 400%.

As there is very little in written form on Hulbert, I felt it necessary to delve into the biographies and archives of those around her for evidence of her activities. Again fortunately, THG holds copies of Iona Wright's *Black Sea Bride* (2001), Tony Gould's *Inside Outsider* (1983), and Jenny Pery's *The Affectionate Eye* (1995). Hulbert is mentioned in all three. Using these and THG's archival material I traced family, friends, former colleagues and students, authors such as Pery and TG Rosenthal, and the children of artists such as Victor Pasmore and Claude Rogers who graciously allowed me into their homes, talked to me and showed me items relating to Hulbert in their possession.

Introduction

My thesis is placed firmly within the Twentieth Century, juxtaposing Hulbert with British artists alone, using the post-Industrial Revolution definition of Working Class. European women, such as Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-c.1656), practiced within a 'working' class of professional artist families as early as The Renaissance. Thelma Hulbert was, undeniably, working class by birth. I have evidence that her father, Richard Hulbert, was a self-employed builder from the village of Batheaston, Somerset, as were his forefathers. Richard also managed a working men's club. I have also discovered that the men on Richard's mother's side were miners from the village of Timsbury, and that Thelma's maternal grandfather was a journeyman who also baked loaves for a small corner bakery in the dilapidated Georgian Walcot quarter of Bath.¹

Hulbert's professional success as a painter during her lifetime is also undeniable, and verifiable, yet since her death her reputation has waned. For some, her name now conjures an inaccurate image of an elderly spinster painting flowers for pleasure, with the prolific body of work² she produced during a fifty-year career unfairly overlooked as outmoded. This biography of her early years seeks to disprove that impression.

From 1938-1989 Hulbert exhibited in eight solo exhibitions, and over 50 group shows, at prestigious national and international galleries.³ Critics reviewed her paintings constructively, and her work was sold to private and public collections. A television documentary was filmed about her, she was interviewed for BBC Radio, and was featured in articles for the magazines *Picture Post* and *Queen*.

In the 1960s Hulbert taught Fine Art at Central School. She had a significant non-professional career as an Artist's Model, and was personally acquainted with leading cultural and political figures. Undeniably this represents a life of remarkable achievement for a woman who started out as a builder's daughter living above a working men's club in the backstreets of Bath.

¹ Census information acquired using www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed throughout 2012-2021.

² There is currently (2021) no published catalogue raisonné of Hulbert's work. Using archives, reviews, exhibition catalogues and auction house listings I have traced 383 titles with 155 images, compiling my own original catalogue raisonné which exceeds the 98-title itinerary at THG, previously the only known catalogue of her work.

³ Until my research only 28 exhibitions and 8 solo shows by Hulbert were recorded at THG, and only two catalogues. I have sourced a further 25 exhibition catalogues with Hulbert as an exhibitor, confirming that Hulbert contributed to a total of 52 solo or group exhibitions, 18 more than were previously believed.

Chapter One: Early Life and Influences 1913-1928

Thelma Hulbert's ambition to become an artist seemed contentious from the beginning. Everything except her talent stood against her. However, I have discovered that many of these obstacles were offset by unique advantages of history, geography, and psychology. It has also become clear from my research that several of the life-long interests and beliefs which began during these formative years impacted strongly on Hulbert's mature practice.

It is a bold assertion that Thelma Hulbert may have been the first professionally accepted woman painter to emerge from the British working class during the early Twentieth Century, yet modern art anthologists describe few parallels. The closest alternative contender might be Evelyn Dunbar (1906-1960) although Dunbar's father, a bespoke Tailor, expanded his business and employed staff, elevating his social standing above that of Hulbert's who was self-employed as a builder. However, the above assertion bears a caveat; where anthologists reference Hulbert at all her background is omitted ⁴ so there may be others from the working class, ⁵ some of whom concealed their humble origins from biographers, as Thelma did in adult life.

In previous centuries British artists invariably derived from wealthy Professional or Aristocratic families, people unconcerned with the urgency of selling their work to survive. By the time of The Great Depression in the 1920s-1930s (Hulbert's adolescence), access to private means had become an aspiring artists' necessity, placing opportunities further beyond the reach of the working class. Hulbert's associates illustrate this point. Iona Carmen Craig (1911-2006), for example, who was the niece of Lord Craigavon, first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, received an allowance from her father Granville Craig, heir to Belfast's Dunville distillery, allowing her to 'live without a job.'⁶

Female working-class painters of professional standing were therefore essentially non-existent in Britain prior to the Twentieth Century. Their male equivalents were few, but not unprecedented. Young men from less privileged backgrounds had access to the profession long before women. These included GF Watts (1817-1904), a piano-maker's son from Marylebone, who benefitted from patronage in place of private income. Watts' female working-class contemporaries, such as Elizabeth Siddall (1829-1862), a cutlery maker's daughter from Southwark, were overlooked as unacceptable risks for investors. These resourceful aspirant women artists contrived entry into painterly circles as models, although society considered this activity morally questionable. Women who sat for men gambled their artistic reputations along with their respectability, hence the irony

⁴ As in Alicia Foster, *Tate Women Artists*, Tate Publishing, 2004, p.120.

⁵ For example, Lithographer Pearl Binder (1904-1990) whose father was also a Tailor, although of Russian, not British, working-class descent.

⁶ Iona Wright, *Black Sea Bride*, Square One Publications, 1997, p.14.

that posing before The Male Gaze ⁷ rendered women painters invisible to male patrons. This dilemma returned to trouble Hulbert as a student in the 1930s when she was obliged to sit for The Euston Road School should their professional model miss a booking.

An additional problem for Siddall, Hulbert and others in Britain stemmed from a widespread paternalistic condescension directed towards women in general. As a result, female artists of any class or degree of talent routinely had their practice dismissed without consideration as second rate, aligned with handicraft rather than Fine Art. ⁸ Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807) and Mary Moser (1744-1819) escaped this prejudice, although both were Europeans from families of artists practicing in Britain whose influential artist fathers validated their work. ⁹

While Thelma Hulbert could do nothing about being a woman, a unique combination of history and geography assisted the circumvention of her problem of class. During the advance of The Industrial Revolution Bath's precipitous terrain proved unsuitable for large-scale infrastructure. An alternative economic and demographic model resulted, centred on Bath's Georgian heritage. In place of factory workers, skilled tradesmen such as Thelma's father were demanded to maintain the city's elegant domestic terraces, which were structurally supported by tiering. By 1918 when Thelma entered school, Bath's working class overlapped with its lower middle classes. Consequently, Thelma was raised with little concern for or awareness of social position. Had she been born a builder's daughter in a more intensively industrialised city, such as Birmingham, this might have been a different matter.

My research suggests The Hulbert's believed themselves socially superior amongst their class. On the 1910 census Richard Hulbert alluded to himself as a 'Stonemason', although his 1916 conscription papers state simply 'Bricklayer.' The census reveals that he and his brother Albert were registered 'Harris Hulbert' at birth, an incorporation of their mother's surname, yet 'Harris' was not conferred on Thelma's five aunts who lost their maiden names on marriage, discontinuing the lineage. This seems inappropriately ostentatious given that The Harrises were simple mining stock. Harris was not added to Thelma's birth certificate either, but again using census information I observe that she briefly adopted it during the 1950s. Presumably she thought this useful in establishing her professional name within a higher-ranking peer group. Several of Hulbert's

⁷ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen*, Vol. 16 (Issue 3), 1973, p.808. Mulvey's phrase defines art created by men for men to gaze upon women who, in turn, may not return the look and have no voice in the transaction.

⁸ Craft was traditionally associated with working-class Applied Arts which further debased its value.

⁹ Kauffman and Moser were amongst 34 founders of London's Royal Academy in 1768. Their fathers elected them. As further British women sought to become members, their right to election was rescinded by the RA's Instrument of Foundation (1879). It was not reinstated until 1936. Women at the RA; www.royalacademy.org.uk. Accessed 20 September 2021.

catalogues allege French ¹⁰ and Spanish descent, implying her belief that cosmopolitan ancestry conferred cultural credibility, aligning her with Europeans such as Kauffman and Gentileschi.

A Working-Class Family History: its psychological effects on Hulbert's mature work

Thelma Hulbert was born on 10 November 1913, five years into the marriage of Richard John Harris Hulbert (1883-1959) and Ethel Eliza Sellar (1881-1968) who married on 26 December 1908. Thelma was an only child. Two babies predeceased her, ¹¹ explaining why Ethel seemed older than most Edwardian prima gravidas. Grief, fear of losing a third child, and health concerns for both Thelma's grandfathers created unease during the pregnancy. ¹² Industrial unrest throughout Britain contributed further tension to the general atmosphere, while war in Europe would soon find the nation unprepared. ¹³

Thelma's infant relationship with Ethel was loving and uncomplicated. ¹⁴ Outwardly she emulated her mother's kind, tranquil disposition which was the opposite of her father's. Ethel taught Thelma to be an excellent cook, and imparted a flair for fashion and furnishings. Her almost abstract consideration for the appearance and placement of ordinary domestic objects undoubtedly influenced her daughter's mature compositions. Hulbert's friend, the painter Robert Organ (b.1933), described this talent as "a wonderful gift transforming everything she touched into a vision of diaphanous beauty and delicacy." ¹⁵ Ethel Sellar had won a prestigious Bookbinding



apprenticeship in her teens ¹⁶ but abandoned her career on marriage as was then expected of women. Bindery by hand required dexterity and aesthetic sensitivity, which suggests Thelma inherited some artistic talent from her mother. Thelma's father Richard Hulbert, by contrast, demonstrated no ability in the plastic arts. The one thing Thelma owed to both parents was their strikingly handsome appearances.

Above left: Ethel and Thelma Hulbert, Weston-Super-Mare c.1920. Photograph, The Hulbert Family collection.

Above right: Richard Hulbert, c1916. Photograph, The Hulbert Family collection.

¹⁰ Hulbert is a French Huguenot name. www.huguenotsociety.org.uk. Accessed 7 April 2021.

¹¹ Iona Wright, *Correspondence with John Furse*, 2001.

¹² Hulbert's paternal grandfather died in January 1912, the maternal in December 1913, a month after her birth. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed 10 March 2020.

¹³ Thelma was christened on 12 March 1914; the British Empire declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed 10 March 2020.

¹⁴ "Thelma worshipped her mother." Diana Holland (née John), *Correspondence with John Furse*, 2001.

¹⁵ Robert Organ, *Correspondence with Deborah Smith*, 27 November 2013.

¹⁶ 1910 Census. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed 10 March 2020.

Richard was robust and extrovert, and his daughter inherited similar traits, whether she - or he - liked it or not. I have discovered that he was acclaimed in the West Country press as an amateur sportsman, founding and captaining Bath Wheeler's cycling club. His reticence over his daughter's rebellious lifestyle ¹⁷ and his resistance to her artistic activities were potential barriers to Thelma's ambitions but, fortunately, her temperament matched his and she was not afraid to stand up to him.

From 1916-1935 Richard Hulbert managed Walcot Liberal Social Club at 35 Thomas Street. ¹⁸ Thelma was aged three when the family moved into the flat above which came with the manager's position, ¹⁹ and here she witnessed the twin existences of her parents diverge. Instinctively, she appears to have learned to navigate between the refined isolation of her mother in the peaceful home upstairs and the boisterous crowd of drinkers carousing with her father below. I believe this evolved into a fluid ability to move between higher and lower sections of society, offending neither and becoming popular with both, which served Thelma well in adult life.

Similarly bifurcated psychological landscapes would materialise in Thelma's mature practice. It is my observation that from approximately 1947 she painted only Still Life (interiors) when working within her permanent domestic environment and only Landscape (exterior views) when temporarily outside her home. Still Life symbolised a secure inner sanctum (the mother) whilst Landscape represented a challenging yet exhilarating world of others (the father) viewed from an emotionally alienated distance. In effect, Thelma's interiors *became* her own landscape. At home she could submerge into herself, but in public she felt compelled to adopt a visitor's carapace and, thus protected, play that role. This evidenced Hegel's ²⁰ ideas of "the unity of inner and outer reality," ²¹ knowledge of which Thelma would later owe to Adrian Stokes ²² and Mondrian. ²³

The Great War, which began in August 1914, was not an immediate disaster for The Hulbert family. Richard's conscription was deferred until May 1916 on grounds of age, he was then furloughed until June 1917 and lived at home until Thelma was nearly four, ²⁴ providing her with a relatively stable infancy. However, on 16 April 1918 Private 144601 Richard John Hulbert was wounded on active service with 141th Battalion Labour Corps on the Western Front in France. A note pencilled on the reverse of a family photograph says he was gassed and suffered shell shock. The reliable

¹⁷ Thelma's cousin Reginald described her youthful demeanour as similar in attitude to a late 1970s Punk Rocker. Robert Canning, *Conversation with Deborah Smith*, 15 March 2013.

¹⁸ The Liberal party represented Bath's non-industrial workers with more credibility than the Socialist parties.

¹⁹ Based on addresses for The Hulberts found on www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed throughout 2012-2020.

²⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), philosopher.

²¹ Janet Sayers, *Art, Psychoanalysis, and Adrian Stokes, A Biography*, Routledge, 2018, p.565.

²² Adrian Durham Stokes (1902-1972), art critic/writer. Stokes knew Hulbert at The Euston Road School. Ibid. p.23.

²³ Pieter Cornelius Mondriaan (1872-1944), from 1926 truncated to Mondrian.

²⁴ Military records for Private 144601 Richard John Hulbert. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed throughout 2012-2020.

father he might once have been instantly became one of Thelma's psychologically 'absent figures', along with her grandfathers and the siblings she never knew.

Richard was demobbed and returned to Thomas Street in 1920 when Thelma was nearly seven. His injuries rendered him unable to participate in his beloved sports or to work in construction, and his inevitable drunken frustration corroded his ebullient disposition. His occasional violence terrified his wife and child.²⁵ From then on Thelma could only relate to her father as an angry drunkard sulking in the corner of his club. He was the first of many to break her heart.

It is evident therefore that Thelma comprehended some of the most intimate consequences of war at an impressionable age, resulting in a subconscious absorption of the first germs of politicisation. In 1926, aged 13, she sent a self-penned poem entitled *Flanders Field* to a local newspaper; as an adult she professed pacifist sympathies.²⁶ Whilst her paintings were non-partisan,²⁷ the politics of Thelma's position as a working-class woman in a profession dominated by a male elite must be addressed, particularly as many significant political developments occurred during her lifetime including the advance of Feminism.

Thelma was born in the year Emily Wilding Davison walked in front of King George V's horse *Anmer* at the Epsom derby, a tragic event which brought The Women's Suffrage Movement to the world's attention. In the same year, 1913, Suffragettes held a demonstration at The Royal Academy demanding women's right to be elected as members. In Bath, The Women's Social and Political Union operated from 10 Walcot Street, adjacent to Richard Hulbert's club, although no evidence suggests Ethel Hulbert was a Suffragette. When Thelma was fourteen, legally old enough to leave school and earn a wage, The Representation of the People Act (1928) was passed allowing women over 21 to vote, and acts to remove discrimination against women in the workplace continued into her maturity.

Hulbert's commitment to painting ran jointly with her refusal to conform to stereotyping of any kind, despite the gender-based prejudice she continually faced. She and other mid-century women painters evidenced their Feminism, ironically, by describing the label 'Feminist' as unnecessary. Sheila Fell (1931-1979), for example, even refused to be called a 'Woman Artist.'²⁸ The distinction was felt to be trivial, with the most convincing way to demonstrate equality with men simply to

²⁵ Holland, *Correspondence with Furse*.

²⁶ Peter Halse, *Conversation with Deborah Smith*, 4 March 2014.

²⁷ Hulbert's paintings of dried South African flowers resulted from a visit to Cape Town in 1950 where she had witnessed Apartheid. See Iona Wright, 'Obituary: Thelma Hulbert,' *The Independent*, 1 March 1995. However, in my view these works do not outwardly engage with political controversy.

²⁸ Sheila Fell, Interview, *Sunday Times*, 16 December 1979.

ignore trivial gender-based differences, such as label or name. Thus, they demanded their surname only be used to identify their practice, as with male artists.²⁹

The absence of siblings must have left Thelma with a considerable emotional hole to fill. Based on my observations I feel strongly that this resulted in a compensation mechanism where, to some extent, she chose her own new brothers and sisters, ensuring they fitted her concept of the ideal companion. Phyllis Elizabeth Sullivan (1908-2002), a neighbouring child four years her senior, was one such surrogate older sister who shared her juvenile experiments in painting and drawing. Phyllis appears to have been a more gifted artist (she won a free scholarship to Bath School of Art in 1926 where her grades were consistently higher than Hulbert's, and was awarded the School's Hickes Scholarship of £25 to enter the Royal College of Art in 1932)³⁰ so this may have subconsciously mobilised the competitive spirit Thelma had inherited from her athlete father.

Phyllis Sullivan might also have contended the position as first working-class woman painter of the Twentieth Century, had her career not drifted into motherhood and teaching. Her parents ran what was once a Ragged Boys School five minutes' walk from Richard Hulbert's club,³¹ although as Superintendent and Matron they might be considered a professional couple with higher social placement than an ex-builder.

In later years, Thelma formed a strong bond with Phyllis' ex-husband Merlyn Oliver Evans (1910-1973), who would play a crucial role in her adult development. Her relationship with Phyllis therefore demonstrates the beginnings of Thelma's innate if unconscious ability to 'network,' building lasting sincere friendships which often benefitted her career.

Thelma's childhood enjoyment of art ran parallel with the exhilaration provided by the Theatre, which became a self-professed life-long passion for dance, drama and music, especially Ballet and Jazz.³² Dance was another feminine accomplishment existing members of her family say were derived from Thelma's mother. She also acquired her father's natural inclination to amuse which had found its outlet in family entertainments at his cycling club, as described in local newspaper reports of the time. Thelma first appeared on stage on 3 February 1923 at St. Paul's church hall, Bath. By 1936 her name had been mentioned in more than seventy West Country press reviews.³³ Character parts became her specialty. Aged 12, she performed "a Hawaiian dance, a Dutch dance,

²⁹ For biographical purposes, Hulbert is referred to by Christian name until the start of her practice, in Chapter Four.

³⁰ 'Examination Successes', *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 18 September 1926. 'Poverty No Barrier To Secondary Education In Bath', [Ibid.] 2 December 1932. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Accessed June 2020.

³¹ Census information for The Sullivans. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed throughout 2012-2020.

³² Jean Hoole, *Conversation with Deborah Smith*, 23 May 2012.

³³ www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Accessed throughout 2012-2020.

a Spanish dance, a Greek dance, an Eastern Dance and a Russian dance”³⁴ in the correct national costumes, assuming national ‘characteristics’ (which might be frowned upon today as ‘politically incorrect’). She called on the same mimicry to entertain and charm as an adult, masking her fears and inadequacies by deflecting attention from her working-class West Country accent.³⁵

Whilst becoming a painter was always her primary ambition, Thelma owed much of her life’s success to being an instinctive actor. A stage career might have beckoned in place of art, given the precedent of working-class girls becoming low brow performers in Music Halls, Radio and Cinema.³⁶ For example, the late Vera Lynn (born in 1917, Thelma’s contemporary) started as a singer in London’s East End pubs and before her singer/comedienne Gracie Fields (1898-1979) had worked in a cotton mill. However, budding artists Thelma and Phyllis had other ambitions, and it was logical they would both look to art college when their mandatory school years ended.

³⁴ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 8 May 1926. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Accessed 9 June 2021.

³⁵ The son a friend from an aristocratic family heard Hulbert’s West County accent when he was six (c.1941) and childishly mistook it as American. David Melland, *Conversation with Deborah Smith*, 18 June 2013. This accent had disappeared by October 1962, when the ATV Arts magazine *Tempo* featuring Hulbert was filmed.

³⁶ Hulbert’s feet were too large for a ballerina, a feature she often joked about at her own expense. Hoole, *Conversation with Smith*. Performers of high culture such as Opera singers and ballerina’s rarely hailed from the working class in 1930s Britain.

Chapter Two: Bath School of Art 1929-1934

Having armed herself with the psychological weaponry to combat an unusual childhood, Thelma Hulbert faced a more practical challenge when she joined Bath School of Art in 1926, testing her aims and aspirations against her talent and application.

Thelma's art school training benefitted from a re-evaluation of art's civilizing influence on society which spread across Europe during and in the wake of The First World War. As the Mayor of Brighton had put it, in 1915 "we are descending into barbarism under the pressure of the war spirit. The School of Art preserves us from that fate."³⁷ In turn, this reassessment allowed Bath's Principal, Arthur E Payne (1865-1938)³⁸ to create a fertile environment in which to germinate the idea that a working-class girl might become a painter.

In 1922 Payne had remodelled the academic structure of the former School of Art, Art Crafts and Design at Bath Municipal Technical College to mirror his own Royal Academy education, dividing it into Junior and Senior Departments offering classic modules such as Drawing from The Antique. Girls were accepted on the same terms as boys and many female students received scholarships to London Art Colleges.³⁹ This enlightened forward-thinking subverted the accepted pre-war practice of teaching Applied Arts to the working-class simply to cultivate increasingly productive workers, thus benefitting the employers more than the students.⁴⁰ (The school's reputation for liberal educational thinking was further enhanced when Clifford Ellis became Head in 1938.)

Payne encouraged working-class students to use the public library adjoining the Art School,⁴¹ which became Thelma's favourite place to retire privately and read. There she discovered books about art ranging from cave painting through to the French classicists, with whom she especially connected. Reviewers of Hulbert's adult work observed it had much in common with that of Jean Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940) and Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947),⁴² particularly in their palette and their regular subject, the domestic interior.⁴³ An appreciation of Impressionism would also affiliate Hulbert with the Euston Road School artists, who mutually admired Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) above all other French painters.

³⁷ John Woodham, *The Victorian Age to The Twentieth Century*, www.brighton.ac.uk. Accessed 17 April 2021.

³⁸ Holland, *Correspondence with Furse*.

³⁹ www.batharchives.co.uk. Accessed 23 September 2020.

⁴⁰ "the fundamental aim and method of the education is production" in the training of art & craft workers. Central School prospectus, 1919-1920. www.sculpture.gla.ac.uk. Accessed 20 June 2014.

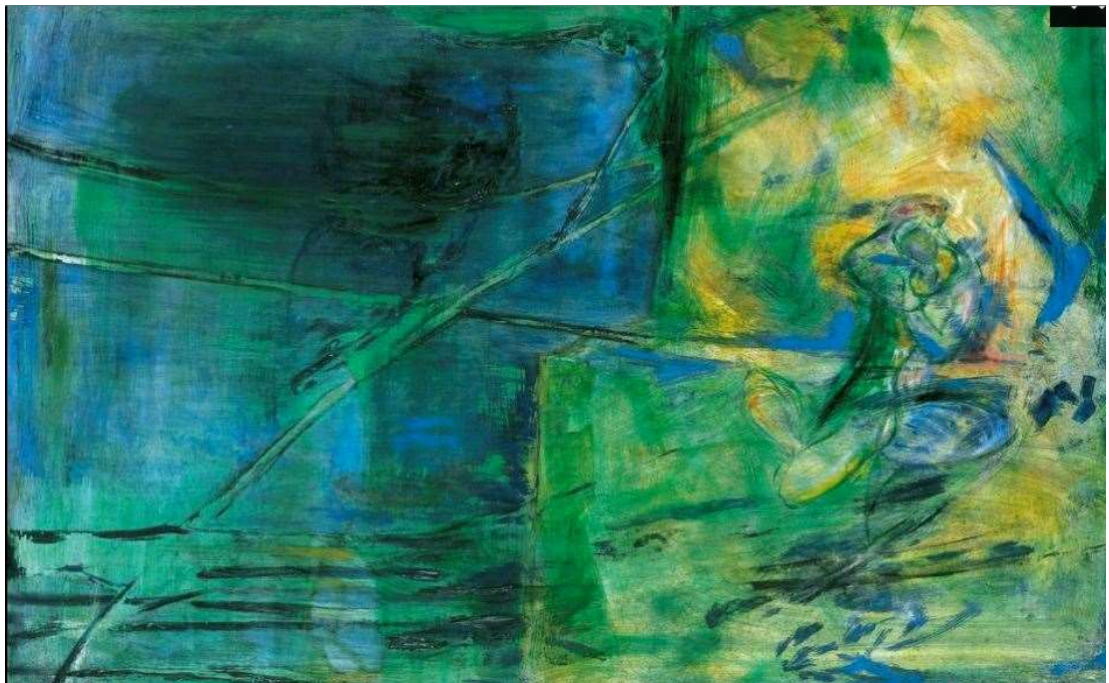
⁴¹ The buildings are now combined as The Victoria Art Gallery which holds two examples of Hulbert's work.

⁴² Les Nabis, France, 1890s.

⁴³ For example, "The intimacy, warmth, and sureness [of Hulbert's work] recalls Bonnard and Vuillard..." Frederick Laws, 'One Woman's Work', *Manchester Guardian*, 1 December 1958.

In the classroom, Payne ensured his students were aware of inter-war advances in Modernism. Dada, Surrealism (originally known as Super-Realism), Expressionism, and Style Moderne (later named Art Deco) all emanated from a general reaction against war, and Thelma's sensitivity to the recent conflict aligned her with their values, if not their techniques. She found a particular empathy with Expressionism which viewed the world through subjective emotion alone, elevating the significance of the invisible human spirit above physical manifestations of reality. On the canvas this was distinguished by the figurative disintegration of the human form which increasingly morphed or dissolved into emotive shape and colour, becoming present by its absence in some abstract dimension. A similar process would evolve within Hulbert's mature practice, enquiring into the essence of places and things rather than people and narratives.

Payne's public lecture 'The Modern Movement in Art' (February 1932),⁴⁴ acknowledged the influence of what was then termed 'Orientalism' on trends such as Style Moderne. Thelma, now in her senior year, understood this intuitively. Ancient cultures had fascinated her since just after her ninth birthday, in November 1922, when her imagination had been stimulated by reports of Howard Carter discovering Tutankhamun's tomb in Egypt. At Bath she was often seen gravitating towards a massive, profusely illustrated replica of the Egyptian Book of The Dead.⁴⁵ The pigments found on these scrolls would inform her mature palette, as evidenced by her use of lapis lazuli, eau de nil and sand-coloured hues, particularly in *Persian Legend* (1961) (below).



Thelma HULBERT, *Persian Legend*, 1961, Oil on Hardboard, 101.5 x 152.5 cm (40 x 60")

⁴⁴ In 1931-1932 Payne gave a series of public lectures, believing art should be accessible to all classes. 'Lectures on Art,' *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 12 February 1932. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Accessed 27 August 2018.

⁴⁵ Holland, *Correspondence with Furse*.



I have discovered that Thelma Hulbert was a dedicated senior student. Each July from 1929-1932 she received a first-class grade in more than 50% of her examinations with the Union of Educational Institutions (UEI).⁴⁶ Her copy of Jean-Antoine Houdon's Bust of Voltaire (1778) (left) won a merit prize.⁴⁷ While Hulbert did not sculpt in her adult career, this small plaster maquette indicates she received a full grounding in all disciplines at Bath School of Art before specialising in painting. It is also one of the few known examples of Hulbert's figurative work.

Above: Thelma HULBERT, Student Copy
Jean-Antoine HOUDIN, *Bust of Voltaire*, c.1932,
Plaster, 35 x 20.25 cm (14 x 8")

Despite her academic achievements, Thelma's student years ended on a discordant note. On completing their studies, Thelma's friends and fellow students Phyllis Sullivan and Diana John both succeeded in gaining places at London Art Colleges, but Thelma did not join them. The reason is unrecorded. It is unlikely that she applied unsuccessfully as she clearly had considerable talent and aptitude. Diana believed Thelma simply did not bother to apply because 'money was tight.'⁴⁸

While art school may have challenged Thelma's creative potential, it presented her parents with the very different problem of finding her fees, especially as The Depression still dominated the national economy. Contributions came from her mother who started a dance studio for young girls in The Corridor arcade opposite the Guildhall to augment the family finances when Thelma's father returned from France unfit for work. Once it became evident that Thelma might be unemployed when her studies ended, Ethel renamed the studio the Thelma Hulbert School of Dancing,⁴⁹ ensuring her daughter an income for as long as was needed.⁵⁰

By August 1932, Thelma was a working girl. West Country newspaper photographs from the 1930s are evidence that she had no difficulty publicising her dance studio with the local press as she was extremely photogenic and, as the fourth estate has long acknowledged, a pretty face boosts newspaper sales. However, I have observed that this entrepreneurial spirit was not to last and would unfortunately desert her as she advanced in society. Using her face – or anyone else's - to find her fortune would become one of Hulbert's most contended internal debates, aligning issues of Identity with arguments for and against modelling.

⁴⁶ Copies of Hulbert's UEI certificates in THG archive. Exam Results in www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

⁴⁷ Hulbert's only surviving student work, now in a relative's collection.

⁴⁸ Holland, *Correspondence with Furse*.

⁴⁹ 3/4 North Parade Buildings, 5/- per week rent; pupils paid 2/6 per session. Post Office Bath Directory 1935, Bath Records Office. www.batharchives.co.uk. Accessed 23 September 2020.

⁵⁰ The school continued until July 1936 according to local newspapers. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk



Left: Thelma, circled top and bottom left.
Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette, December 1931. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

While Thelma and Ethel's business thrived, art was still Thelma's primary interest. When not teaching ballroom, ballet or 'toe dance' (tap) to music from her ancient wind-up gramophone, she used the studio for painting. It was close to the art school and therefore perfect for student parties, allowing Thelma to retain her contacts there. It also provided occasional overnight refuge from her father's disapproval as she grew older and wilder, showing no inclination to settle down or get a 'proper job.'⁵¹

During this period, as her press cuttings prove, Thelma expanded her involvement in theatre from dance and performance to set and costume design. As she reached maturity, the conviction that the fields of Art, Music, Poetry and Drama were suffused rather than separate became crucial in Hulbert's ideology.⁵² Thus, it is pertinent that her very first review was a critique of her successful staging of 'Bath at Christmas is Merrie Still' at The Pump & Assembly Rooms, 1932;

"Four attractive backcloths for the masque were designed and painted by Miss Thelma Hulbert, a student of Bath Art School (who also played a member of the cast), they are clever designs and typify with an economy of line, and a few splashes of colour, the various periods represented."⁵³

This all-encompassing passion for Theatricality persisted into Hulbert's mature practice, where a dramatic element informed the composition of her often autobiographical Still Life paintings. These invariably featured a floral arrangement, posed as in a tableau vivant⁵⁴ in front of a stage-like window, framed with curtains which formed the wings of a set. This important theme will be

⁵¹ Holland, *Correspondence with Furse*.

⁵² Hoole, *Conversation with Smith*.

⁵³ 'Bath is Merrie Still,' *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 31 December 1932. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Accessed 9 June 2021.

⁵⁴ Definition: French, meaning living picture, a theatrically lit static scene with silent stationary figures.

returned to in the concluding chapter, but I will use this opportunity to include an example from outside the period to 1950 which poignantly illustrates the fact; Hulbert's last painting *Dark Green Plant & Blowing Curtain* (1994) (below) depicts a coy central 'character' peeping around a curtain as if taking its final bow.



Thelma HULBERT, *Dark Green Plant and Blowing Curtain*, 1994,
Oil on Canvas, 146.7 x 78.7 cm (57.75 x 31")

Chapter Three: A Country Girl about Town 1934-1935

When Thelma Hulbert left Bath School of Art in July 1932 her artistic ambitions stalled for the first time. For the next two years she lived with her parents while directing a successful school of dance until a final altercation with her father provided the catalyst for her departure.

Thelma Hulbert left Bath for London in Spring 1934 with no immediate plan to become an artist. Relatives believe she ‘stormed out’ or was thrown out, penniless,⁵⁵ while friends understood she always planned to ‘seek her fortune and try her luck,’⁵⁶ suggesting her exit was not entirely unpremeditated. Refuge was always available with Diana or Phyllis, now students in London. Meanwhile Thelma and Kathleen Reid, another ex-student, persuaded Kathleen’s widowed mother to chaperone them to The Mary Bagot-Stack Health School in Holland Park for a Women’s League of Health and Beauty training course, attractively packaged with a complimentary return rail fare.⁵⁷ Mrs Reid duly rented a room in Chalk Farm for all three of them, ensuring Thelma’s escape.⁵⁸

According to Diana John’s account, after a few weeks Kathleen returned to Bath as a qualified instructor, while Thelma stayed on to organise classes in North London for the League’s administration. Rooms were provided above their headquarters (also the Bagot-Stack home) which Thelma now shared with Diana and Bagot-Stack’s daughter Prunella, styled by the Daily Mail in 1933 as ‘Britain’s Perfect Girl.’ Bagot-Stack’s exercises were designed for women from all walks of life despite the League’s middle-class public image, and this blurring of class divisions allowed Thelma to elevate her status by association with the glamorous, dynamic Bagot-Stack women.

Thelma’s renewed friendship with Diana revived her interest in Art. In Autumn 1934 Diana became engaged to printmaker and illustrator James Holland (1905-1996), and between them the couple enabled Thelma to ‘infiltrate the Central scene,’⁵⁹ primarily through the Lithography evening classes run by Holland’s friend James Fitton (1899-1982). This was purely opportunistic as Thelma was not an officially enrolled student,⁶⁰ and had no interest in Printmaking, nor is there evidence of her subsequently producing print-work. However, many of the students and staff in the Central Lithography Department became life-long friends who would assist Thelma’s career in future

⁵⁵ Canning, *Conversation with Smith*.

⁵⁶ Holland, *Correspondence with Furse*.

⁵⁷ “Have a cheap trip to London. A Fifteen-Guinea all-inclusive fortnight with the Bagot Stack Health School entitles you to return fare to London from anywhere in the British Isles.” Advertisement. 1930s. *Irish Times*, etc. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

⁵⁸ Holland, *Correspondence with Furse*.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Hulbert’s Leicester Galleries catalogue, 1958, claims she ‘studied at Central for a short period’ but the college has no record of her enrolment or attendance. She may have sat in on classes by tutors who were also her friends.

years. These included Tom Clark Hutton (1898-1985) the Principal Lithographer, Diana's tutor Harold 'Hal' Missingham (1906-1984), Merlyn Oliver Evans (1910-1973), Morris Kestelman (1905–1998) and part-time student Victor Pasmore (1910-1998).

Hulbert as Artists Model

Thelma's casual career as an unpaid Artist's Model (1934-1952) began with sittings as favours to win new friends at Central, following the path taken by Elizabeth Siddall decades before. I believe Thelma's stage experience gave her the confidence to pose, undaunted by the objectification of her body, and this together with her photogenic qualities made her an excellent subject.

Thelma sat for Pasmore several times between their meeting in 1934 and his marriage in 1940 to painter Wendy Lloyd Blood (1915-2015). Hulbert's role in his work is well documented, especially *Parisienne Café* (1938),⁶¹ one of the first Euston Road School paintings to receive approbation, and their names are still often linked in anthologies of Twentieth Century Art History.

Hulbert and Pasmore occupied common ground, although of opposite social status. Limited finances had prevented both from graduating to a London Art College, with the premature death of Pasmore's father, a Physician, forcing Victor to become the family provider at the age of seventeen. Both therefore undertook non-vocational employment to pay for extramural classes, he as a clerk for London County Council, she as the Euston Road School secretary. Their perceived lack of training delimited them as 'Sunday Painters' to Slade-educated contemporaries, although ultimately both surpassed the professional successes of many from that group. A shared similarity of appearance suggested Pasmore might have passed as Thelma's brother, and undoubtedly she looked upon him as such. With thick black hair and dark brown eyes set against pale complexions, Thelma joked they looked "like two currant buns walking arm in arm along Charlotte Street."⁶² A romance was often implied, but Iona Craig claimed the couple 'were never lovers.'⁶³ Pasmore preferred girlfriends with blonde hair and blue eyes, such as Sonia Brownell (1918-1980), and his future wife Wendy, while Thelma claimed she could "never marry a man who left wet towels on the bathroom floor."⁴⁶

Iona Craig was another of Diana's introductions, becoming an older sister figure to Thelma, mirroring Pasmore as a substitute sibling. Thelma met Iona at the 1935 Central Summer dance and struck an immediate rapport despite a difference of family background (as was becoming the case

⁶¹ "...the waitress [was] the enchanting Thelma Hulbert" Victor Pasmore quoted in Bruce Laughton, *The Euston Road School*, Scholar Press, 1980, p.60.

⁶² Wright, 'Obituary: Thelma Hulbert.'

⁶³ Wright, *Correspondence with Furse*.

by now), although The Craig's had also lost two babies before her birth like The Hulbert's ⁶⁴ which no doubt helped to cement their sisterly friendship. Iona was an Oxford graduate who had enrolled at Central on return from 18 months with Parson's School, New York and, like Bagot-Stack, the glamour of Iona's independence, travels, education and class drew Thelma to her, providing her with an entrée to higher society by association. Thelma adored Iona's accounts of watching The Charleston and Jazz musicians at The Cotton Club, but was also disturbed to learn of the club's segregation policy and the poverty Iona witnessed in Harlem. ⁶⁵

In September 1936 Diana married James and moved to Haverstock Hill. Iona secured a second-floor flat for herself and Thelma at 76 Charlotte Street, known locally as 'Constable's House.' ⁶⁶ Their landlady, pianist Nora Back (1890-1980), also lived there with Gwyneth Johnstone (1915-2010), the product of Nora's brief relationship with Augustus John (1878-1961) who often frequented the house. Iona's allowance met the two-pounds per week rent while Thelma contributed 'in kind' with the cooking and housekeeping, ⁶⁷ as might an unpaid live-in maidservant (which two of her aunts had been), subconsciously highlighting the class divide between herself and Iona.

However, Thelma was not entirely without means, occasionally earning a few shillings painting flowers on china plates beside Frank Graham Bell (1910-1943) ⁶⁸ at Miss Keyes' pottery which I have located in nearby Clipstone Street. ⁶⁹ Iona described it as a 'sweat shop' despite its connections with Omega Studios. ⁷⁰ The work was deceptively uncreative and Thelma hated it, suffering, I believe, under a working-class compulsion to take any job to make ends meet.

More enjoyably, she continued to teach dance to paying customers including an 'Indian Gentleman.' ⁷¹ I deduce this may have been Sri Lankan Tamil Poet Tambimuttu. ⁷² who was a frequent visitor to Constable's House. Tambimuttu was friends with glass engraver Laurence

⁶⁴ Wright, *Black Sea Bride*, p.2.

⁶⁵ "I went to the famous Cotton Club, where white people danced but watched the blacks from the balcony..." Ibid. p.15.

⁶⁶ So named because the painter John Constable (1776-1837) had lived, worked, and died there.

⁶⁷ Wright, *Correspondence with Furse*.

⁶⁸ Laughton, *The Euston Road School*, p.130.

⁶⁹ www.ancestry.co.uk.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Meary James Thurairajah Tambimuttu (1915-1983).

Whistler (1912-2000) who sub-rented Iona's front rooms.⁷³ The girl's apartment was thereafter known as 'The Dancing Studio.'⁷⁴

At weekends Iona returned to her parents in Bolney, Sussex while Thelma attended parties in *The Marquis of Granby* or *The Fitzroy* where she forged friendships amongst London's poets and writers. These included Sonia Brownell (then Pasmore's girlfriend), Brownell's future husband Eric Blair (1903-1950) otherwise known as George Orwell, and Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) who spent his first week with Caitlin McNamara (1931-1994) in a room next to Pasmore and Brownell above the Eiffel Tower Restaurant in Percy Street. Thelma recalled, in later years, witnessing McNamara push Thomas down the stairs at a rowdy party in The Wheatsheaf.⁷⁵

By the end of 1936 Thelma had entered an era of semi-communal living, replacing the family she had run from or been denied with like-minded siblings, uncles and aunts of her own choosing. In a letter to John Furse dated 2001 Iona listed their Fitzrovian neighbours⁷⁶ as Whistler's brother Rex (1905-1944), Lynton Lamb (1907-1977), Duncan Grant (1885-1978), Vanessa Bell (1879-1961), Clive Bell (1881-1964), Basil Jonzen (1913-1967), William Coldstream (1908-1987), and Helen Anrep (1885-1965). Iona's boyfriend Denis Wright⁷⁷ lived in nearby Russell Square, as did Graham Bell. The Charlotte Street restaurants Bertorelli's, Vianni's, and Café Conte became favoured subjects among the artists who frequented them.

Thelma painted *Café Conte* in 1938 but regrettably this canvas cannot be traced.⁷⁸ I can only account for nine works by Hulbert dated between 1937-1939, using catalogues from later exhibitions, although some may have perished during World War II. This may be evidence that Thelma's social life took priority over her practice for her first few years in London

⁷³ Laurence Whistler, *Initials in The Heart*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964, p.26.

⁷⁴ London Telephone Directory. 1935-6. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed 2014.

⁷⁵ Canning, *Conversation with Smith*.

⁷⁶ Wright, *Correspondence with Furse*.

⁷⁷ Denis Arthur Hepworth Wright (1911-2005), British Ambassador to Iran from 1953.

⁷⁸ *Thelma Hulbert. Retrospective exhibition, paintings and drawings 1937-1962*. Whitechapel Gallery, October-November 1962. Catalogue No.2. Last known owner, David Higham (1895-1978), Dylan Thomas's publisher. Higham had a flat in Fitzroy Square from 1935 onwards. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed 4 November 2020.

Chapter Four: “A brief era of intense social and artistic commitment” 1936-1938

Between 1936-1938 Thelma Hulbert continued to search for a purpose in life, supported by a network of sympathetic friends who challenged her preconceptions about Politics and Art. Thelma called this time ‘that brief era of intense social and artistic commitment’ prior to World War II.⁷⁹

Thelma Hulbert’s sheltered adolescence in rural Bath left her with a narrowed understanding of working-class existence in more industrialised regions but, fortunately for her, this view was widened and improved through new contacts in urban London. The Lithographers at Central included several politically active working-class males, while associates from wealthier families, such as Blair (George Orwell), who were denied the indulgent lifestyles of their forefathers during The Depression considered themselves “economically belonging to the working class.”⁸⁰ Thelma fell between, appearing genteel on the surface, yet betrayed as working-class by the remaining fragments of her West Country accent.

These groups of social opposites established common political goals as the international political situation deteriorated during the 1930s. At home, King Edward VIII was crowned and abdicated within the year provoking a constitutional crisis in 1936. The rise of Oswald Moseley’s British Union of Fascists mirrored that of the right-wing German National Socialist party, Spanish Nationalists rebelled against their Republic, the Italians threatened Abyssinia (Ethiopia), and Japan invaded China. Britain’s newly proletarianised creative community felt compelled to protest at the atrocities committed against civilians in conflicts abroad, along with an increasing sense of responsibility for the welfare of their own working class. As a result, Thelma’s friends at Fitton’s evening class created “an available outlet for anti-war and anti-fascist sentiments,”⁸¹ which was christened the Artists International Association (AIA). The association was active well before Thelma first encountered the Central school Lithographers. It held its first meeting in 1933, a year before Thelma fled to London. Holland and Fitton were among the initial 20 founders and most of Fitton’s students, including Pasmore, became members⁸² as did Thelma’s future associates Betty Rea⁸³ and Nan Youngman.⁸⁴ Thelma’s life-long friend Sylvia Melland joined in 1939.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Thelma Hulbert quoted in Laughton, *The Euston Road School*, p.169.

⁸⁰ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Victor Gollancz, 1937. Orwell was not working class by birth, his father was a Civil Servant, his great grandfather was a Plantation Landlord.

⁸¹ James Holland, ‘The Three James’s,’ www.plantagenetconsultingtypepad.co.uk. Accessed 19 November 2020.

⁸² Pasmore exhibited *Portrait of Thelma Hulbert* (1938) in the AIA’s 25th Anniversary exhibition, 29 March-23 April 1958, RBA Galleries, London SW1.

⁸³ Elizabeth Marion Rea (1904–1965), sculptor.

⁸⁴ Nancy Mayhew Youngman (1906-1995), painter/educationalist. Thelma rented rooms with Youngman and Rea, 1951-52. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed 10 March 2020.

⁸⁵ Katy Deepwell, *Women Artists between the Wars*, Manchester University Press, 2010, p.71.

Katy Deepwell tells us that women participated within the AIA “at all levels” yet she also points out that the AIA “sought to include working class male artists in their exhibitions, but working-class women were not included.”⁸⁶ This ambiguity may have influenced Thelma’s ‘decision’ not to join The AIA.⁸⁷ As with the Feminist movement, she declined to affiliate herself with any organisation, cultural or political, leading to a misconception that she had no interest in politics. Her reasons concurred with those of Merlyn Evans; “...the artist should be committed to his art only, and should avoid allegiance to groups, isms, ...to be free from external control.”⁸⁸

Iona Craig did not join the AIA either, despite similar political affiliations. She had studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at St Hugh’s, Oxford, and with her knowledge guided Thelma toward academic perspectives on issues such as Class and War. Iona also assisted Thelma’s elocution. In return, Thelma taught Iona to cook and to dance.⁸⁹ While this seems a trivial class-biased exchange, the shy academic must have been grateful for social skills which benefitted her later as a Consulate’s wife in remote Trebizond, and thus it would appear that the ‘Dancing Studio’ became effectively an unorthodox type of finishing school for *both* young ladies.

Iona was fully supportive of her working-class friends. Her mother was a Fabian Socialist,⁹⁰ who assisted Thelma and her family financially.⁹¹ Iona had inherited her mother’s political standpoint, joining the Oxford University Labour Club as an undergraduate along with fellow student Denis Wright, her future husband.⁹² Denis was a Grammar School boy from a businessman’s family in suburban Kingston-upon-Thames and felt unequal to Iona. However, Iona made it clear that class was unimportant to her, especially in her closest relationships, and the entire Craig family accepted both Denis and Thelma as their own, to Thelma’s huge delight. She appreciated their kindness, but also viewed the connection as further elevation in Society.

Thelma admired Mrs Craig’s ethical principles and aspired to them in the same way she had emulated her own mother’s domestic values. When Thelma lived alone in 1950s-1960s she

⁸⁶ Deepwell, *Women Artists between the Wars*, p.289.

⁸⁷ Interestingly, I have found no evidence of Thelma’s friend and fellow Bath School alumni Diana Holland joining either, although she married one of the founder members. Fitton’s wife Margaret Cook was a member. Ibid. p.289.

⁸⁸ Alan Bowness, *The Political Paintings of Merlyn Evans*, Tate Gallery, 27 March-2 June 1985, p.28.

⁸⁹ John Furse, *Thelma; A Portrait of the Artist Thelma Hulbert*, Sidmouth; EDDC publications, 2002, p.5.

⁹⁰ John Gurney, ‘Obituary: Sir Denis Wright,’ *Iran*, vol. 43. 2005, British Institute of Persian Studies, pp.5-14.

⁹¹ Thelma Hulbert, *Correspondence with Iona Craig*, September 1939.

⁹² Wright, *Black Sea Bride*, p.14.

frequently welcomed unpaying lodgers such as students who had little money, partly for company, in part to pay something back to Society, as Iona's mother had done.⁹³

In July 1936 the civil war in Spain erupted, giving organisations such as the AIA their opportunity to play an active part, with several of Thelma's acquaintances thrown into the arena by accident or design. Blair/Orwell served with the POUM, a Spanish Marxist militia, having entered Spain as a journalist. Hal Missingham embarked on an ill-advised driving holiday to Valencia, to be rescued by HMS Brazen.⁹⁴ The AIA's Felicia Browne,⁹⁵ who travelled concurrently with Missingham, volunteered for the Catalan Communist militia as a British Communist and was shot in action. Her death became the catalyst for the Arts Peace Campaign (APC) chaired by her friend Betty Rea.

On 26 April 1937 the Spanish Civil War escalated and international public opinion was outraged by Europe's first civilian-targeted air attack which decimated the Basque town of Guernica. Immediately, the Andalusian painter Pablo Ruiz Picasso (1881-1973) started work on his enormous monochrome war statement *Guernica* (1937), incorporating outlandish elements of Cubism and Surrealism to underscore his horrified reaction. Picasso's status as an international cultural hero empowered *Guernica* as a cry from the voiceless Spanish peasant class, awakening a similar desire in other artists to speak out for the international underclasses.

In July Thelma and a crowd of friends, including Iona, Diana, and Claude and Elsie Rogers⁹⁶ viewed *Guernica* in the Spanish Pavilion at the International Exposition in Paris.⁹⁷ The primary reason for this visit was to support Diana's new husband, James Holland, who had co-designed the two English rooms (League of Nations Room, International Peace Campaign Room) with Rea, Youngman and Mischa Black.⁹⁸ Rea had also created murals for the APC's Peace Pavilion.

It can therefore be evidenced that, up until this point, Hulbert's⁹⁹ engagement with political campaigning had been restricted to her support for fellow artists. It is probable she joined "everyone in The Euston Road School"¹⁰⁰ painting protest banners based on Goya's *Disasters of War* following the fall of Barcelona on 26 January, although her name does not appear in the catalogue for the resulting *Exhibition of Paraphrases* (Storran Gallery, 15 February-11 March 1939).

⁹³ Hoole, *Conversation with Smith*.

⁹⁴ Staff Reporter, 'Australians in Danger Zone,' *Adelaide News*, 30 July 1936, p.8.

⁹⁵ Felicia Mary Browne (1904–1936), painter/sculptor.

⁹⁶ Elsie Evelyn Few (1909-1980), painter. Wife of Claude Rogers.

⁹⁷ Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, Paris.

⁹⁸ Mischa Black (1910-1977), architect, designer.

⁹⁹ nb. From here on I reference Thelma by her surname 'Hulbert' to mark her transition into serious practice.

¹⁰⁰ Laughton, *The Euston Road School*, p.198.

However, I do not believe this by itself proves Hulbert's non-participation because, as we shall discover, women artists were regularly excluded from Euston Road School exhibitions.¹⁰¹

Fortunately, Hulbert's involvement in the campaign for peace in China was independent of such controls. It began as her personal response to a call for medical aid from the China Campaign Committee (CCC) which was formed in July 1937 following the Marco Polo Bridge incident at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Hulbert and Iona became affiliated with the campaign through CCC member Bernard Floud,¹⁰² Iona's future brother-in-law. Hulbert had a keen interest in Chinese art and culture, while Iona's attempts to become a cinematographer had taken her into China itself. Earlier in 1937 she had crossed Eastern Europe to Japan by Trans-Siberian express on a world trip, destined for Hollywood.¹⁰³ In Shanghai Iona joined satirical cartoonist Jack Chen (1908-1995) as he transported his anti-Japanese woodcut exhibition to Moscow, returning to Charlotte Street as Chen's works transferred to London.

Chen arrived on 10 October 1937 and was carried triumphantly to address a CCC rally in Trafalgar Square. The tenth day of the tenth month - "Double Tenth" (China's National Day) - marked the start of a major CCC campaign. From 4-18 November Thelma Hulbert and Iona Craig hosted Jack Chen's fund-raising exhibition *Five Thousand Years Young: Modern Chinese Drawings and Woodcuts* on the ground floor at 76 Charlotte Street. Dr Quo Tai-chi, Chinese Ambassador to London, opened the exhibition which subsequently toured Britain, Europe, and the USA.

My research into newspapers of the time has revealed that Hulbert painted three Peace Panels¹⁰⁴ for the Arts Peace Variety Show and Dance in London, March 1938, which I have discovered was the culmination of the International Peace Campaign's *China Week* of 19-27 February. China Week posters were reported¹⁰⁵ as reading "Save China, Save Peace" and "The People Can Stop the War," (although I cannot yet confirm these were the same panels Hulbert created). Hulbert's panels were auctioned for medical aid for China, after which she was personally thanked by Ambassador Quo. These political banners are among the only works by Hulbert which my evidence suggests were produced between 1934-1939.

¹⁰¹ This was not unusual in the 1930s. For example, women consistently formed "less than 10% of the exhibitors" in all the major international exhibitions of 1937. Deepwell, *Women Artists between the Wars*, p.269.

¹⁰² Bernard Francis Castle Floud (1915-1967), Labour politician.

¹⁰³ Wright, *Black Sea Bride*, p.18.

¹⁰⁴ 'Bath Artist's Peace Panels,' *Bath Chronical and Weekly Gazette*, 26 March 1938. www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Accessed 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Christian Philip Peterson, William M. Knoblauch, Michael Loadenthal, *The Routledge History of World Peace since 1750*, New York: Routledge, 2018, p.362.

On 12 March 1938 Austria was annexed into Germany during The Anschluss. Elsie Rogers' sister Margerie,¹⁰⁶ a Jewish music student in Vienna, was advised by the British Consul to leave immediately. The Rogers helped her escape and brought her to live with them at 28 Charlotte Street, where she became one of Hulbert's closest friends.

An approaching Second World War was starting to make itself felt.

An Era of Artistic Commitment

Hulbert's political awakening transpired concurrently with several landmark exhibitions and events in British and International Art leading to the Euston Road School's establishment in 1937.¹⁰⁷

As Hulbert made her way towards London in Spring 1934, the nucleus of what would become the Euston Road School exhibited together for the first time in *Objective Abstractions* at the Zwemmer Gallery. The interesting word here is 'Abstractions' which seems to contradict the previous word, 'Objective.' The term was later abandoned in favour of 'Objective Realism.' While Hulbert did not exhibit in this show, she was still establishing herself in Fitzrovia, the phrase Objective Abstractions would eventually serve to describe her work well. Her mature paintings inhabited a liminal space somewhere between the objective and the abstract, an intermediary phase on the route between the two which became a place in itself.

Once resident in London, Hulbert could look at pictures she had previously only seen in books, including the French Classicist Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904) in November 1934 at The Lefevre Gallery. In April 1936 Lefevre showed works by International Modernists in *Abstract and Concrete*. This was the first exhibition of British and European Abstract art in England and included Mondrian's UK debut. It was curated by a woman, Nicolette Gray (1911-1997).¹⁰⁸

Abstract and Concrete ran simultaneously with the equally momentous *Cubism & Abstract Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. MOMA Curator Alfred Barr (1902-1981) looked on Mondrian and Britain's Ben Nicholson¹⁰⁹ as the vanguard of Western abstraction, and intended their inclusion to initiate the migration of Modernism from Paris to New York as its centre. This move became one of the most significant developments in mid-Twentieth Century Art History. Its repercussions were felt by all artists, especially those teaching in the 1950s and 1960s such as Hulbert.

¹⁰⁶ Margerie Gladys Few (1916-2000), concert pianist.

¹⁰⁷ In 1937 Hulbert painted *Portrait of Iona*, her first recorded painting since leaving Bath School of Art in 1932.

¹⁰⁸ From 1964-81 Gray taught Typography at Central as Thelma's colleague, although no friendship is recorded.

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin Lauder Nicholson (1894-1982), painter.

Later in Summer 1936, British viewers had their first experience of Super-Real Art in the innovative *London International Surrealist Exhibition* at Mayfair's New Burlington Galleries. Hulbert's friend Merlyn Evans was an exhibitor. Surrealism had no influence on Hulbert's work, yet it echoed Expressionism by depicting reality in 'unreal' ways. 1930s Super-Real Art glanced side-on at psychological aspects of the human condition rather than addressing the physical world directly, as if the inhumanity of The First World War had left conscience-torn artists with a desire to look differently at concrete truths. This view was crystalised in Mondrian's first essay, 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art', which was printed in July 1937 in the magazine *Circle: International Survey of Constructivist Art*. The essay's publication for the first time in English allowed Hulbert to access Mondrian's seminal ideas.

Also in summer 1937, an exhibition of Post-Impressionist paintings by Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), again at Lefevre, served as an unplanned prelude to the launch of the School of Drawing and Painting, later known as The Euston Road School, which was run by admirers of Cézanne. Adrian Stokes' *Colour & Form*, praising Cézanne as "the father of us all"¹¹⁰ was also published coincidentally with the school's opening in October 1937. The school's directors felt Stokes' views on Cézanne consolidated their own ideology, and looked on *Colour & Form* as their unofficial handbook.

Hulbert would not join The Euston Road School until its second year, in October 1938.

¹¹⁰ Apocryphal phrase, attributed to many including Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Picasso, naming Cézanne as the link between C19th and C20th art.

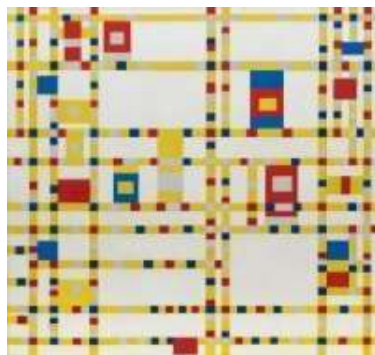
Chapter Five: Mondrian's Presence in Absence during Hulbert's Interwar Years

Hulbert's exposure to art as political commentary in the late 1930s was augmented by her introduction to aesthetic and spiritual philosophies which conditioned her future approaches to painting, primarily those of the Dutch Modernist Mondrian.

Ideas in British and European Art during the interwar years were dominated by recovery from a first world war and weary anticipation of a second. Hulbert's genesis as an adult painter was occluded by these shadows, as was that of many others. R H Wilenski ¹¹¹ described her generation as "unlucky ...the 'thirties was an evil time for artists, especially the young ones." ¹¹² Yet out of what seemed so dark came light, epitomised by Mondrian's *Le Neoplasticism* (1920) which had an especially profound effect on its readers, including Hulbert, Evans and Pasmore.

"To develop, to be able to continue Mondrian's work, one would have to paint pictures of absence."

Anatole Jakovski, *Axis*, January 1935, p.14.



It was a revelation to read that Mondrian, "of all the Modernists, was the contemporary artist Hulbert most admired" ¹¹³ as his effect is not immediately perceptible in Hulbert's work. Neither would one suspect that a student of the Euston Road School system, based on Realism, would espouse his views. However, both Hulbert and the Euston Road School's Victor Pasmore found Mondrian's theories intriguing, though each expressed their admiration in contrasting ways. Mondrian's engagement with shape and colour was echoed in Pasmore's publicly announced turn to Abstraction, whereas Hulbert translated Mondrian's ideas for her own contemplation via a subtle numinous depth which permeated her practice, not easily described by word, shape, or colour - something felt emotionally or spiritually rather than seen.

Above left: Victor PASMORE, *Abstract in White, Green, Black, Blue, Red, Grey and Pink*, c.1963, Perspex and Painted Wood, 81.5 x 91 x 46 cm (32 x 35.75 x 1.6")

Below left: Piet MONDRIAN, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942, Oil on Canvas, 127 x 127 cm (50 x 50")

¹¹¹ Reginald Howard Wilenski (1887-1975) painter, art historian, art critic.

¹¹² Bryan Robertson, *Merlyn Evans, paintings, drawings and etchings*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, October-November 1956, p.11.

¹¹³ Wright, *Correspondence with Furse*.

Hulbert's earliest opportunity to see Mondrian's work at first hand came in April 1936, her second year in London, with the aforementioned group exhibition *Abstract and Concrete*. Her interest had been piqued by her friend Merlyn Evans who had visited Mondrian's studio at 26 Rue du Depart during frequent visits to S W Hayter's ¹¹⁴ Atelier 17 print workshop, Paris, between 1934-1936. ¹¹⁵

From September 1938-September 1940 Mondrian rented the garden flat of a boarding house at 60 Parkhill Road, Hampstead which Ben Nicholson had found for him following a hurried departure from Paris forced by the threat of conflict between France and Germany. ¹¹⁶ It is believed Hulbert met Mondrian in London. ¹¹⁷ Mondrian had a gregarious nature, despite his dour non-smiling demeanour in photographs. He enjoyed socializing with London's contemporary artists and danced at the London jazz clubs which Hulbert and Evans frequented. Indeed, Nicholson and his partner Barbara Hepworth ¹¹⁸ were friends with both Mondrian and Evans, so the meeting is plausible.

Mondrian, the son of a headmaster, was born into a strict Calvinist family but broke away on joining the Theosophical Society in 1894. Theosophy's bearing on contemporary art in the cultural aftermath of The First World War, and its part in informing Mondrian's ideology, are well documented.

The war's initial impact on Mondrian's practice was positive. From 1912-1914 he had lived and worked in Paris, associating with Cubists such as Picasso, but was in Holland at the commencement of hostilities. Free movement of Dutch citizens was restricted during the war and thus enforced isolation from the dominant Modernists in Paris allowed Mondrian to find his own path. During the war, in 1917, Mondrian co-founded the De Stijl movement with Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931). Their "plastic vision," or Neo-Plasticism, combined Theosophy's belief in a harmonious universal truth named The Absolute (a united balance of the spiritual and temporal realms) with the philosophies of Hegel. Neo-Plastic theory challenged the convention that the world is concrete and unchanging while the inner life of plastic emotions is in flux. It posited an opposing view that the figurative appearance of 'real' existence was mutable while 'invisible' spiritual non-realism was anchored in permanence. The result was art where, the recognisable physical world was dissolved into basic colours and shapes suggesting humanity through emotional response, as with Expressionism.

¹¹⁴ Stanley William Hayter (1901–1988), graphic artist, lithographer.

¹¹⁵ Mel Gooding, *Merlyn Evans*, Cameron & Hollis, 2010, p.38.

¹¹⁶ Mondrian's work was classified as 'degenerate art' by the German National Socialist Party in 1937.

¹¹⁷ Peter Barnard, *email correspondence with Deborah Smith*, 3 December 2012.
Peter Barnard studied Fine Art under Thelma Hulbert at Central School of Art, 1963-5.

¹¹⁸ Jocelyn Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975).

The Great War left Mondrian with the conviction that a universal fresh start, using Art as its agency, was essential for humanity's survival. The old, pre-war world represented by realistic paintings would be replaced by new art containing little or no figurative content, effectively erasing The Past and its symbolism from the collective conscious. It was this trust in the redemptive powers of Art for all mankind which seems to have inspired Hulbert's admiration above aesthetic considerations, especially as she had witnessed the physical and emotional wounds of war in her father.

Hulbert and Mondrian were connected by the subtlest of parallels in operation. Hulbert concurred with Mondrian's reverence for the canvas as a sacred site, where Hegelian outer and inner spheres might correlate equally, officiated over by the Artist as 'priest.'¹¹⁹ Both artists lived and worked in one space, the studio overlapping the domestic areas, requiring 'monastic' conditions of serene isolation in order to work to their fullest satisfaction. Their instruments of officiation, brushes, palettes, cloths, were kept ordered and pristine. The studio thus became a church consecrated to a unique faith of their own individual manufacture. The viewer was allowed to participate in this quasi-religious experience only when the work left the studio for the gallery.

These cloistered chambers also resembled stages on which to perform the act of painting, calling on Hulbert's love of Theatre. Mondrian described the studio as a place where art could commune with music, dance, drama, "each and every one of the artistic disciplines [to] reflect the harmony ruling in the universe."¹²⁰ Michel Seuphor (1901-1999) described entering Mondrian's apartment (also his studio) as if stepping into another world, filled with 'an incredible feeling of beauty, peace, quiet and harmony,'¹²¹ while Colin MacInnes (1914-1976) wrote "to enter Thelma's studio, you come out of Holland Park, into a dream ...a fairy tale."¹²² Both Hulbert and Mondrian were always immaculately dressed, as if in costume presenting a character to the world based on their physical appearance. However, for both of them, the inner life of the spirit was more important than the corporeal world.

While acknowledging that Mondrian's influence on Hulbert was ideological rather than technical, it is clear she incorporated certain determining concrete elements from his works into her own Still Lives. This is evidenced primarily in her compositions.¹²³ Manifestations of Mondrian's approach to colour in Hulbert's palette presented itself in a more complex way, as explained in Chapter Eight.

¹¹⁹ Pablo Bris-Marino, *The Influence of Theosophy on Mondrian's Neoplastic Work*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2014, pp.489–504.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

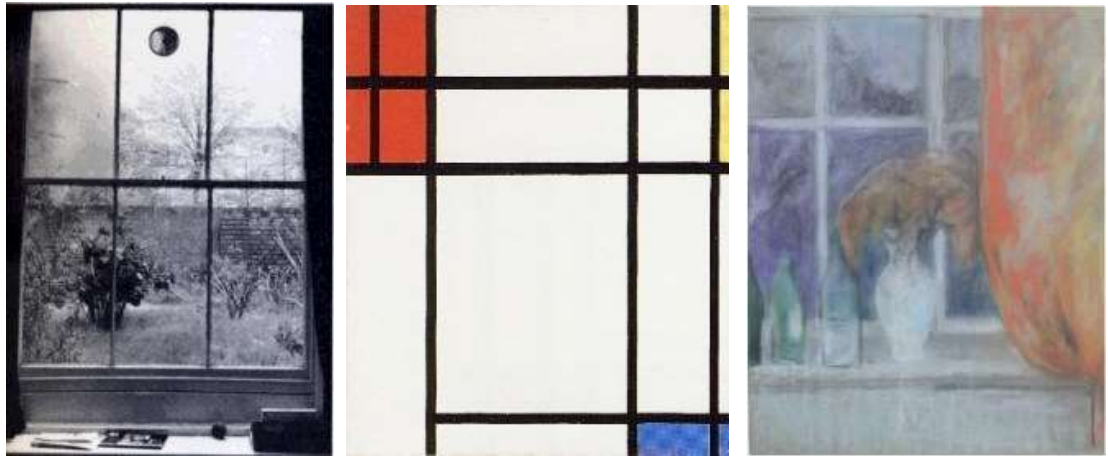
¹²¹ Frans Postma, Cees Boekraad, 26, *Rue Du Depart, Piet Mondrian's Studio*, Ernst & Sohn, 1995, p.6.

¹²² Colin MacInnes, 'A Natural View,' *Queen*, October 1962, p.83.

¹²³ Mondrian's visible influence is not perceptible in Hulbert's Landscapes.

On close analysis of the majority of Hulbert's paintings faint yet resolute grid structures become discernible, paying quiet homage to Mondrian's trademark lines and squares. These internal matrixes appear most often in the guise of man-made window frames encasing panes of glass which mirror Mondrian's strident black and white intersections, but reversed, as if some benign ghost were present.

Compare Mondrian's window (photograph, 1938, below left), ¹²⁴ with his *Composition No. 2/Red, Blue, Yellow & White* (1938) (below middle), and Hulbert's *Still Life by a Window* (1949) (below right) and it is believable that Hulbert observed Mondrian composing new works at the six-frame sash window of his Hampstead flat.



Above left: photograph of Mondrian's garden window, *Studio International*, December 1966.

Above centre: Piet MONDRIAN, *Composition No. 2/Red, Blue, Yellow and White*, 1939, Oil on Canvas, 44.6 x 38.2 cm (17.5 x 15")

Above right: Thelma HULBERT, *Still Life with Vase of Flowers in a Window*, 1949, Pastel on Paper, 53 x 43 cm (21 x 17")

Hulbert's physical use of window pane structures reached their apogee in her practice through a concise series created in the 1960s where works on fine Japanese paper, or sometimes transparency, were encased on both faces by two glass sheets. ¹²⁵ In this way Hulbert took the squares from the grid to their utmost extreme, being simultaneously visible and invisible, framing - yet also being part of - the work. Unfortunately, these fragile works are now untraceable.

¹²⁴ Charles Harrison, 'Mondrian in London,' *Studio International*, December 1966, p.293.

¹²⁵ Frederick Laws, *Art in the 50s and 60s, Part 2 Between Painting and Sculpture*, Visual Publications, 1977, p.4.

Chapter Six: Thelma Hulbert at the Euston Road School 1938-1939

Thelma Hulbert's involvement with The Euston Road School began in 1938, after Claude and Elsie Rogers moved into rooms above hers at 76 Charlotte Street. Rogers became aware of Hulbert's long-term aspiration to become a painter and offered her an administrative position at the school together with his personal tuition.

The few Twentieth Century anthologists who mention Hulbert at all invariably leave her story at The Euston Road School,¹²⁶ yet her short time there marked just the beginning of a prolific career. On a more positive note, Hulbert is generally acknowledged as the school's most prominent female participant,¹²⁷ although as a Secretary, Friend and Model rather than an Alumnus.

Research suggests that Rogers provided greater impetus to Hulbert's career than Pasmore, although her name was most commonly associated with the latter. Rogers not only supported her with tuition and paid employment within the arts, he also persuaded the London Group to include her *Portrait of Iona Craig* (1937) (right) in their 37th annual show as a non-member at Burlington House, Piccadilly during the winter of 1938. This marked Hulbert's first professional exhibition and sale.



It is ironic that *Iona* launched Hulbert's exhibiting career as no subsequent portraits by her are extant. There is written and photographic proof that she attended life classes at Bath and with The Euston Road School, but from 1938/9 her engagement with the human figure ceased abruptly. In 1962 she explained that she did not paint people because the relationship between personalities "get[s] in the way of what I want to do in painting,"¹²⁸ again referencing Mondrian, who argued "when art speaks for itself, personality is displaced."¹²⁹

Left: Thelma HULBERT, *Portrait of Iona Craig*, 1937, Oil on Canvas, 76.2 x 50.8 cm (30 x 20")

¹²⁶ For example, Richard Shone, *The Century of Change; British Painting Since 1900*, Phaidon Press Limited, 1977, p.30, where Hulbert is the only female Euston Road artist named.

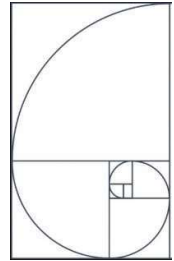
¹²⁷ Margaret Nairne Mellis (1914-2009) and Angelica Vanessa Garnett (1918-2012) were also women alumni, but both left after one term in disagreement with the school's tutorial methods.

¹²⁸ 'Looking', *Tempo* TV Arts Documentary Magazine, Anglian Television, broadcast 9 December 1962.

¹²⁹ Mondrian, 1922, quoted in Bris-Marino, *The Influence of Theosophy on Mondrian's Neoplastic Work*, p.496.

Equally, the evident failings in *Iona* may have proved to Hulbert that she was not particularly adept at figures. The subject's disproportionately rendered limbs appear to slip sideways, while her feet are determinedly crammed in at the frame where Hulbert has miscalculated the composition, producing an amateur result. Yet, in Hulbert's defence, there is something in the subject's bashful posture, perched on a small chair wearing an awkward hat, which is convincing, as if Hulbert knew Iona well and had caught something of the latter's personality, if not an actual likeness, by her gauche attempts.

Iona provides early evidence of devices habitually employed in Hulbert's later Still Lives, for example the placement in the lower right quarter of the canvas of a plant or vase at the intersection of three unequal rectangles, following The Golden Mean, or Ratio (right). Also present is Hulbert's characteristic mottled background, almost shimmering with iridescence, possibly reflecting on religious or meditative liminal space, as found in mediaeval devotional paintings.



Hulbert exhibited with The London Group again in 1939, showing *Vase of Flowers* (not dated) in their *Special War-Time* exhibition. Her name was now printed in two catalogues beside professionals such as David Bomberg (1890-1957) and Mark Gertler (1891-1939), her work priced comparably with experienced artists.¹³⁰ Thelma Hulbert could justify the claim inscribed beside her registered war-time address that she was a 'Professional Artist and Painter.'¹³¹

When the school's final Autumn semester began at its eponymous second address,¹³² Thelma Hulbert was to be found at the top of the stairs as its Organising Secretary. Lawrence Gowing¹³³ described her as "delightful not to say accommodating."¹³⁴ Elsie Few saw her more pertinently as "the hinge by which the school hung together, the one person who was always there."¹³⁵ Hulbert kept the register, booked the models, and tried to settle the accounts, where she struggled. Her greatest success was in arranging social events at Bertorelli's, the school's favourite Charlotte Street restaurant.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ Bomberg's *San Justo and The Toledo Hills* was priced at £25 in 1939, as was Hulbert's *Iona* in 1938.

¹³¹ September 1939 Census. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed 8 February 2020.

¹³² The name 'Euston Road School' was adopted following Clive Bell's (1881-1964) review of *Cross-Section of English Painting* at Wildenstein & Co., London. Clive Bell, *New Statesman & Nation*, 26 March 1938.

¹³³ Lawrence Burnett Gowing (1918-1991).

¹³⁴ Laughton, *The Euston Road School*, p.180.

¹³⁵ 'Obituary: Thelma Hulbert,' *The Times*, 7 March 1995.

¹³⁶ Jenny Pery, *The Affectionate Eye*, Samson Press, 1995, p.90

The school established an identity around this new location in a way it had failed to do as The School of Drawing and Painting in Fitzroy Street. By October 1938 it had become what is now referred to as a ‘brand’ and Hulbert became its public face. Her presence countered the school’s outwardly middle-class appearance, as it had at Bagot-Stack’s establishment, verifying the school’s alleged ethos of encouraging diversity, if tinged with an element of Tokenism. Hulbert may have represented the working-class stalwart, maintaining the ‘contact with the proletariat’¹³⁷ which Coldstream feared would be severed in response to modern art’s purported elitism, but she was also a solitary exception. She remained the school’s only definitively working-class woman artist or student throughout the entire two years of its existence.

Rogers was “always encouraging to women painters” regarding them “unusually for that time, as equal to men,”¹³⁸ which was of great benefit to Hulbert. However, his tuition was more supportive than didactic as the foundations of her personal vision had already been formed during five years at Bath School of Art. Fortunately, Rogers approached his task in keeping with the Euston Road prospectus which advertised “no attempt ...to impose a style.” Any trace of Rogers’ technique which traversed Hulbert’s work derived purely from their mutual admiration for French Classicism.



Above left: Thelma HULBERT, *Dressing Table and Flowers*, 1939, Oil on Board, 78 x 64 cm (29.9 x 25.2")

Above right: Claude ROGERS, *Still Life and Sheet Music*, c.1930s, Oil on Canvas, 25.5cm x 31 cm (10 x 12.25")

The declaration that the school did not impose stylistically was slightly deceiving. The original School of Painting and Drawing was financed by a fund established during The Depression by Kenneth Clark.¹³⁹ Clark guaranteed the Principals regular salaries on the proviso that they return

¹³⁷ Juliet Gardiner, *Life in 1930s, an Intimate History*, Harper Collins, 2010, p.336.

¹³⁸ Pery, *The Affectionate Eye*, p.102.

¹³⁹ Kenneth Mackenzie Clark (1903-1983), at that time the youngest appointed Director of the National Gallery.

‘to exploration & expression, through observation’, rejecting ‘the trend for abstraction & surrealism.’¹⁴⁰ The result was a thin syllabus devoid of important developments and ideologies, centred on developing basic operational skills. The outcome was a clearly discernible Euston Road School style. This led to Herbert Read’s comment that the school was “waging a conscious protest against the tyrannical [Modernist] influence of the ‘School of Paris’ .”¹⁴¹ By 1938-1939 Realism (observation) had become the radical antithesis of Modernism, as evidenced by Surrealism’s filtering of observation through thoughts and dreams and Abstraction’s dissection of observed reality.

To Rogers’ credit, the simple value of ‘looking’ was the one crucial lesson Hulbert extracted from the school’s tuition. The flaws and indistinctions evident in *Iona* became honed and sharpened. After World War II, when the school had ceased to exist, Hulbert continued to loyally wave its flag of conscious protest by producing well-observed Still Lifes, while Pasmore and others were drawn towards the Modernisms they had once rejected, or been asked to reject.

With no formally authorised style to teach, The Euston Road School developed an equally informal staffing structure. Tutors worked on independent projects beside their students, throwing in words of encouragement or suggesting improvements. Hulbert’s paid administrative post put her on a similar footing with the school’s *massier’s*,¹⁴² senior male students charged with practical responsibilities to maintain the fires (heating), materials etc. in lieu of fees. However, this informality blurred the boundaries between Hulbert’s threefold disciplines as Secretary, Student and occasional Model. It was unclear if she was professional or amateur, a participant at the school, or one of its products – or whether her gender distinguished or diminished her status.

Despite these contended issues, Hulbert’s position as the school’s Secretary held advantages. It increased her networking opportunities, making her conspicuous to highly influential persons. These included the last vestiges of what was once referred to as ‘The Bloomsbury Group.’¹⁴³ Hulbert recognized that The Euston Road School could be divided into two factions. The first she called the ‘Charlotte Street community’ and described as ‘a continuation of late flowering Bloomsbury,’¹⁴⁴ a ‘still authentic bohemia’ surrounding the Fitzroy Tavern. The second, far smaller, group comprised the Euston Road’s Directors.

¹⁴⁰ Laughton, *The Euston Road School*, p.5.

¹⁴¹ Herbert Read, *Contemporary British Art*, Penguin, 1953, p.15.

¹⁴² Laughton, *The Euston Road School*, pp.143-146.

¹⁴³ An informal intellectual and cultural collective established near Bloomsbury in the early C20th.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.169.

In her secretarial role, Hulbert became another ‘hinge’ between the two groups, tasked with mitigating the convoluted relationship between the school’s Principals and ‘Bloomsbury Set’ representatives such as Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell.¹⁴⁵ The Directors acknowledged the support they had received from these celebrated figures but disliked their paintings.

Conversely, Grant and Bell were enthusiastic patrons yet were uncomfortable with the Principal’s artistic direction. They insisted on contributing voluntary unpaid tutorials, at which the Directors could only thank them and grit their teeth. At this juncture, Hulbert’s working-class attitudes towards money began to wilt, adopting a gently middle-class embarrassment at asking patrons such as Helen Anrep for their pledges or the students for their fees.

Hulbert, like the Directors, “rejected the Bloomsbury painters” in her practice, “although she enjoyed their personalities and conversation.”¹⁴⁶ However, comparisons can be drawn between their work which indicates that Hulbert may have taken something from Bell’s example, if subconsciously. According to Iona Craig, Bell became ‘very fond of Thelma’¹⁴⁷ who was flattered when Bell visited her second (first London) one man exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in 1958.

‘Late flowering Bloomsbury’ and The Euston Road School were also hinged by The Storran Gallery, run from 1936 by Edward Eardley Knollys (1902–1991). Their mutual associates included Grant and Edward le Bas (1904-1966). The gallery and the school first encountered each other at close proximity in Fitzroy Street. Both subsequently relocated together to 314/316 Euston Road where Storran’s became in effect the school’s in-house showroom. It exhibited their first unofficial group show, *Fifteen Paintings of London*, in 1938, although Hulbert’s work was not among them - no women artists from Euston Road were included in this show.

Fifteen Paintings of London emerged from Bell and Coldstream’s term as Artists in Residence with Tom Harrisson’s Mass Observation project, a study of ‘the everyday lives of ordinary people’¹⁴⁸ in working-class Bolton. Bell and Coldstream claimed to be Socialists (with middle-class upbringings), but often failed to suppress an inbred condescension towards their social inferiors, for example, Bell wrote of Bolton as “more undistinguished than words can describe. What with the smell¹⁴⁹ ...and the poverty of the people.”¹⁵⁰ MacInnes observed that ‘the teachers and their

¹⁴⁵ Duncan James Corrowr Grant (1885-1978), Vanessa Bell (1879-1961).

¹⁴⁶ Bryan Robertson, ‘Obituary: Thelma Hulbert,’ *The Guardian*, March 1995.

¹⁴⁷ Wright, *Correspondence with Furze*.

¹⁴⁸ www.massobs.org.uk. Accessed 4 August 2021.

¹⁴⁹ Orwell also wrote “The lower classes smell.” *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.87.

¹⁵⁰ Graham Bell, *Correspondence with Olivier Popham*, 1938. Quoted in Virginia Nicholson, *Mass Observation Archive 75th Anniversary Lecture*, 8 December 2011. www.sussex.ac.uk. Accessed 3 September 2021.

gifted friends were [also] perhaps a bit condescending' towards Hulbert at Euston Road.¹⁵¹ She would find few consoling surrogate siblings amongst these types. All apart from Hulbert, male or female, had fathers in professions ranging from Banker, Surgeon, Academic, and Theologian to two Knights and a Viscount. Even the school's regular life model, Freda Walker, was the wife of a company director.¹⁵²

In January 1939, an article entitled 'A Day in The Life of an Artists Model' in the popular new magazine *Picture Post* marked a publicity coup for The Euston Road School, although Walker was its primary subject. This was the first in a series of four photo essays by Bill Brandt,¹⁵³ unofficially aligned with the Mass Observation project.¹⁵⁴ Its purpose was to challenge conventionally held misinformation about women working in service industries which had persisted since the days of artist and model Elizabeth Siddall. Brandt carefully depicted Walker as a married woman from the professional classes, dressed respectably while out shopping for a wholesome meal in one photograph, while posing nude (with her back to the lens) in others. Hulbert also appeared, in her dual participant/product roles, as Bookings Secretary, and as a Student in her characteristic stance at 90° to the easel. She was the second 'working woman' in Brandt's article, although uncredited as such and, ironically, the only one of the two with a genuinely working-class background. The article might have had more relevance had Hulbert been the subject.

The school's requirements of their new Secretary often reached beyond the call of duty, for example, if professional models such as Walker failed to fulfil their bookings, Hulbert was asked (expected) to understudy. MacInnes reflected that Hulbert felt these requests 'imposed on her good nature,'¹⁵⁵ noting that she looked unable to refuse. This suggests the presumption that a working-class girl would simply comply with their requests out of gratitude. Elsie Few's *Thelma Painting at the Euston Road School*, 1938,¹⁵⁶ proves by its title that Few viewed Hulbert as a woman and an equal, yet elsewhere there are sketches and paintings of Hulbert modelling at the Euston Road School which do not so much as specify her by name, mostly created by men.

This behaviour altered Hulbert's position on modelling as she matured. In the post war period she posed just twice, for Edward le Bas and Merlyn Evans, both friends whom she trusted, who

¹⁵¹ MacInnes sensed this prejudice acutely, having suffered similar social exclusion for his homosexuality.

¹⁵² Clarence Redvers Freeland (1900-1979). Hulbert babysat their son, John Redvers Freeland (1927-2014), who became a diplomat and international lawyer. Petra Freeland, *Conversation with Deborah Smith*, 16 April 2015.

¹⁵³ Hermann Wilhelm Brandt (1904-1983), German born photographer/photojournalist.

¹⁵⁴ Paul Delany, *Bill Brandt: A Life*, Stanford University Press, 2004, p.150.

¹⁵⁵ MacInnes, 'A Natural View', p.83.

¹⁵⁶ Foster, *Tate Women Artists*, p.120.

produced serious works for which she received credit. Once her own career gained momentum she stopped modelling altogether. She would no longer allow her own body to become a weapon in a semi-political battle over her higher status as an artist and her lower rank as a male artist's muse, lest her future as a professional painter be tainted by a conflation of these roles. Ultimately, she was determined to be seen as a participant, not a product.

.....

Without diminishing the severity of Hulbert's problems, toward the end of the 1930s there were issues of greater importance abroad causing concern. As war in Europe approached once more The Euston Road School closed its doors and, unbeknownst to the staff and students, it was not to reopen.

Chapter Seven: Thelma Hulbert's Second World War 1939-1943

World War II created a second career hiatus for Thelma Hulbert, who found herself “too busy helping the war effort to produce many paintings.”¹⁵⁷ Practical reasons also limited her output. Materials were rationed, expensive, and hard to obtain. She had no fixed abode, so no studio, and needed a licence to paint outdoors. In addition, she had personal concerns over family in Bath.¹⁵⁸

On 3 September 1939, Thelma Hulbert and Thomas George Barnett Cocks,¹⁵⁹ known to friends as ‘Barney,’ took a Sunday morning walk near the cottage they rented with Margerie Few and her boyfriend in Great Kingshill, Buckinghamshire.¹⁶⁰ ¹⁶¹ Passing a neighbouring house at 11.15am they heard through the window Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s radio announcement that Britain was at war with Germany.¹⁶²

The four friends, referred to by suspicious locals as “Them in The Woods,”¹⁶³ recognised their lives would soon change. Hulbert’s closest friend Iona tells us she revisited Charlotte Street by bus that afternoon and found it already almost deserted; many of its residents had been Greeks or Italians, while the Buhler’s, who owned one of The Euston Road School’s favourite cafés, were German.¹⁶⁴ Within a few weeks Iona also left Britain to join Denis Wright, now her fiancée, who was in Constanza, Romania when war was declared. They would marry there and not return until after the war. Other friends, such as Stokes and Mellis, had already abandoned the city for the relative safety of countryside and coast. The Euston Road school dispersed. Pasmore and Gowing became conscientious objectors, the other male artists reluctantly took up military positions. British painters such as Coldstream were appointed official war artists by the War Artists Advisory Committee, another of Kenneth Clark’s initiatives to secure artist’s incomes in difficult times. Euston Road’s women artists, now mostly wives and mothers, prioritised wartime domestic duties above their art practice. None of the women were appointed by the WAAC or had work accepted by it.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁷ Hoole, *Conversation with Smith*.

¹⁵⁸ Three ‘Baedeker’ raids targeted Bath between 25-27 April 1942.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas George Barnett Cocks (1907-1989); Sir Barnett Cocks, Clerk of the House of Commons 1962-1974.

¹⁶⁰ 1939 Census. www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed 24 March 2020.

¹⁶¹ Iona Craig also used the cottage, avoiding threatened attacks on London. Wright, *Black Sea Bride*, p.27.

¹⁶² Thelma Hulbert, *Correspondence with Iona Wright*, 6 September 1984.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁴ At one point the émigrés in Charlotte Street earned it the nick name ‘Charlottestrassen.’

¹⁶⁵ The WAAC accepted only 32 works by women out of 264 submissions. Only one woman, Evelyn Dunbar, had a fulltime contract like the men. www.iwm.org.uk. Accessed 9 April 2021.

At the commencement of war, Hulbert returned to Bath where her mother was caring for elderly relatives. Her grandmother, who lived with her parents, and her aunt Anne Jones living next door, were both terminally ill. Thelma's father was unable to help as he still suffered from shell shock. Anne died in November 1939, her grandmother in September 1940. Thelma's paternal grandmother was also unwell and died later, in 1942.

Thelma then lived in Essex for a year with Graham Bell's estranged wife Eileen Anne Bilborough (1909-2001) and her infant daughter Harriet.¹⁶⁶ In December 1941 Hulbert missed military conscription for women aged 20-24 as she was 28, however, she returned to London in 1942 to 'do her bit' with the PDSA¹⁶⁷ rescuing displaced and wounded animals.¹⁶⁸

The disbanded Euston Road School's Principals and Patrons were desirous that the school's reputation remain buoyant early in the war, still anticipating its revival when fighting ceased. To maintain momentum, Clark and Pasmore persuaded the Contemporary Arts Society to organise *An Exhibition of Paintings by Members of the Euston Road Group* at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford from 17 May-July 1941. This could have provided Hulbert's first opportunity to establish her name nationally, but unfortunately none of the women were invited to exhibit.

A similar situation followed Bell and Rogers' proposal to produce the first self-initiated Euston Road School exhibition in March 1942, where women were included, but only just. Bell's six column table of exhibitors¹⁶⁹ placed the founders (all-male) in column one, male associates in column two, and regular male students (although Hulbert and other women were also regulars) in column three. The fourth was reserved for women. The ambiguously delineated fifth was all male, with female students relegated to a final sixth column.

Unfortunately, this show became Hulbert's second missed opportunity. On 9 August 1943 Bell died in a Wellington bomber training crash at RAF Ossington, Nottinghamshire and his exhibition plans died with him. *The Euston Road School and Others*, at Wakefield City Art Gallery in 1948 was loosely based on Bell's concept, but with the school's women students again excluded.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Olivier Bell, *Correspondence with Deborah Smith*, 13 November 2013.

¹⁶⁷ People's Dispensary for Sick Animals.

¹⁶⁸ Wright, 'Obituary: Thelma Hulbert.'

¹⁶⁹ Laughton, *The Euston Road School*, p.6.

¹⁷⁰ Laughton proves that Rogers' wife Elsie Few and Scottish painter Barbara Harris were the only women permitted to exhibit a single painting each in the original show. I have found no record of Harris' attendance at the Euston Road School. Ibid p.354. However, when the exhibition set off on its Arts Council tour, 1948-1949, both Few and Harris were excluded, and no other women took their place. Ibid. p.357.

It should be noted that the original exhibition including two women deployed the ambiguous wording 'and Others' in its title. In my view this allowed the male artists to distance themselves from Few and Harris by classing them as 'Other.' Significantly, the word 'Others' was dropped when the exhibition went on tour without women artists.

Traditional prejudices had prevailed. Clark had advised his male proteges against showing their paintings beside women artists, fearing comparison with inferiors would devalue the men's work.

In mid-1943 the age for women's conscription was extended to 19-43, and Hulbert, aged 29, duly received her call up papers and joined the Women's Voluntary Services. She was stationed in the canteen of a Ministry of Works billet for Gibraltarian evacuees at King's College of Household and Social Science, Campden Hill Road.¹⁷¹ However, catering for 'Los Gibraltarenos' demanded very little of Hulbert's culinary expertise. Cheap unappetising food was supplied by J. Lyons & Co. which frustrated the cooks and was unpopular with the guests, who threatened unrest. A concerned Parliament noted that the evacuees were "not getting the food they would like, cooked in the way they would like"¹⁷² while the press reported that the Gibraltarians objected to "... cabbage, cabbage, and more cabbage... Brussels Sprouts and no fruit."¹⁷³

By summer 1944 Thelma Hulbert was no longer required by the WVS and was unemployed. The East Front of the billet in Campden Hill Road had been demolished by a high-explosive bomb on 19 February 1944, and the Gibraltarians were relocated to Northern Ireland. In the Autumn she was appointed Artist in Residence at Camden School for Girls on the recommendation of Irina Radetsky,¹⁷⁴ wife of sculptor Henry Moore (1898-1986), and began earning money from her art practice. Irina's intervention was invaluable to Hulbert who had not been trained to teach. She could have taken advantage of the new crash course certificate introduced by R.A. Butler's Education Act (1944) to fulfil the urgent requirement for teachers in post-war Britain, but in Hulbert's case this was not a necessity as her enrolment was eased through by "important powers ...to appoint and employ their own teachers ...and support staff,"¹⁷⁵ granted to the Governors in 1944 when Camden School for Girls became direct grant funded.

Miss Hulbert shared teaching duties with Miss McCloud, the Art Mistress. She made a striking impression on her pupils, who fondly remembered her in their senior years. Her flamboyant attire dazzled the fashion-conscious teenagers, who proudly accompanied her on trips to important post-war exhibitions such as *Paintings by Picasso and Matisse* at the Victoria & Albert Museum in the harsh winter of 1945/46. She stood out from other staff in long black dresses, red or purple silk scarves, cloaks and black jet jewellery, making her appear attractively rebellious to the girls in her charge.

¹⁷¹ Gibraltar had strategic air and naval importance. In August 1941 12,500 evacuees arrived in London.

¹⁷² *Hansard*, 29 July 1943.

¹⁷³ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 29 November 1942.

¹⁷⁴ Wright, 'Obituary: Thelma Hulbert.'

¹⁷⁵ 'The History of the School', *Camden School Prospectus*, 2015.



Apart from instruction in painting and drawing, Miss Hulbert's enthusiasm for Theatre had the girls painting scenery and sewing costumes for school productions, using whatever materials they could scavenge. Her personal influence helped several pupils gain places at Central, Slade and Camberwell, or to become assistants to professional artists on graduation.

Above left: Thelma Hulbert, bottom row, second left. Camden Staff photograph, May 1946.

Between leaving the WVS and joining Camden School Hulbert moved to Mecklenburgh Square which provided her with tree lined streets and a private garden as subjects to paint following a three-year break in practice. The resulting works, which I have named as The Mecklenburgh Square series, eventually comprised ten works in oil or pastel dated from 1943 to 1949. The pastels were exhibited with paintings by Sylvia Melland at Basil Jonzen's weekend gallery in his flat at 8 Bolton Gardens in August 1948, Hulbert's first exhibition since before the war.¹⁷⁶

Hulbert's only piece of war commentary, *Bombed Site: Taviton Street* (1943), was produced during her first year at Mecklenburgh Square. I presume this was painted at the first-floor studio at 13 Taviton Street which Claude Rogers rented from August 1943 before Hulbert had established a studio of her own in her new apartment. Rogers painted this view into Taviton Street many times.

The current location of this canvas is unknown, no reproductions exist and its visual content can only be surmised. However, a non-visual assessment distinguishes it as unusual. The subject is curious given Hulbert's Pacifist sympathies while the title is atypical as it is descriptive and suggests a narrative. Hulbert named her works prosaically throughout her entire career, eg. Mecklenburgh Square "at night", "by evening", "from a balcony", etc. These titles were distinctive for their nondisclosure of surrounding events or circumstances. For example, none of her Mecklenburgh Square works dated 1943 reference bomb damage by title although the area was raided during the 1943 blitz.

For these reasons *Bombed Site: Taviton Street* (1943) stands apart from Hulbert's other works. I believe Rogers' may have encouraged her to speculatively paint this scene, with the object of generating much needed income from a WAAC purchase, although searches for further information at the Imperial War Museum archive have proved inconclusive.

¹⁷⁶ Listings, *The New Statesman and Nation*, 1 August 1948, p.84. www.britishnewspaperarchive.com.

Chapter Eight: A Still Life at Mecklenburgh Square

21 Mecklenburgh Square became Thelma Hulbert's most permanent address in a decade of temporary lodgings, providing a firm platform from which to launch her post-war career. The flat resembled a commune, the creative 'family' Hulbert had secretly yearned for since childhood, shared with Concert Pianist Margerie Few and Cellist Penelope Simm. My research has found that Merlyn Evans joined them in 1944 and gathered intellectuals around him, effectively creating a 'salon.' During this time Hulbert earned her living from teaching while painting constantly.

With Iona in Romania and friends in the AIA occupied with their own post-war recovery it fell to Merlyn Evans to continue Hulbert's intellectual development. Evans was Welsh, but brought up in Scotland, the son of an Analytic Chemist and a Nurse. His parents sent him to Allen Glen's in Glasgow to train for his father's profession. During his journey through the streets to school he witnessed the poverty endured by the city's working class.

Evans was "deeply read in psychology, philosophy, politics, the history and techniques of art, modernist literature and contemporary poetry."¹⁷⁷ In London he formed friendships with other intellectuals who, in turn, became Hulbert's associates. I have discovered that Czechoslovakian art historian J P Hodin¹⁷⁸ joined the Mecklenburgh circle in 1945 when he married Simm's sister Doris Pamela. Socialist Historian R H Tawney (1880-1962) occupied the flat below, with South African journalist and painter Hercules Enslin Du Plessis (1894-1978) at No 14. My further research has found that regular visitors included Charles Ginner (1878- 1952),¹⁷⁹ with South African war artist Geoffrey Kellett Long (1916-1961),¹⁸⁰ Afrikaans poet Mattheus Uys Krige (1910-1987), and others, often making 21 or 14 Mecklenburgh Square their temporary home.

From observation, it is my belief that Hulbert and Evans might have become one of the Twentieth Century's most interesting artist pairings, had other events not intervened. Both lives were to some extent politicised, by circumstances at birth or by observations and experiences, yet both believed that the art they created should stand as art alone and not be read for political comment. Each had formulated a singular style and vision during training, culminating in idiosyncratic works which did not conform to fashions or movements in art. They complimented each other, dancing an arabesque of opposing approaches. Merlyn's lithographs were angular and masculine with a strong reliance on the aggressive stamp of thick oily black pigment, while Hulbert's paintings epitomised femininity through graceful, carefully considered brushstrokes from a gentler palette. Their

¹⁷⁷ *Swinging Out into the Void, British Abstract Art 1950-1985*, Portland Gallery, 26 June-31 August 2017, p.47.

¹⁷⁸ Josef Paul Hodin (1905-1995).

¹⁷⁹ Staff Reporter, 'Recital and Party,' *The Tatler and Bystander*, 11 April 1945, p.41.

¹⁸⁰ Johannes Meintjes, *London Dagboek: Februarie 1941- Februarie 1947*, 1961, p.128.

contradictory directions revealed paradoxical views of humanity, in Hulbert's case reflecting the spiritual and good, in Evans' quite often the visceral and bad. Hulbert meditated quietly and internally whilst Evans 'raged, raged' at the world in general, like his friend and fellow Welshman Dylan Thomas. Evans was no surrogate brother, as were others such as Pasmore. Their relationship was an adult meeting of mind, body, heart and soul.

Hulbert's Arboreal Landscape Series

The environment surrounding Mecklenburgh Square prompted Hulbert's first adult approaches to Landscape, coinciding with her reprised admiration for Mondrian who had died in New York on 1 February 1944. Mondrian had intended his arboreal Cityscapes of 1908-1913 to capture the essence of The Tree, in effect removing (abstracting) the essence from the reality, mapping his transition from Realism to Modernism in the process. Hulbert's 1943-1949 Mecklenburgh Square series embraced this principle, embedding it in her own practice. The transitional element in Hulbert's work, however, was induced by personal concerns rather than stylistic directions.



Mecklenburgh Square (1947) (left) demonstrates Hulbert's success at capturing the essential vibrance of spring trees signalling tentative new beginnings. As restrictions on artists lifted, Hulbert engaged *en plein air* with the 'arboricultural extravagance'¹⁸¹ of the gardens facing her new home, flanked by properties abandoned or in ruins. Here Hulbert illustrates the side elevation of a damaged building shielded by whitewash and tarpaulin. Sparse yet elegant London Planes sway in the breeze while the emotionless house discretely shrouds its disturbing memories from them. The white rectangular form of the building sits above the rhomboid shape of the street, betraying unintentionally Modernist abstract qualities in the composition.

Above: Thelma HULBERT, *Mecklenburgh Square*, 1947, Oil on Canvas, 70.1 x 50.8 cm (27.6 x 20")

¹⁸¹ www.bloomsburysquares.com/mecklenburgh-square. Accessed 8 May 2020.

Hulbert's Mecklenburgh Square series defines two stages of transition in her practice and her personal life. The first was externally focused, the second internally based. Hulbert's *en plein air* period, or sometimes looking out from a window, coincided with the return of Merlyn to London in November 1944. They exude euphoric feelings of rediscovery and freedom. Over the next few years, the dynamic within the Mecklenburgh Square group altered, to Hulbert's disadvantage, precipitating a second stage from 1948 where her view retreated inside the window, stopping at the glass. And there, apart from coastal landscapes which she produced on vacation in reaction to other people's environments, is where her focus remained for the rest of her life.

By 1950/51, with several failed romances behind her, Hulbert became resolutely unmarried, committing herself instead to her interior world of Still Life painting as if to a husband and family. She stood out from most other women painters of the time not just for being working class, but for not marrying another artist. These factors were related. Women painters who married male artists in Britain were often wealthier than their spouses.¹⁸² Claude Rogers married Elsie Few, a Jamaican plantation heiress, and Merlyn Evans married her sister. Hulbert and her family had nothing to offer financially in marriage.

While Hulbert's early Mecklenburgh Square paintings demonstrate knowledge of Mondrian's transitional tree period, her later works suggest the influence of his more obscure floral pictures. Only a selective group were aware of these before their documentation and public display in 1991, four years before Hulbert's death.¹⁸³ Mondrian produced flower paintings during the 1920s as a commercial exercise to fund his Modernist experiments. He feigned embarrassment over them, perhaps fearing they be compared with women's art and thought of as slight, although in fact they continued to engage his quest for nature's captured essence. Any that remained unsold had accompanied him to his apartment in New York, where he hung them on a concealed wall, only disclosing them to amuse his friends.¹⁸⁴ We might logically assume that Mondrian initially brought these paintings with him from Holland to Paris, then Paris to London, concluding that Hulbert may have been granted the rare privilege of viewing them in his Hampstead flat.

The palette of blended sub-primary hues which originated during Hulbert's Mecklenburgh Square years owed much to the colouration of Mondrian's flower paintings and less to Hulbert's beloved

¹⁸² For example, between 1871-1945 female Slade students (from wealthy families) outnumbered the males (of all classes) by three to one. Inevitably these women married, as was convention, often to a fellow student of lower status, providing financial support for the husband's practice. See Mark Antliff, Scott Klein, *Vorticism; New Perspectives*, Oxford Press, 2013, p.123.

¹⁸³ *Mondrian Flowers in American Collections*, 28 March-27 April 1991, Sidney Janis Gallery, New York. Accompanying publication by David Shapiro, *Mondrian: Flowers*, Harry N Abrams Inc., 1991.

¹⁸⁴ Charmion von Wiegand (1896-1983), quoted in Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian, Life and Work*, Harry N Abrams, 1957, p.181.

French Classicists. These colours were unlike Mondrian's Modernist pure primaries, which resonated with Theosophical theories.



Above left: Piet MONDRIAN, *Flowers Sun*, 1909, Oil on Canvas, 29×22 cm (8.5 x 11.5")

Above right: Thelma HULBERT, *Honesty and Window*, 1972, Oil on Canvas, 156 x 127 cm (61.4 x 50")

Theosophist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) believed that an 'aura' surrounding each human body emitted vibrations, or wavelengths, relating colours to emotional states. Charles Leadbeater (1854-1934) and Annie Besant (1847-1933) distilled this theory into a table of "meanings of colours" (right) in their book, *Thought Forms*, 1901. Mondrian often painted in these colours during his early tree and flower periods.

However, his self-imposed Neo-Plastic disciplines demanded Mondrian reduce colour to its purest primary forms in his later Modernist paintings.

1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
1. High Spirituality.	1. Devotion mixed with Affection.	1. Devotion in a Noble Ideal.	1. Pure Religious Feeling.	1. Selfish Religious Feeling.	
2. Religious Feeling tinged with Fear.	2. Highest Intellect.	2. Strong Intellect.	2. Low type of Intellect.	2. Pride.	
3. Sympathy.	3. Love for Humanity.	3. Unselfish Affection.	3. Selfish Affection.	3. Pure Affection.	
4. Adaptability.	4. Jealousy.	4. Doubt.	4. Fear.	4. Depression.	
5. Selflessness.	5. Avarice.	5. Anger.	5. Sensuality.	5. Malice.	



The shades in Leadbeater and Beasant's chart were used consistently by Hulbert throughout her career, and reflect her interest with The Gurdjieff Work in later years.¹⁸⁵ The perfect example is *Blue Window, Fruit, and Leaves* (1976) which is painted in the Theosophical colours of Pure Religious Feelings (Azure), Highest Intellect (Golden Yellow) and Unselfish Affection (Lilac). This painting was completed three years after Evan's sudden tragic death and I believe it makes a fitting tribute to his spiritual and emotional connection with Hulbert.

Left: Thelma HULBERT, *Blue Window, Fruit, and Leaves*, 1976, Oil on Canvas, 100 x 61 cm (39.4 x 24")

In another example from this period, Hulbert appears to have studied Mondrian's primary blue oil painting *Evening, Red Tree* (1908-10) (right) for her pastel sketch *Mecklenburgh Square, Night* (1945) (below right), but this is an exception. Hulbert's arboreal works were more often saturated with green pigment, a colour Mondrian claimed to detest. Curiously, as Hulbert's gaze turned increasingly inward, her use of Green (Sympathy, Adaptability) diminished and finally disappeared.



Above right:
MONDRIAN, *Evening, Red Tree*, 1908-10, Oil on Canvas, 70 x 99 cm (28 x 39")



Below right:
Thelma HULBERT, *Mecklenburgh Square, Night* 1945, Pastel Sketch, 42.5 x 51.4 cm (16.75 x 20.25")

¹⁸⁵ Hulbert refers to "my Gurdjieff group" in Thelma Hulbert, *Correspondence with Iona Wright*, 24 March 1967.

Hulbert had begun working on her Mecklenburgh Square paintings when Bryan Robertson first visited the flat to view Merlyn Evans' work in 1945.¹⁸⁶ Robertson had been working as a junior sub-editor at *The Studio* magazine where he was introduced to Evans by Mary Kessel (1914-1977). Hulbert and Robertson subsequently became close friends, sharing a love of ballet, good food, good company and bad jokes. A substitute younger brother had arrived in her life.

The friendship was consolidated by the shared problems of a working-class upbringing. Robertson was born in South London in 1927. His father was often unemployed, and his family struggled financially. Like Hulbert, and Pasmore, Robertson was considered untrained. He had attended Battersea Grammar School but asthma prevented him from progressing to university or undertaking military service. Fortunately, illness allowed him time to become extremely well read like Evans, who had also benefitted this way during childhood.

Despite his youth and inexperience, Robertson immediately recognised that Hulbert's work lacked the incisiveness and dynamism of Evans' yet possessed qualities which he admired. He would later place her paintings in the category of '...[British] Artists who could not be classified under any critical framework, ...'straightforward' if unfashionable art.'¹⁸⁷ The same could not be said of his opinions of The Euston Road School in general, who's output he condemned as 'the last vestiges of wartime gloom and austerity.'¹⁸⁸ Hulbert had now emerged from the school's shadow, despite being one of the few to retain their core value of Objective Realism.

Hulbert became one of the first in Robertson's stable of women artists, which included Hepworth and later Bridget Riley (b.1931), whom he championed and promoted quite differently from male artists, saying that he "learned much about the difficulties experienced by women artists from his friendships with [them]."¹⁸⁹

Hulbert's career would undoubtedly have been less successful or far reaching without Robertson's intervention. He arrived in her life at a time when challenges in her personal relationships were beginning to defeat her artistic ambitions, and effectively became her professional mentor. Between 1949-1950 Robertson included her work in three of his first exhibitions as Director of The Heffer Gallery, Sidney Street, Cambridge, beside artists of the calibre of Henry Moore. These three exhibitions marked the true beginning of Hulbert's professional career.

¹⁸⁶ Andrew Lambirth, *The Life of Bryan*, Unicorn Press, 2019, p.40.

¹⁸⁷ Simon Pierse, *Australian Art and Artists in London, 1950-1965*, Taylor & Francis, 2017, p.66.

¹⁸⁸ Patrick Procktor, *Paintings 1959-1989*, Oriel 31 Davies Memorial Gallery, 1989, p.9.

¹⁸⁹ Mary Yule, 'A Place for Living Art', *Artists & Patrons in Post-War Britain*, Routledge, 2019, p.8.

Chapter Nine: First Solo Exhibition 1950

After seven years, the Mecklenburgh Square group disbanded. Penelope Simms married Jack Stahl in Autumn 1949, and when Margerie married Merlyn Evans in Spring 1950 the flat at No 21 became their marital home. Hulbert spent the next year at 14 Mecklenburgh Square with Du Plessis before finding alternative lodgings.¹⁹⁰

1950 was a year of mixed blessings for Thelma Hulbert. It began with Evans' wedding to Few, which Hulbert had not anticipated, and was followed by the selection of an oil painting and a pastel for the prestigious *Young British Painters 1950* exhibition at The Heffer Gallery, Cambridge. This exhibition was ambitiously billed as 'The First Survey of New Trends in British Painting,' and appears to me to have been Robertson's attempt at creating a ground-breaking collective resembling a prototype YBA (Young British Artists) group of the late 1980s-1990s.¹⁹¹

Hulbert's first solo exhibition, *Recent Paintings by Thelma Hulbert*, ran from 19 April until 17 May at the same venue. Reviews appeared in *Art News and Review*,¹⁹² *Cambridge Review*, and *Varsity* magazine. Immediately after the private view Hulbert sailed to Cape Town, South Africa, intending to marry and emigrate there, but by August this romance had joined her list of failures.

The preface to Hulbert's first solo catalogue was written by Cambridge poet Frances Cornford¹⁹³ at the request of Bryan Robertson, then Heffer's charismatic new director. Cornford began by saying "Thelma Hulbert makes no effort to be an original painter, and this is perhaps largely why she is one"¹⁹⁴ which was very astute. Her solo debut seemed ill-timed. The works resulted from six-months painting in France in 1949¹⁹⁵ during which time New York had overtaken Paris as the centre of the contemporary art world. From 1950 onwards, French inspired paintings such as Hulbert's were deemed *passée*.

However, this did not concern Hulbert, who was determined not to comply with Transatlantic trends and convert to Abstraction or Colour Field Painting. Neither was she outwardly attracted by the mid-century British school dubbed 'Neo-Romanticism' although her work might be said to fall into this category because of her arcane mystical interests. British Neo-Romantic art emerged in parallel with The Euston Road School during the 1930s and 1940s. It was epitomised by the

¹⁹⁰ Addresses and dates researched using www.ancestry.co.uk. Accessed throughout 2019-2021.

¹⁹¹ The term 'YBA' (Young British Artists) originally derived from an article in *Art Monthly*, 1996.

¹⁹² Carol Hogben, 'Thelma Hulbert: Heffer's Gallery, Cambridge,' *Art News and Review*, 20 May 1950, p.5.

¹⁹³ Frances Crofts Cornford (1886-1960), poet.

¹⁹⁴ *Exhibition of Recent Paintings by Thelma Hulbert*, Heffer Gallery, 19 April-17 May 1950, p.2.

¹⁹⁵ *Thelma Hulbert, Recent Paintings*, Leicester Galleries, London, 27 November-17 December 1958, p.3.

paintings of John Piper, Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland ¹⁹⁶ – none of whom Hulbert knew well personally – and harked back to earlier painters beyond the main stream, such as William Blake (1757-1827) and Samuel Palmer (1805-1881). Similarities between Hulbert’s paintings and the works of Nash and Sutherland in particular revolve around their mutual fascination for dried leaves and driftwood. Sutherland viewed these objects as ‘personages’ ¹⁹⁷ which inspired him on inward meditational journeys, just as Hulbert did.

Cornford described Hulbert as being like Virginia Woolf’s character Lily Briscoe in *To The Lighthouse* (Hogarth Press, 1927), ¹⁹⁸ and this too is an accurate observation, particularly in Hulbert’s rejection of the conventional female wife/mother role, although in 1950 there was still time for Thelma to achieve these goals had she wished. Cornford’s point was more clearly directed towards Briscoe’s diligence and determination which found its echo in Hulbert’s strength at resolving her canvases. Cornford may also have become aware of the connections between Hulbert and Vanessa Bell, Woolf’s sister.

Robertson had calculated that Cornford’s reputation amongst Cambridge’s academics would enhance Hulbert’s name by association, drawing attention away from the latter’s working-class background and assumed lack of a convincing education. Cornford’s poetry was popular with both intellectual and middle brow readers, guaranteeing that the preface would impress a wide-ranging audience. However, Cornford also “fought to present the voice of the underrepresented,” ¹⁹⁹ comprehending Thelma’s situation as a working-class woman painter.

Cornford and Hulbert shared similarities of approach to their practice, despite their 22-year age difference – Hulbert was 36 in 1950, Cornford, 64. To paraphrase Cornford, one might call this perspective ‘Unoriginal Originality.’ Both sought to portray a unique personal authenticity in their work, described by Cornford as the longing to “write much more in the stresses of my natural speaking voice,” ²⁰⁰ yet both felt that the role of the poet [artist] was Universal, conveying an all-encompassing experience.

In Autumn 2019 after seven years of fruitless search, an original copy of Hulbert’s first solo catalogue was finally traced to The Henry Moore Foundation archive. This elusive publication could not be sourced elsewhere, not even at The Tate. It was an exciting discovery. The first items of note were the two titles heading the list of exhibits, no. 1. *The Shy Birds and The Morning Planet*,

¹⁹⁶ John Egerton Christmas Piper (1903-1992), Paul Nash (1889-1946), Graham Vivian Sutherland (1903-1980).

¹⁹⁷ Malcome Yorke, *The Spirit of Place*, Constable and Company Ltd., 1988, p.118.

¹⁹⁸ The Hogarth Press was situated at 37 Mecklenburgh Square until it was bombed in 1940.

¹⁹⁹ Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910–1939: Resisting Femininity*, Routledge, 2001, p.32.

²⁰⁰ Jane Dowson, Alice Entwistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.36.

and no. 2 *The Grey Leaves Flicker where Sleep Wanders*,²⁰¹ derived from the translated lyric poetry of the female Greek poet Sappho (c.630-c.570 BCE). These are curious, as no other titles by Hulbert reference poetic or literary quotations, and they are not mentioned in any itineraries of Hulbert's works. Even Cornford notes the paintings are 'curiously vague' and 'not yet entirely her own.'²⁰² It seems they were an experiment, not to be repeated. Unfortunately, we have no images to critique, but we might imagine how these uncommon works appear. The language of Sappho, even in translation, is simple and graceful, nuanced with suggested colours and emotional responses and therefore perfect vehicles for Hulbert's approach.

Putting Sapphic connotations aside,²⁰³ and regardless of Hulbert's affinity with Ancient Classical worlds,²⁰⁴ these titles may not have originated with Hulbert herself but rather from Robertson's encouragement to look at Greek poetry as a way of easing her entry to Cambridge society. Her solo debut was to be staged in a gallery surrounded by colleges,²⁰⁵ three minutes-walk from King's College with its further connections to Virginia Woolf. Hulbert now moved in a different world from Bath's Working Men's Club or the rowdy pubs of Fitzrovia, and an intellectual ploy such as reference to Sappho's lyrics was required to mark the transition. Topical credence was added by the coincidental publication of at least three books referencing Sappho, including Lawrence Durrell's first play, all in 1950.²⁰⁶

(In an interesting aside, the biographical note in Hulbert's first solo exhibition catalogue was the only time where her origins as a builder's daughter from Bath were alluded to, ie. "Male side of the family of Somerset stock." This distinction was dropped from future catalogues while the more exotic sounding 'French and Spanish' ancestry (on the female side) was allowed to remain.)

A loose connection puts Hulbert in proximity to Paul Roche,²⁰⁷ poet, and translator of Sappho's poetry. In 1944 Hulbert had her portrait painted at Glebe Place, Chelsea by Roche's close friend, Edward Le Bas. Roche also sat for Le Bas. Roche's translations of Sappho were not published until 1966, but he may have aired his early thoughts about the poems with Hulbert when she visited their mutual friend Le Bas, putting the suggestion into her mind. Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell were also close associates of Roche and Le Bas, and Bell was fond of Hulbert. Grant and Roche were

²⁰¹ Bliss Carman, *Sappho; One Hundred Lyrics*, Boston: L.C. Page and Co., 1904, p.50.

²⁰² *Exhibition of Recent Paintings by Thelma Hulbert*, p.2.

²⁰³ Hulbert was heterosexual, or at least no Lesbian relationships have been uncovered.

²⁰⁴ Hulbert was primarily interested in Egyptian and Far Eastern cultures and religions, rather than Greek.

²⁰⁵ Trinity College, Sidney Sussex College, Gonville and Caius College.

²⁰⁶ Lawrence Durrell, *Sappho, A Play in Verse*, Faber and Faber; Alphonse Daudet, *Sappho, Moeurs Parisiennes*. Avon Books; *Poèmes de Sappho*, illustrated by Marie Laurencin.

²⁰⁷ Donald Robert Paul Roche (1916-2007), poet, novelist.

neighbours with The Rogers, Hulbert's friends, in Taviton Street, which Hulbert painted in 1943, proving she was in the vicinity.

Images of these Sapphic tributes are not available for analysis because Hulbert's first solo catalogue is not illustrated. None of the titles are dated, and no dimensions given. This makes it difficult to assess how far Hulbert had progressed between her first exhibited painting *Portrait of Iona Craig* (1937) and her first solo exhibition in 1950. Fortunately, a few titles reoccur in other catalogues and these can be dated with certainty. The majority were Still Life paintings, although Landscape is also indicated by titles referencing travel in France and the West Country.

Flower Painting as 'Women's Art'

Alignment with Still Life had always proved detrimental to a woman artist's standing against men, and Hulbert did her long-term aspirations few favours by opting for it. It was placed last in importance in the list of five genres established by The Academies during The Seventeenth Century. Historical Paintings²⁰⁸ came first, followed in order by Portraiture, Landscape, Genre or Everyday Life, and finally Still Life. The true reason for this is unclear. Was Still Life thought inferior because it was practiced largely by women, or was it delegated down to them by men who thought women's talent insufficient for the major genres?

The origins of Still Life painting can be traced back to the Lotus flowers of early Buddhist, Chinese and Ancient Egyptian manuscripts, appealing to Thelma's love of The Exotic and The Oriental. Medieval and Renaissance artists used flowers symbolically in place of words at a time when only the socially elite were literate. Hulbert may have discovered the language of flowers via her enjoyment of gardens. As an ingénue she was intrigued by the coded world of Courtly Love (her favourite novel in the Charlotte Street years was *The Forest Lovers* by Maurice Hewett, a pseudo medieval romance), all of which suggests it is unlikely that the meanings traditionally ascribed to plants would pass her by.

In the Twentieth Century, floral subjects became vehicles for Abstraction, as witnessed in Mondrian's search for nature's quintessence. Many Euston Road painters, especially Pasmore, made the transition from Still Life to Abstraction easily and obviously. Hulbert, however, persevered with her idiosyncratic account of traditional Still Life for her entire career, ultimately forming at least 80% of her known works. Still Life was highly convenient, and cheaper than hiring a life model. In 1930s and 1940s The Euston Road School offered just two subjects, Life or Still

²⁰⁸ Scenes from ancient, classical, literary, or biblical history.

Life, with tutors bringing in flowers and plants from their homes if their budget would not stretch to a life model that week.²⁰⁹

Hulbert stated that she worked when she noticed ‘something or other’²¹⁰ about the objects around her, and cut, dead or dried stems, together with the vessels which contained them, were immediately available when she wanted to paint. They represented interior domesticity, tamed and asexual. As years progressed and Hulbert became increasingly isolated they became her friends and family, always there to comfort her. Her landscapes did not feature flowers, focusing instead on rocks, rough seas, and sturdy trees, which were challenging and fresh. Her feminine Still Lifes were the Yin to her Landscape’s masculine Yan.

Hulbert’s commitment to observational Still Life reinforced her position as one of the only ‘products’ of the Euston Road School to stay faithful to its original aims, but to the detriment of her finances. By rejecting portraiture, she excluded herself from lucrative opportunities to paint society figures, up to and including The Royal Family, which her male contemporaries such as Rogers seized with both hands. She also ruled herself out of the equally lucrative fields of book, magazine and advertising illustration which were largely figurative in 1940s and 1950s. This proves that Hulbert, while financially cautious, was prepared to sacrifice security for the sake of fine art, a rare sentiment for a working-class person.

Flowers Representing Absence

When Hulbert rejected figuration she did not stop painting the people she knew, she simply stopped painting them as people. Instead, she painted their personalities as flowers, or leaves, filling the space left by their absence. A return to Hulbert’s painting *Iona* (1937) illustrates this point as it is clearly an amalgamation of Portrait and Still Life. Remove the figure from the painting and the personality of Iona Craig is still present, represented by the vase of flowers on the small table in the lower right section, see *Iona*, transitional diagram, then *Vase of Flowers*, left.



²⁰⁹ Miss Hutchings, *Correspondence with Claude Rogers*, Tate Gallery Archive: 8121.1.

²¹⁰ ‘Looking’, *Tempo*.



Specific plants reoccur in Hulbert's Still Lives too frequently for mere chance. The most prolific, and poignant, were the glistening seed heads of Honesty (*Lunaria*) which she referenced in at least seven titles. These empty moon-like discs might denote the melancholy wax and wane of the female cycle, or the fickle male heart. In *Leaves: Honesty and Eucalyptus* (left) the glaucous stems nestling beside the silver pods surely indicate intimacy between Hulbert (represented so often by the Honesty plant it might today be her personal icon or logo) and the antipodean Hal Missingham (the soft green Eucalyptus).²¹¹ Floral metaphor also offered the discrete advantage of anonymity as most of Hulbert's lovers were married.

Above: Thelma HULBERT, *Leaves: Honesty and Eucalyptus*, 1951, Oil on Board 49.5 x 38 cm (19.5 x 15")

In 1940/41, Victor Pasmore began his brief *Everlasting Flowers* period which initiated his transition from Realism to Abstraction,²¹² mirroring Mondrian's stylistic passage through flowers and trees. Note the Honesty seed heads amongst the rustling bouquet in the example shown. Hulbert would have witnessed this series when she visited the newly wed Pasmores at their homes in Chiswick and Hammersmith. Her own everlasting flowers may have represented the absence felt



in lost love; Iona and others thought Hulbert and Pasmore would have made a good marriage. Similarly, Hulbert's use of Flora to signify an emotional absence may owe something, once again, to Mondrian who stood a lonely artificial flower waiting at his front door, its green plastic stem and leaves painted white, representing "the missing woman in his own life, which was wholly dedicated to art."²¹³

Above: Victor PASMORE, *Bouquet: Everlasting Flowers*, 1940/41, Oil on Canvas 68.5 x 91.5 cm (27 x 36")

²¹¹ *Honesty and Eucalyptus* was painted in 1951, the year Missingham toured Britain as Director of the Gallery of New South Wales. Family photographs show Hulbert hosting a party in his honour at 21 Mecklenburgh Square.

²¹² Laughton, *The Euston Road School*, p.221.

²¹³ Susanne Deicher, *Mondrian*, Taschen, 2020, p.57.

Still Life as Theatre

Hulbert's Still Life compositions owed much to her Theatrical interests, and Mondrian's as we have observed, being regularly 'staged' in a window, with curtains, as though the subject were performing on a set. This is not a revolutionary concept in itself as artists have used similar mechanisms for a variety of reasons throughout the centuries, which Hulbert probably first encountered at Bath School of Art. Cecil Collins,²¹⁴ Hulbert's colleague at Central in the 1960s, also produced images resembling a stage flanked by curtains. Both he and Hulbert approached the canvas as if "directing a theatre"²¹⁵ although they arrived at this construct independently.

The difference was in the destination and the reception. Richard Morphet described these formats as signifying "the threshold of a sacred world."²¹⁶ Morphet believed Collins invited his viewer to pass through the portal for their edification "disclosing reality" to his audience, whereas Hulbert, I believe, used painting as a personal route to inner contemplation, revealing the intimate realities of the world's physical and spiritual essences to herself.

²¹⁴ James Henry Cecil Collins (1908-1989).

²¹⁵ *The Prints of Cecil Collins*, Tate Gallery, London, 5 August-12 November 1981, p.16.

²¹⁶ Ibid. This also synchronises with Mondrian's concept of the canvas as a site for veneration.

Conclusion

She “broke off a fragment of her soul for us to guess at.”²¹⁷

Bliss Carman, *Sappho; One Hundred Lyrics*, Frontispiece.

This biography of the artist Thelma Hulbert tells a story of opposites, equals, interiors, exteriors, presence and absence. As a thesis it presents a clear picture of Thelma Hulbert as a working-class woman who over-came multiple obstacles to pursue a successful career as a painter in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain. It comprises evidence which proves she was among the first, if not the first, to achieve this distinction, although it also proves this was not necessarily an accolade she would cheerfully acknowledge.

Few professional Women Artists born in the 1910s or 1920s shared Hulbert’s origins. The nearest may have been Sheila Fell, a Cumbrian miner’s daughter, who was not born until 1931. The eighteen-year interval between their ages suggests Hulbert was a woman ahead of her times. In 1949, 20 years after Hulbert had commenced her initial training, a working-class background still marked Fell as “an unusual art student.”²¹⁸

Comparisons between Hulbert and Fell provide insight into the impact of social class on Hulbert’s practice. Their approaches to Landscape reveal contrasting attitudes towards their backgrounds separated by less than two decades of social change. Fell’s Landscapes repeatedly describe a topography dominated by mining activity, referencing the neighbourhoods of her birth, whereas Hulbert produced only one known work which referenced her home town by title in her entire career, namely *Landscape near Bath* (c.1949). From 1950 onward any scenes which might identify Hulbert with her roots were removed from her visual lexicon along with the human figure. It appears that a shift in British attitudes towards women and class in the early 1950s had allowed Fell to feel comfortable alluding to her origins in her first solo show of 1955, while Hulbert, in 1950, had not.

It is therefore ironic that the seed heads of *Lunaria* (Honesty) should become Hulbert’s personal emblem, as her choice of what not to include in her paintings appears to illustrate a conscious deception. A similar desire to conceal followed her deliberate move away from figurative painting, which seems inexplicable on a personal level as Hulbert was a highly physical human being with a passion for dance and a strong libido who outwardly celebrated corporeal existence.

²¹⁷ This book was in circulation during Hulbert’s youth.

²¹⁸ Foster, *Tate Women Artists*, p.97.

Hulbert's complex personality was exacerbated by an equally complicated relationship with her parents. Friends, Colleagues and Students described her as kind, generous, sensitive and understanding yet she was designated a 'snob' by Relatives,²¹⁹ who felt her keen embarrassment when they visited. With the exceptions of Iona Craig and Bryan Robertson, few of Hulbert's London associates knew the details of her upbringing. She was blessed throughout life by a succession of wealthy friends who supported her financially, securing their friendship using a theatrical talent to amuse, conjuring wonderful meals for them and making them feel as close as family in her true family's absence.

The late Tom Rosenthal commented that Hulbert's financial situation contrasted with that of her contemporary, the Neo-Romantic Abstract painter Prunella Clough (1919-1999) who had independent family wealth to support her.²²⁰ Unlike Hulbert and Fell, Hulbert and Clough were of a similar generation. Clough was a single child who was married to her work as an adult, like Hulbert, and on canvas both abandoned figurative human representations, however with Clough this was gradual not sudden, and guided by intellect not quasi-spirituality, unlike Hulbert. Clough systematically dissolved humanity's shadows and appurtenances within an industrial landscape although this reflected nothing about her class, yet as a result the effects of Industry on the working man became Clough's subtext. This outcome might have been more expected of Hulbert, had she been more honest.

However, Hulbert was not a fraud. Her spiritual and political sentiments were sincere, as were her friendships, and her commitment to Art was intense. Ultimately, 'Unoriginal Originality' became Hulbert's unwavering stance, impressed upon her by her year with the Euston Road School and by decades following Classic French painters, both of which aligned her work with a class above her own by association. Anonymity and discretion became her way of life. Uninformed viewers might guess Hulbert's works were created by a female hand from their sensitive colouration and graceful gestural technique, but few would assume the artist was working class as Hulbert had obliterated all the clues.

Yet, regardless of her personal flaws, in conclusion there is sufficient evidence to concede that Thelma Hulbert was indeed a pioneer amongst British working-class women painters of the Twentieth Century, even if she was reluctant to admit it.

²¹⁹ "I realised her visits were more 'duty' than pleasure. I thought her a terrible snob." Liz Issacs, *Correspondence with Deborah Smith*, September 2012.

²²⁰ Thomas Gabriel Rosenthal (1935-2014), *Conversation with Deborah Smith*, December 2013.

Appendix

Analysis of Pre-existing Printed Biographical Material: *Thelma; A Portrait of The Artist Thelma Hulbert* by Dr John Furse (2002).

As of February 2022, a single concise 44-page A5 booklet provides the only printed account of Hulbert's life. *Thelma; A Portrait of The Artist Thelma Hulbert* by Dr John Furse was commissioned in 2000 by East Devon District Council and printed in 2002 by EDDC's in-house graphic design department in a short run of 600 copies. The aim of the booklet was to promote the launch of the Thelma Hulbert Gallery, Honiton, Devon, in Hulbert's former home and studio at Elmfield House.

The booklet reveals no biographical details about the author, John Furse. My research using the internet identifies him as Dr John Furse (1938-2005) an artist, art writer and critic, affiliated with Plymouth University. The only major previous publication I have sourced by Dr Furse is *Michelangelo and his Art*, published by Hamlyn in 1975.

Page by page analysis

Cover: Title.

Two monochrome photographs of Thelma Hulbert seated at home.

Analysis: photography uncredited by Dr Furse. I identified the photographer as Robert Canning, Hulbert's second cousin, when I interviewed Mr Canning in 2013 and found the photographs were taken by him in 1982.

Page 2. [Blank]

Page 3. Title.

Colour reproduction of a section from the painting *Thelma* (1938) by Sylvia Melland.

15 words taken from Hulbert's Whitechapel catalogue essay by Colin MacInnes, 1962.

Analysis: Melland's painting is uncredited by Dr Furse, with no medium or dimensions.

Page 4. Monochrome photograph of Thelma Hulbert.

Analysis: photograph uncredited by Dr Furse. I was able to identify the photographer as Eileen Tweedy by referencing photography in Hulbert's Whitechapel catalogue.

Page 5. Foreword.

Acknowledgments by Mark Doyle [then THG curator], Iona Wright [Hulbert's friend], Anthony Harris and Jean Hoole [original Artistic Executors.] I have found one useful quotation in Iona Wright's acknowledgement's which is cited on page 26 of this thesis.

In the foreword, Jean Hoole aptly summarises Dr Furse's booklet as a collection of "personal reminiscences, critical reviews and correspondences from the period before

[Hulbert's] Whitechapel exhibition in 1962." Furse's booklet contains only a thin outline of Hulbert's life and activities prior to 1962, making no mention of her life and work between 1963 and her death in 1995. The reviews cited by Dr Furse are widely available in archives including the Tate, where I have discovered other reviews (not cited by Furse) during my research. The reminiscences and correspondences which Dr Furse selected for quotation are available in the THG archive. Where I have used the same material I have selected different passages which Dr Furse has not used, illustrating different points.

Page 6. Introduction.

Contents.

Dr Furse states that Hulbert was born in Bath.

Analysis: Furse does not acknowledge Hulbert's parentage. I uncovered her working-class beginnings during interviews with her existing relatives and from archival census material.

Page 7. [Blank] Chapter Heading: *Artist and Model*

Page 8-9. Dr Furse states that Hulbert moved to London in 1934 and lived at 76 Charlotte Street with Iona Craig (85 words).

Two quotations, from *Black Sea Bride* by Iona Craig and *Initials in The Heart* by Laurence Whistler, describing 1930s London. I have used different quotes from these publications.

Analysis: Furse does not give Hulbert's reasons for leaving Bath. I have discovered the true story using correspondence in the THG archive, interviews with relatives, press cuttings and archival census material.

Uncaptioned b/w photograph, appears to be a view along the Euston Road in 1930s.

Analysis: In my opinion many of the photographs used throughout this publication simply pad out the text, several are not strictly relevant to Hulbert at all.

Page 10. Two quotations from *Black Sea Bride*.

Dr Furse describes the genesis of the Euston Road School (80 words).

Analysis: similar content to Laughton's *Euston Road School* (1980).

Page 11. Half page monochrome photograph of Euston Road School building 1930s (captioned).

300 words by Dr Furse about Euston Road School.

Analysis: again similar in content to Laughton.

Page 12. 170 words by Dr Furse on Pasmore's *The Parisienne Café* (1936) with Hulbert as a model.

Analysis: similar content to Laughton.

Half page colour reproduction of *The Parisienne Café* (1936) (captioned).

Page 13. Full page colour reproduction of Pasmore's *Portrait of Thelma Hulbert* (1939).

Page 14/15. Half page quotation from Hulbert in Laughton on 'the Charlotte Street community.'

Analysis: Dr Furse does not cite the page for this quotation.

240 words by Dr Furse describing Bill Brandt's Euston Road School photo session for *Picture Post*.

Half page monochrome photograph of a Euston Road School life class.

Analysis: This is not Brandt's photograph from *Picture Post*. The photograph is not dated or credited, and Hulbert is not shown.

Page 16. Full page colour reproduction of *Thelma* (1938) by Sylvia Melland.

Page 17. Quotation from personal correspondence between Dr Furse and Iona Craig, 2000, in which Craig reveals that Hulbert sat for Edward le Bas, and Vanessa Bell was 'fond' of Hulbert.

Quotation from Whistler's *Initials in the Heart* describing pre-war life in Charlotte Street.

Analysis: I have discovered further correspondence in the THG archive between Dr Furse and Craig which Furse did not include, and I cite these where used in my thesis.

Nb. Hulbert is not mentioned by name in Whistler's quote nor in his publication.

Page 18. [Blank] Chapter Heading: *Cornwall*.

Page 19. 140 words by Dr Furse indicating that Hulbert and Pasmore visited Cornwall in 1939.

1/3rd page quotation from Adrian Stokes' *Colour and Form* (1936).

1/3rd page quotation from Adrian Stokes' *Rough and Smooth* (1951).

nb. Stokes describes Cornwall (*Rough and Smooth*) but does not mention Hulbert's visit.

Analysis: Furse does not explain the relevance of Stokes' publications to the work of Hulbert or The Euston Road School. Alarmingly, he suggests Hulbert may have been out of her depth with Stokes' ideas (citing no proof of these difficulties) – I have sought to dismiss suggestions that Hulbert struggled intellectually throughout my thesis. To the contrary, Jean Hoole and others expressed the view that Hulbert was extremely well read.

Page 20. One page history of the St Ives colony by Dr Furse (435 words).

Analysis: this section is barely relevant. Hulbert was not part of this group, she visited once in 1939 and according to my research did not return until 1963. I have deduced through my research that it was the atmospheric *landscape* of Cornwall in general which inspired some of her 1960s paintings and not the artists working in St Ives in 1930s.

Page 21. Half page colour reproduction of Pasmore's *Snowstorm* (1951).

Dr Furse compares Hulbert's *Seascape* (1959) with Pasmore's *Snowstorm* (130 words).

Thumbnail monochrome reproduction of Hulbert's *Seascape* (1959).

Analysis: Furse makes an unconvincing and disputable case that Hulbert was influenced by Pasmore's move to abstraction.

Page 22: Dr Furse describes St Ives in 1950s-1960s, mentioning Merlyn Evans, Eldred Evans and Wilhelmina Barnes-Graham (180 words).

1/3rd page monochrome photograph of Barnes-Graham in St Ives, 1953.

Quotation from correspondence between Furse and Barnes-Graham stating she did not know Hulbert well until Hulbert moved to Devon.

Analysis: Dr Furse attempts an assertion that Cornwall played a vital role in Hulbert's artistic development but provides no real evidence to back this. Dr Furse does not mention Hulbert's 18-month sojourn in Ischia 1958-1959 in this booklet which is of far more

importance as it formed much of the basis for her 1962 Whitechapel retrospective. I have made personal research into Hulbert's time in Ischia using interviews, archive material and catalogues intending that my research be included in my future writings about Hulbert.
nb. The photograph of Barnes-Graham has no relevance.

Page 24. [Blank.] Chapter Heading; *Miss Hulbert, Art Mistress*.

Page 25-27. Reminiscences by Camden School pupils recalling Hulbert as their art mistress.

Analysis: No input from Dr Furse, who also fails to mention that Hulbert had a far more influential teaching position in 1960s as Senior Fine Art Tutor at Central School of Art.

Page 28. [Blank.] Chapter Heading; *Reputation in Retrospect*.

Page 29. A brief history of the Whitechapel gallery, not relating to Hulbert (168 words).

A brief synopsis of Hulbert's 1962 Whitechapel retrospective, mentioning catalogue and essay by Colin MacInnes, curator Bryan Robertson, 171 exhibits, and takings (240 words).

Analysis: Dr Furse does not cite his sources for this information, which I have discovered for myself using the 1962 catalogue and paperwork contained in the Whitechapel archive.

Page 30. Full page colour reproduction of *Still Life; Pink and Ochre* (1960) by Thelma Hulbert.

Page 31. Partial transcript of Colin MacInnes' catalogue essay in Hulbert's 1962 Whitechapel show.

Dr Furse outlines MacInnes' career, mentioning Hulbert at Euston Road (119 words).

Page 32. Whitechapel exhibition review, *London Evening News*, 17 October 1962.

Page 33. 2/3rd page colour reproduction of Hulbert's *The Roof, Ischia* (1959) in Whitechapel show.

Whitechapel exhibition review, *The Lady*, 15 November 1962.

Analysis: Dr Furse did not take this opportunity to expand on Hulbert's trip to Ischia.

Page 34-36. Reviews from *The Tatler*, 31 October 1962; *Arts Review*, 3 November 1962; *The Observer*, 21 October 1962; *The Guardian*, 18 October 1962.

Page 37. [Blank.] Chapter Heading; *Looking*

Page 38. Dr Furse explains the status of the 1960s television arts magazine *Tempo* (117 words).

Page 39-40. Complete transcript of Hulbert's monologue in *Tempo*, broadcast 9 December 1962.

Analysis: Dr Furse's describes the status of *Tempo* in early arts broadcasting. I will cite this information when I write about Hulbert during 1960s in my proposed PhD dissertation.

Page 41. Bibliography, containing five titles.

Professor Bruce Laughton, *Euston Road School*.

Tom Cross, *Warmth of the Sun* (nb. I can find no reference to Hulbert in Cross' book).

Tony Gould, *Inside Outsider*.

Jenny Pery, *The Affectionate Eye*.

Whitechapel Arts Centenary.

Page 42. Picture Credits.

Page 43. Full-page monochrome photograph of Elmfield House (undated, photographer uncredited).

Page 44. Back Cover. Date and place of publication.

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Petra Freeland is the grand-daughter of Hulbert's friend, model Freda Walker.

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Peter Halse was a Liberal Town Councillor for Honiton who sought Hulbert's political viewpoint.

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