



NEWS: Obituary Sir Terry Frost, RA, 1915-2003

The life in brief

Born in Leamington Spa in 1915, Terry lived with, and was brought up by, his grandparents. Educated locally, his first job on leaving school was at Curry's cycle shop. From 1932 to 1939 Terry was employed at Armstrong Whitworth, Coventry, painting red, white and blue roundels on aircraft wings, something that would echo throughout the remainder of his working life.

On the outbreak of the second world war,

Terry joined the household cavalry and served in France, Palestine and the Lebanon – where he was captured in 1941. He spent the rest of the war as a prisoner in Stalag 383 in Bavaria. It was here that he met Adrian Heath, a fellow prisoner of war who would set him on his journey to become a painter. Painting portraits of fellow interns and views of his prison camp, it was Heath who suggested Terry should, on his release, go to St Ives and paint. This he did, enrolling at the St



Figure 1 Terry Frost [left] speaks to Patrick Heron, another Cornish resident and art world luminary, for the first time in many years at Sims gallery, St Ives

Ives School of Painting and taking tuition in drawing from Leonard Fuller. It was immediately apparent that Terry was a gifted draughtsman. His brilliant line drawings done at this time are eagerly sought after by collectors worldwide.

Still doing a few portraits to help ends meet, and with Kathleen, his new wife, who he had married in 1946, working as well, Terry had his first exhibition at Downing's Book Shop in 1947. It was in this year that Terry painted his first major abstract work, *Madrigal*. After this he never painted another portrait or representational work again. Terry was into pure abstract. St Ives at this time was in the van of modernism. With Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo already working there, St Ives became a magnet to the *avant garde* set of painters who were following this new idea of expressionism in painting.

Taking Adrian Heath's advice yet again, Terry enrolled at Camberwell School of Painting under Coldstream. Here he stayed only for one year before finding that the advice given to him by Victor Pasmore, who himself was teaching there, to go into the world and 'just paint' was far more to his way of thinking. Terry moved back to St Ives and did just that.

During 1950 Terry helped Barbara Hepworth for a period until he left to go to the Bath Academy at Corsham where he taught from 1952–54. In 1957 Terry was awarded a fellowship at Leeds University and it was at this period that he did some of his most memorable paintings of the Yorkshire Moors. It was also at this time that Terry first started to introduce symbols into his paintings. These were inspired by his journey to Leeds and the difficulty he had finding his way there. Roundabouts, lorry radiators, road signs and chevrons were all around him and these were included into his paintings as a way of expressing his feeling for the area to which he had just moved.

The years 1952, 1956 and 1958 saw Terry exhibiting for the first time in London at the Leicester Galleries and thereafter at the Waddington Gallery until the late 1970s. In 1960 and 1962 Terry showed in New York where he met the American Expressionist painters Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Rothko then returned to England with Terry and there followed the famous meeting of all the artists and the well documented photograph.

Terry taught for a time in 1962 at Banbury School of Art, before returning to St Ives. In 1964 he went to Newcastle for one year, returning and taking up the post of full time lecturer at Reading University from 1965–1974 where he became Professor of Art.

On his return to Cornwall Terry bought the house he was to live in for the remainder of his life: Gernick Studio, situated high above Newlyn overlooking Mounts Bay. It was to be here that he commenced his most prodigious output of work. Here in his garden he had a large studio overlooking the sea and the capability to undertake work on a scale he had not been able to do before. Mobiles, printwork of all kinds (etching, monoprint, lithography and silkscreen) ceramic and glass sculptures; everything was now possible. And he did it all!

The man

Now, to talk of Terry Frost the man. Terry was a very special person. An approachable and friendly man. A man of great humility with great pride in his working class background. Well read and with a great knowledge of art, he exuded happiness.

Terry had a unique ability. He had the ability to put down onto canvas and paper his sunny personality. He knew well that as an abstract painter he was limited in his ability to convey his feelings to the onlook-



er. Colour, form and texture are the only parameters he could work in, but Terry introduced a further ingredient: Symbolism. Throughout his life down in St Ives and Newlyn he was acutely aware of his surroundings and the things that gave him most pleasure. These were the images that became part of his painting. Images of prows of boats moored against the harbour wall. The sun in all its guises: rising, setting, full bright light and even black (when the sun had set it had become black to Terry). Light dancing in zigzag form on the sea, lobster-pot marker-buoy flags. Coiled ropes on the harbour side, the moon usually painted cold blue or even black for moonless nights. Possibly his most famous was the *Walk Along The Quay in St Ives* when he had to take one of his crying children out for a walk to get him to settle down. As he pushed the pram along the quayside he noticed the boats bobbing in the water and the harbour lights reflecting in the huge wet stones that formed the harbour. To him they summed up his feeling and the experience he was going through.

Leon Suddaby ran a gallery specialising in the early Newlyn and St Ives schools of painting and had never sold an abstract work until he went to meet Terry Frost at his home in Newlyn in 1988. An irate Terry Frost, fresh from an unsuccessful gallery exhibition, challenged Leon to sell his recent work and put his money where his mouth was – and the story of a great friendship began there and then. Leon has since sold over 1000 Terry Frost works and suffered countless breakfasts of burnt toast, Marmite and cheese with his friend on his regular morning visits.

Sometimes it takes only a small symbol to express a great feeling. This is what Terry has mastered so well. His small images of his surroundings can convey exactly the message he wanted to give in his painting. Although an abstract artist, his inclusion of all these well loved images in his work have enabled his buying public to understand and appreciate his work to such an extent that, although his output of work was prodigious, very little of it was left behind. Terry Frost was an institution in his own lifetime, an accolade that is given to few artists. Elected a member of the Royal Academy in 1992, he was given a one man show at the Academy in 2000, knighted in 2001 and had a major show in the Tate St Ives in 2003.

Terry Frost has received every accolade that could have been given to him. A very public way of saying WELL DONE TERRY.

Leon Suddaby
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