

WILHELMINA BARNES-GRAHAM – 'ON GROWTH AND FORM'
Paintings and Drawings 1950-2002

D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson had a profound influence on the work of Scottish artist Wilhelmina Barns-Graham. She remarked in a 1981 exhibition catalogue that, as a child growing up in St Andrews, she knew the professor. Not only was Thompson a prominent figure around town, but he was a friend of the Barns-Graham family. Further to this childhood connection, Barns-Graham added "...very many years later I discovered his wonderful enlightening book 'Growth & Form'." (*Untitled*, LYC Press, 1981)

Professor D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form* was a widely influential book, particularly with visual artists. Published first in 1917 and revised in 1942, this volume was taken up by the eminent art critic Herbert Read in the 1940s, and through his writings came to the notice of many leading artists of the period. D'Arcy Thompson's concepts resonated with artists who were seeking to reconcile the new art of abstraction with the natural world. His application of precise mathematical models to the morphology of organisms according to their laws of growth underscores Barns-Graham's own investigations into natural forms and her outwardly abstract imagery. Thompson's ideas on the relation between inner space and outer form were particularly important. These are reflected in the sculptures of Naum Gabo and Barbara Hepworth that Barns-Graham was fully aware of in St Ives. In Barn-Graham's own work, such concerns feature in, for example, her glacier studies of 1949-50 and in the later series of small drawings that explore the visible and invisible energies of sea waves and wind currents. (GLASS CASES)

As part of the discussion on the application of mathematics to organic form, D'Arcy Thompson refers to the proportion of the 'divine' or The Golden Section in nature where a system of numbers, similar to the related Fibonacci series, is applied to the ratio of growth. In terms of art, this system is used to divide space, determining the perfect rectangle with its many and various sub-divisions. This complex set of divisions often lies as the sub-structure in Barns-Graham's paintings. In works from the 1950s one can see this in the arrangement of rock forms (COMPOSITION SEA 1954) or with the alignment of vertical elements that cross the painting's surface (RED MOVEMENT ON VIOLET 1958). And it is a

system that she referred to throughout her life's work (CONSTRUCTION IN SPACE 1989), including the painterly, colourful images from the 1990s. In these later works, an underlying grid is occasionally visible (NIGHT WALK PORTHMEOR 1999), but to a large extent Barns-Graham was so familiar with the principles behind the Golden Section that she could apply her brush directly to the correct line and angle.

Barns-Graham's use of the Golden Section was a starting point for her painting. However, as Lynne Green states in her 2001 monograph on the artist, "In her use of the Golden Section, the framework is rarely, if ever, rigidly adhered to: having established it, the artist then works across it and outside it, introducing independent elements (not strictly determined by measurement) and colours which transcend it. The grid provides balance, and a fabric of lines with forms within them, upon which to build the image: the artist is always free to improvise, to respond to or ignore the predetermined skeleton." (*W. Barns-Graham: a studio life*, Lund Humphries 2001)

It is clear that *On Growth and Form* was an important element in Barns-Graham's work. Her art was, for her, as much an investigation into the wonders of the natural world as it was about the act of painting. D'Arcy Thompson's book aided her understanding and helped shape the development of her art.

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Wilhelmina Barns-Graham was born in St Andrews in 1912. After graduating from Edinburgh College of Art in 1937, she moved to St Ives in 1940. Early on she met Borlase Smart, Alfred Wallis and Bernard Leach, as well as Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo. She became a member of the Newlyn Society of Artists and St Ives Society of Artists but was to leave the latter in 1949 when she became a founding member of the Penwith Society of Artists. She was one of the initial exhibitors of the significant Crypt Group.

Barns-Graham was widely successful throughout the 1950s, winning awards and acclamations. In 1960 she inherited from her aunt, Mary Neish, the house Balmungo that sits to the south of St Andrews. From that time she divided her year between St Ives and her Scottish home, spending the summers in the South and wintering in the North.

She exhibited consistently throughout her career, both in private and public galleries. Though not short of exposure through the 1960s and 1970s, her greatest successes, critically and

commercially, came in her last decade. Her contribution to British modernist painting was confirmed with important shows at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh in 2001, and at the Tate St Ives in 1999 and 2005.

Barns-Graham was made CBE in 2001, and received four honorary doctorates - St Andrews (1992), Plymouth (2000), Exeter (2001) and Heriot-Watt Universities (2003). Her work is found in all major public collections within the UK. She died in January 2004.